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PROLOGUE

Being an Account those Events came to the Throne of Riva and how he slew the Accursed God Torak.

-from the Introduction, Legends of Aloria

After the seven Gods created the world, it is said that they and those races of men they had chosen dwelt together in peace and harmony. But UL, father of the Gods, remained aloof, until Gorim, leader of those who had no God, went up on a high mountain and importuned him mightily. Then the heart of UL melted, and he lifted up Gorim and swore to be his God and God of his people, the Ulgos.

The God Aldur remained apart, teaching the power of the Will and the Word to Belgarath and other disciples. And a time came when Aldur took up a globe-shaped stone no larger than the heart of a child. Men named the stone the Orb of Aldur, and it was filled with enormous power, for it was the embodiment of a Necessity which had existed since the beginning of time.

Torak, God of the Angarak peoples, coveted lordship and dominion over all things, for to him had come an opposing Necessity. When he learned of the Orb, he was sorely troubled, fearing that it would counter his destiny. He went therefore to Aldur to plead that the stone be set aside. When Aldur would not give up the stone, Torak smote him and fled with the Orb.

Then Aldur summoned his other brothers, and they went with a mighty army of their followers to confront Torak. But Torak, seeing that his Angaraks must be defeated, raised the Orb and used its power to crack the world and bring in the Sea of the East to divide him from his enemies.

But the Orb was angered that Torak should use it thus and it lashed him with a fire whose agony could not be quenched.

Torak's left hand was burned away, his left cheek was seared in the arts of sorcery and charred, and his left eye took flame and was ever after filled with the fire of the Orb's wrath.

In agony, Torak led his people into the wastelands of Malloreia, and his people built him a city in Cthol Mishrak, which was called the City of Night, for Torak hid it under an endless cloud. There, in a tower of iron, Torak contended with the Orb, trying in vain to quell its hatred for him.

Thus it endured for two thousand years. Then Cherek Bear-Shoulders, King of the Alorns, went down to the Vale of Aldur to tell Belgarath the Sorcerer that the northern way was clear. Together they left the Vale with Cherek's three mighty sons, Dras Bull-neck, Algar Fleet-foot and Riva Irongrip. They stole through the marches, with Belgarath taking the form of a wolf to guide them, and they crossed over into Malloreia. By night, they stole into Torak's iron tower. And while the maimed God tossed in pain-haunted slumber, they crept to the room where he kept the Orb locked in an iron casket. Riva Iron-grip, whose heart was without ill intent, took up the Orb, and they left for the West.

Torak waked to find the Orb gone and he pursued them.

But Riva lifted up the Orb, and its angry flame filled Torak with fear. Then the company passed from Malloreia and returned to their own lands.

Belgarath divides Aloria into four kingdoms. Over three he set Bear-Shoulders, Dras Bull-neck, and Algar Fleet-foot. To Riva Iron-grip and to his line he gave the Orb of Aldur and sent him to the Isle of the Winds. Belar, God of the Alorns, sent down two stars, and from them Riva forged a mighty sword and placed the Orb on its pommel. And he hung the sword on the wall of the throne room of the Citadel, where it might ever guard the West from Torak.

When Belgarath returned to his home, he discovered that his wife, Poledra, had borne him twin daughters, but then had passed away. In heartsick sorrow, he named his daughters Polgara and Beldaran. And when they were of age, he sent Beldaran to Riva Iron-grip to be his wife and mother of the Rivan line. But Polgara he kept with him and instructed in the arts of sorcery.

In rage at the loss of the Orb, Torak destroyed the City of Night and divided the Angaraks. The Murgos, the Nadraks, and the Thulls he sent to dwell in the wastelands along the western shores of the Sea of the East. The Malloreans he kept to subdue all of the continent on which they dwelt.

Over all, he set his Grolim priests to watch, to scourge any who faltered, and to offer human sacrifices to him.

Many centuries passed. Then Zedar the Apostate, who served Torak, conspired with Salmissra, Queen of the snake-people, to send emissaries to the Isle of the Winds to slay Gorek, Riva's descendant, and all his family. This was done, though some claimed that a lone child escaped; but none could say for certain.

Emboldened by the death of the guardian of the Orb, Torak gathered his host and invaded the West, planning to enslave the peoples and regain the Orb. At Vo Mimbire on the plains of Arendia, the hordes of Angarak met the armies of the West in dreadful slaughter. And there Brand the Rivan Warder, bearing the Orb upon his shield, met Torak in single combat and struck down the maimed God. The Angarak, seeing that, were disheartened and they were overthrown and destroyed. But at night, as the Kings of the West celebrated, Zedar the Apostate took the body of Torak and spirited it away. Then the High Priest of the Ulgos, named Gorim as all such High Priests had been, revealed that Torak had not been killed, but bound in slumber until a king of the line of Riva sat once more on the throne in the Hall of the Rivan King. The Kings of the West believed that meant forever, for it was held that the line of Riva had perished utterly. But Belgarath and his daughter Polgara knew better. For a child had escaped the slaughter of Gorek's family, and they had concealed him and his descendants in obscurity for generations. But ancient prophecies revealed to them that the time for the return of the Rivan King was not yet come. Many more centuries passed. Then, in a nameless city on the far side of the world, Zedar the Apostate came upon an innocent child and resolved to take the child and go secretly with him to the Isle of the Winds. There he hoped that the innocence of the child might enable that child to take the Orb of Aldur from the pommel of the sword of the Rivan King. It occurred as he wished, and Zedar fled with the child and the Orb toward the East.

Polgara the Sorceress had been living with a young boy, who called her Aunt Pol, in obscurity on a farm in Sendaria.

This boy was Garion, the orphaned last descendant of the Rivan line, but he was unaware of his parentage. When Belgarath learned of the theft of the Orb, he hastened to Sendaria to urge his daughter to join him in the search for Zedar and the Orb. Polgara insisted that the boy must accompany them on the quest, so Garion accompanied his Aunt Pol and Belgarath, whom he knew as a storyteller who sometimes visited the farm and whom he called Grandfather.

Durnik, the farm smith, insisted on going with them. Soon they were joined by Barak of Cherek and by Kheldar of Drasnia, whom men called Silk. In time, their quest for the Orb was joined by others: Hettar, horse-lord of Algaria; Mandorallen, the Mimbrate knight; and Relg, an Ulgo zealot.

And seemingly by chance, the Princess Ce'Nedra, having quarreled with her father, Emperor Ran Borune XXIII of Tolnedra, fled his palace and became one of the companions, though she knew nothing of their quest. Thus was completed the company foretold by the prophecy of the Mrin Codex.

Their search led them to the Wood of the Dryads, where they were confronted by the Murgo Grolim Asharak, who had long spied secretly upon Garion. Then the voice of prophecy within Garion's mind spoke to Garion, and he struck Asharak with his hand and his Will. And Asharak was utterly consumed in fire. Thus Garion learned that he was possessed of the power of sorcery. Polgara rejoiced, telling him that henceforth he should be named Belgarion, as was proper for a sorcerer, for she knew then that the centuries of waiting were over and that Garion should be the one to reclaim the Rivan Throne, as foretold.

Zedar the Apostate fled from Belgarath in haste. Unwisely, he entered the realms of Ctuchik, High Priest of the western Grolims. Like Zedar, Ctuchik was a disciple of Torak, but the two had lived in enmity throughout the centuries. As Zedar crossed the barren mountains of Cthol Murgos, Ctuchik waited him in ambush and wrested from him the Orb of Aldur and the child whose innocence enabled him to touch the Orb and not die. Belgarath went ahead to seek out the trail of Zedar, but Beltira, another disciple of Aldur, gave him the news that Ctuchik now held the child and the Orb. The other companions went on to Nyissa, where Salmissra, Queen of the snake-loving people, had Garion seized and brought to her palace. But Polgara freed him and turned Salmissra into a serpent, to rule over the snake-people in that form forever.

When Belgarath rejoined his companions, he led the company on a difficult journey to the dark city of Rak Cthol, which was built atop a mountain in the desert of Murgos.

They accomplished the difficult climb to confront Ctuchik, who knew of their coming and awaited with the child and the Orb. Then Belgarath engaged Ctuchik in a duel of sorcery. But Ctuchik, hard-pressed, tried a forbidden spell, and it rebounded on him, destroying him so utterly that no trace of him remained.

The shock of his destruction tumbled Rak Cthol from its mountaintop. While the city of the Grolims shuddered into rubble, Garion snatched up the trusting child who bore the Orb and carried him to safety. They fled, with the hordes of Taur Urgas, King of the Murgos, pursuing them. But when they crossed into the lands of Algaria, the Algarians came against the Murgos and defeated them. Then at last, Belgarath could turn toward the Isle of the Winds to restore the Orb to its rightful place.

There in the Hall of the Rivan King at Erastide, the child whom they called Errand placed the Orb of Aldur into Garion's hand, and Garion stood on the throne to set it in its accustomed place on the pommel of the

great Sword of the Rivan King. As he did so, the Orb leaped into flame, and the sword blazed with cold blue fire. By these signs, all knew that Garion was indeed the true heir to the throne of Riva and they acclaimed him King of Riva, Overlord of the West, and the Keeper of the Orb.

Soon, in keeping with the Accords signed after the Battle of Vo Mimbire, the boy who had come from a humble farm in Sendaria to become the Rivan King was betrothed to the Princess Ce'Nedra. But before the wedding could take place, the voice of prophecy that was within his head urged him to go to the room of documents and there take down the copy of the Mrin Codex.

In that ancient prophecy, he discovered that he was destined to take up Riva's sword and go with it to confront the maimed God Torak and to slay or be slain, thereby to decide the fate of the world. For Torak had begun to end his long slumber with the crowning of Garion, and in this meeting must be determined which of the two opposing Necessities or prophecies would prevail.

Garion knew that he could marshal an army to invade the East with him. But though his heart was filled with fear, he determined that he alone should accept the danger. Only Belgarath and Silk accompanied him. In the early morning, they crept out of the Citadel of Riva and set out on the long northern journey to the dark ruins of the City of Night where Torak lay.

But the Princess Ce'Nedra went to the Kings of the West and persuaded them to join her in an effort to distract the forces of the Angaraks, so that Garion might win through safely. With the help of Polgara, she marched through Sendaria, Arendia, and Tolnedra, raising a mighty army to follow her and to engage the hosts of the East. They met on the plain surrounding the city of Thull Mardu. Caught between the forces of Emperor 'Zakath of Mallorean and those of the mad King of the Murgos, Taur Urgas, Ce'Nedra's army faced annihilation. But Cho-Hag, Chief of the Clan-Chiefs of Algaria, slew Taur Urgas; and the Nadrak King Drosta lek Thun changed sides, giving her forces time to withdraw.

Ce'Nedra, Polgara, Durnik, and the child Errand, however, were captured and sent to Zakath, who sent them on to the ruined city of Cthol Mishrak for Zedar to judge. Zedar slew Durnik, and it was to see Polgara weeping over his body that Garion arrived.

In a duel of sorcery, Belgarath sealed Zedar into the rocks far below the surface. But by then Torak had awakened fully.

The two destinies which had opposed each other since time began thus faced each other in the ruined City of Night. And there in the darkness, Garion, the Child of Light, slew Torak, the Child of Dark, with the flaming sword of the Rivan King, and the dark prophecy fled wailing into the void.

UL and the six living Gods came for the body of Torak.

And Polgara importuned them to bring Durnik back to life. Reluctantly they consented. But since it would not be mete for her so far to exceed Durnik's abilities, they gave to him the gift of sorcery.

Then all returned to the city of Riva. Belgarion married Ce'Nedra, and Polgara took Durnik as her husband.

The Orb was again in its rightful place to protect the West. And the war of Gods, kings, and men, which had endured for seven thousand years, was at an end.

Or so men thought.

PART ONE

THE VALE OF ALDUR

It was late spring. The rains had come and passed, and the frost had gone out of the ground. Warmed by the soft touch of the sun, damp brown fields lay open to the sky, covered only by a faint green blush as the first tender shoots emerged from their winter's sleep. Quite early one fine morning, when the air was still cool, but the sky gave promise of a golden day, the boy Errand, along with his family, left an inn lying in one of the quieter districts of the bustling port city of Camaar on the south coast of the kingdom of Sendaria.

Errand had never had a family before, and the sense of belonging was new to him. Everything around him seemed colored, overshadowed almost, by the fact that he was now included in a small, tightly knit group of people bound together by love. The purpose of the journey upon which they set out that spring morning was at once simple and very profound. They were going home. Just as he had not had a family before, Errand had never had a home; and, though he had never seen the cottage in the Vale of Aldur which was their destination, he nonetheless yearned toward that place as if its every stone and tree and bush had been imprinted upon his memory and imagination since the day he was born.

A brief rain squall had swept in off the Sea of the Winds about midnight and then had passed as quickly as it had come, leaving the gray, cobbled streets and tall, tile-roofed buildings of Camaar washed clean to greet the morning sun.

As they rolled slowly through the streets in the sturdy wagon which Durnik the smith, after much careful inspection, had bought two days earlier, Errand, riding burrowed amongst the bags of food and equipment which filled the wagon bed, could smell the faint, salt tang of the harbor and see the bluish morning cast in the shadows of the red-roofed buildings they passed. Durnik, of course, drove the wagon, his strong brown hands holding the reins in that competent way with which he did everything, transmitting somehow along those leather straps to the wagon team the comforting knowledge that he was completely in control and knew exactly what he was doing.

The stout, placid mare upon which Belgarath the Sorcerer rode, however, quite obviously did not share the comfortable security felt by the wagon horses. Belgarath, as he sometimes did, had stayed late in the taproom of the inn the previous night and he rode this morning slumped in the saddle, paying little or no heed to where he was going. The mare, also recently purchased, had not yet had the time to accustom herself to her new owner's peculiarities, and his almost aggressive inattention made her nervous. She rolled her eyes often, as if trying to determine if this immobile lump mounted on her back really intended for her to go along with the wagon or not.

Belgarath's daughter, known to the entire world as Polgara the Sorceress, viewed her father's semicomatose progress through the streets of Camaar with a steady gaze, reserving her comments for later. She sat beside Durnik, her husband of only a few weeks, wearing a hooded cape and a plain gray woolen dress. She had put aside the blue velvet gowns and jewels and rich, fur-trimmed capes which she had customarily worn while they had been at Riva and had assumed this simpler mode of dress as if almost with relief. Polgara was not averse to wearing finery when the occasion demanded it; and when so dressed, she appeared more regal than any queen in all the world. She had, however, an exquisite sense of the appropriate and she had dressed herself in these plain garments almost with delight, since they were appropriate to something she had wanted to do for uncounted centuries.

Unlike his daughter, Belgarath dressed entirely for comfort. The fact that his boots were mismatched was neither an indication of poverty nor of carelessness. It stemmed rather from conscious choice, since the left boot of one pair was comfortable upon his left foot and its mate pinched his toes, whereas his right boot - from another pair - was most satisfactory, while its companion chafed his heel. It was much the same with the rest of his clothing. He was indifferent to the patches on the knees of his hose, unconcerned by the fact that he was one of the few men in the world who used a length of soft rope for a belt, and quite content to wear a tunic so wrinkled and gravy-spotted that persons of only moderate fastidiousness would not even have considered using it for a scrub-rag.

The great oaken gates of Camaar stood open, for the war that had raged on the plains of Mishrak ac Thull, hundreds of leagues to the east, was over. The vast armies that had been raised by the Princess Ce'Nedra to fight that war had returned to their homes, and there was peace once more in the Kingdoms of the West. Belgarion, King of Riva and Overlord of the West, sat upon the throne in the Hall of the Rivan King with the Orb of Aldur once again in its proper place above his throne. The maimed God of Angarak was dead, and his eons-old threat to the West was gone forever.

The guards at the city gate paid scant attention to Errand's family as they passed, and so they left Camaar and set out upon the broad, straight imperial highway that stretched east toward Muros and the snow-topped mountains that separated Sendaria from the lands of the horse clans of Algaria.

Flights of birds wheeled and darted in the luminous air as the wagon team and the patient mare plodded up the long hill outside Camaar. The birds sang and trilled almost as if in greeting and hovered strangely on stuttering wings above the wagon. Polgara raised her flawless face in the clear, bright light to listen.

"What are they saying?" Durnik asked.

She smiled gently. "They're babbling," she replied in her rich voice. "Birds do that a great deal. In general they're happy that it's morning and that the sun is shining and that their nests have been built. Most of them want to talk about their eggs. Birds always want to talk about their eggs."

"And of course they're glad to see you, aren't they?"

"I suppose they are."

"Someday do you suppose you could teach me to understand what they're saying?"

She smiled at him. "If you wish. It's not a very practical thing to know, however."

"It probably doesn't hurt to know a few things that aren't practical," he replied with an absolutely straight face.

"Oh, my Durnik." She laughed, fondly putting her hand over his. "You're an absolute joy, do you know that?" Errand, riding just behind them among the bags and boxes and the tools Durnik had so carefully selected in Camaar, smiled, feeling that he was included in the deep, warm affection they shared. Errand was not used to affection. He had been raised, if that is the proper term, by Zedar the Apostate -a man who had looked much like Belgarath. Zedar had simply come across the little boy in a narrow alleyway in some forgotten city and had taken him along for a specific purpose. The boy had been fed and clothed, nothing more, and the only words his bleak-faced guardian had ever spoken to him were, "I have an errand for you, boy" Because those were the only words he had heard, the only word the child spoke when he had been found by these others was "Errand." And since they did not know what else to call him, that had become his name.

When they reached the top of the long hill, they paused for a few moments to allow the wagon horses to catch their breath. From his comfortable perch in the wagon, Errand looked out over the broad expanse of neatly walled fields lying pale green in the long, slanting rays of the morning sun.

Then he turned and looked back toward Camaar with its red roofs and its sparkling blue-green harbor filled with the ships of a half-dozen kingdoms.

"Are you warm enough?" Polgara asked him.

Errand nodded. "Yes," he said, "thank you." The words were coming more easily to him now, though he still spoke but rarely.

Belgarath lounged in his saddle, absently rubbing at his short white beard. His eyes were slightly bleary, and he squinted as if the morning sunlight was painful to him. "I sort of like to start out a journey in the sunshine," he said. "It always seems to bode well for the rest of the trip." Then he grimaced. "I don't know that it needs to be this bright, however."

"Are we feeling a bit delicate this morning, father?" Polgara asked him archly.

He turned to regard his daughter, his face set. "Why don't you go ahead and say it, Pol? I'm sure you won't be happy until you do."

"Why, father," she said, her glorious eyes wide with feigned innocence, "what makes you think I was going to say anything?"

He grunted.

"I'm sure you realize by now all by yourself that you drank a bit too much ale last night," she continued. "You don't need me to tell you that, do you?"

"I'm not really in the mood for any of this, Polgara," he told her shortly.

"Oh, poor old dear," she said in mock commiseration. "Would you like to have me stir something up to make you feel better?"

"Thank you, but no," he replied. "The aftertaste of your concoctions lingers for days. I think I prefer the headache."

"If a medicine doesn't taste bad, it isn't working," she told him. She pushed back the hood of the cape she wore. Her hair was long, very dark, and touched just over her left brow with a single lock of snowy white. "I did warn you, father," she said relentlessly.

"Polgara," he said, wincing, "do you suppose we could skip the 'I told you so?' "

"You heard me warn him, didn't you, Durnik?" Polgara asked her husband.

Durnik was obviously trying not to laugh.

The old man sighed, then reached inside his tunic and took out a small flagon. He uncorked it with his teeth and took a long drink. .

"Oh, father," Polgara said disgustedly, "didn't you get enough last night?"

"Not if this conversation is going to linger on this particular subject, no." He held out the flagon to his daughter's husband. "Durnik?" he offered.

"Thanks all the same, Belgarath," Durnik replied, "but it's a bit early for me."

"Pol?" Belgarath said then, offering a drink to his daughter.

"Don't be absurd."

"As you wish." Belgarath shrugged, recorking the bottle and tucking it away again. "Shall we move along then?" he suggested. "It's a very long way to the Vale of Aldur." And he nudged his horse into a walk.

Just before the wagon rolled down on the far side of the hill, Errand looked back toward Camaar and saw a detachment of mounted men coming out through the gate. Glints and flashes of reflected sunlight said quite clearly that at least some of the garments the men wore were made of polished steel. Errand considered mentioning the fact, but decided not to. He settled back again and looked up at the deep blue sky dotted with puffy white clouds. Errand liked mornings.

In the morning a day was always full of promise. The disappointments usually did not start until later.

The soldiers who had ridden out of Camaar caught up with them before they had gone another mile. The commander of the detachment was a sober-faced Sendarian officer with only one arm. As his troops fell in behind the wagon, he rode up alongside.

"Your Grace," he greeted Polgara formally with a stiff little bow from his saddle.

"General Brendig," she replied with a brief nod of acknowledgment. "You're up early."

"Soldiers are almost always up early, your Grace."

"Brendig," Belgarath said rather irritably, "is this some kind of coincidence, or are you following us on purpose?"

"Sendaria is a very orderly kingdom, Ancient One," Brendig answered blandly. "We try to arrange things so that coincidences don't happen."

"I thought so," Belgarath said sourly. "What's Fulrach up to now?"

"His Majesty merely felt that an escort might be appropriate."

"I know the way, Brendig. I've made the trip a few times before, after all."

"I'm sure of it, Ancient Belgarath," Brendig agreed politely. "The escort has to do with friendship and respect."

"I take it then that you're going to insist?"

"Orders are orders, Ancient One."

"Could we skip the 'Ancient?' " Belgarath asked plaintively.

"My father's feeling his years this morning, General." Polgara smiled, "All seven thousand of them."

Brendig almost smiled. "Of course, your Grace."

"Just why are we being so formal this morning, my Lord Brendig?" she asked him. "I'm sure we know each other well enough to skip all that nonsense."

Brendig looked at her quizzically. "You remember when we first met?" he asked.

"As I recall, that was when you were arresting us, wasn't it?" Durnik asked with a slight grin.

"Well-" Brendig coughed uncomfortably, "-not exactly, Goodman Durnik. I was really just conveying his Majesty's invitation to you to visit him at the palace. At any rate, Lady Polgara -your esteemed wife- was posing as the Duchess of Erat, you may remember."

"Durnik nodded. "I believe she was, yes."

"I had occasion recently to look into some old books of heraldry and I discovered something rather remarkable. Were you aware, Goodman Durnik, that your wife really is the Duchess of Erat?"

Durnik blinked. "Pol?" he said incredulously.

Polgara shrugged. "I'd almost forgotten," she said. "It was a very long time ago."

"Your title, nonetheless, is still valid, your Grace," Brendig assured her. "Every landholder in the District of Erat pays a small tithe each year into an account that's being held in Sendar for you."

"How tiresome," she said.

"Wait a minute, Pol," Belgarath said sharply, his eyes suddenly very alert. "Brendig, just how big is this account of my daughter's -in round figures?"

"Several million, as I understand it," Brendig replied.

"Well," Belgarath said, his eyes going wide. "Well, well, well."

Polgara gave him a level gaze. "What have you got in your mind, father?" she asked him pointedly.

"It's just that I'm pleased for you, Pol," he said expansively. "Any father would be happy to know that his child has done so well." He turned back to Brendig. "Tell me, General, just who's managing my daughter's fortune?"

"It's supervised by the crown, Belgarath," Brendig replied.

"That's an awful burden to lay on poor Fulrach," Belgarath said thoughtfully, "considering all his other responsibilities. Perhaps I ought to-"

"Never mind, Old Wolf," Polgara said firmly.

"I just thought-"

"Yes, father. I know what you thought. The money's fine right where it is."

Belgarath sighed. "I've never been rich before," he said wistfully.

"Then you won't really miss it, will you?"

"You're a hard woman, Polgara -to leave your poor old father sunk in deprivation like this."

"You've lived without money or possessions for thousands of years, father. Somehow I'm almost positive that you'll survive."

"How did you get to be the Duchess of Erat?" Durnik asked his wife.

"I did the Duke of Vo Wacune a favor," she replied. "It was something that no one else could do. He was very grateful."

Durnik looked stunned. "But Vo Wacune was destroyed thousands of years ago," he protested.

"Yes. I know."

"I think I'm going to have trouble getting used to all this."

"You knew that I wasn't like other women," she said.

"Yes, but-"

"Does it really matter to you how old I am? Does it change anything?"

"No," he said immediately, "not a thing."

"Then don't worry about it."

They moved in easy stages across southern Sendaria, stopping each night at the solid, comfortable hostels operated by the Tolnedran legionnaires who patrolled and maintained the imperial highway and arriving in Muros on the afternoon of the third day after their departure from Camaar. Vast cattle herds from Algaria were already filling the acre upon acre of pens lying to the east of the city, and the cloud of dust raised by their milling hooves blotted out the sky. Muros was not a comfortable town during the season of the cattle drives. It was hot, dirty, and noisy. Belgarath suggested that they pass it up and stop for the night in the mountains where the air would be less dust-clogged and the neighbors less rowdy.

"Are you planning to accompany us all the way to the Vale?" he asked General Brendig after they had passed the cattle pens and were moving along the Great North Road toward the mountains.

"Ah -no, actually, Belgarath," Brendig replied, peering ahead at a band of Algar horsemen approaching along the highway. "As a matter of fact, I'll be turning back about now."

The leader of the Algar riders was a tall, hawk-faced man in leather clothing, with a raven-black scalp lock flowing behind him. When he reached the wagon, he reined in his horse.

"General Brendig," he said in a quiet voice, nodding to the Sendarian officer.

"My Lord Hettar," Brendig replied pleasantly.

"What are you doing here, Hettar?" Belgarath demanded.

Hettar's eyes went very wide. "I just brought a cattle herd across the mountains, Belgarath," he said innocently. "I'll be going back now and I thought you might like some company."

"How strange that you just happen to be here at this particular time."

"Isn't it, though?" Hettar looked at Brendig and winked.

"Are we playing games?" Belgarath asked the pair of them. "I don't need supervision and I definitely don't need a military escort every place I go. I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself."

Durnik went to the wagon and took a coil.

"We all know that, Belgarath," Hettar said placatingly. He looked at the wagon. "It's nice to see you again, Polgara," he said pleasantly. Then he gave Durnik a rather sly look. "Married life agrees with you, my friend," he added. "I think you've put on a few pounds."

"I'd say that your wife has been adding a few extra spoonfuls to your plate as well." Durnik grinned at his friend.

"Is it starting to show?" Hettar asked.

Durnik nodded gravely. "Just a bit," he said.

Hettar made a rueful face and then gave Errand a peculiar little wink. Errand and Hettar had always got on well together, probably because neither of them felt any pressing need to fill up the silence with random conversation.

"I'll be leaving you now," Brendig said. "It's been a pleasant journey." He bowed to Polgara and nodded to Hettar. And then, with his detachment of troops jingling along behind him, he rode back toward Muros.

"I'm going to have words with Fulrach about this," Belgarath said darkly to Hettar, "and with your father, too."

"It's one of the prices of immortality, Belgarath," Hettar said blandly. "People tend to respect you -even when you'd rather they didn't. Shall we go?"

The mountains of eastern Sendaria were not so high as to make travel across them unpleasant. With the fierce-looking Algar clansmen riding both to the front and to the rear of the wagon, they traveled at an easy pace along the Great North Road through the deep green forests and beside mountain streams. At one point, when they had stopped to rest their horses, Durnik stepped down from the wagon and walked to the edge of the road to gaze speculatively at a deep pool at the foot of a small, churning waterfall.

"Are we in any particular hurry?" he asked Belgarath.

"Not really. Why?"

"I just thought that this might be a pleasant place to stop for our noon meal," the smith said artlessly.

Belgarath looked around. "If you want, I suppose it's all right."

"Good."

With that same slightly absent look on his face, Durnik went to the wagon and took a coil of thin, waxed cord from one of the bags. He carefully tied a hook decorated with some brightly colored yarn to one end of the cord and began looking about for a slender, springy sapling. Five minutes later he was standing on a boulder that jutted out into the pool, making long casts into the turbulent water just at the foot of the falls. Errand drifted down to the edge of the stream to watch.

Durnik was casting into the center of the main flow of the current so that the swiftly moving green water pulled his lure down deep into the pool.

After about a half an hour, Polgara called to them. "Errand, Durnik, your lunch is ready"

"Yes, dear" Durnik replied absently. "In a moment."

Errand obediently went back up to the wagon, though his eyes yearned back toward the rushing water.

Polgara gave him one brief, understanding look, then laid the meat and cheese she had sliced for him on a piece of bread so that he could carry his lunch back to the stream bank.

"Thank you," he said simply.

Durnik continued his fishing, his face still intent. Polgara came down to the water's edge. "Durnik," she called. "Lunch."

"Yes," he replied, not taking his eyes off the water. "I'm coming." He made another cast.

Polgara sighed. "Oh, well," she said. "I suppose every man needs at least one vice."

After about another half-hour, Durnik looked baffled. He jumped from his boulder to the stream bank and stood scratching his head and staring in perplexity at the swirling water. "I know they're in there," he said to Errand. "I can almost feel them."

"Here," Errand said, pointing down at the deep, slow moving eddy near the bank.

"I think they'd be farther out, Errand," Durnik replied doubtfully.

"Here," Errand repeated, pointing again.

Durnik shrugged. "If you say so," he said dubiously, flipping his lure out into the eddy. "I still think they'd be out in the main current, though."

And then his pole bent sharply into a tense, quivering bow. He caught four trout in rapid succession, thick, heavy-bodied trout with silvery, speckled sides and curved jaws filled with needlelike teeth.

"Why did it take you so long to find the right spot?" Belgarath asked later that afternoon when they were back on the highway.

"You have to work that kind of pool methodically, Belgarath," Durnik explained. "You start at one side and work your way across, cast by cast."

"I see."

"It's the only way to be really sure you've covered it all."

"Of course."

"I was fairly sure where they were lying, though."

"Naturally."

"It was just that I wanted to do it the right way. I'm sure you understand."

"Perfectly," Belgarath said gravely.

After they had passed through the mountains, they turned south, riding through the vast grasslands of the Algarian plain where herds of cattle and horses grazed in that huge green sea of grass that rippled and swayed under the steady easterly breeze. Although Hettar strongly urged them to stop by the Stronghold of the Algar clans, Polgara declined. "Tell Cho-Hag and Silar that we may visit later," she said, "but we really should get to the Vale. It's probably going to take most of the summer to make my mother's house habitable again."

Hettar nodded gravely and then waved a brief salute as he and his clansmen turned eastward and rode off across the rolling grasslands toward the mountainlike Stronghold of his father, Cho-Hag, Chief of the Clan-Chiefs of Algaria.

The cottage that had belonged to Polgara's mother lay in a valley among the rolling hills marking the northern edge of the Vale of Aldur. A sparkling stream flowed through the sheltered hollow, and there were woods, birch intermixed with cedar, stretching along the valley floor. The cottage was constructed of fieldstone, gray, russet, and earthy-brown, all neatly fitted together. It was a broad, low building, considerably larger than the word "cottage" suggested. It had not been occupied for well over three thousand years, and the thatching and the doors and windowframes had long since surrendered to the elements, leaving the shell of the house standing, bramble-filled and unroofed to the sky.

There was, nonetheless, a peculiar sense of waiting about it, as if Poledra, the woman who had lived here, had instilled in the very stones the knowledge that one day her daughter would return. They arrived in the middle of a golden afternoon, and Errand, lulled by a creaking wheel, had drifted into a doze. When the wagon stopped, Polgara shook him gently awake. "Errand," she said, "we're here." He opened his eyes and looked for the first time at the place he would forever call home. He saw the weathered shell of the cottage nestled in the tall green grass. He saw the woods beyond, with the white trunks of the birch trees standing out among the dark green cedars, and he saw the stream. The place had enormous possibilities. He realized that at once. The stream, of course, was perfect for sailing toy boats, for skipping stones, and, in the event of failing inspiration, for falling into. Several of the trees appeared to have been specifically designed for climbing, and one huge, white old birch overhanging the stream promised the exhilarating combination of climbing a tree and falling into the water, all at one time.

The land upon which their wagon had stopped was a long hill sloping gently down toward the cottage. It was the kind of a hilldown which a boy could run on a day when the sky was a deep blue dotted with dandelion-puff clouds racing in the breeze. The knee-high grass would be lush in the sun, and the turf damply firm underfoot; the rush of sweet-smelling air as one ran down that long slope would be intoxicating. And then he felt quite keenly a sense of deep sorrow, a sorrow which had endured unchanged for century upon century, and he turned to look at Belgarath's weathered face and the single tear coursing down the old man's furrowed cheek, to disappear in his close-cropped white beard.

In spite of Belgarath's sorrow for his lost wife, Errand looked out at this small, green valley with its trees and its stream and its lush meadow with a deep and abiding contentment. He smiled and said, "Home," trying the word and liking the sound of it.

Polgara looked gravely into his face. Her eyes were very large, and luminous, and their color changed with her mood, ranging from a light blue so pale as to be virtually gray to a deep lavender. "Yes, Errand," she replied in her vibrant voice. "Home." Then she put her arms about him to hold him softly, and there was in that gentle embrace all the yearning toward this place which had filled her down through the weary centuries that she and her father had labored at their task.

Durnik the smith looked thoughtfully at the hollow spread below in the warm sunshine, considering, planning, arranging and rearranging things in his mind. "It's going to take a while to get everything the way we want it, Pol," he said to his bride.

"We have all the time in the world, Durnik," Polgara replied with a gentle smile.

"I'll help you unload the wagon and set up your tents," Belgarath said, scratching absently at his beard.

"Then tomorrow I suppose I ought to go on down into the Vale -have a talk with Beldin and the twins, look in on my tower- that sort of thing."

Polgara gave him a long, steady look. "Don't be in such a hurry to leave, father," she told him. "You talked with Beldin just last month at Riva and on any number of occasions you've gone for decades without visiting your tower. I've noticed that every time there's work to be done, you suddenly have pressing business someplace else."

Belgarath's face assumed an expression of injured innocence. "Why, Polgara-" he started to protest.

"That won't work either, father," she told him crisply. "A few weeks -or a month or two- of helping Durnik isn't going to injure you permanently. Or did you plan to leave us abandoned to the winter snows?"

Belgarath looked with some distaste at the shell of the house standing at the foot of the hill, with the hours of toil it was going to take to make it livable stamped all over it.

"Why, of course, Pol," he said somewhat too quickly. "I'd happy to stay and lend a hand."

"I knew we could depend on you, father," she said sweetly.

Belgarath looked critically at Durnik, trying to assess the strength of the smith's convictions. "I hope you weren't intending to do everything by hand," he said tentatively.

"What I mean is -well, we do have certain alternatives available to us, you know."

Durnik looked a little uncomfortable, his plain, honest face touched with the faintest hint of a disapproving expression. "I-uh-I really don't know, Belgarath," he said dubiously. "I don't believe that I'd really feel right about that. If I do it by hand, then I'll know that it's been done properly. I'm not all that comfortable with this other way of doing things yet. Somehow it seems like cheating -if you get what I mean."

Belgarath sighed. "Somehow I was afraid you might look at it that way." He shook his head and squared his shoulders.

"All right, let's go on down there and get started."

It took about a month to dig the accumulated debris of three eons out of the corners of the house, to reframe the doors and windows and to re-beam and thatch the roof. It would have taken twice as long had Belgarath

not cheated outrageously each time Durnik's back was turned. All manner of tedious tasks somehow performed themselves whenever the smith was not around. Once, for example, Durnik took out the wagon to bring in more timbers; as soon as he was out of sight, Belgarath tossed aside the adze with which he had been laboriously squaring off a beam, looked gravely at Errand, and reached inside his jerkin for the earthenware jar of ale he had filched from Polgara's stores. He took a long drink and then he directed the force of his will at the stubborn beam and released it with a single muttered word.

An absolute blizzard of white wood chips went flying in all directions. When the beam was neatly squared, the old man looked at Errand with a self-satisfied smirk and winked impishly. With a perfectly straight face, Errand winked back.

The boy had seen sorcery performed before. Zedar the Apostate had been a sorcerer, and so had Ctuchik. Indeed, throughout almost his entire life the boy had been in the care of people with that peculiar gift. Not one of the others, however, had that air of casual competence, that verve, with which Belgarath performed his art. The old man's offhand way of making the impossible seem so easy that it was hardly worth mentioning was the mark of the true virtuoso. Errand knew how it was done, of course. No one can possibly spend that much time with assorted sorcerers without picking up the theory, at least. The ease with which Belgarath made things happen almost tempted him to try it himself; but whenever he considered the idea, he realized that there wasn't really anything he wanted to do that badly.

The things the boy learned from Durnik, while more commonplace, were nonetheless very nearly as profound. Errand saw almost immediately that there was virtually nothing the smith could not do with his hands. He was familiar with almost every known tool. He could work in wood and stone as readily as in iron and brass. He could build a house or a chair or a bed with equal facility. As Errand watched closely, he picked up the hundreds of little tricks and knacks that separated the craftsman from the bumbling amateur. Polgara dealt with all domestic matters. The tents in which they slept while the cottage was being readied were as neatly kept as any house. The bedding was aired daily, meals were prepared, and laundry was hung out to dry. On one occasion Belgarath, who had come to beg or steal more ale, looked critically at his daughter, who was humming contentedly to herself as she cut up some recently cooked-down soap.

"Pol," he said acidly, "you're the most powerful woman in the world. You've got more titles than you can count, and there's not a king in the world who doesn't bow to you automatically. Can you tell me exactly why you find it necessary to make soap that way? It's hard work, hot work, and the smell is awful."

She looked calmly at her father. "I've spent thousands of years being the most powerful woman in the world, Old Wolf," she replied. "Kings have been bowing to me for centuries, and I've lost track of all the titles. This is, however, the very first time I've ever married. You and I were always too busy for that. I've wanted to be married, though, and I've spent my whole life practicing. I know everything a good wife needs to know and I can do everything a good wife needs to do. Please don't criticize me, father, and please don't interfere. I've never been so happy in my life."

"Making soap?"

"That's part of it, yes."

"It's such a waste of time," he said. He gestured negligently, and a cake of soap that had not been there before joined the ones she had already made.

"Father!" she said, stamping her foot. "You stop that this minute!"

He picked up two cakes of soap, one his and one hers. "Can you really tell me the difference between them, Pol?"

"Mine was made with love; yours is just a trick."

"It's still going to get clothes just as clean."

"Not mine, it won't," she said, taking the cake of soap out of his hand. She held it up, balanced neatly on her palm. Then she blew on it with a slight puff, and it instantly vanished.

"That's a little silly, Pol," he told her.

"Being silly at times runs in my family, I think," she replied calmly. "Just go back to your own work, father, and leave me to mine."

"You're almost as bad as Durnik is," he accused her.

She nodded with a contented smile. "I know. That's probably why I married him."

"Come along, Errand," Belgarath said to the boy as he turned to leave. "This sort of thing might be contagious, and I wouldn't want you to catch it."

"Oh," she said. "One other thing, father. Stay out of my stores. If you want a jar of ale, ask me."

Assuming a lofty expression, Belgarath strode away without answering. As soon as they were around the corner, however, Errand pulled a brown jar from inside his tunic and wordlessly gave it to the old man.

"Excellent, my boy." Belgarath grinned. "You see how easy it is, once you get the hang of it?"

Throughout that summer and well into the long, golden autumn which followed it, the four of them worked to make the cottage habitable and weathertight for the winter. Errand did what he could to help, though more often than not his help consisted primarily of providing company while keeping out from underfoot.

When the snows came, the entire world seemed somehow to change. More than ever before, the isolated cottage became a warm, safe haven. The central room, where they took their meals and where they all sat in the long evenings, faced a huge stone fireplace that provided both warmth and light.

Errand, whose time was spent out of doors on all but the most bitterly cold days, was usually drowsy during those golden, firelit hours between supper and bedtime and he often lay on a fur rug before the fire and gazed into the dancing flames until his eyes slowly closed. And later he waked in the cool darkness of his own room with warm, down-filled coverlets tucked up under his chin and he knew that Polgara had quietly carried him in and put him to bed. And he sighed happily and went back to sleep.

Durnik made him a sled, of course, and the long hill which ran down into the valley was perfect for sledding. The snow was not deep enough to make the runners of the sled bog down, and Errand was able to coast amazing distances across the meadow at the bottom of the hill because of the terrific momentum built up as he slid down the slope.

The absolute cap of the entire sledding season came late one biting cold afternoon, just after the sun had dropped into a bank of purple clouds on the western horizon and the sky had turned to a pale, icy turquoise. Errand trudged up the hill through the frozen snow, pulling his sled behind him.

When he reached the top, he stopped for a moment to catch his breath. The thatched cottage below nestled in the surrounding snowbanks with the light from its windows golden and the column of pale blue smoke rising from its chimney as straight as an arrow into the dead calm air.

Errand smiled, lay down on his sled, and pushed off. The combination of circumstances was perfect for sledding.

There was not even a breeze to impede his rapid descent, and he gathered astounding speed on his way down the hill.

He flew across the meadow and in among the trees. The white-barked birches and dark, shadowy cedars flashed by as he sped through the woods. He might have gone even farther had the stream not been in his way. And even that conclusion to the ride was fairly exciting, since the bank of the stream was several feet high and Errand and his sled sailed out over the dark water in a long, graceful arc which ended abruptly in a spectacular, icy splash.

Polgara spoke to him at some length when he arrived home, shivering and with ice beginning to form up on his clothing and in his hair. Polgara, he noticed, tended to overdramatize things -particularly when an opportunity presented itself for her to speak to someone about his shortcomings. She took one long look at him and immediately fetched a vile-tasting medicine, which she spooned into him liberally. Then she began to pull off his frozen clothing, commenting extensively as she did so. She had an excellent speaking voice and a fine command of language. Her intonations and inflections added whole volumes of meaning to her commentary. On the whole, however, Errand would have preferred a shorter, somewhat less exhaustive discussion of his most recent misadventure -particularly in view of the fact that Belgarath and Durnik were both trying without much success to conceal broad grins as Polgara spoke to him while simultaneously rubbing him down with a large, rough towel.

"Well," Durnik observed, "at least he won't need a bath this week."

Polgara stopped drying the boy and slowly turned to gaze at her husband. There was nothing really threatening in her expression, but her eyes were frosty. "You said something?" she asked him.

"Uh-no, dear," he hastily assured her. "Not really." He looked at Belgarath a bit uncomfortably, then he rose to his feet. "Perhaps I'd better bring in some firewood," he said.

One of Polgara's eyebrows went up, and her gaze moved on to her father. "Well?" she said.

He blinked, his face a study in total innocence.

Her expression did not change, but the silence became ominous, oppressive.

"Why don't I give you a hand, Durnik?" the old man suggested finally, also getting up. Then the two of them went outside, leaving Errand alone with Polgara.

She turned back to him. "You slid all the way down the hill," she asked quite calmly, "and clear across the meadow?"

He nodded.

"And then through the woods?"

He nodded again.

"And then off the bank and into the stream?"

"Yes, ma'am," he admitted.

"I don't suppose it occurred to you to roll off the sled before it went over the edge and into the water?"

Errand was not really a very talkative boy, but he felt that his position in this affair needed a bit of explanation. "Well," he began, "I didn't really think of rolling off -but I don't think I would have, even if I had thought of it."

"I'm sure there's an explanation for that."

He looked at her earnestly. "Everything had gone so splendidly up until then that -well, it just wouldn't have seemed right to get off just because a few things started to go wrong."

There was a long pause. "I see," she said at last, her expression grave. "Then it was in the nature of a moral decision -this riding the sled all the way into the stream?"

"I suppose you might say that, yes."

She looked at him steadily for a moment and then slowly sank her face into her hands. "I'm not entirely certain that I have the strength to go through all of this again," she said in a tragic voice.

"Through what?" he asked, slightly alarmed.

"Raising Garion was almost more than I could bear," she replied, "but not even he could have come up with a more illogical reason for doing something." Then she looked at him, laughed fondly, and put her arms about him. "Oh, Errand," she said, pulling him tightly to her, and everything was all right again.

CHAPTER TWO

Belgarath the Sorcerer was a man with many flaws in his character. He had never been fond of physical labor and he was perhaps a bit too fond of dark brown ale. He was occasionally careless about the truth and had a certain grand indifference to some of the finer points of property ownership. The company of ladies of questionable reputation did not particularly offend his sensibilities, and his choice of language very frequently left much to be desired.

Polgara the Sorceress was a woman of almost inhuman determination and she had spent several thousand years trying to reform her vagrant father, but without much notable success. She persevered, however, in the face of overwhelming odds. Down through the centuries she had fought a valiant rearguard action against his bad habits. She had regretfully surrendered on the points of indolence and shabbiness. She grudgingly gave ground on swearing and lying.

She remained adamant, however, even despite repeated defeats, on the points of drunkenness, thievery, and wenching.

She felt for some peculiar reason that it was her duty to fight on those issues to the very death. Since Belgarath put off his return to his tower in the Vale of Aldur until the following spring, Errand was able to witness at close hand those endless and unbelievably involuted skirmishes between father and daughter with which they filled the periodic quiet spaces in their lives. Polgara's comments about the lazy old man's lounging about in her kitchen, soaking up the heat from her fireplace and the well-chilled ale from her stores with almost equal facility, were pointed, and Belgarath's smooth evasions revealed centuries of highly polished skill. Errand, however, saw past those waspish remarks and blandly flippant replies. The bonds between Belgarath and his daughter were so profound that they went far beyond what others might conceivably understand, and so, over the endless years, they found it necessary to conceal their boundless love for each other behind this endless façade of contention. This is not to say that Polgara might not have preferred a more upstanding father, but she was not quite as disappointed in him as her observations sometimes indicated.

They both knew why Belgarath sat out the winter in Poledra's cottage with his daughter and her husband. Though not one word of the matter had ever passed between them, they knew that the memories the old man had of this house needed to be changed -not erased certainly, for no power on earth could erase Belgarath's memories of his wife, but rather they needed to be altered slightly so that this thatched cottage might also remind the old man of happy hours spent here, as well as that bleak and terrible day when he had returned to find that his beloved Poledra had died.

After the snow had been cut away by a week of warm spring rains and the sky had turned blue once again, Belgarath at last decided that it was time to take up his interrupted journey. "I don't really have anything pressing," he admitted, "but I'd like to look in on Beldin and the twins, and it might be a good time to tidy up my tower. I've sort of let that slide over the past few hundred years."

"If you'd like, we could go along," Polgara offered. "After all, you did help with the cottage -not enthusiastically, perhaps, but you did help. It only seems right that we help you with cleaning your tower." "Thanks all the same, Pol," he declined firmly, "but your idea of cleaning tends to be a bit too drastic for my taste. Things that might be important later on have a way of winding up on the dust heap when you clean. As long as there's a clear space somewhere in the center, a room is clean enough for me."

"Oh, father"" she said, laughing, "you never change."

"Of course not," he replied. He looked thoughtfully over at Errand, who was quietly eating his breakfast. "If it's all right, though," he said, "I'll take the boy with me."

She gave him a quick look.

Belgarath shrugged. "He's company and he might enjoy a change of scenery. Besides, you and Durnik haven't really had a chance to be alone since your wedding day. Call it a belated present if you want."

She looked at him. "Thank you, father," she said simply, and her eyes were suddenly very warm and filled with affection.

Belgarath looked away, almost as if her look embarrassed him. "Did you want your things? From the tower, I mean. You've left quite a few trunks and boxes there at one time or another over the years."

"Why, that's very nice of you, father."

"I need the space they're taking up," he said. Then he grinned at her.

"You will watch the boy, won't you? I know your mind sometimes wanders when you start puttering around in your tower."

"He'll be fine with me, Pol," the old man assured her.

And so the following morning Belgarath mounted his horse, and Durnik boosted Errand up behind him. "I'll bring him home in a few weeks," Belgarath said. "Or at least by midsummer." He leaned down, shook Durnik's hand, and then turned his mount toward the south.

The air was still cool, although the early spring sunshine was very bright. The scents of stirring growth were in the air, and Errand, riding easily behind Belgarath, could feel Aldur's presence as they pressed deeper into the Vale. He felt it as a calm and gentle kind of awareness, and it was dominated by an overpowering desire to know. The presence of the God Aldur here in the Vale was not some vague spiritual permeation, but rather was quite sharp, on the very edge of being palpable.

They moved on down into the Vale, riding at an easy pace through the tall, winter-browned grass. Broad trees dotted the open expanse, lifting their crowns to the sky, holding the tips of their branches, swollen with the urgency of budding leaves, up to receive the gentle kiss of sun-warmed air.

"Well, boy?" Belgarath said after they had ridden a league or more.

"Where are the towers?" Errand asked politely.

"A bit farther. How did you know about the towers?"

"You and Polgara spoke of them."

"Eavesdropping is a very bad habit, Errand."

"Was it a private conversation?"

"No, I suppose not."

"Then it wasn't eavesdropping, was it?"

Belgarath turned sharply, looking over his shoulder at the boy riding behind him. "That's a pretty fine distinction for somebody as young as you are. How did you arrive at it?"

Errand shrugged. "It just came to me. Do they always graze here like that?" He pointed at a dozen or so reddishbrown deer feeding calmly nearby.

"They have done so ever since I can remember. There's something about Aldur's presence that keeps animals from molesting each other."

They passed a pair of graceful towers linked by a peculiar, almost airy bridge arching between them, and Belgarath told him that they belonged to Beltira and Belkira, the twin sorcerers whose minds were so closely linked that they inevitably completed each other's sentences. A short while later they rode by a tower so delicately constructed of rose quartz that it seemed almost to float like a pink jewel in the lambent air. This tower, Belgarath told him, belonged to the hunchbacked Beldin, who had surrounded his own ugliness with a beauty so exquisite that it snatched one's breath away.

At last they reached Belgarath's own squat, functional tower and dismounted. "Well," the old man said, "here we are. Let's go up."

The room at the top of the tower was large, round, and incredibly cluttered. As he looked around at it, Belgarath's eyes took on a defeated look. "This is going to take weeks," he muttered.

A great many things in the room attracted Errand's eye, but he knew that, in Belgarath's present mood, the old man would not be inclined to show him or explain to him much of anything. He located the fireplace, found a tarnished brass scoop and a short-handled broom, and knelt in front of the cavernous, soot-darkened opening.

"What are you doing?" Belgarath asked.

"Durnik says that the first thing you should do in a new place is get a spot ready for your fire."

"Oh, he does, does he?"

"It's not usually a very big chore, but it gets you started and once you get started, the rest of the job doesn't look so big. Durnik's very wise about things like that. Do you have a pail or a dust bin of some kind?"

"You're going to insist on cleaning the fireplace?"

"Well -if you don't mind too much. It is pretty dirty, don't you think?"

Belgarath sighed. "Pol and Durnik have corrupted you already, boy," he said. "I tried to save you, but a bad influence like that always wins out in the end."

"I suppose you're right," Errand agreed. "Where did you say that pail was?"

By evening they had cleared a semicircular area around the fireplace, finding in the process a couple of couches, several chairs, and a sturdy table.

"I don't suppose you have anything to eat stored anyplace?" Errand said wistfully. His stomach told him that it was definitely moving on toward suppertime.

Belgarath looked up from a parchment scroll he had just fished out from under one of the couches. "What?" he asked. "Oh yes. I'd almost forgotten. We'll go visit the twins. They're bound to have something on the fire."

"Do they know we're coming?"

Belgarath shrugged. "That doesn't really matter, Errand. You must learn that that's what friends and family are for -to be imposed upon. One of the cardinal rules, if you want to get through life without overexerting yourself, is that, when all else fails, fall back on friends and relations."

The twin sorcerers, Beltira and Belkira, were overjoyed to see them, and the "something on the fire" turned out to be a savory stew that was at least as good as one that might have emerged from Polgara's kitchen. When Errand commented on that, Belgarath looked amused. "Who do think taught her how to cook?" he asked.

It was not until several days later, when the cleaning of Belgarath's tower had progressed to the point where the floor was receiving its first scrubbing in a dozen or more centuries, that Beldin finally stopped by.

"What are you doing, Belgarath?" the filthy, misshapen hunchback demanded. Beldin was very short, dressed in battered rags, and he was gnarled like an old oak stump. His hair and beard were matted, and twigs and bits of straw clung to him in various places.

"Just a little cleaning," Belgarath replied, looking almost embarrassed.

"What for?" Beldin asked. "It's just going to get dirty again." He looked at a number of very old bones lying along the curved wall. "What you really ought to do is render down your floor for soup stock."

"Did you come by to visit or just to be disagreeable?"

"I saw the smoke from your chimney. I wanted to see if anybody was here or if all this litter had just taken fire spontaneously."

Errand knew that Belgarath and Beldin were genuinely fond of each other and that this banter between them was one of their favorite forms of entertainment. He continued with the work he was doing even as he listened.

"Would you like some ale?" Belgarath asked.

"Not if you brewed it," Beldin replied ungraciously. "You'd think that a man who drinks as much as you do have learned how to make decent ale by now."

"That last batch wasn't so bad," Belgarath protested.

"I've run across stump water that tasted better."

"Quit worrying. I borrowed this keg from the twins."

"Did they know you were borrowing it?"

"What difference does that make? We all share everything anyway."

One of Beldin's shaggy eyebrows raised. "They share food and drink, and you share your appetite and thirst. I suppose that works out."

"Of course it does." Belgarath turned with a slightly pained look. "Errand, do you have to do that?"

Errand looked up from the flagstones he was industriously scrubbing "Does it bother you?" he asked.

"Of course it bothers me. Don't you know that it's terribly impolite to keep working like that when I'm resting?"

"I'll try to remember that. How long do you expect that you'll be resting?"

"Just put the brush down, Errand," Belgarath told him. "That patch of floor has been dirty for a dozen centuries at least, another day or so isn't going to matter all that much."

"He's a great deal like Belgarion was, isn't he?" Beldin said, sprawling in one of the chairs near the fire.

"It probably has something to do with Polgara's influence," Belgarath agreed, drawing two tankards of ale from keg. "She leaves marks on every boy she meets. I try to moderate the effects of her prejudices as much as possible, though." He looked gravely at Errand. "I think this one is smarter than Garion was, but he doesn't seem to have Garion's sense of adventure -and he's just a bit too well behaved."

"I'm sure you'll be able to work on that."

Belgarath settled himself into another chair and pushed his feet out toward the fire. "What have you been up to?" he asked the hunchback. "I haven't seen you since Garion's wedding."

"I thought that somebody ought to keep an eye on the Angaraks," Beldin replied, scratching vigorously at one armpit.

"And?"

"And what?"

"That's an irritating habit you've picked up somewhere. What are the Angaraks doing?"

"The Murgos are still all in little pieces about the death of Taur Urgas." Beldin laughed. "He was completely mad, but he kept them unified -until Cho-Hag ran his sabre through him. His son Urgit isn't much of a king. He's barely able to get their attention. The western Grolims can't even function any more. Ctuchik's dead, and Torak's dead, and about all the Grolims can do now is stare at the walls and count their fingers. My guess is that Murgo society is right on the verge of collapsing entirely."

"Good. Getting rid of the Murgos has been one of my main goals in life."

"I wouldn't start gloating just yet," Beldin said sourly. "After word reached 'Zakath that Belgarion had killed Torak, he threw off all pretenses about the fiction of Angarak unity and marched his Malloreans on Rak Goska. He didn't leave much of it standing."

Belgarath shrugged. "It wasn't a very attractive city anyway."

"It's a lot less attractive now. 'Zakath seems to think that crucifixions and impalings are educational. He decorated what was left of the walls of Rak Goska with object lessons. Every time he goes any place in Cthol Murgos, he leaves a trail of occupied crosses and stakes behind him."

"I find that I can bear the misfortunes of the Murgos with great fortitude," Belgarath replied piously.

"I think you'd better take a more realistic look at things, Belgarath," the hunchback growled. "We could probably match Murgo numbers if we really had to, but people don't talk about the uncountable hordes of boundless Mallorea for nothing. 'Zakath has a very big army, and he commands most of the seaports on the east coast, so he can ship in as many more troops as he wants. If he succeeds in obliterating the Murgos, he's going to be camped on our southern doorstep with a lot of bored soldiers on his hands. Certain ideas are bound to occur to him at about that time."

Belgarath grunted. "I'll worry about that when the time comes."

"Oh, by the way," Beldin said suddenly with an ironic grin, "I found out what that apostrophe is doing in his name."

"Whose name?"

"'Zakath's..would you believe that it indicates the word 'Kal'?"

"Kal Zakath?" Belgarath stared at him incredulously.

"Isn't that outrageous?" Beldin chortled. "I guess that the Malloreaan emperors have been secretly yearning to take that title since just after the battle of Vo Mimbire, but they were always afraid that Torak might wake up and take offense at their presumption. Now that he's dead, a fair number of Malloreans have begun to call their ruler 'Kal Zakath' -the ones who want to keep their heads do, at any rate."

"What does 'Kal' mean?" Errand asked.

"It's an Angarak word that means King and God," Belgarath explained. "Five hundred years ago, Torak set aside the Malloreaan emperor and personally led his hordes against the west. The Angaraks -all of them: Murgos, Nedraks, and Thulls, as well as the Malloreans -called him Kal Torak."

"What happened?" Errand asked curiously. "When Kal Torak invaded the West, I mean?"

Belgarath shrugged. "It's a very old story."

"Not until you've heard it," Errand told him.

Beldin gave Belgarath a sharp look. "He is quick, isn't he?"

Belgarath looked at Errand thoughtfully. "All right," he said. "Putting it very briefly, Kal Torak smashed Drasnia, laid siege to the Algarian Stronghold for eight years, and then crossed Ulgoland to the plains of

Arendia. The Kingdoms of the West met him at Vo Mimbire, and he was struck down in a duel with the Rivan Warder."

"But not killed."

"No. Not killed. The Rivan Warder struck him straight through the head with his sword, but Torak wasn't killed. He was only bound in slumber until a king sat once again on the throne of Riva."

"Belgarion," Errand said.

"Right. You know what happened then. You were there, after all."

Errand sighed. "Yes," he said sadly.

Belgarath turned back to Beldin. "All right," he said, "what's going on in Mallorean?"

"Things are about the same as always," Beldin replied, taking a drink of ale and belching thunderously. "The bureaucracy is still the glue that holds everything together. There are still plots and intrigues in Melcene and Mal Zeth. Karanda and Darshiva and Gandahar are on the verge of open rebellion, and the Grolims are still afraid to go near Kell."

"The Mallorean Grolims are still a functioning church then?" Belgarath seemed a little surprised. "I thought that the citizenry might have taken steps -the way they did in Mishrak ac Thull. I understand that the Thulls started building bonfires with Grolims."

"Kal Zakath sent a few orders back to Mal Zeth," Beldin told him, "and the army stepped in to stop the slaughter. After all, if you plan to be King and God, you're going to need yourself a church. Zakath seems to think that it might be easier to use one that's already established."

"What does Urvon think of that idea?"

"He's not making much of an issue of it right now. Before the army moved in, the people of Mallorean were finding a great deal of entertainment in hanging Grolims up on iron hooks. Urvon is staying in Mal Yaska and keeping very quiet. I think he believes that the fact that he's still alive might just be an oversight on the part of his exalted Majesty, Kal Zakath. Urvon is a slimy snake, but he's no fool."

"I've never met him."

"You haven't missed a thing," Beldin said sourly. He held out his tankard. "You want to fill this?"

"You're drinking up all of my ale, Beldin."

"You can always steal more. The twins never lock their doors. Anyway, Urvon was a disciple of Torak, the same as Ctuchik and Zedar. He doesn't have any of their good qualities, however."

"They didn't have any good qualities," Belgarath said, handing him back the refilled tankard.

"Compared to Urvon, they did. He's a natural-born bootlicker, a fawning, contemptible sneak. Even Torak despised him. But, like all people with those charming traits, as soon as he got the least little bit of power, he went absolutely berserk with it. He's not satisfied with bows as a sign of respect; he wants people to grovel before him."

"You seem moderately unfond of him," Belgarath noted.

"I loathe that piebald back stabber."

"Piebald?"

"He's got patches of skin on his face and hands with no color at all, so he looks all splotchy -as if he had some gruesome disease. I'm viewed in some quarters as passing ugly, but Urvon could scare a troll into fits. Anyway, if Kal Zakath wants to turn the Grolim church into a state religion with his face on the altars instead of Torak's, he's going to have to deal with Urvon first, and Urvon always stays holed up in Mal Yaska, completely surrounded by Grolim sorcerers. Zakath won't be able to get near him. I can't even get near him. I give it a try every hundred years or so, hoping that somebody might get careless or that I might get lucky enough to get a large, sharp hook into his guts. What I'd really like to do, though, is drag him face down over red-hot coals for a few weeks."

Belgarath looked a little surprised at the little man's vehemence. "That's all he's doing then? Staying under cover in Mal Yaska?"

"Not hardly! Urvon plots and schemes even in his sleep. In the last year and a half -ever since Belgarion ran his sword through Torak- Urvon's been scrambling around, trying to preserve what's left of his church. There are some old, moth-eaten prophecies -the Grolims call them Oracles- from a place called Ashaba in the Karandese Mountains. Urvon dusted them off and he's been twisting them around so that they seem to say that Torak will return -that he's not dead, or that he'll be resurrected or possibly reborn."

Belgarath snorted. "What nonsense!"

"Of course it is, but he had to do something. The Grolim church was convulsing like a headless snake, and Zakath was right on the verge of putting his fist around everybody's throat to make sure that every time any Angarak bowed, it would be to him. Urvon made sure that there were very few copies of these Ashabine

Oracles left lying about and he's been inventing all sorts of things and claiming that he found them in the prophecies. That's about the only thing holding Zakath off right now and probably that wouldn't even work, if the emperor weren't so busy trying to decorate every tree he comes across with a Murgo or two."

"Did you have any trouble moving around in Mallorean?"

Beldin snorted a crude obscenity. "Of course not. Nobody even notices the face of a deformed man. Most people couldn't tell you if I'm an Alorn or a Marag. They can't see past the hump on my back." He rose from his chair, went to the cask, and refilled his tankard again. "Belgarath," he said very seriously, "does the name Cthrag Sardius mean anything to you?"

"Sardius? Sardonyx, you mean?"

Beldin shrugged. "The Mallorean Grolims call it Cthrag Sardius. What's the difference?"

"Sardonyx is a gemstone -sort of orange colored with milky-white stripes. It's not really very rare -or very attractive."

"That doesn't quite match up with the way I heard the Malloreans talk about it." Beldin frowned. "From the way they use the name Cthrag Sardius, I gather that it's a single stone -and that it's got a certain kind of importance."

"What sort of importance?"

"I can't say for sure. About all I could gather was that just about every Grolim in Mallorean would trade his soul for the chance to get his hands on it."

"It could just be some kind of internal symbol -something to do with the power struggle that's going on over there."

"That's possible, I suppose, but why would its name be Cthrag Sardius then? They called the Orb of Aldur 'Cthrag Yaska,' remember? There'd almost have to be a connection between Cthrag Sardius and Cthrag Yaska, wouldn't there? And if there is, maybe we ought to have a look into it."

Belgarath gave him a long look and then sighed. "I thought that, once Torak was dead, we might get a chance to rest."

"You've had a year or so." Beldin shrugged. "Much more than that and you start to get flabby."

"You're a very disagreeable fellow, do you know that?"

Beldin gave him a tight, ugly grin. "Yes," he agreed. "I thought you might have noticed that."

The next morning Belgarath began meticulously sorting through a mountainous heap of crackling parchments, trying to impose some kind of order upon centuries of chaos. Errand watched the old man quietly for a time, then drifted over to the window to look out at the sun-warmed meadows of the Vale. Perhaps a mile away, there was another tower, a tall, slender structure that looked somehow very serene.

"Do you mind if I go outside?" he asked Belgarath.

"What? No, that's all right. Just don't wander too far away."

"I won't," Errand promised, going to the top of the stairway that spiraled down into the cool dimness below. The early morning sunlight slanted across the dew-drenched meadow, and skylarks sang and spun through the sweet-smelling air. A brown rabbit hopped out of the tall grass and regarded Errand quite calmly. Then it sat on its haunches and began vigorously to scratch its long ears with a busy hind foot.

Errand had not come out of the tower for random play, however, nor to watch rabbits. He had someplace to go and he set out across the dewy green meadow in the direction of the tower he had seen from Belgarath's window.

He hadn't really counted on the dew, and his feet were uncomfortably wet by the time he reached the solitary tower.

He walked around the base of the stone structure several times, his feet squelching in their sodden boots.

"I wondered how long it would take before you came by," a very calm voice said to him.

"I was busy helping Belgarath," Errand apologized.

"Did he really need help?"

"He was having a little trouble getting started."

"Would you like to come up?"

"If it's all right."

"The door's on the far side."

Errand went around the tower and found a large stone that had been turned to reveal a doorway. He went into the tower and on up the stairs.

One tower room was much like another, but there were certain differences between this one and Belgarath's. As in Belgarath's tower, there was a fireplace here with a fire burning in it, but there appeared to be nothing in the flames here for them to feed upon. The room itself was strangely uncluttered, for the owner

of this tower stored his parchment scrolls, tools, and implements in some unimaginable place, to be summoned as he required them.

The owner of the tower sat beside the fire. His hair and beard were white, and he wore a blue, loose-fitting robe.

"Come over to the fire and dry your feet, boy," he said in his gentle voice.

"Thank you," Errand replied.

"How is Polgara?"

"Very well," Errand said, "And happy. She likes being married, I think." He lifted one foot and held it close to the fire.

"Don't burn your shoes."

"I'll be careful."

"Would you like some breakfast?"

"That would be nice. Belgarath forgets things like that sometimes."

"On the table there."

Errand looked at the table and saw a steaming bowl of porridge that had not been there before.

"Thank you," he said politely, going to the table and pulling up a chair.

"Was there something special you wanted to talk about?"

"Not really," Errand replied, picking up a spoon and starting on the porridge. "I just thought I should come by. The Vale is yours, after all."

"Polgara's been teaching you manners, I see."

Errand smiled. "And other things, too."

"Are you happy with her, Errand?" the owner of the tower asked.

"Yes, Aldur, I really am," Errand replied and continued to eat his porridge.

CHAPTER THREE

As the summer progressed, Errand found himself rather naturally more and more in the company of Durnik. The smith, he soon discovered, was an extraordinarily patient man who did things the old way, not so much because of some moral bias against what Belgarath called "the alternative we have available to us," but rather because he took a deep satisfaction in working with his hands. This was not to say that Durnik did not occasionally take short cuts. Errand noticed a certain pattern to the smith's evasions. Durnik absolutely would not cheat on any project involving making something for Polgara or for their home. No matter how laborious or tedious those projects might be, Durnik completed them with his hands and his muscles. Certain outside activities, however, were not quite so closely tied up with Durnik's sense of ethics. Two hundred yards of rail fence, for example, appeared rather quickly one morning. The fence needed to be there; there was no question of that, since a nearby herd of Algar cattle had to be diverted from plodding with bovine stubbornness across Polgara's garden on their way to water. As a matter of fact, the fence actually began to appear instantly just in front of the startled cows. They regarded the first fifty feet or so in bafflement then, after considering the problem for several minutes, they moved to go around the obstruction. Another fifty feet of fence appeared in their path. In time, the cows grew surly about the whole thing and even tried running, perhaps thinking in their sluggish way that they might be able to outrace this phantom fence builder. Durnik, however, sat planted on a stump, his eyes intent and his face determined, extending his fence section by section in front of the increasingly irritable cows.

One dark brown bull, finally goaded into a fury of frustration, lowered his head, pawed the earth a few times, and charged the fence with a great bellow. Durnik made a peculiar twisting gesture with one hand, and the bull was suddenly charging away from the fence, turned around somehow in midstride without even knowing it. He ran for several hundred yards before it occurred to him that his horns had not yet encountered anything substantial. He slowed and raised his head in astonishment. He looked dubiously back over his shoulder at the fence, then turned around and gave it another try. Once again Durnik turned him, and once again he charged ferociously off in the wrong direction. The third time he tried it, he charged over the top of the hill and disappeared on the other side. He did not come back.

Durnik looked gravely at Errand and then he winked. Polgara came out of the cottage, drying her hands on her apron, and noted the fence which had somehow constructed itself while she had been washing the breakfast dishes. She gave her husband a quizzical look, and Durnik seemed a bit abashed at having been caught using sorcery rather than an axe.

"Very nice fence, dear," she said encouragingly to him.

"We kind of needed one there," he said apologetically. "Those cows -well, I had to do it in a hurry."

"Durnik," she said gently, "there's nothing morally reprehensible about using your talent for this sort of thing and you should practice every so often." She looked at the zig-zag pattern of the interlocking rail fence, and then her expression became concentrated. One after another, each of the junctures of the rails was suddenly bound tightly together with stout rosebushes in full bloom. "There," she said contentedly, patted her husband's shoulder, and went back inside.

"She's a remarkable woman, do you know that?" Durnik said to Errand.

"Yes," Errand agreed.

Polgara was not always pleased with her husband's ventures into this new field, however. On one occasion toward the hot, dusty end of summer when the vegetables in her garden were beginning to wilt, Polgara devoted the bulk of one morning to locating a small, black rain cloud over the mountains in Ulgoland and gently herding its sodden puffiness toward the Vale of Aldur and, more specifically, toward her thirsty garden.

Errand was playing along the fence when the cloud came in low over the hill to the west and then stopped directly over the cottage and the waiting garden. Durnik glanced up from the harness he was mending, saw the blond-haired boy at play and the ominous black cloud directly over his head, and rather negligently pulled in his will. He made a small flipping gesture with one hand. "Shoo," he said to the cloud.

The cloud gave a peculiar sort of twitch, almost like a hiccup, then slowly flowed on eastward. When it was several hundred yards beyond Polgara's parched garden, it began to rain -a nice, steady, soaking downpour that very satisfactorily watered several acres of empty grassland.

Durnik was not at all prepared for his wife's reaction. The door to the cottage banged open, and Polgara emerged with her eyes flashing. She gave the happily raining cloud a hard stare, and the soggy-looking thing gave another of those peculiar hiccups and actually managed to look guilty.

Then Polgara turned and looked directly at her husband, her eyes a bit wild. "Did you do that?" she demanded, pointing at the cloud.

"Why -yes," he replied. "I suppose I did, Pol."

"Why did you do that?"

"Errand was out there playing," Durnik said, still concentrating most of his attention on the harness. "I didn't think you'd want him to get wet."

Polgara looked at the cloud wasting all of its rain on grass so deeply rooted that it could have easily survived a ten-month drought. Then she looked at her garden and its drooping turnip tops and pathetic beans. She clenched her teeth tightly together to keep in certain words and phrases which she knew might shock her strait-laced and proper husband.

She raised her face to the sky and lifted her arms in supplication. "Why me?" she demanded in a loud, tragic voice. "Why me?"

"Why, dear," Durnik said mildly, "whatever is wrong?"

Polgara told him what was wrong -at some length.

Durnik spent the next week putting in an irrigation system leading from the upper end of their valley to Polgara's garden, and she forgave him for his mistake almost as soon as he had finished it.

The winter came late that year, and autumn lingered in the Vale. The twins, Beltira and Belkira, came by just before the snows set in and told them that, after several weeks of discussion, both Belgarath and Beldin had left the Vale, and that each of them had gone away with that serious expression on his face that meant that there was trouble somewhere.

Errand missed Belgarath's company that winter. To be sure, the old sorcerer had, more often than not, managed to get him in trouble with Polgara, but Errand felt somehow that he shouldn't really be expected to devote every waking moment to staying out of trouble. When the snow came, he took up sledding again.

After she had watched him come flying down the hill and across the meadow a few times, Polgara prudently asked Durnik to erect a barrier at the stream bank to prevent a recurrence of the previous winter's mishap. It was while the smith was erecting a woven wattle fence to keep Errand on dry land that he happened to glance down into the water. Because the often muddy little rills that emptied into their stream were all locked in ice now, the water was low and as clear as crystal. Durnik could very clearly see the long, narrow shapes hovering like shadows in the current above the beds of gravel that formed the bottom.

"What a curious thing," he murmured, his eyes taking on that peculiarly abstracted look. "I've never noticed them there before."

"I've seen them jumping," Errand said. "But most of the time, the water's too cloudy to see them when they're lying underwater."

"I imagine that's the reason for it, all right," Durnik agreed. He tied the end of the wattle fence to a tree and thoughtfully walked through the snow toward the shed he had built at the back of the cottage. A moment or so later he emerged with the skein of waxed cord in his hand; five minutes later he was fishing. Errand smiled and turned to trudge back up the long hill, towing his sled behind him. When he reached the top of the hill, a strange, hooded young woman awaited him.

"Can I help you?" he asked politely.

The young woman pushed back her hood to reveal the fact that a dark cloth was tightly bound across her eyes. "Thou art the one they call Errand?" she asked. Her voice was low and musical, and there was a peculiar lilt to her archaic speech.

"Yes," Errand replied, "I am. Did you hurt your eyes?"

"Nay, gentle child," she replied. "I must needs look upon the world by a light other than that of the mundane sun."

"Would you like to come down to our cottage?" Errand asked her. "You could warm yourself by our fire, and Polgara would welcome company."

"Though I revere the Lady Polgara, the time has not yet arrived for us to meet," the young woman said, "and it is not cold where I am." She paused and bent forward slightly as if she were in fact peering at him, though the cloth over her eyes was quite thick. "It is true, then," she murmured softly. "We could not be certain at such great distance, but now that I am face to face with thee, I know that there can be no mistake." She straightened then. "We will meet again," she told him.

"As you wish, ma'am," Errand replied, remembering his manners.

She smiled, and her smile was so radiant that it seemed almost to bring sunlight to the murky winter afternoon. "I am Cyradis," she said, "and I bear thee friendship, gentle Errand, even though the time may come when I must needs decide against thee." And then she vanished, disappearing so suddenly that she was there and then gone in the space of a single heartbeat.

Startled a bit, Errand glanced at the snow where she had stood and saw that there were no marks or footprints. He sat down on his sled to think about it. Nothing that the strange young woman had said really seemed to make much sense, but he was fairly sure that a time would come when it would. After a bit of thought, he concluded that this peculiar visit would upset Polgara if she heard about it. Since he was certain that this Cyradis posed no threat and meant him no harm, he decided that he would not mention the incident.

Then, because it was growing quite chilly atop the hill, he pushed his sled into motion and coasted down the long slope and across the meadow and to within a few dozen yards of where Durnik was fishing with such total concentration that he was oblivious of all that was going on around him.

Polgara was tolerant about Durnik's pastime. She was always suitably impressed at the length, weight, and silvery color of the prizes he brought home and she drew upon all her vast knowledge to find new and interesting ways to fry, bake, broil, roast, and even poach fish. She adamantly insisted, however, that he clean them.

When spring returned once again, Belgarath came by, mounted on a spirited roan stallion.

"What happened to your mare?" Durnik asked the old man as he dismounted in the dooryard of the cottage. Belgarath made a sour face. "I was halfway to Drasnia when I discovered that she was pregnant. I traded her for this enthusiast." He gave the prancing roan a hard look.

"It looks as if you might have gotten the best of the bargain," Durnik mused, looking Belgarath's horse over.

"The mare was sedate and sensible," the old man disagreed. "This one doesn't have a brain in his head. All he wants to do is show off -running, jumping, rearing, and pawing the air with his hooves." He shook his head in disgust.

"Put him in the barn, father," Polgara suggested, "and wash up. You're just in time for supper. You can have a baked fish. As a matter of fact, you can have several baked fish if you'd like."

After they had eaten, Belgarath turned his chair around, leaned back, and pushed his feet out toward the fire. He looked around with a contented smile at the polished flagstone floor, the limed white walls with polished pots and kettles hanging on pegs, and at the dancing light and shadow coming from the arched fireplace. "It's good to relax a bit," he said. "I don't think I've stopped moving since I left here last autumn."

"What is it that's so pressing, father?" Polgara asked him as she cleared away the supper dishes.

"Beldin and I had quite along talk," the old man replied. "There are some things going on in Mallorean that I don't quite like."

"What earthly difference can it make now, father? Our interest in Mallorea ended at Cthol Mishrak when Torak died. You were not appointed caretaker of the world, you know."

"I wish it were that easy, Pol," he said. "Does the name 'the Sardion' mean anything to you? Or 'Cthrag Sardius' perhaps?"

She was pouring hot water from a kettle into the large pan in which she customarily washed the dishes, but she stopped, frowning slightly. "I think I heard a Grolim say something about 'Cthrag Sardius' once. He was delirious and babbling in old Angarak."

"Can you remember what he was saying?" Belgarath asked intently.

"I'm sorry, father, but I don't speak old Angarak. You never got around to teaching me, remember?" She looked at Errand and crooked one finger at him.

Errand sighed disconsolately, got up, and fetched a dishtowel.

"Don't make faces, Errand," she told him. "It doesn't hurt you to help clean up after supper." She looked back at Belgarath as she started to wash the dishes. "What's the significance of the 'Sardion' or whatever you call it?"

"I don't know," Belgarath replied, scratching at his beard in perplexity. "As Beldin pointed out, though, Torak called our Master's Orb 'Cthrag Yaska.' It's possible, I suppose, that 'Cthrag Sardius' might be connected in some way."

"I picked up a lot of 'possibles' and 'supposes' and 'mights' in there, father," she said. "I wonder if you aren't chasing after shadows out of habit -or just to keep busy."

"You know me well enough to know that I'm not all that enthusiastic about keeping busy, Pol," he said wryly.

"So I've noticed. Is anything else happening in the world?"

"Let's see," Belgarath leaned back and stared speculatively at the low-beamed ceiling. "The Grand Duke Noragon ate something that definitely didn't agree with him."

"Who is the Grand Duke Noragon? And why are we interested in his digestion?" Polgara asked.

"The Grand Duke Noragon was the candidate of the Honeth family to succeed Ran Borune on the Imperial Throne of Tolnedra," Belgarath smirked. "He was a complete and total jackass, and his ascension to the throne would have been an unmitigated disaster."

"You said was," Durnik noted.

"Right. Noragon's indigestion proved fatal. It is widely suspected that some splendid Horbite sympathizer used certain exotic condiments that come from the jungles of Nyissa to season the Grand Duke's last lunch. The symptoms, I understand, were quite spectacular. The Honeths are in total disarray, and the other families are gloating outrageously."

"Tolnedran politics are disgusting," Polgara declared.

"Our Prince Kheldar appears to be well on his way toward becoming the wealthiest man in the world," Belgarath continued.

"Silk?" Durnik looked a bit amazed. "Has he managed to steal that much already?"

"I gather that what he's doing is sort of legitimate this time," Belgarath said. "He and that rascal Yarblek have somehow managed to gain control of the entire Nadrak fur harvest. I wasn't able to get all the details, but the screams of anguish coming from the major commercial houses in Bektor would seem to indicate that our friends are doing rather well."

"I'm pleased to hear that," Durnik said.

"That's probably because you haven't been in the market for a fur cape lately " Belgarath chuckled. "The price has taken quite a jump, I understand." The old man rocked back in his chair. "In Cthol Murgos, your friend Kal Zakath is methodically butchering his way down the east coast. He's added Rak Cthan and Rak Hagga to the list of cities he's captured and depopulated. I'm not too fond of Murgos, but it's just possible that Zakath is going a little too far."

"Kal Zakath?" Polgara asked with one eyebrow slightly raised.

"An affectation," Belgarath shrugged.

"More likely a symptom," she observed. "Angarak rulers always seem to be unstable in one way or another." She turned to look at her father. "Well?"

"Well what?"

"Have you heard anything from Riva? How are Garion and Ce'Nedra doing?"

"I haven't heard a sound -oh, a few official things. 'The Rivan King is pleased to announce the appointment of Earl what's-his-name as Rivan ambassador to the Kingdom of Drasnia.' That sort of thing, but nothing in the least bit personal."

"We are sure he knows how to write, aren't we?" she demanded exasperatedly. "I'm sure that he's not so busy that he hasn't had the time to write at least one letter in the last two years."

"He did," Errand said quietly. He might not have mentioned the letter, but it seemed very important to Polgara.

She looked at him sharply. "What did you say?" she asked.

"Belgarion wrote to you last winter," Errand said. "The letter got lost, though, when the ship his messenger was aboard sank."

"If the ship sank, then how do you-"

"Pol," Belgarath said in a tone that seemed uncharacteristically firm, "why don't you let me handle this?" He turned to Errand. "You say that Garion wrote a letter to Polgara last winter?"

"Yes," Errand said.

"But that the letter was lost when the messenger's ship sank?"

Errand nodded.

"Why didn't he write another one then?"

"He doesn't know that the ship sank."

"But you do?"

Errand nodded again.

"Do you by any chance know what the letter said?"

"Yes."

"Do you suppose you could recite it for us?"

"I guess I could, if you want. Belgarion's going to write another one in a week or so, though."

Belgarath gave him a strange look. "Why don't you tell us what the first one said? That way we won't miss anything."

"All right," Errand agreed. He frowned, concentrating very hard. "He started out by saying, 'Dear Aunt Pol and Durnik.' I think that's sort of nice, don't you?"

"Just recite the letter, Errand," Belgarath said patiently. "Save the comments for later."

"All right." Errand stared thoughtfully into the fire.

"I'm sorry I haven't written earlier," he recited, "but I've been terribly busy learning how to be a good king. It's easy enough to be King -all you need is to be born into the right family. To be a good king is harder, though. Brand helps me as much as he can, but I still have to make a lot of decisions about things that I don't really understand."

"Ce'Nedra is well -at least I think so. We're hardly talking to each other any more, so it's kind of hard to say for sure. Brand is a bit concerned that we haven't had any children yet, but I don't think he needs to worry. So far as I can tell, we're never going to have any children, and maybe it's just as well. I really think we should have gotten to know each other a little better before we got married. I'm sure that there's some way that we could have called it off. Now it's too late. We'll just have to make the best of it. If we don't see each other too much, we can usually manage to be civil to each other -at least civil enough to keep up appearances."

"Barak came by in that big War boat of his last summer, and we had a very good visit. He told me all about-"

"Just a moment, Errand." Polgara stopped the recitation. "Does he say any more about the trouble he's having with Ce'Nedra?"

"No, ma'am," Errand replied after a moment during which he quickly ran through the rest of the letter in his mind.

"He wrote about Barak's visit and some news he got from King Anheg and a letter from Mandorallen. That's about all. He said that he loves you and misses you very much. That's how he ended it."

Polgara and Belgarath exchanged a very long look. Errand could feel their perplexity, but he was not sure exactly how to set their minds at rest about the matter.

"You're sure that's the way the letter went?" Belgarath asked him.

Errand nodded. "That's what he wrote."

"And you knew what was in the letter as soon as he wrote it?"

Errand hesitated. "I don't know if it was like that, exactly. It doesn't really work that way, you know. You have to sort of think about it, and I didn't really think about it until the subject came up -when Polgara was talking about it just now."

"Does it matter how far away the other person is?" Belgarath asked curiously.

"No," Errand replied, "I don't think so. It just seems to be there when I want it to be."

"No one can do that, father." Polgara said to the old man. "No one has ever been able to do that."
"Apparently the rules have changed," Belgarath said thoughtfully. "I think we'll have to accept it as genuine, don't you?"

She nodded. "He doesn't have any reason to make it up."

"I think you and I are going to have to have some very long talks together, Errand," the old man said.

"Perhaps," Polgara said, "but not just yet." She turned back to the boy. "Could you repeat what Garion said about Ce'Nedra for me?"

Errand nodded. "'Ce'Nedra is well -at least I think so. We're hardly talking to each other any more, so it's kind of hard to say for sure. Brand is a bit concerned that-' "

"That's fine, Errand," she said, raising one hand slightly. Then she looked into the boy's face. After a moment, one of her eyebrows shot up. "Tell me," she said, very carefully choosing her words, "do you know what's wrong between Garion and Ce'Nedra?"

"Yes," Errand replied.

"Would you tell me?"

"If you want. Ce'Nedra did something that made Garion very angry, and then he did something that embarrassed her in public, and that made her angry. She thinks that he doesn't pay enough attention to her and that he spends all his time on his work so that he won't have to spend any with her.

He thinks that she's selfish and spoiled and doesn't think about anybody but herself. They're both wrong, but they've had a lot of arguments about it and they've hurt each other so much with some of the things they've said that they've both given up on being married to each other. They're terribly unhappy."

"Thank you, Errand," she said. Then she turned to Durnik. "We'll need to pack a few things," she said.

"Oh?" He looked a bit surprised.

"We're going to Riva," she said quite firmly.

CHAPTER FOUR

At Camaar, Belgarath ran across an old friend in a tavern near the harbor. When he brought the bearded, furclad Cherek to the inn where they were staying, Polgara gave the swaying sailor a penetrating look. "How long have you been drunk, Captain Gredlik?" she asked bluntly.

"What day is it?" His reply was vague.

She told him.

"Astonishing." He belched. "Par'n me," he apologized.

"I appear to have lost track of several days somewhere. Do you know by any chance what week it is?"

"Gredlik," she said, "do you absolutely have to get drunk every time you're in port?"

Gredlik looked thoughtfully at the ceiling, scratching at his beard. "Now that you mention it, Polgara, I believe I do. I hadn't really thought about it that way before, but now that you suggest it-

She gave him a hard stare, but the look he returned was deliberately impudent.

"Don't waste your time, Polgara," he suggested. "I'm not married; I've never been married; and I'm not ever going to get married. I'm not ruining any woman's life by the way I behave, and it's absolutely certain that no woman is ever going to ruin mine. Now, Belgarath says that you want to go to Riva. I'll round up my crew, and we'll leave on the morning tide."

"Will your crew be sober enough to find their way out of the harbor?"

He shrugged. "We might bump into a Tolnedran merchantman or two on the way out, but we'll find our way to the open sea eventually. Drunk or sober, my crew is the best afloat. We'll put you on the quay at Riva by midafternoon on the day after tomorrow -unless the sea freezes solid between now and then, in which case it might take a couple hours longer." He belched again. "Par'n me," he said, swaying back and forth and peering at her with his bleary eyes.

"Gredlik," Belgarath said admiringly, "you're the bravest man alive."

"The sea doesn't frighten me," Gredlik replied.

"I wasn't talking about the sea."

About noon of the following day, Gredlik's ship was running before a freshening breeze through foaming whitecaps.

A few of the less indisposed members of his crew lurched about the deck tending the lines and keeping a more or less alert eye on the stern where Gredlik, puffy-eyed and obviously suffering, clung to the tiller.

"Aren't you going to shorten your sail?" Belgarath asked him.

"What for?"

"Because if you leave full sail up in this kind of wind, you'll uproot your mast."

"You stick to your sorcery, Belgarath," Gredlik told him, "and leave the sailing to me. We're making good time, and the deck-planking starts to buckle up long before the mast is in any danger."

"How long before?"

Gredlik shrugged. "Almost a minute or so -most of the time."

Belgarath stared at him. "I think I'll go below" he said at last.

"That's a good idea."

By evening the wind had abated, and Gredlik's ship continued across a quieter sea as night fell. There were only occasional glimpses of the stars, but they were sufficient; when the sun rose the next morning, it was, as the wayward captain had predicted, dead astern. By midmorning, the dark, rocky crags and jagged peaks that formed the crest of the Isle of the Winds were poked above the western horizon, and their ship was once again plunging like a spirited horse through the whitecaps under a crisp blue sky. A broad grin split Gredlik's bearded face as his ship swooped and lurched and shuddered her way through the hammering seas, throwing out great sheets of sparkling spray each time she knifed into a wave.

"That's a very unreliable man," Polgara said, giving the captain a disapproving stare.

"He really seems to be a good sailor, Pol," Durnik said mildly.

"That's not what I was talking about, Durnik."

"Oh."

The ship tacked smoothly between two rocky headlands and into the sheltered harbor of the city of Riva. The gray stone buildings mounted steeply upward toward the grim, menacing battlements of the Citadel which brooded over the city and the harbor below.

"This place always looks so bleak," Durnik noted. "Bleak and uninviting."

"That was sort of the idea when they built it, Durnik," Belgarath replied. "They didn't really want many visitors."

Then, at the end of a starboard tack, Gredlik swung his tiller hard over, and his ship, her prow knifing through the dark water, ran directly at the stone quay jutting out from the foot of the city. At the last possible moment he swung his tiller again. To the flapping of her patched sails, the ship coasted the last few yards and bumped gently against the salt-crusted stones of the quay.

"Do you think anybody saw us coming and told Garion?" Durnik asked.

"Evidently so," Belgarath replied, pointing toward the arched gate that had just swung open to reveal the broad flight of stone stairs mounting upward within the thick, high walls protecting the seaward side of Riva. A number of official-looking men were coming through the gate; in the center of the group strode a tall young man with sandy-colored hair and a serious expression on his face.

"Let's step over to the other side of the ship," Belgarath suggested to Durnik and Errand. "I want to surprise him."

"Welcome to Riva, Captain Gredlik." Errand recognized Garion's voice, even though it sounded older, more sure now.

Gredlik squinted appraisingly over the rail. "You've grown, boy," he said to the King of Riva. A man as free as Gredlik almost never felt the need for using customary terms of respect.

"It's been going around lately," Garion replied dryly. "Almost everybody my age has come down with it."

"I've brought you some visitors," Gredlik told him.

Grinning, Belgarath moved across the deck to the quayside railing with Durnik and Errand close behind him.

"Grandfather?" Garion's face was completely astonished. "What are you doing here? And Durnik -and Errand?"

"Actually it was your aunt's idea," Belgarath told him.

"Is Aunt Pol here, too?"

"Of course I am," Polgara replied calmly, emerging from the low-roofed cabin under the stern.

"Aunt Pol!" Garion exclaimed, looking dumfounded.

"Don't stare, Garion," she told him, adjusting the collar of her blue cloak. "It's impolite."

"But, why didn't you let me know you were coming? What are you all doing here?"

"Visiting, dear. People do that from time to time."

When they joined the young king on the quay, there were the usual embraces and handshakes and the long looks into each others' faces that go with reunions. Errand, however, was much more interested in something else. As they started the climb up through the gray city toward the Citadel brooding above it, he tugged once at Garion's sleeve. "Horse?" he asked.

Garion looked at him. "He's in the stables, Errand. He'll be happy to see you."

Errand smiled and nodded.

"Does he still talk that way?" Garion asked Durnik. "Just one word at a time like that? I thought -well-"

"Most of the time he speaks normally -for his age," Durnik replied, "but he's been thinking about the colt ever since we left the Vale and sometimes, when he gets excited, he slips back to the old way."

"He listens, though," Polgara added, "which is more than I can say about another boy when he was that age."

Garion laughed. "Was I really that difficult, Aunt Pol?"

"Not difficult, dear. You just didn't listen."

When they arrived at the Citadel, the Rivian Queen greeted them under the high, thick-walled arch of the front gate. Ce'Nedra was as exquisite as Errand remembered her. Her coppery-colored hair was caught at the back of her head by a pair of golden combs, and the ringlets tumbled down her back in a flaming cascade. Her green eyes were large. She was tiny, not much taller than Errand, but she was every inch a queen. She greeted them all regally, embracing Belgarath and Durnik and lightly kissing Polgara's cheek. Then she held out both hands to Errand, and he took them in his and looked into her eyes. There was a barrier there, the faintest hint of the defensive tightening with which she kept the hurt away. She drew him to her and kissed him; even in that gesture, he could feel the unhappy tenseness that she was probably no longer even aware of. As she removed her soft lips from his cheek, Errand once again looked deeply into her eyes, letting all the love and hope and compassion he felt for her flow into his gaze. Then, without even thinking, he reached out his hand and gently touched her cheek. Her eyes went very wide, and her lip began to tremble. That faint touch of agate-hard defensiveness about her face began to crumble. Two great tears welled up in her eyes; then, with a brokenhearted wail, she turned and stumbled blindly, her arms outstretched. "Oh, Lady Polgara!" she cried.

Polgara calmly took the sobbing little queen in her arms and held her. She looked directly into Errand's face, however, and one of her eyebrows was raised questioningly. Errand returned her look and gave her a calm, answering nod.

"Well," Belgarath said, slightly embarrassed by Ce'Nedra's sudden weeping. He scratched at his beard and looked around the inner courtyard of the Citadel and the broad granite steps leading up to the massive door. "Have you got anything to drink handy?" he asked Garion.

Polgara, her arms still about the weeping Ce'Nedra, gave him a level look. "Isn't it a bit early, father?" she asked.

"Oh, I don't think so," he replied blandly. "A bit of ale helps to settle the stomach after a sea voyage."

"There's always some excuse, isn't there?"

"I can usually manage to think of something."

Errand spent the afternoon in the exercise yard at the rear of the royal stables. The chestnut-colored colt was not really a colt any more, but rather a full-grown young stallion. His dark coat was glossy, and his muscles rippled under that coat as he ran in a wide circle about the yard. The single white patch on his shoulder seemed almost incandescent in the bright sunlight.

The horse had known somehow that Errand was coming and had been restive and high-strung all morning. The stableman cautioned Errand about that. "Be careful of him," he said. "He's a bit flighty today for some reason."

"He'll be fine now," Errand said, calmly unlatching the door to the young horse's stall.

"I wouldn't go-" the stableman started sharply, half reaching out as if to pull the boy back, but Errand had already entered the stall with the wide-eyed animal. The horse snorted once and pranced nervously, his hooves thudding on the straw-covered floor. He stopped and stood quivering until Errand put out his hand and touched that bowed neck. Then everything was all right between them. Errand pushed the door of the stall open wider and, with the horse contentedly nuzzling at his shoulder, led the way out of the stable past the astonished groom.

For the time being, it was enough for the two of them just to be together -to share the bond which was between them and had somehow existed even before they had met and, in a peculiar way, even before either of them was born. There would be more later, but for now this was enough.

When the purple hue of evening began to creep up the eastern sky, Errand fed the horse, promised that he would come again the following day, and went back into the Citadel in search of his friends. He found them seated in a low-ceilinged dining hall. This room was smaller than the great main banquet hall and it was less formal. It was perhaps as close to being homey as any room in this bleak fortress could be.

"Did you have a pleasant afternoon?" Polgara asked him.

Errand nodded.

"And was the horse glad to see you?"

"Yes."

"And now you're hungry, I suppose?"

"Well-a little." He looked around the room, noting that the Rivan Queen was not present. "Where's Ce'Nedra?" he asked.

"She's a little tired," Polgara replied. "She and I had a long talk this afternoon."

Errand looked at her and understood. Then he looked around again. "I really am sort of hungry," he told her. She laughed a warm, fond laugh. "All boys are the same," she said.

"Would you really want us to be different?" Garion asked her.

"No," she said, "I don't suppose I would."

The next morning, quite early, Polgara and Errand were in front of the fire in the apartment that had always been hers. Polgara sat in a high-backed chair with a fragrant cup of tea on the small table beside her. She wore a deep blue velvet dressing gown and held a large ivory comb. Errand sat on a carpet-covered footstool directly in front of her, enduring a part of the morning ritual. The washing of the face, ears, and neck did not take all that much time, but for some reason the combing of his hair always seemed to fill up the better part of a quarter hour. Errand's personal tastes in the arrangement of his hair were fairly elemental. As long as it was out of his eyes, it was satisfactory. Polgara, however, seemed to find a great deal of entertainment in pulling a comb through his soft, pale-blond curls. Now and then at odd times of the day, he would see that peculiar softness come into her eyes and see her fingers twitching almost of their own will toward a comb and he would know that, if he did not immediately become very busy with something, he would be wordlessly seated in a chair to have his hair attended to.

There was a respectful tap on the door.

"Yes, Garion?" she replied.

"I hope I'm not too early, Aunt Pol. May I come in?"

"Of course, dear."

Garion wore a blue doublet and hose and soft leather shoes. Errand had noticed that if he had any choice in the matter, the young King of Riva almost always wore blue.

"Good morning, dear," Polgara said, her fingers still busy with the comb.

"Good morning, Aunt Pol," Garion said. And then he looked at the boy who sat fidgeting slightly on the stool in front of Polgara's chair. "Good morning, Errand," he said gravely.

"Belgarion," Errand said, nodding.

"Hold your head still, Errand," Polgara said calmly. "Would you like some tea?" she asked Garion.

"No, thank you." He drew up another chair and sat down across from her. "Where's Durnik?" he asked.

"He's taking a walk around the parapet," Polgara told him. "Durnik likes to be outside when the sun comes up."

"Yes," Garion smiled. "I seem to remember that from Faldor's farm. Is everything all right? With the rooms, I mean?"

"I'm always very comfortable here," she said. "In some ways it was always was the closest thing I had to a permanent home -at least until now." She looked around with satisfaction at the deep crimson velvet drapes and the dark leather upholstery of her chairs and sighed contentedly.

"These have been your rooms for a long time, haven't they?"

"Yes. Beldaran set them aside for me after she and Iron-grip were married."

"What was he like?"

"Iron-grip? Very tall -almost as tall as his father -and immensely strong." She turned her attention back to Errand's hair.

"Was he as tall as Barak?"

"Taller, but not quite so thick-bodied. King Cherek himself was seven feet tall, and all of his sons were very big men. Dras Bull-neck was like a tree trunk. He blotted out the sky. Iron-grip was leaner and he had a fierce black beard and piercing blue eyes. By the time he and Beldaran were married, there were touches of gray in his hair and beard; but even so, there was a kind of innocence about him that we could all sense. It was very much like the innocence we all feel in Errand here."

"You seem to remember him very well. For me, he's always been just somebody in a legend. Everybody knows about the things he did, but we don't know anything about him as a real man."

"I'd remember him a bit more acutely, Garion. After all, there had been the possibility that I might have married him."

"Iron-grip?"

"Aldur told father to send one of his daughters to the Rivan King to be his wife. Father had to choose between Beldaran and me. I think the old wolf made the right choice, but I still looked at Iron-grip in a rather special way." She sighed and then smiled a bit ruefully. "I don't think I'd have made him a good wife," she said. "My sister Beldaran was sweet and gentle and very beautiful. I was neither gentle nor very attractive."

"But you're the most beautiful woman in the world, Aunt Pol," Garion objected quickly.

"It's nice of you to say that, Garion, but when I was sixteen, I wasn't what most people would call pretty. I was tall and gangly. My knees were always skinned, and my face was usually dirty. Your grandfather was never very conscientious about looking after the appearance of his daughters.

Sometimes whole weeks would go by without a comb ever touching my hair. I didn't like my hair very much, anyway. Beldaran's was soft and golden, but mine was like a horse's mane, and there was this ugly white streak." She absently touched the white lock at her left brow with the comb.

"What caused that?" he asked curiously.

"Your grandfather touched me there with his hand the first time he saw me -when I was just a baby. The lock turned white instantly. We're all marked in one way or another, you know. You have the mark on your palm; I have this white lock; your grandfather has a mark just over his heart. It's in different places on each of us, but it means the same thing."

"What does it mean?"

"It has to do with what we are, dear." She turned Errand around and looked at him, her lips pursed. Then she gently touched the curls just over his ears. "Anyway, as I was saying, I was wild and willful and not at all pretty when I was young. The Vale of Aldur isn't really a very good place for a girl to grow up, and a group of crotchety old sorcerers is not really a very good substitute for a mother. They tend to forget that you're around. You remember that huge, ancient tree in the middle of the Vale?"

He nodded.

"I climbed up into that tree once and stayed there for two weeks before anyone noticed that I hadn't been underfoot lately. That sort of thing can make a girl feel neglected and unloved."

"How did you finally find out -that you're really beautiful, I mean?"

She smiled. "That's another story, dear." She looked at him rather directly. "Do you suppose we can stop tiptoeing around the subject now?"

"What?"

"That business in your letter about you and Ce'Nedra."

"Oh, that. I probably shouldn't have bothered you with it, Aunt Pol. It's my problem, after all." He looked away uncomfortably.

"Garion," she said firmly, "in our particular family there's no such thing as a private problem. I thought you knew that by now. Exactly what is the difficulty with Ce'Nedra?"

"It's just not working, Aunt Pol," he said disconsolately. "There are things that I absolutely have to see to by myself, and she wants me to spend every waking minute with her -well, at least she used to. Now we go for days without seeing each other at all. We don't sleep in the same bed any more, and-" He looked suddenly at Errand and coughed uncomfortably.

"There," Polgara said to Errand as if nothing had happened. "I guess you're presentable now. Why don't you put on that brown wool cape and go find Durnik? Then the two of you can go down to the stables and visit the horse."

"All right, Polgara," Errand agreed, slipping down off the stool and going to fetch the cape.

"He's a very good little boy, isn't he?" Garion said to Polgara.

"Most of the time," she replied. "If we can keep him out of the river behind my mother's house. For some reason, he seems to feel incomplete if he can't fall into the water once or twice a month."

Errand kissed Polgara and started toward the door.

"Tell Durnik that I said the two of you can enjoy yourselves this morning," she told him. She gave Garion a direct look. "I think I'm going to be busy here for a few hours."

"All right," Errand said, and went out into the corridor. He gave only the briefest of thoughts to the problem which had made Garion and Ce'Nedra so unhappy. Polgara had already taken the matter in hand, and Errand knew that she would fix things. The problem itself was not a large one, but it had somehow been exploded into something of monstrous proportions by the arguments it had caused. The smallest misunderstanding, Errand realized, could sometimes fester like a hidden wound, if words spoken in haste and in heat were allowed to stand without apology or forgiveness. He also realized that Garion and

Ce'Nedra loved each other so much that they were both extremely vulnerable to those hasty and heated words. Each had an enormous power to hurt the other. Once they were both made fully aware of that, the whole business could be allowed to blow over.

The corridors of the Citadel of Riva were lighted by torches held in iron rings protruding from the stone walls. Errand walked down a broad hallway leading to the east side of the fortress and the steps leading to the parapet and the battlements above. When he reached the thick east wall, he paused to look out one of the narrow windows that admitted a slender band of steel-gray light from the dawn sky. The Citadel was high above the city, and the gray stone buildings and narrow, cobblestone streets below were still lost in shadows and morning mist. Here and there, lighted windows gleamed in the houses of early risers. The clean salt smell of the sea, carried by an onshore breeze, wafted over the island kingdom. Contained within the ancient stones of the Citadel itself was the sense of desolation the people of Riva Iron-grip had felt when they had first glimpsed this rocky isle rising grim and storm-lashed out of a laden sea. Also within those stones was that stern sense of duty that had made the Rivans wrest their fortress and their city directly from the rock itself, to stand forever in defense of the Orb of Aldur.

Errand climbed the flight of stone stairs and found Durnik standing at the battlements, looking out over the Sea of the Winds that was rolling endlessly in to crash in long, muted combers against the rocky shore.

"She finished with your hair, I see," Durnik noted.

Errand nodded. "Finally," he said wryly.

Durnik laughed. "We can both put up with a few things if they please her, can't we?" he said.

"Yes," Errand agreed. "She's talking with Belgarion right now. I think she wants us to stay away until they've talked it all out."

Durnik nodded. "That's the best way, really. Pol and Garion are very close. He'll tell her things when they're alone that he wouldn't say if we were around. I hope she can get things straightened out between him and Ce'Nedra."

"Polgara will fix it," Errand assured him.

From somewhere in a meadow high above them where the morning sun had already touched the emerald grass, a shepherdess lifted her voice to sing to her flock. She sang of love in a pure, unschooled voice that rose like bird song.

"That's the way love should be," Durnik said. "Simple and uncomplicated and clear -just like that girl's voice."

"I know," Errand said. "Polgara said we could go visit the horse -whenever you're finished up here."

"Of course," Durnik said, "and we could probably stop by the kitchen and pick up some breakfast along the way."

"That's an awfully good idea, too," Errand said.

The day went very well. The sun was warm and bright, and the horse frolicked in the exercise yard almost like a puppy.

"The king won't let us break him," one of the grooms told Durnik. "He hasn't even been trained to a halter yet. His Majesty said something about this being a very special horse -which I don't understand at all. A horse is a horse, isn't it?"

"It has to do with something that happened when he was born," Durnik explained.

"They're all born the same," the groom said.

"You had to have been there," Durnik told him.

At supper that evening, Garion and Ce'Nedra were looking rather tentatively across the table at each other, and Polgara had a mysterious little smile playing across her lips.

When they had all finished eating, Garion stretched and yawned somewhat theatrically. "For some reason I'm feeling very tired tonight," he said. "The rest of you can sit up and talk if you'd like, but I think I'll go to bed."

"That might not be a bad idea, Garion," Polgara told him.

He got to his feet, and Errand could feel his trembling nervousness. With an almost agonizing casualness he turned to Ce'Nedra. "Coming, dear?" he asked, putting an entire peace proposal into those two words.

Ce'Nedra looked at him, and her heart was in her eyes.

"Why -uh- yes, Garion," she said with a rosy little blush, "I believe I will. I seem to be very tired, too."

"Good night, children," Polgara said to them in tones of warm affection. "Sleep well."

"What did you say to them?" Belgarath asked his daughter when the royal couple had left the room hand in hand.

"A great many things, father," she replied smugly.

"One of them must have done the trick," he said. "Durnik, be a good fellow and top this off for me." He passed his empty tankard to Durnik, who sat beside the ale barrel. Polgara was so pleased with her success that she did not even comment on that.

It was well after midnight when Errand awoke with a slight start.

"You're a very sound sleeper," a voice that seemed to be inside his mind said to him.

"I was dreaming," Errand replied.

"I noticed that," the voice said drily. "Pull on some clothes. I need you in the throne room."

Errand obediently got out of bed and pulled on his tunic and his short, soft Sendarian boots.

"Be quiet," the voice told him. "Let's not wake up Polgara and Durnik."

Quietly they left the apartment and went down the long, deserted corridors to the Hall of the Rivan King, the vast throne room where, three years before, Errand had placed the Orb of Aldur in Garion's hand and had forever changed the young man's life.

The huge door creaked slightly as Errand pulled it open, and he heard a voice inside call out, "Who's there?"

"It's only me, Belgarion," Errand told him.

The great Hall was illuminated by the soft blue radiance of the Orb of Aldur, standing on the pommel of the huge sword of Riva, hanging point downward above the throne.

"What are you doing wandering around so late, Errand?" Garion asked him. The Rivan King was sprawled on his throne with his leg cocked up over one of the arms.

"I was told to come here," Errand replied.

Garion looked at him strangely. "Told? Who told you?"

"You know," Errand said, stepping inside the Hall and closing the door. "Him."

Garion blinked. "Does he talk to you, too?"

"This is the first time. I've known about him, though."

"If he's never-" Garion broke off and looked sharply up at the Orb, his eyes startled. The soft blue light of the stone had suddenly changed to a deep, angry red. Errand could very clearly hear a strange sound. For all of the time he had carried the Orb, his ears had been filled with the crystalline shimmer of its song, but now that shimmer seemed to have taken on an ugly iron overtone, as if the stone had encountered something or someone that filled it with a raging anger.

"Beware!" that voice which they both heard quite clearly said to them in tones which could not be ignored.

"Beware Zandramas!"

CHAPTER FIVE

As soon as it was daylight, the two of them went in search of Belgarath. Errand could sense that Garion was troubled and he himself felt that the warning they had received concerned a matter of such importance that everything else must be set aside in the face of it. They had not really spoken much about it during those dark, silent hours while they sat together in the Hall of the Rivan King, waiting for the first light to touch the eastern horizon. Instead, they had both watched the Orb of Aldur closely, but the stone, after that one strange moment of crimson anger, had returned to its customary azure glow.

They found Belgarath seated before a recently rekindled fire in a low-beamed hall close to the royal kitchens. On the table not far from where he sat lay a large chunk of bread and a generous slab of cheese. Errand looked at the bread and cheese, realizing suddenly that he was hungry and wondering if Belgarath might be willing to share some of his breakfast. The old sorcerer seemed lost in thought as he gazed into the dancing flames, and his stout gray cloak was drawn about his shoulders, though the hall was not cold.

"You two are up early," he noted as Garion and Errand entered and came to join him by the fireside.

"So are you, Grandfather," Garion said.

"I had a peculiar dream," the old man replied. "I've been trying to shake it off for several hours now. For some reason I dreamed that the Orb had turned red."

"It did," Errand told him quietly.

Belgarath looked at him sharply.

"Yes. We both saw it, Grandfather," Garion said. "We were in the throne room a few hours ago, and the Orb suddenly turned red. Then that voice that I've got in here-" He tapped his forehead. "-said to beware of Zandramas."

"Zandramas?" Belgarath said with a puzzled look. "Is that a name or a thing or what?"

"I don't really know, Grandfather," Garion replied, "but both Errand and I heard it, didn't we, Errand?" Errand nodded, his eyes still on the bread and cheese.

"What were the two of you doing in the throne room at that hour?" Belgarath asked, his eyes very intent.

"I was asleep," Garion answered. Then his face flushed slightly. "Well, sort of asleep. Ce'Nedra and I talked until quite late. We haven't talked very much lately, and so we had a lot of things to say to each other.

Anyway, he told me to get up and go to the throne room."

Belgarath looked at Errand. "And you?"

"He woke me up," Errand replied, "and he-"

"Hold it," Belgarath said sharply. "Who woke you up?"

"The same one who woke Garion."

"You know who he is?"

"Yes."

"And you know what he is?"

Errand nodded.

"Has he ever spoken to you before?"

"No."

"But you knew immediately who and what he is?"

"Yes. He told me that he needed me in the throne room, so I got dressed and went. When I got there, the Orb turned red, and the voice said to beware of Zandramas."

Belgarath was frowning. "You're both absolutely positive that the Orb changed color?"

"Yes, Grandfather," Garion assured him, "and it sounded different, too. It usually makes this kind of ringing noise -like the sound a bell makes after you strike it. This was altogether different."

"And you're sure that it turned red? I mean it wasn't just a darker shade of blue or something?"

"No, Grandfather. It was definitely red."

Belgarath got up out of his chair, his face suddenly grim. "Come with me," he said shortly and started toward the door.

"Where are we going?" Garion asked.

"To the library. I need to check on something."

"On what?"

"Let's wait until I read it. This is important, and I want to be sure that I've got it right."

As he passed the table, Errand picked up the piece of cheese and broke off part of it. He took a large bite as he followed Belgarath and Garion from the room. They went quickly through the dim, torchlit corridors and up a steep, echoing flight of narrow stone steps. In the past few years Belgarath's expression had become rather whimsical and touched with a sort of lazy self-indulgence. All trace of that was gone now, and his eyes were intent and very alert. When they reached the library, the old man took a pair of candles from a dusty table and lighted them from the torch hanging in an iron ring just outside the door. Then he came back inside and set one of the candles down. "Close the door, Garion," he said, still holding the other candle. "We don't want to be disturbed."

Wordlessly, Garion shut the solid oak door. Belgarath went over to the wall, lifted his candle and began to run his eyes over the row upon row of dusty, leather-bound books and the neatly stacked, silk-wrapped scrolls. "There," he said, pointing to the top shelf. "Reach that scroll down for me, Garion -the one wrapped in blue silk."

Garion stretched up on his tiptoes and took down the scroll. He looked at it curiously before handing it to his grandfather. "Are you sure?" he asked. "This isn't the Mrin Codex, you know."

"No," Belgarath told him. "It isn't. Don't get your attention so locked onto the Mrin Codex that you ignore all the others." He set down his candle and carefully untied the silver tasseled cord binding the scroll. He stripped off the blue silk cover and began to unroll the crackling parchment, his eyes running quickly over the ancient script. "Here it is," he said at last. "'Behold,' " he read, " 'in the day that Aldur's Orb burns hot with crimson fire shall the name of the Child of Dark be revealed.' "

"But Torak was the Child of Dark," Garion protested. "What is that scroll?"

"The Darine Codex," Belgarath told him. "It's not always as reliable as the Mrin, but it's the only one that mentions this particular event."

"What does it mean?" Garion asked him, looking perplexed.

"It's a bit complicated," Belgarath replied, his lips pursed and his eyes still fixed on the passage in question.

"Rather simply put, there are two prophecies."

"Yes, I knew that, but I thought that when Torak died, the other one just -well-"

"Not exactly. I don't think it's that simple. The two have been meeting in these confrontations since before the beginning of this world. Each time, there's a Child of Light and a Child of Dark. When you and Torak met at Cthol Mishrak, you were the Child of Light and Torak was the Child of Dark. It wasn't the first time the two had met. Apparently it was not to be the last, either."

"You mean that it's not over yet?" Garion demanded incredulously.

"Not according to this," Belgarath said, tapping the parchment.

"All right, if this Zandramas is the Child of Dark, who's the Child of Light?"

"As far as I know, you are."

"Me? Still?"

"Until we hear something to the contrary."

"Why me?"

"Haven't we had this conversation before?" Belgarath asked drily.

Garion's shoulders slumped. "Now I've got this to worry about again -on top of everything else."

"Oh, stop feeling sorry for yourself, Garion," Belgarath told him bluntly. "We're all doing what we have to do, and sniveling about it won't change a thing."

"I wasn't sniveling."

"Whatever you call it, stop it and get to work."

"What am I supposed to do?" Garion's tone was just a trifle sullen.

"You can start here," the old man said, waving one hand to indicate all the dusty books and silk-wrapped scrolls. "This is perhaps one of the world's best collections of prophecy -western prophecy at least. It doesn't include the Oracles of the Mallolean Grolims, of course, or the collection that Ctuchik had at Rak Cthol or the secret books of those people at Kell, but it's a place to start. I want you to read your way through this -all of it- and see if you can find out anything at all about this Zandramas. Make a note of every reference to 'the Child of Dark.' Most of them will probably have to do with Torak, but there might be some that mean Zandramas instead." He frowned slightly. "While you're at it, keep an eye out for anything that has to do with something called 'the Sardion' or 'Cthrag Sardius.'"

"What's that?"

"I don't know. Beldin ran across the term in Mallorea. It might be important -or it might not."

Garion looked around the library, his face blanching slightly. "Are you telling me that this is all prophecy?"

"Of course not. A lot of it -most of it probably- is the collected ravings of assorted madmen, all faithfully written down."

"Why would anybody want to write down what crazy people say?"

"Because the Mrin Codex is precisely that, the ravings of a lunatic. The Mrin prophet was so crazy that he had to be chained up. A lot of very conscientious people went out after he died and wrote down the gibberish of every madman they could find on the off chance that there might be prophecy hidden in it somewhere."

"How do I tell the difference?"

"I'm not really sure. Maybe after you've read them all, you'll be able to come up with a way to separate them. If you do, let us know. It could save us all a lot of time."

Garion looked around the library in dismay. "But, Grandfather," he protested, "this could take years!"

"You'd probably better get started then, hadn't you? Try to concentrate on things that are supposed to happen after the death of Torak. We're all fairly familiar with the things that led up to that."

"Grandfather, I'm not really a scholar. What if I miss something?"

"Don't," Belgarath told him firmly. "Like it or not, Garion, you're one of us. You have the same responsibilities that the rest of us do. You might as well get used to the idea that the whole world depends on you -and you also might just as well forget that you ever heard the words, 'why me?' That's the objection of a child, and you're a man now." Then the old man turned and looked very hard at Errand. "And what are you doing mixed up in all of this?" he asked.

"I'm not sure," Errand replied calmly. "We'll probably have to wait and see, won't we?"

That afternoon Errand was alone with Polgara in the warm comfort of her sitting room. She sat by the fire with her favorite blue robe about her and her feet on a carpeted footstool. She held an embroidery hoop in her hands and she was humming softly as her needle flashed in the golden firelight. Errand sat in the leather-covered armchair opposite hers, nibbling on an apple and watching her as she sewed.

One of the things he loved about her was her ability to radiate a kind of calm contentment when she was engaged in simple domestic tasks. At such quiet times her very presence was soothing.

The pretty Rivan girl who served as Polgara's maid tapped softly and entered the room. "Lady Polgara," she said with a little curtsy, "My Lord Brand asks if he might have a word with you."

"Of course, dear," Polgara replied, laying aside her embroidery. "Show him in, please." Errand had noticed that Polgara tended to call all young people "dear," most of the time without even being aware that she was doing it.

The maid escorted the tall, gray-haired Rivan Warder into the room, curtsied again, and then quietly withdrew.

"Polgara," Brand greeted her in his deep voice. He was a large, bulky man with a deeply lined face and tired, sad eyes and he was the last Rivan Warder. During the centuries-long interregnum following the death of King Gorek at the hands of Queen Salmissra's assassins, the Isle of the Winds and the Rivan people had been ruled by a line of men chosen for their ability and their absolute devotion to duty. So selfless had been that devotion that each Rivan Warder had submerged his own personality and had taken the name Brand. Now that Garion had come at last to claim his throne, there was no further need for that centuries-old stewardship. So long as he lived, however, this big, sad-eyed man would be absolutely committed to the royal line -not perhaps so much to Garion himself, but rather to the concept of the line and to its perpetuation. It was with that thought uppermost in his mind that he came that quiet afternoon to thank Polgara for taking the estrangement of Garion and his queen in hand.

"How did they manage to grow so far apart?" she asked him. "When they married, they were so close that you couldn't pry them away from each other."

"It all started about a year ago," Brand replied in his rumbling voice. "There are two powerful families on the northern end of the island. They had always been friendly, but a dispute arose over a property arrangement that was involved in a wedding between a young man from one family and a girl from the other. People from one family came to the Citadel and presented their cause to Ce'Nedra, and she issued a royal decree supporting them."

"But she neglected to consult Garion about it?" Polgara surmised.

Brand nodded. "When he found out, he was furious. There's no question that Ce'Nedra had overstepped her authority, but Garion revoked her decree in public."

"Oh, dear," Polgara said. "So that's what all the bitterness was about. I couldn't really get a straight answer out of either of them."

"They were probably a little too ashamed to admit it," Brand said. "Each one had humiliated the other in public, and neither one was mature enough just to forgive and let it slide. They kept wrangling at each other until the whole affair got completely out of hand. There were times when I wanted to shake them both -or maybe spank them."

"That's an interesting idea." She laughed. "Why didn't you write and tell me they were having problems?"

"Belgarion told me not to," he replied helplessly.

"Sometimes we have to disobey that kind of order."

"I'm sorry, Polgara, but I can't do that."

"No, I suppose you couldn't."

She turned to look at Errand, who was closely examining an exquisite piece of blown glass, a crystal wren perched on a budding twig. "Please don't touch it, Errand," she cautioned. "It's fragile and very precious."

"Yes," he agreed, "I know." And to reassure her, he clasped his hands firmly behind his back.

"Well." She turned back to Brand. "I hope the foolishness is all past now. I think we've restored peace to the royal house of Riva."

"I certainly hope so," Brand said with a tired smile. "I would definitely like to see an occupant in the royal nursery."

"That might take a bit longer."

"It's getting sort of important, Polgara," he said seriously. "We're all a bit nervous about the lack of an heir to the throne. It's not only me. Anheg and Rhodar and Cho-Hag have all written to me about it. All of Aloria is holding its breath waiting for Ce'Nedra to start having children."

"She's only nineteen, Brand."

"Most Alorn girls have had at least two babies by the time they're nineteen."

"Ce'Nedra isn't an Alorn. She's not even entirely Tolnedran. Her heritage is Dryad, and there are some peculiarities about Dryads and the way they mature."

"That's going to be a little hard to explain to other Alorns," Brand replied. "There has to be an heir to the Rivan throne. The line must continue."

"Give them a little time, Brand," Polgara said placidly. "They'll get around to it. The important thing was to get them back into the same bedroom."

Perhaps a day or so later, when the sun was sparkling on the waters of the Sea of the Winds and a stiff onshore breeze was flecking the tops of the green waves with frothy white-caps, a huge Cherek war boat maneuvered its way ponderously between the two rocky headlands embracing the harbor at Riva. The ship's captain was also more than life-sized. With his red beard streaming in the wind, Barak, Earl of Trelheim, stood at his tiller, a look of studied concentration on his face as he worked his way through a tricky eddy just inside one of the protective headlands and then across the harbor to the stone quay. Almost before his sailors had made the ship fast, Barak was coming up the long flight of granite steps to the Citadel. Belgarath and Errand had been on the parapet atop the walls of the fortress and had witnessed the arrival of Barak's ship. And so, when the big man reached the heavy gates, they were waiting for him.

"What are you doing here, Belgarath?" the burly Cherek asked. "I thought you were at the Vale."

Belgarath shrugged. "We came by for a visit."

Barak looked at Errand. "Hello, boy," he said. "Are Polgara and Durnik here, too?"

"Yes," Errand replied. "They're all in the throne room watching Belgarion."

"What's he doing?"

"Being king," Belgarath said shortly. "We saw you come into the harbor."

"Really impressive, wasn't it?" Barak said proudly.

"Your ship steers like a pregnant whale, Barak," Belgarath told him bluntly. "You don't seem to have grasped the idea that bigger is not necessarily better."

Barak's face took on an injured expression. "I don't make jokes about your possessions, Belgarath."

"I don't have any possessions, Barak. What brought you to Riva?"

"Anheg sent me. Is Garion going to be much longer at whatever he's doing?"

"We can go find out, I suppose."

The Rivan King, however, had concluded the formal audience for that morning and, in the company of Ce'Nedra, Polgara, and Durnik, had gone through a dim, private passageway which led from the great Hall of the Rivan King to the royal apartments.

"Barak!" Garion exclaimed, hurrying forward to greet his friend in the corridor outside the door to the apartment.

Barak gave him a peculiar look and bowed respectfully.

"What's that all about?" Garion asked him with a puzzled look.

"You're still wearing your crown, Garion," Polgara reminded him, "and your state robes. All of that makes you look rather official."

"Oh," Garion said, looking a bit abashed, "I forgot. Let's go inside." He pulled open the door and led them all into the room beyond.

With a broad grin, Barak enfolded Polgara in a vast bear hug.

"Barak," she said a trifle breathlessly, "you'd be much nicer at close quarters if you'd remember to wash your beard after you've been eating smoked fish."

"I only had one," he told her.

"That's usually enough." He turned then and put his bulky arms around Ce'Nedra's tiny shoulders and kissed her soundly.

The little queen laughed and caught her crown in time to keep it from sliding off her head. "You're right, Lady Polgara," she said, "he definitely has a certain fragrance about him."

"Garion," Barak said plaintively, "I'm absolutely dying for a drink."

"Did all the ale barrels on your ship run dry?" Polgara asked him.

"There's no drinking aboard the Seabird," Barak replied.

"Oh?"

"I want my sailors sober."

"Astonishing," she murmured.

"It's a matter of principle," Barak said piously.

"They do need their wits about them," Belgarath agreed. "That big ship of his is not exactly what you'd call responsive."

Barak gave him a hurt look.

Garion sent for ale, removed his crown and state robes with obvious relief, and invited them all to sit down.

Once Barak had quenched his most immediate thirst, his expression became serious. He looked at Garion. "Anheg sent me to warn you that we're starting to get reports about the Bear-cult again."

"I thought they were all killed at Thull Mardu," Durnik said.

"Grodeg's underlings were," Barak told him. "Unfortunately, Grodeg wasn't the whole cult."

"I don't exactly follow you," Durnik said.

"It gets a little complicated. You see, the Bear-cult has always been there, really. It's a fundamental part of the religious life of the more remote parts of Cherek, Drasnia, and Algaria. Every so often, though, somebody with more ambition than good sense -like Grodeg- gains control and tries to establish the cult in the cities. The cities are where the power is, and somebody like Grodeg automatically tries to use the cult to take them over. The problem is that the Bear-cult doesn't work in the cities."

Durnik's frown became even more confused.

"People who live in cities are always coming in contact with new people and new ideas," Barak explained.

"Out in the countryside, though, they can go for generations without ever encountering a single new thought. The Bear-cult doesn't believe in new thoughts, so it's the natural sort of thing to attract country people."

"New ideas aren't always good ones," Durnik said stiffly, his own rural background painfully obvious.

"Granted," Barak agreed, "but old ones aren't necessarily good either, and the Bear-cult's been working on the same idea for several thousand years now. About the last thing Belar said to the Alorns before the Gods departed was that they should lead the Kingdoms of the West against the people of Torak. It's that word 'lead' that's caused all the problems. It can mean many things, unfortunately. Bear-cultists have always taken it to mean that their very first step in obeying Belar's instructions should be a campaign to force the other Western Kingdoms to submit to Alorn domination. A good Bear-cultist isn't thinking about fighting Angarak, because all of his attention is fixed on subduing Sendaria, Arendia, Tolnedra, Nyissa, and Maragor."

"Maragor doesn't even exist any more," Durnik objected.

"That news hasn't reached the cult yet," Barak said drily. "After all, it's only been about three thousand years now. Anyway, that's the rather tired idea behind the Bear-cult. Their first goal is to reunite Aloria; their next is to overrun and subjugate all of the Western Kingdoms; and only then will they start to give some thought to attacking Murgos and Malloreans."

"They are just a bit backward, aren't they?" Durnik observed.

"Some of them haven't even discovered fire yet," Barak snorted.

"I don't really see why Anheg is so concerned, Barak," Belgarath said. "The Bear-cult doesn't really cause any problems out there in the countryside. They jump around bonfires on midsummer's eve and put on bearskins and shuffle around in single file in the dead of winter and recite long prayers in smoky caves, until they get so dizzy that they can't stand up. Where's the danger in that?"

"I'm getting to that," Barak said, pulling at his beard. "Always before, the rural Bear-cult was just a reservoir of undirected stupidity and superstition. But in the last year or so, something new has been going on."

"Oh?" Belgarath looked at him curiously.

"There's a new leader of the cult -we don't even know who he is. In the past, Bear-cultists from one village didn't even trust the ones from another, so they were never organized enough to be any problem. This new leader of theirs has changed all of that. For the first time in history, rural Bear-cultists are all taking orders from one man."

Belgarath frowned. "That is serious," he admitted.

"This is very interesting, Barak," Garion said, looking a bit perplexed, "but why did King Anheg send you all the way here to warn me? From what I've been told, the Bear-cult has never been able to get a foothold here on the Isle of the Winds."

"Anheg wanted me to warn you to take a few precautions, since this new cult's antagonism is directed primarily at you."

"Me? What for?"

"You married a Tolnedran," Barak told him. "To a Bear-cultist a Tolnedran is worse than a Murgo."

"That's a novel position," Ce'Nedra said with a toss of her curls.

"That's the way those people think," Barak told her. "Most of those blockheads don't even know what an Angarak is. They've all seen Tolnedrans though -usually merchants who deal quite sharply. For a thousand years, they've been waiting for a king to come and pick up Riva's sword and lead them on a holy war to crush all the Kingdoms of the West into subjugation, and when he does finally show up, the very first thing

he does is marry an Imperial Tolnedran Princess. The way they look at it, the next Rivan King is going to be a mongrel. They hate you like poison, my little sweetheart."

"What an absolute absurdity!" she exclaimed.

"Of course it is," the big Cherek agreed. "But absurdity has always been a characteristic of the mind dominated by religion. We'd all be a lot better off if Belar had just kept his mouth shut.

Belgarath laughed suddenly.

"What's so funny?" Barak asked.

"Asking Belar to keep his mouth shut would probably have been the most futile thing any human being could even contemplate," the old sorcerer said, still laughing. "I remember one time when he talked for a week and a half straight without stopping."

"What was he saying?" Garion asked curiously.

"He was explaining to the early Alorns why it wasn't a good idea to start a trek into the far north at the beginning of winter. Sometimes in those days you really had to talk to an Alorn to get an idea through to him."

"That hasn't really changed all that much," Ce'Nedra said with an arch look at her husband. Then she laughed and fondly touched his hand.

The next morning dawned clear and sunny, and Errand, as he usually did, went to the window as soon as he awoke to see what the day promised. He looked out over the city of Riva and saw the bright morning sun standing over the Sea of the Winds and smiled. There was not a hint of cloud.

Today would be fine. He dressed himself in the tunic and hose which Polgara had laid out for him and then went to join his family. Durnik and Polgara sat in two comfortable, leather-upholstered chairs, one on each side of the fire, talking together quietly and sipping tea. As he always did, Errand went to Polgara, put his arms about her neck and kissed her.

"You slept late," she said, brushing his tousled hair back from his eyes.

"I was a little tired," he replied. "I didn't get much sleep the night before last."

"So I heard." Almost absently, she pulled him up into her lap and held him nestled against the soft velvet of her blue robe.

"He's growing a bit big for your lap," Durnik noted, smiling fondly at the two of them.

"I know," Polgara answered. "That's why I hold him as often as I can. Very soon he'll outgrow laps and cuddling, so I need to store up as much as I can now. It's all very well for them to grow up, but I miss the charm of having a small one about."

There was a brief tap on the door, and Belgarath entered.

"Well, good morning, father!" Polgara greeted him.

"Pol." He nodded briefly. "Durnik."

"Did you manage to get Barak put to bed last night?" Durnik asked with a grin.

"We poured him in about midnight. Brand's sons helped us with him. He seems to be getting heavier as he puts on the years."

"You're looking surprisingly well," Polgara observed, "considering the fact that you spent the evening at Garion's ale barrel."

"I didn't drink all that much," he told her, coming to the fire to warm his hands.

She looked at him with one raised eyebrow.

"I've got a lot on my mind," he said. Then he looked directly at her. "Is everything straightened out between Garion and Ce'Nedra?"

"I think so, yes."

"Let's be sure. I don't want things here to fly apart again. I'm going to have to get back to the Vale, but if you think you ought to stay and keep an eye on those two, I can go on ahead." His voice was serious, even decisive.

Errand looked at the old man, noting once again that Belgarath seemed sometimes to be two different people. When there was nothing of any urgency going on, he reveled in his leisure, amusing himself with drink, deception, and petty theft. When a serious problem arose, however, he could set all that aside and devote almost unlimited concentration and energy to solving it.

Polgara quietly put Errand down and looked at her father. "It's serious, then?"

"I don't know, Pol," he said, "and I don't like it when things are going on that I don't know about. If you've finished with what you came here to do, I think we'd better get back. As soon as we can get Barak on his feet, we'll have him take us to Camaar. We can pick up horses there. I need to talk with Beldin -see if he knows anything about this Zandramas thing."

"We'll be ready whenever you want to leave, father," she assured him.

Later that same morning Errand went to the stables to say good-bye to the frolicsome young horse. He was a bit sad to be leaving so soon. He was genuinely fond of Garion and Ce'Nedra. The young King of Riva was in many ways like a brother to Errand, and Ce'Nedra was delightful -when she was not going out of her way to be difficult. Most of all, however, he was going to miss the horse. Errand did not think of the horse as a beast of burden. They were both young and shared a wholehearted enthusiasm for each other's company. The boy stood in the center of the exercise yard with the long-legged animal frisking about him in the bright morning sunlight. Then he caught a movement out of the corner of his eye, turned, and saw Durnik and Garion approaching.

"Good morning, Errand," the Rivan King said.

"Belgarion."

"You and the horse seem to be enjoying yourselves."

"We're friends," Errand said. "We like to be together."

Garion looked almost sadly at the chestnut-hued animal. The horse came to him and curiously nuzzled at his clothing. Garion rubbed the pointed ears and ran his hand down the smooth, glossy forehead. Then he sighed. "Would you like to have him for your very own?" he asked Errand.

"You don't own friends, Belgarion."

"You're right," Garion agreed, "but would you like it if he went back to the Vale with you?"

"But he likes you, too."

"I can always come and visit," the Rivan King said. "There isn't really much room for him to run here, and I'm always so busy that I don't have the time to spend with him the way I should. I think it would be best for him if he went with you. What do you think?"

Errand considered that, trying to think only of the well being of the young animal and not of his own personal preferences. He looked at Garion and saw how much this generous offer had cost his friend. When he finally answered, his voice was quiet and very serious. "I think you're right, Belgarion. The Vale would be better for him. He wouldn't have to be penned up there."

"You'll have to train him," Garion said. "He's never been ridden."

"He and I can work on that," Errand assured him.

"He'll go with you, then," Garion decided.

"Thank you," Errand said simply.

"You're welcome, Errand."

"And done!" Errand could hear the voice as clearly as if it had spoken in his own mind.

"What?" Garion's silent reply was startled.

"Excellently done, Garion. I want these two to be together. They have things to do that need the both of them." Then the voice was gone.

CHAPTER SIX

"The best way to begin is to lay a tunic or a coat across his back," Hettar said in his quiet voice. The tall Algar wore his usual black leather and he stood with Errand in the pasture lying to the west of Poledra's cottage. "Be sure that it's something that has your scent on it. You want him to get used to your smell and the idea that it's all right if something that smells like you is on his back."

"He already knows what I smell like, doesn't he?" Errand asked.

"This is just a little different," Hettar told him. "You have to go at these things slowly. You don't want to frighten him. If he's frightened, he'll try to throw you off his back."

"We're friends," Errand tried to explain. "He knows I won't do anything to hurt him, so why should he try to do something to hurt me?"

Hettar shook his head and looked out over the rolling grassland. "Just do it the way I explained, Errand," he said patiently. "Believe me, I know what I'm talking about."

"If you really want me to," Errand replied, "but I think it's an awful waste of time."

"Trust me."

Errand obediently laid one of his old tunics across the horse's back several times while the horse looked at him curiously, quite obviously wondering what he was doing. Errand wished that he could make Hettar understand. They had already wasted a good part of the morning on the hawkfaced Algar warrior's cautious approach to horse training.

If they had just got right on with it, Errand knew that he and the horse could be galloping together across the free open expanse of hills and valleys stretched out before them.

"Is that enough?" Errand asked after he had put the tunic on the horse's back several times. "Can I get on him now?"

Hettar sighed. "It looks as if you're going to have to learn the hard way," he said. "Go ahead and climb on, if you want. Try to find a soft place to land when he throws you off, though."

"He wouldn't do that," Errand replied confidently. He put his hand on the chestnut's neck and gently led him over to where a white boulder stuck up out of the turf.

"Don't you think you ought to bridle him first?" Hettar asked him. "At least that gives you something to hang on to."

"I don't think so," Errand replied. "I don't believe he'd like that bridle."

"It's up to you," Hettar said. "Do it any way you like. Just try not to break anything when you fall."

"Oh, I don't think I'll fall."

"Tell me, do you know what the word 'wager' means?"

Errand laughed and climbed up on the boulder. "Well," he said, "here we go." He threw his leg over the horse's back.

The colt flinched slightly and stood trembling.

"It's all right," Errand assured him in a calm voice.

The horse turned and looked at him with soft astonishment in his large, liquid eyes.

"You'd better hang on," Hettar warned, but his eyes had an oddly puzzled look, and his voice was not quite as certain as the words.

"He's fine," Errand flexed his legs, not actually even bringing his heels in contact with the chestnut's flanks.

The horse took a tentative step forward and then looked back enquiringly.

"That's the idea," Errand encouraged him.

The horse took several more steps, then stopped to look back over his shoulder again.

"Good," Errand said, patting his neck. "Very, very good." The horse pranced about enthusiastically.

"Watch out!" Hettar said sharply.

Errand leaned forward and pointed toward a grassy knoll several hundred yards off to the southwest. "Let's go up there," he said into the sharply upstanding ear.

The horse gave a sort of delighted shudder, bunched himself, and ran for the hilltop as hard as he could.

When, moments later, they crested the knoll, he slowed and pranced about proudly.

"All right," Errand said, laughing with sheer delight. "Now, why don't we go to that tree way over there on that other hillside?"

"It was unnatural," Hettar said moodily that evening as they all sat at the table in Poledra's cottage, bathed in the golden firelight.

"They seem to be doing all right," Durnik said mildly.

"But he's doing everything wrong," Hettar protested. "That horse should have gone absolutely wild when Errand just got on him like that without any warning. And you don't tell a horse where you want him to go. You have to steer him. That's what the reins are for."

"Errand's an unusual boy," Belgarath told him, "and the horse is an unusual horse. As long as they get along and understand each other, what difference does it make?"

"It's unnatural," Hettar said again with a baffled look. "I kept waiting for the horse to panic, but his mind stayed absolutely calm. I know what a horse is thinking, and about the only thing that colt was feeling when Errand got on his back was curiosity. Curiosity! He didn't do or think anything the way he should." He shook his head darkly, and his long black scalplock swung back and forth as if in emphasis. "It's unnatural," he growled as if that were the only word he could think of to sum up the situation.

"I think you've already said that several times, Hettar," Polgara told him. "Why don't we just drop the subject since it seems to bother you so much and you can tell me about Adara's baby instead."

An expression of fatuous pleasure came over Hettar's fierce, hawk-like face. "He's a boy," he said with the overwhelming pride of a new father.

"We gathered that," Polgara said calmly. "How big was he when he was born?"

"Oh-" Hettar looked perplexed. "About so big, I'd say." He held his hands half a yard apart.

"No one took the trouble to measure him?"

"They might have done that, I suppose. My mother and the other ladies were doing all sorts of things right after he came."

"And would you care to estimate his weight?"

"Probably about as much as a full-grown hare, I suppose -a fairly good-sized one- or perhaps the weight of one of those red Sendarian cheeses."

"I see, perhaps a foot and a half long and eight or nine pounds -is that what you're trying to say?" Her look was steady.

"About that, I suppose."

"Why didn't you say so, then?" she demanded in exasperation.

He looked at her, startled. "Is it really that important?"

"Yes, Hettar, it really is that important. Women like to know these things."

"I'll have to remember that. About all I was really interested in was whether he had the usual number of arms, legs, ears, noses -things like that- that and making sure that his very first food was mare's milk, of course."

"Of course," she said acidly.

"It's very important, Polgara," he assured her. "Every Algar's first drink is mare's milk."

"That makes him part horse, I suppose."

He blinked. "No, of course not, but it establishes a sort of bond."

"Did you milk the mare for him? Or did you make him crawl out and find one for himself?"

"You're taking all this very oddly, Polgara."

"Blame it on my age," she said in a dangerous voice.

He caught that tone almost immediately. "No, I don't think I'd want to do that."

"Wise decision," Durnik murmured. "You said that you were going up into the mountains of Ulgoland."

Hettar nodded. "You remember the Hrulgin?"

"The flesh-eating horses?"

"I have sort of an idea I want to try out. A full-grown Hrulga can't be tamed, of course, but maybe if I can capture some of their colts."

"That's very dangerous, Hettar," Belgarath warned. "The whole herd will defend the young."

"There are some ways to separate the colts from the rest of the herd."

Polgara looked at him disapprovingly. "Even if you succeed, what do you plan to do with the beasts?"

"Tame them," Hettar replied simply.

"They can't be tamed."

"Nobody's ever tried it. And even if I can't tame them, I perhaps I can breed them with ordinary horses."

Durnik looked puzzled. "Why would you want horses with fangs and claws?"

Hettar looked thoughtfully into the fire. "They're faster and stronger than ordinary horses," he replied. "They can jump much farther, and-" His voice drifted off into silence.

"And because you can't stand the idea of anything that looks like a horse that you can't ride," Belgarath finished for him.

"That might be a part of it," Hettar admitted. "They'd give a man a tremendous advantage in a battle, though."

"Hettar," Durnik said, "the most important thing in Algaria is the cattle, right?"

"Yes."

"Do you really want to start raising a breed of horses that would probably look at a cow as something to eat?"

Hettar frowned and scratched at his chin. "I hadn't thought about that," he admitted.

Now that he had the horse, Errand's range increased enormously. The young stallion's stamina was virtually inexhaustible, and he could run for most of the day without tiring.

Because Errand was still only a boy, his weight was not enough to burden the enthusiastic animal, and they ran freely over the rolling, grass-covered hills of southern Algaria and down into the tree-dotted expanse of the Vale of Aldur.

The boy rose early each morning and ate his breakfast impatiently, knowing that the chestnut stallion was waiting just outside the cottage and that, as soon as breakfast was over, the two of them could gallop out through the dewdrenched grass glistening green and lush in the slanting, golden rays of the morning sun and pound up the long slopes of the hills lying before them with the cool, sweet morning air rushing past them. Polgara, who seemed to know instinctively why they both had this need to run, said nothing as Errand wolfed down his food, sitting on the very edge of his chair so that at the very instant his plate was clean he could bolt for the door and the day which lay before him. Her eyes were gentle as she watched him, and the smile she gave him when he asked to be excused was understanding.

On a dewy, sun-filled morning in late summer when the grass was golden and heavy with ripe seeds, Errand came out of the door of the cottage and touched the bowed neck of his waiting friend with a gentle, caressing hand. The horse quivered with pleasure and took a few prancing steps, eager to be off. Errand laughed, took a handful of the stallion's mane, swung his leg and flowed up onto the strong, glossy back in a single, fluid move. The horse was running almost before the boy was in place. They galloped up the long hill, paused to look out over the sun-touched grassland lying open before them, and then circled the small valley where the thatched stone cottage lay and headed south, down into the Vale.

This day's ride was not, as so many others had been, a random excursion with no particular goal or purpose. For days now, Errand had felt the presence of a strange, awareness emanating from the Vale that seemed to be calling to him and, as he had emerged from the cottage door, he had suddenly resolved to find out exactly what it was that seemed to summon him so quietly.

As they moved down into the quiet Vale, past placidly grazing deer and curious rabbits, Errand could feel that awareness growing stronger. It was a peculiar kind of consciousness, dominated more than anything by an incredible patience -an ability, it seemed, to wait for eons for a response to these occasional quiet calls. As they crested a tall, rounded hill a few leagues to the west of Belgarath's tower, a brief shadow flickered across the bending grass. Errand glanced up and saw a blue-banded hawk circling on motionless wings on a rising column of sun-warmed air. Even as the boy watched, the hawk tilted, sideslipped, and then spiraled down in long, graceful circles. When it was no more than inches above the golden tassels of the ripe grass, it flared its wings, thrust down with its taloned feet and seemed somehow to shimmer in the morning air. When the momentary shimmer faded, the hawk was gone and the hunchbacked Beldin stood waist-deep in the tall grass, with one eyebrow cocked curiously. "What are you doing all the way down here, boy?" he asked without any kind of preamble.

"Good morning, Beldin," Errand said calmly, leaning back to let the horse know that he wanted to stop for a few minutes.

"Does Pol know how far from home you've been going?" the ugly man demanded, ignoring Errand's gesture toward politeness.

"Probably not entirely," Errand admitted. "She knows that I'm out riding, but she might not know how much ground we can cover."

"I've got better things to do than spend every day watching over you, you know," the irascible old man growled.

"You don't have to do that."

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I do. It's my month for it."

Errand looked at him, puzzled.

"Didn't you know that one of us watches you every time you leave the cottage?"

"Why would you want to do that?"

"You do remember Zedar, don't you?"

Errand sighed sadly. "Yes," he said.

"Don't waste your sympathy on him," Beldin said. "He got exactly what he deserved."

"Nobody deserves that."

Beldin gave a snort of ugly laughter. "He's lucky that it was Belgarath who caught up with him. If it had been me, I'd have done a lot more than just seal him up inside solid rock. But that's beside the point. You remember why Zedar found you and took you with him?"

"To steal the Orb of Aldur."

"Right. So far as we know, you're the only person beside Belgarion who can touch the Orb and keep on living. Other people know that, too, so you might as well get used to the idea of being watched. We are not going to let you wander around alone where somebody might get his hands on you. Now, you didn't answer my question."

"Which question?"

"What are you doing all the way down in this part of the Vale?"

"There's something I need to see."

"What's that?"

"I don't know. It's up ahead somewhere. What is it that's off in that direction?"

"There's nothing out there but the tree."

"That must be it, then. It wants to see me."

"See?"

"Maybe that's the wrong word."

Beldin scowled at him. "Are you sure it's the tree?"

"No. Not really. All I know is that something in that direction has been-" Errand hesitated. "I want to say inviting me to come by. Would that be the proper word?"

"It's talking to you, not me. Pick any word you like. All right, let's go then."

"Would you like to ride?" Errand offered. "Horse can carry us both."

"Haven't you given him a name yet?"

"Horse is good enough. He doesn't seem to feel that he needs one. Would you like to ride?"

"Why would I want to ride when I can fly?"

Errand felt a sudden curiosity. "What's it like?" he asked. "Flying, I mean?"

Beldin's eyes suddenly changed, to become distant and almost soft. "You couldn't even begin to imagine," he said. "Just keep your eyes on me. When I get over the tree, I'll circle to show you where it is." He stooped in the tall grass, curved out his arms, and gave a strong leap. As he rose into the air, he shimmered into feathers and swooped away.

The tree stood in solitary immensity in the middle of a broad meadow, its trunk larger than a house, its wide-spread branches shading entire acres, and its crown rising hundreds of feet into the air. It was incredibly ancient. Its roots reached down almost into the very heart of the world, and its branches touched the sky. It stood alone and silent, as if forming a link between earth and sky, a link whose purpose was beyond the understanding of man.

As Errand rode up to the vast shaded area beneath the tree's shelter, Beldin swooped in, hovered, and dropped, almost seeming to stumble into his natural form. "All right," he growled, "there it is. Now what?"

"I'm not sure." Errand slid down off the horse's back and walked across the soft, springy turf toward the immense trunk. The sense of the tree's awareness was very strong now, and Errand approached it curiously, still unable to determine exactly what it wanted with him.

Then he put out his hand and touched the rough bark; in the instant that he touched it, he understood. He quite suddenly knew the whole of the tree's existence. He found that he could look back over a million million mornings to the time when the world had just emerged out of the elemental chaos from which the Gods had formed it. All at once, he knew of the incredible length of time that the earth had rolled in silence, awaiting the coming of man. He saw the endless turning of the seasons and felt the footsteps of the Gods upon the earth. And even as the tree knew, Errand came to know the fallacy which lay behind man's conception of the nature of time. Man needed to compartmentalize time, to break it into manageable pieces -eons, centuries, years, and hours.

This eternal tree, however, understood that time was all one piece -that it was not merely an endless repetition of the same events, but rather that it moved from its beginning toward a final goal. All of that convenient segmenting which men used to make time more manageable had no real meaning. It was to tell him this simple truth that the tree had summoned him here. As he grasped that fact, the tree acknowledged him in friendship and affection.

Slowly Errand let his fingertips slide from the bark, then turned, and walked back to where Beldin stood.

"That's it?" the hunchbacked sorcerer asked. "That's all it wanted?"

"Yes. That's all. We can go back now."

Beldin gave him a penetrating look. "What did it say?"

"It's not the kind of thing you can put into words."

"Try."

Well -it was sort of saying that we pay too much attention to years."

"That's enormously helpful, Errand."

Errand struggled with it, trying to formulate words that would express what he had just learned. "Things happen in their own time," he said finally, "It doesn't make any difference how many -or few- of what we call years come between things."

"What things are we talking about?"

"The important ones. Do you really have to follow me all the way home?"

"I need to keep an eye on you. That's about all. Are you going back now?"

"Yes."

"I'll be up there." Beldin made a gesture toward the arching blue dome of the sky. He shuddered into the form of a hawk and drove himself into the air with strong thrusts of his wings.

Errand pulled himself up onto the chestnut stallion's back. His pensive mood was somehow communicated to the animal; instead of a gallop, the horse turned and walked north, back toward the cottage nestling in its valley.

The boy considered the message of the eternal tree as he rode slowly through the golden, sun-drenched grass and, all lost in thought, he paid but little attention to his surroundings. It was thus that he was not actually aware of the robed and hooded figure standing beneath a broad-spread pine until he was almost on top of it. It was the horse that warned him with a startled snort as the figure made a slight move.

"And so thou art the one," it snarled in a voice which seemed scarcely human.

Errand calmed the horse with a reassuring hand on its quivering neck and looked at the dark figure before him. He could feel the waves of hatred emanating from that shadowy shape and he knew that, of all the things he had ever encountered, this was the thing he should most fear. Yet, surprising even himself, he remained calm and unafraid.

The shape laughed, an ugly, dusty kind of sound. "Thou art a fool, boy," it said. "Fear me, for the day will come when I shall surely destroy thee."

"Not surely," Errand replied calmly. He peered closely at the shadow-shrouded form and saw at once that - like the figure of Cyradis he had met on the snowy hilltop- this seemingly substantial shape was not really here, but somewhere else, sending its malevolent hatred across the empty miles. "Besides," he added, "I'm old enough now not to be afraid of shadows."

"We will meet in the flesh, boy," the shadow snarled, "and in that meeting shalt thou die."

"That hasn't been decided yet, has it?" Errand said.

"That's why we have to meet -to decide which of us will stay and which must go." The dark-robed shape drew in its breath with a sharp hiss.

"Enjoy thy youth, boy," it snarled, "for it is all the life thou wilt have. I will prevail." Then the dark shape vanished.

Errand drew in a deep breath and glanced skyward at the circling Beldin. He realized that not even the hawk's sharp eyes could have penetrated the spreading treelimb to where that strange, cowed figure had stood. Beldin could not know of the meeting. Errand nudged the stallion's flanks, and they moved away from the solitary tree at a flowing canter, riding in the golden sunlight toward home.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The years that followed were quiet years at the cottage. Belgarath and Beldin were often away for long periods of time, and when they returned, travel-stained and weary, their faces usually wore the frustrated look of men who have not found what they were looking for. Although Durnik was often on the stream bank, bending all of his attention to the problem of convincing some wary trout that a thumbnail-sized bit of polished metal with a few strands of red yarn trailing behind it in the current was not merely edible but irresistibly delicious, he nonetheless maintained the cottage and its immediate surroundings in that scrupulously tidy condition which announced louder than words that the proprietor of any given farmstead was a Sendar. Although rail fences, by their very nature, zigzagged and tended to meander with the lay of the ground, Durnik firmly insisted that his fence lines be absolutely straight. He was quite obviously constitutionally incapable of going around any obstacle.

Thus, if a large rock happened to intrude itself in the path of one of his fences, he immediately stopped being a fence builder and became an excavator.

Polgara immersed herself in domesticity. The interior of her cottage was immaculate. Her doorstep was not merely swept but frequently scrubbed. The rows of beans, turnips, and cabbages in her garden were as straight as any of Durnik's fences, and weeds were absolutely forbidden. Her expression as she toiled at these seemingly endless tasks was one of dreamy contentment, and she hummed or sang very old songs as she worked.

The boy, Errand, however, tended on occasion toward vagrancy. This was not to say that he was indolent, but many of the chores around a rural farmstead were tedious, involving repeating the same series of actions over and over again. Stacking firewood was not one of Errand's favorite pastimes. Weeding the garden seemed somehow futile, since the weeds grew back overnight. Drying the dishes seemed an act of utter folly, since, left alone, the dishes would dry themselves without any assistance whatsoever. He made some effort to sway Polgara to his point of view in this particular matter. She listened gravely to his impeccable logic, nodding her agreement as he demonstrated with all the eloquence at his command that the dishes did not really need to be dried. And when he had finished, summing up all his arguments with a dazzling display of sheer brilliance, she smiled and said, "Yes, dear," and implacably handed him the dishtowel.

Errand was hardly overburdened with unrelenting toil, however. In point of fact, not a day went by when he did not spend several hours on the back of the chestnut stallion, roaming the grasslands surrounding the cottage as freely as the wind.

Beyond the timeless, golden doze of the Vale, the world moved on. Although the cottage was remote, visitors were not uncommon. Hettar, of course, rode by often and sometimes he was accompanied by Adara, his tall, lovely wife, and their infant son. Like her husband, Adara was an Algar to her fingertips, as much at home in the saddle as she was on her feet. Errand was very fond of her. Though her face always seemed serious, even grave, there lurked just beneath that calm exterior an ironic, penetrating wit that absolutely delighted him. It was more than that, however. The tall, dark-haired girl, with her flawless features and alabaster skin, carried about her a light, delicate fragrance that always seemed to tug at the outer edges of his consciousness. There was something elusive yet strangely compelling about that scent. Once, when Polgara was playing with the baby, Adara rode with Errand to the top of a nearby hill and there she told him about how the perfume she wore originated.

"You did know that Garion is my cousin?" she asked him.

"Yes."

"We had ridden out from the Stronghold once -it was in the winter when everything was locked in frost. The grass was brown and lifeless, and all the leaves had fallen from the bushes. I asked him about sorcery -what it was and what he could do with it. I didn't really believe in sorcery -I wanted to, but I just couldn't bring myself to believe. He took up a twig and wrapped some dry grass around it; then he turned it into a flower right in front of my eyes."

Errand nodded. "Yes, that's the kind of thing Garion would do. Did it help you to believe?"

She smiled. "Not right away -at least not altogether. There was something else I wanted him to do, but he said that he couldn't."

"What was that?"

She blushed rosily and then laughed. "It still embarrasses me," she said. "I wanted him to use his power to make Hettar love me."

"But he didn't have to do that," Errand said, "Hettar loved you already, didn't he?"

"Well -he needed a little help to make him realize it. But I was feeling very sorry for myself that day. When we rode back to the Stronghold, I forgot the flower and left it behind on the sheltered side of a hill. A year or so later, the whole hillside was covered with low bushes and these beautiful little lavender flowers. Ce'Nedra calls the flower 'Adara's rose,' and Ariana thought it might have some medicinal value, even though we've never been able to find anything it cures. I like the fragrance of the flower, and it is mine in a sort of special way, so I sprinkle petals in the chests where I keep my clothes." She laughed a wicked sort of little laugh. "It makes Hettar very affectionate," she added.

"I don't think that's entirely caused by the flower," Errand said.

"Perhaps, but I'm not going to take any chances with that. If the scent gives me an advantage, I'm certainly going to use it."

"That makes sense, I suppose."

"Oh, Errand," she laughed, "you're an absolutely delightful boy."

The visits of Hettar and Adara were not entirely social in nature. Hettar's father was King Cho-Hag, Chief of the Clan-Chiefs of Algaria, and Cho-Hag, the nearest of the Alorn monarchs, felt that it was his responsibility to keep Polgara advised of the events which were taking place in the world beyond the boundaries of the Vale. From time to time he sent reports of the progress of the bloody, endless war in southern Cthol Murgos, where Kal Zakath, emperor of Mallorean, continued his implacable march across the plains of Hagga and into the great southern forest in Gorut. The Kings of the West were at a loss to explain Zakath's seemingly unreasoning hatred of his Murgo cousins. There were rumors of a personal affront at some time in the past, but that had involved Taur Urgas, and Taur Urgas had died at the Battle of Thall Mardu. Zakath's enmity for the Murgos, however, had not died with the madman who ruled them, and he now led his Malloreans in a savage campaign evidently designed to exterminate all of Murgodom and to erase from human memory all traces of the fact that the Murgos had ever even existed.

In Tolnedra, Emperor Ran Borune XXIII, the father of Queen Ce'Nedra of Riva, was in failing health; and because he had no son to succeed him on the Imperial Throne at Tol Honeth, the great families of the Empire were engaged in a vicious struggle over the succession. Enormous bribes changed hands, and assassins crept through the streets of Tol Honeth by night with sharpened daggers and vials of those deadly poisons purchased in secret from the snake people of Nyissa. The wily Ran Borune, however, much to the chagrin and outrage of the Honeths, the Vordues, and the Horbites, had appointed General Varana, the

Duke of Anadile, as his regent; and Varana, whose control of the legions was very nearly absolute, took firm steps to curb the excesses of the great houses in their scramble for the throne.

The internecine wars of the Angaraks and the only slightly less savage struggles of the Grand Dukes of the Tolnedran Empire, however, were of only passing interest to the Alorn Kings. The monarchs of the north were far more concerned with the troublesome resurgence of the Bear-cult and with the sad but undeniable fact that King Rhodar of Drasnian was quite obviously declining rapidly. Rhodar, despite his vast bulk, had demonstrated an astonishing military genius during the campaign which had culminated in the Battle of Thull Mardu, but Cho-Hag sadly reported that the corpulent Drasnian monarch had grown forgetful and in some ways even childish in the past few years. Because of his huge weight, he could no longer stand unaided and he frequently fell asleep, even during the most important state functions. His lovely young queen, Porenn, did as much as she possibly could to relieve the burdens imposed upon him by his crown, but it was quite obvious to all who knew him that King Rhodar would be unable to reign much longer.

At last, toward the end of a severe winter that had locked the north in snow and ice deeper than anyone could remember, Queen Porenn sent a messenger to the Vale to entreat Polgara to come to Boktor to try her healing arts on the Drasnian king. The messenger arrived late one bitter afternoon as the wan sun sank almost wearily into a bed of purple cloud lying heavy over the mountains of Ulgo. He was thickly wrapped in rich sable fur, but his long, pointed nose protruded from the warm interior of his deep cowl and immediately identified him.

"Silk!" Durnik exclaimed as the little Drasnian dismounted in the snowy dooryard. "What are you doing all the way down here?"

"Freezing, actually," Silk replied. "I hope you've got a good fire going."

"Pol, look who's here," Durnik called, and Polgara opened the door to look out at their visitor.

"Well, Prince Kheldar," she said, smiling at the rat-faced little man, "have you so completely plundered Garog Nadrak that you've come in search of a new theater for your depredations?"

"No," Silk told her, stamping his half-frozen feet on the ground. "I made the mistake of passing through Boktor on my way to Val Alorn. Porenn dragooned me into making a side trip."

"Go inside," Durnik told him. "I'll tend to your horse."

After Silk had removed his sable cloak, he stood shivering in front of the arched fireplace with his hands extended toward the flames. "I've been cold for the last week," he grumbled. "Where's Belgarath?"

"He and Beldin are off in the East somewhere," Polgara replied, mixing the half-frozen man a cup of spiced wine to help warm him.

"No matter, I suppose. Actually I came to see you. You've heard that my uncle isn't well?"

She nodded, picking up a glowing-hot poker and plunging it into the wine with a bubbling hiss. "Hettar brought us some news about that last fall. Have his physicians put a name to his illness yet?"

"Old age," Silk shrugged, gratefully taking the cup from her.

"Rhodar isn't really that old."

"He's carrying a lot of extra weight. That tires a man out after a while. Porenn is desperate. She sent me to ask you -no, to beg you- to come to Boktor and see what you can do. She says to tell you that Rhodar won't see the geese come north if you don't come."

"Is it really that bad?"

"I'm not a physician," Silk replied, "but he doesn't look very good, and his mind seems to be slipping. He's even starting to lose his appetite, and that's a bad sign in a man who always ate seven big meals a day."

"Of course we'll come," Polgara said quickly.

"Just let me get warm first," Silk said in a plaintive tone.

They were delayed for several days just south of Aldurford by a savage blizzard that swept out of the mountains of Sendaria to howl across the open plains of northern Algaria. As luck had it, they reached the encampment of a nomadic band of roving herdsmen just as the storm broke and sat out the days of shrieking wind and driving snow in the comfortable wagons of the hospitable Algars. When the weather cleared at last, they pressed on to Aldurford, crossed the river, and reached the broad causeway that stretched across the snowchoked fens to Boktor.

Queen Porenn, still lovely despite the dark circles under her eyes that spoke so eloquently of her sleepless concern, greeted them at the gates of King Rhodar's palace. "Oh, Polgara," she said, overwhelmed with gratitude and relief as she embraced the sorceress.

"Dear Porenn," Polgara said, enfolding the careworn little Drasnian queen in her arms. "We'd have been here sooner, but we encountered bad weather. How's Rhodar?"

"A little weaker every day," Porenn replied with a kind of hopelessness in her voice. "Even Kheva tires him now."

"Your son?"

Porenn nodded. "The next king of Drasnia. He's only six -much too young to ascend the throne."

"Well, let's see what we can do to delay that."

King Rhodar, however, looked even worse than Silk's assessment of his condition had led them to believe. Errand remembered the King of Drasnia as a fat, jolly man with a quick wit and seemingly inexhaustible energy. Now he was listless, and his gray-hued skin hung on him in folds. He could not rise; perhaps even more serious was the fact that he could not lie down without his breath coming in painful, choking gasps. His voice, which had once been powerful enough to wake a sleeping army, had become a puny, querulous wheeze. He smiled a tired little smile of greeting when they entered, but after only a few minutes of conversation, he dozed off again.

"I think I need to be alone with him," Polgara told the rest of them in a crisp, efficient voice, but the quick look she exchanged with Silk carried little hope for the ailing monarch's recovery.

When she emerged from Rhodar's room, her expression was grave.

"Well?" Porenn asked, her eyes fearful.

"I'll speak frankly," Polgara said. "We've known each other too long for me to hide the truth from you. I can make his breathing a bit easier and relieve some of his discomfort. There are some things that will make him more alert -for short periods of time- but we have to use those sparingly, probably only when there are some major decisions to be made."

"But you cannot cure him." Porenn's quiet voice hovered on the very edge of tears.

"It's not a condition that's subject to cure, Porenn. His body is just worn out. I've told him for years that he was eating himself to death. He's as heavy as three normal men. A man's heart was simply not designed to carry that kind of weight. He hasn't had any real exercise in the past several years, and his diet is absolutely the worst he could possibly have come up with."

"Could you use sorcery?" the Drasnian queen asked desperately.

"Porenn, I'd have to rebuild him from the ground up. Nothing he has really functions right any more. Sorcery simply wouldn't work. I'm sorry."

Two great tears welled up in Queen Porenn's eyes. "How long?" she asked in a voice scarcely more than a whisper.

"A few months -six at the most."

Porenn nodded, and then, despite her tear-filled eyes, she lifted her chin bravely. "When you think he's strong enough, I'd like to have you give him those potions that will clear his mind. He and I will have to talk. There are arrangements that are going to have to be made -for the sake of our son, and for Drasnia."

"Of course, Porenn."

The bitter cold of that long, cruel winter broke quite suddenly a couple of days later. A warm wind blew in off the Gulf of Cherek during the night, bringing with it a gusty rainstorm that turned the drifts clogging the broad avenues of Boktor into sodden brown slush. Errand and Prince Kheva, the heir to the Drasnian throne, found themselves confined to the palace by the sudden change in the weather. Crown Prince Kheva was a sturdy little boy with dark hair and a serious expression. Like his father, the ailing King Rhodar, Kheva had a marked preference for the color red and he customarily wore a velvet doublet and hose in that hue.

Though Errand was perhaps five years or so older than the prince, the two of them became friends almost immediately. Together they discovered the enormous entertainment to be found in rolling a brightly colored wooden ball down along flight of stone stairs. After the bouncing ball knocked a silver tray from the hands of the chief butler, however, they were asked quite firmly to find other amusements.

They wandered for a time through the echoing marble halls of the palace, Kheva in his bright red velvet and Errand in sturdy peasant brown, until they came at last to the grand ballroom. At one end of the enormous hall, a broad marble staircase with a crimson carpet down the center descended from the upper floors of the palace, and along each side of that imposing stair was a smooth marble balustrade. The two boys looked speculatively at those twin banisters, both of them immediately recognizing the tremendous potential of all that slippery marble. There were polished chairs along each side of the ballroom, and each chair was padded with a red velvet cushion. The boys looked at the balustrades. Then they looked at the cushions. Then they both turned to be sure that no guard or palace functionary was in the vicinity of the large, double doors at the back of the ballroom.

Errand prudently closed the doors; then he and Prince Kheva went to work. There were many chairs and many red velvet cushions. When those cushions were all piled in two heaps at the bottom of the marble stair railings, they made a pair of quite imposing mountains.

"Well?" Kheva said when all was in readiness.

"I guess we might as well," Errand replied.

Together they climbed the stairs and then each of them mounted one of the smooth, cool banisters descending grandly toward the white marble floor of the ballroom far below.

"Go!" Kheva shouted, and the two of them slid down, gaining tremendous speed as they went and landing with soft thumps in the heaps of cushions awaiting them.

Laughing with delight, the two boys ran back up the stairs again and once again they slid down. All in all, the afternoon went very well, until at last one of the cushions burst its seams and filled the quiet air of the grand ballroom with softly drifting goose down. It was, quite naturally, at that precise moment that Polgara came looking for them. Somehow it always happened that way. The moment anything was broken, spilled, or tipped over, someone in authority would appear. There was never an opportunity to tidy up, and so such situations always presented themselves in the worst possible light.

The double doors at the far end of the ballroom opened, and Polgara, regally beautiful in blue velvet, stepped inside.

Her face was grave as she regarded the guilty-looking pair lying at the foot of the stairs in their piles of cushions, with a positive blizzard of goose down swirling around them.

Errand winced and held his breath.

Very softly, she closed the doors behind her and walked slowly toward them, her heels sounding ominously loud on the marble floor. She looked at the denuded chairs lining each side of the ballroom. She looked at the marble balustrades. She looked at the boys with feathers settling on them. And then, without warning whatsoever, she began to laugh, a rich, warm, vibrant laugh that absolutely filled the empty hall.

Errand felt somehow betrayed by her reaction. He and Kheva had gone out of their way to get themselves into trouble, and all she did was laugh about it. There was no scolding, no acid commentary, nothing but laughter. He definitely felt that this levity was out of place, an indication that she was not taking this thing as seriously as she ought. He felt a trifle bitter about the whole thing. He had earned the scolding she was denying him.

"You boys will clean it up, won't you?" she asked them.

"Of course, Lady Polgara," Kheva assured her quickly. "We were just about to do that."

"Splendid, your Highness," she said, the corners of her mouth still twitching. "Do try to gather up all the feathers." And she turned and walked out of the ballroom, leaving the faint echo of her laughter hovering in the air behind her.

After that, the boys were watched rather closely. There was nothing really obvious about it; it was just that there always seemed to be someone around to call a halt before things got completely out of hand.

About a week later, when the rains had passed and the slush had mostly melted off the streets, Errand and Kheva were sitting on the floor of a carpeted room, building a fortress out of wooden blocks. At a table near the window Silk, splendidly dressed in rich black velvet, was carefully reading a dispatch he had received that morning from his partner, Yarblek, who had remained in Gar og Nadrak to tend the business. About midmorning, a servant came into the room and spoke briefly with the rat-faced little man. Silk nodded, rose, and came over to where the boys were playing. "What would you gentlemen say to a breath of fresh air?" he asked them.

"Of course," Errand replied, getting to his feet.

"And you, cousin?" Silk asked Kheva.

"Certainly, your Highness," Kheva said.

Silk laughed. "Must we be so formal, Kheva?"

"Mother says I should always use the proper forms of address," Kheva told him seriously. "I guess it's to help me keep in practice or something."

"Your mother isn't here," Silk told him slyly, "so it's all right to cheat a little."

Kheva looked around nervously. "Do you really think we should?" he whispered.

"I'm sure of it," Silk replied. "Cheating is good for you. It helps you to keep your perspective."

"Do you cheat often?"

"Me?" Silk was still laughing. "All the time, cousin. All the time. Let's fetch cloaks and take a turn about the city. I have to go by the headquarters of the intelligence service; and since I've been appointed your keeper for the day, the two of you had better come along."

The air outside was cool and damp, and the wind was brisk enough to whip their cloaks about their legs as they passed along the cobbled streets of Boktor. The Drasnian capital was one of the major commercial centers of the world, and the streets teemed with men of all races. Richly mantled Tolnedrans spoke on street corners with sober-faced Senders in sensible brown. Flamboyantly garbed and richly jeweled Darwinians haggled with leather-garbed Nadraks, and there were even a few black-robed Murgos striding along the blustery streets, with their broad-backed Thullish porters trailing behind them, carrying heavy packs filled with merchandise. The porters, of course, were followed at a discreet distance by the ever present spies.

"Dear, sneaky old Boktor," Silk declaimed extravagantly, "where at least every other man you meet is a spy."

"Are those men spies?" Kheva asked, looking at them with a surprised expression.

"Of course they are, your Highness." Silk laughed again.

"Everybody in Drasnia is a spy -or wants to be. It's our national industry. Didn't you know that?"

"Well -I knew that there are quite a few spies in the palace, but I didn't think they'd be out in the streets."

"Why should there be spies in the palace?" Errand asked him curiously.

Kheva shrugged. "Everybody wants to know what everybody else is doing. The more important you are, the more spies you have watching you."

"Are any of them watching you?"

"Six that I know of. There are probably a few more besides -and of course, all the spies are being spied on by other spies."

"What a peculiar place," Errand murmured.

Kheva laughed. "Once, when I was about three or so, I found a hiding place under a stair and fell asleep.

Eventually, all the spies in the palace joined in the search for me. You'd be amazed at how many there really are."

This time, Silk laughed uproariously. "That's really very bad form, cousin," he said. "Members of the royal family aren't supposed to hide from the spies. It upsets them terribly. That's the building over there." He pointed at a large stone warehouse standing on a quiet side street.

"I always thought that the headquarters was in the same building with the academy," Kheva said.

"Those are the official offices, cousin. This is the place where the work gets done."

They entered the warehouse and went through a cavernous room piled high with boxes and bales to a small, unobtrusive door with a bulky-looking man in a workman's smock lounging against it. The man gave Silk a quick look, bowed, and opened the door for them. Beyond that somewhat shabby-looking door lay a large, well-lighted room with a dozen or more parchment-littered tables standing along the walls. At each table sat four or five people, all poring over the documents before them.

"What are they doing?" Errand asked curiously.

"Sorting information," Silk replied. "There probably isn't much that happens in the world that doesn't reach this room eventually. If we really wanted to know, we could probably ask around and find out what the King of Arendia had for breakfast this morning. We want to go into that room over there." He pointed toward a solid-looking door on the far side of the room.

The chamber beyond the door was plain, even bare. It contained a table and four chairs -nothing more. The man seated at the table in one of the chairs wore black hose and a pearl-gray doublet. He was as thin as an old bone, and even here, in the very midst of his own people, there was about him the sense of a tightly coiled spring. "Silk," he said with a terse nod.

"Javelin," Silk replied. "You wanted to see me?"

The man at the table looked at the two boys. He inclined his head briefly to Kheva. "Your Highness," he said.

"Margrave Khendon," the prince responded with a polite bow.

The seated man looked at Silk, his idle-appearing fingers twitching slightly.

"Margrave," Kheva said almost apologetically, "my mother's been teaching me the secret language. I know what you're saying."

The man Silk called Javelin stopped moving his fingers with a rueful expression. "Caught by my own cleverness, I see," he said. He looked speculatively at Errand.

"This is Errand, the boy Polgara and Durnik are raising," Silk told him.

"Ah," Javelin said, "the bearer of the Orb."

"Kheva and I can wait outside if you want to speak privately." Errand offered.

Javelin thought about that. "That probably won't be necessary," he decided. "I think we can trust you both to be discreet. Sit down, gentlemen." He pointed at the other three chairs.

"I'm sort of retired, Javelin," Silk told him. "I've got enough other things to keep me busy just now."

"I wasn't really going to ask you to get personally involved," Javelin replied. "All I really want is for you to find room for a couple of new employees in one of your enterprises."

Silk gave him a curious look.

"You're shipping goods out of Gar og Nadrak along the Northern Caravan Route," Javelin continued. "There are several villages near the border where the citizens are highly suspicious of strangers with no valid reason for passing through."

"And you want to use my caravans to give your men an excuse for being in those villages," Silk concluded.

Javelin shrugged. "It's not an uncommon practice."

"What's going on in eastern Drasnia that you're so interested in?"

"The same thing that's always going on in the outlying districts."

"The Bear-cult?" Silk asked incredulously. "You're going to waste time on them?"

"They've been behaving peculiarly lately. I want to find out why."

Silk looked at him with one eyebrow raised.

"Just call it idle curiosity if you like."

The look Silk gave him then was very hard. "Oh, no. You're not going to catch me that easily, my friend."

"Aren't you the least bit curious?"

"No. As a matter of fact, I'm not. No amount of clever trickery is going to lure me into neglecting my own affairs to go off on another one of your fishing expeditions. I'm too busy, Javelin." His eyes narrowed ever so slightly. "Why don't you send Hunter?"

"Hunter's busy someplace else, Silk, and stop trying to find out who Hunter is."

"It was worth a try. Actually I'm not interested at all, not in the least." He sat back in his chair with his arms adamantly crossed. His long pointed nose, however, was twitching. "What do you mean by 'behaving peculiarly?'" he asked after a moment.

"I thought you weren't interested."

"I'm not," Silk repeated hastily. "I most definitely am not." His nose, however, was twitching even more violently. Angrily he got to his feet. "Give me the names of the men you want me to hire," he said abruptly.

"I'll see what I can do."

"Of course, Prince Kheldar," Javelin said blandly. "I appreciate your sense of loyalty to your old service."

Errand remembered something that Silk had said in the large outer room. "Silk says that information about almost everything is brought to this building," he said to Javelin.

"That might be an exaggeration, but we try."

"Then perhaps you might have heard something about Zandramas."

Javelin looked at him blankly.

"It's something that Belgarion and I heard about," Errand explained. "And Belgarath is curious about it, too. I thought you might have heard about it."

"I can't say that I have," Javelin admitted. "Of course we're a long way from Darshiva."

"What's Darshiva?" Errand asked.

"It's one of the principalities of the old Melcene Empire in eastern Mallorean. Zandramas is a Darshivan name. Didn't you know that?"

"No. We didn't."

There was a light tap on the door.

"Yes?" Javelin answered.

The door opened, and a young lady of perhaps nineteen or twenty came in. Her hair was the color of honey, her eyes were a warm, golden brown, and she wore a plain-looking gray dress. Her expression was serious, but there was just the hint of a dimple in each of her cheeks. "Uncle," she said, and her voice had a kind of vibrancy about it that made it almost irresistibly compelling.

Javelin's hard, angular face softened noticeably. "Yes, Liselle?" he said.

"Is this little Liselle?" Silk exclaimed.

"Not quite so little any more," Javelin said.

"The last time I saw her she was still in braids."

"She combed out the braids a few years ago," Javelin said drily, "and look what was hiding under them."

"I am looking," Silk said admiringly.

"The reports you wanted, uncle," the girl said, laying a sheaf of parchment on the table. Then she turned to Kheva and curtsied to him with incredible grace. "Your Highness," she greeted him.

"Margravine Liselle," the little prince replied with a polite bow.

"And Prince Kheldar," the girl said then.

"We weren't at all so formal when you were a child," Silk protested.

"But then, I'm not a child any more, your Highness."

Silk looked over at Javelin. "When she was a little girl, she used to pull my nose."

"But it's such a long, interesting nose," Liselle said. And then she smiled, and the dimples suddenly sprang to life.

"Liselle is helping out here," Javelin said. "She'll be entering the academy in a few months."

"You're going to be a spy?" Silk asked her incredulously.

"It's the family business, Prince Kheldar. My father and mother were both spies. My uncle here is a spy. All of my friends are spies. How could I possibly be anything else?"

Silk looked a trifle off-balance. "It just doesn't seem appropriate, for some reason."

"That probably means that I'll be quite successful, doesn't it? You look like a spy, Prince Kheldar. I don't, so I won't have nearly as many problems as you've had."

Though the girl's answers were clever, even pert, Errand could see something in her warm, brown eyes that Silk probably could not. Despite the fact that the Margravine Liselle was obviously a grown woman, Silk just as obviously still thought of her as a little girl -one who had pulled his nose.

The look she gave him, however, was not the look of a little girl, and Errand realized that she had been waiting for a number of years for the opportunity to meet Silk on adult terms. Errand covered his mouth with his hand to hide a smile. The wily Prince Kheldar had some very interesting times ahead of him.

The door opened again, and a nondescript man came in, quickly crossed to the table, and whispered something to Javelin. The man's face, Errand noticed, was pale, and his hands were trembling.

Javelin's face grew set, and he sighed. He gave no other outward sign of emotion, however. He rose to his feet and came around the table. "Your Majesty," he said formally to Prince Kheva, "I believe that you should return to the palace immediately."

Silk and Liselle both caught the changed form of address and looked sharply at the Chief of Drasnian Intelligence.

"I believe that we should all accompany the King back to the palace," Javelin said sadly. "We must offer our condolences to his mother and aid her in any way we can in her hour of grief."

The King of Drasnian looked at his intelligence chief, his eyes very wide and his lip trembling.

Errand gently took the little boy's hand in his. "We'd better go, Kheva," he said. "Your mother will need you very much right now."

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Kings of Aloria gathered in Boktor for the funeral of King Rhodar and the subsequent coronation of his son, Kheva. Such a gathering, of course, was traditional. Though the nations of the north had diverged somewhat over the centuries, the Alorns nonetheless had never forgotten their origins in the single kingdom of King Cherek Bear-shoulders five thousand years in the dim past, and they came together at such times in sadness to bury a brother. Because King Rhodar had been beloved and respected by other nations as well, Anheg of Cherek, Cho-Hag of Algaria, and Belgarion of Riva were joined by Fulrach of Sendaria, Korodullin of Arendia, and even by the erratic Drosta Iek Thun of Gar og Nadrak. In addition, General Varana was present as the representative of Emperor Ran Borune XXIII of Tolnedra, and Sadi, Chief Eunuch of the palace of Queen Salmissra of Nyissa, was also in attendance.

The burial of an Alorn King was a serious matter, and it involved certain ceremonies at which only the other Alorn monarchs were present. No gathering of so many kings and high-ranking functionaries, however, could ever be entirely ceremonial. Inevitably, politics were of major concern in the quiet discussions which took place in the somberly draped corridors of the palace.

Errand, soberly dressed and quiet, drifted from one small gathering to another in those days preceding the funeral.

The Kings all knew him, but they seemed for some reason to take little note of his presence, and so he heard many conversations which he might perhaps not have heard had they stopped to consider the fact that he was no longer the little boy they had known during the campaign in Mishrak ac Thull.

The Alorn Kings -Belgarion in his usual blue doublet and hose, and the brutish-looking Anheg in his rumpled blue robe and dented crown, and quiet-voiced Cho-Hag in silver and black -stood together in a sable-draped embrasure in one of the broad hallways of the palace.

"Porenn is going to have to serve as regent," Garion said. "Kheva is only six, and somebody's going to have to run things until he's old enough to take charge himself."

"A woman?" Anheg said, aghast.

"Anheg, are we going to have that argument again?" Cho-Hag asked mildly.

"I don't see any alternative, Anheg," Garion said in his most persuasive manner. "King Drosta is almost drooling at the prospect of a boy king on the throne of Drasnia. His troops will be biting off chunks of the borderlands before the rest of us get home unless we put someone in charge here."

"But Porenn is so tiny," Anheg objected irrationally, "and so pretty. How can she possibly run a kingdom?"

"Probably very well," Cho-Hag replied, shifting his weight carefully on his crippled legs. "Rhodar confided in her completely, and she was behind the scheme that eliminated Grodeg, after all."

"About the only other person in Drasnia competent enough to take charge here is the Margrave Khendon," Garion told the King of Cherek. "The one they call Javelin. Do you want the Chief of Drasnian Intelligence sitting behind the throne giving orders?"

Anheg shuddered. "That's a ghastly thought. What about Prince Kheldar?"

Garion stared at him. "You're not serious, Anheg," he said incredulously. "Silk? As regent?"

"You might be right," Anheg conceded after a moment's thought. "He is just a little unreliable, isn't he?"

"A little?" Garion laughed.

"Are we agreed, then?" Cho-Hag asked. "It has to be Porenn, right?"

Anheg grumbled, but finally agreed.

The Algar King turned to Garion. "You'll probably have to issue a proclamation."

"Me? I don't have any authority in Drasnia."

"You're the Overlord of the West," Cho-Hag reminded him. "Just announce that you recognize Porenn's regency and declare that anyone who argues about it or violates her borders will have to answer to you."

"That should back Drosta off," Anheg chuckled grossly. "He's almost more frightened of you than he is of Zakath. He probably has nightmares about your flaming sword sliding between his ribs."

In another corridor, Errand came upon General Varana and Sadi the Eunuch. Sadi wore the mottled, iridescent silk robe of the Nyissans, and the general was draped in a silver Tolnedran mantle with broad bands of gold-colored trim across his shoulders.

"So, it's official, then?" Sadi said in his oddly contralto voice, eyeing the general's mantle.

"What's that?" Varana asked him. The general was a blocky-looking man with iron-gray hair and a slightly amused expression.

"We had heard rumors in Sthiss Tor that Ran Borune had adopted you as his son."

"Expediency," Varana shrugged. "The major families of the Empire were dismantling Tolnedra in their scramble for the throne. Ran Borune had to take steps to quiet things down."

"You will take the throne when he dies, though, won't you?"

"We'll see," Varana replied evasively. "Let's pray that his Majesty will live for many years yet."

"Of course," Sadi murmured. "The silver mantle of the crown prince does become you, however, my dear General." He rubbed one long-fingered hand over his shaved scalp.

"Thank you," Varana said with a slight bow. "And how are affairs in Salmissra's palace?"

Sadi laughed sardonically. "The same as they always are. We connive and plot and scheme against each other, and every scrap of food prepared in our kitchens is tainted with poison."

"I'd heard that was the custom," Varana remarked. "How does one survive in such a lethal atmosphere?"

"Nervously," Sadi replied, making a sour face. "We are all on a strict regimen. We routinely dose ourselves with every known antidote to every known poison. Some of the poisons are actually quite flavorful. The antidotes all taste foul, however."

"The price of power, I suppose."

"Truly. What was the reaction of the Grand Dukes of Tolnedra when the Emperor designated you his heir?" Varana laughed. "You could hear the screams echoing from the wood of the Dryads to the Arendish border."

"When the time comes, you may have to step on a few necks."

"It's possible."

"Of course the legions are all loyal to you."

"The legions are a great comfort to me."

"I think I like you, General Varana," the shaved-headed Nyissan said. "I'm certain that you and I will be able to come to some mutually profitable accommodations."

"I always like to be on good terms with my neighbors, Sadi," Varana agreed with aplomb.

In another corridor, Errand found a strangely assorted group. King Fulrach of Sendaria, dressed in sober, businesslike brown, was speaking quietly with the purple-garbed King Korodullin of Arendia and with the scabrous-looking Drosta lek Thun, who wore a richly jeweled doublet of an unwholesome-looking yellow. "Have either of you heard anything about any decisions concerning a regency?" the emaciated Nadrak king asked in his shrill voice. Drosta's eyes bulged, seeming almost to start out of his pock-marked face, and he fidgeted continuously.

"I would imagine that Queen Porenn will guide the young king," Fulrach surmised.

"They surely wouldn't put a woman in charge," Drosta scoffed. "I know Alorns, and they all look at women as subhuman."

"Porenn is not exactly like other women," the King of Sendaria noted. "She's extraordinarily gifted."

"How could a woman possibly defend the borders of so large a kingdom as Drasnia?"

"Thy perception is awry, your Majesty," Korodullin told the Nadrak with uncharacteristic bluntness.

"Inevitably, the other Alorn Kings will support her, and most particularly Belgarion of Riva will defend her. Methinks no monarch alive would be so foolhardy as to counter the wishes of the Overlord of the West."

"Riva's a long way away," Drosta suggested, his eyes narrowing.

"Not so far, Drosta," Fulrach told him. "Belgarion has a very long arm."

"What news hast thou heard from the south, your Majesty?" Korodullin asked the King of the Nadraks.

Drosta made an indelicate sound. "Kal Zakath is wading in Murgo blood," he said disgustedly. "He's pushed Urgit into the western mountains and he's butchering every Murgo he can lay his hands on. I keep hoping that someone will stick an arrow into him, but you can't depend on a Murgo to do anything right."

"Have you considered an alliance with King Gethell?" Fulrach asked.

"With the Thulls? You're not serious, Fulrach. I wouldn't saddle myself with the Thulls, even if it meant that I had to face the Malloreans alone. Gethell's so afraid of 'Zakath that he wets himself at the mention of his name. After the Battle of Thull Mardu, 'Zakath told my Thullish cousin that the very next time Gethell displeased him, he was going to have Gethell crucified. If Kal Zakath decides to come north, Gethell will probably hide himself under the nearest manure pile."

"'Zakath is not overfond of thee either, I am told," Korodullin said.

Drosta laughed a shrill, somehow hysterical-sounding laugh. "He wants to grill me over a slow fire," he replied. "And possibly use my skin to make a pair of shoes."

"I'm amazed that you Angaraks didn't destroy each other eons ago," Fulrach smiled.

"Torak told us not to," Drosta shrugged. "And he told his Grolims to gut anybody who disobeyed. We may not always have liked Torak, but we always did what he told us to do. Only an idiot did otherwise - a dead idiot, usually."

On the following day, Belgarath the Sorcerer arrived from the East, and King Rhodar of Drasnia was laid to rest. The small blonde Queen Porenn, dressed in deepest black, stood beside young King Kheva during the ceremony. Prince Kheldar stood directly behind the young king and his mother, and there was a strange, almost haunted look in his eyes. As Errand looked at him, he could see very plainly that the little spy had loved his uncle's tiny wife for years, but also that Porenn, though she was fond of him, did not return that love.

State funerals, like all state functions, are long. Both Queen Porenn and her young son were very pale during the interminable proceedings, but at no time did either of them show any outward signs of grief. Immediately following the funeral, Kheva's coronation took place, and the newly crowned Drasnian king announced in a piping but firm voice that his mother would guide him through the difficult years ahead.

At the conclusion of the ceremony, Belgarion, King of Riva and Overlord of the West, arose and briefly addressed the assembled notables. He welcomed Kheva to the rather exclusive fraternity of reigning monarchs, complimented him on the wisdom of the choice of the Queen Mother as regent and then advised one and all that he fully supported Queen Porenn and that anyone offering her the slightest impertinence would most surely regret it. Since he was leaning on the massive sword of Riva Iron-grip as he made that declaration, everyone in the Drasnian throne room took him very seriously.

A few days later, the visitors all departed.

Spring had come to the plains of Algaria as Polgara, Durnik, Errand, and Belgarath rode southward in the company of King Cho-Hag and Queen Silar.

"A sad journey," Cho-Hag said to Belgarath as they rode. "I'm going to miss Rhodar."

"I think we all will," Belgarath replied. He looked ahead where a vast herd of cattle under the watchful eyes of a band of Algar clansmen was plodding slowly west toward the mountains of Sendaria and the great cattle fair at Muros.

"I'm a little surprised that Hettar agreed to go back to Riva with Garion at this time of year. He's usually at the head of the cattle herds."

"Adara persuaded him," Queen Silar told the old man.

"She and Ce'Nedra wanted to spend some time together, and there's almost nothing that Hettar won't do for his wife."

Polgara smiled. "Poor Hettar," she said. "With both Adara and Ce'Nedra working on him, he didn't stand a chance. That's a pair of very determined young ladies."

"The change of scenery will do him good," Cho-Hag noted. "He always gets restless in the summertime and, now that all the Murgos have retreated to the south, he can't even amuse himself by hunting down their raiding parties."

When they reached southern Algaria, Cho-Hag and Silar bade them farewell and turned eastward toward the Stronghold. The rest of the ride south to the Vale was uneventful.

Belgarath stayed at the cottage for a few days and then prepared to return to his tower. Almost as an afterthought, he invited Errand to accompany him.

"We are a bit behind here, father," Polgara told him. "I need to get my garden in, and Durnik has a great deal of work ahead of him after this past winter."

"Then it's probably best if the boy is out from underfoot, isn't it?"

She gave him along steady look and then finally gave up. "Oh, very well, father," she said.

"I knew you'd see it my way, Pol," he said.

"Just don't keep him all summer."

"Of course not. I want to talk with the twins for a while and see if Beldin has come back. I'll be off again in a month or so. I'll bring him home then."

And so Errand and Belgarath went on down into the heart of the Vale again and once more took up residence in the old man's tower. Beldin had not yet returned from Mallorean, but Belgarath had much to discuss with Beltira and Belkira, and so Errand and his chestnut stallion were left largely to find their own amusements.

It was on a bright summer morning that they turned toward the western edge of the Vale to explore the foothills that marked the boundary of Ulgo. They had ridden for several miles through those rolling, tree-clad hills and stopped in a broad, shallow ravine where a tumbling brook babbled over mossy green stones. The morning sun was very warm, and the shade of the tall, fragrant pines was pleasant.

As they sat, a she-wolf padded quietly from out of the bushes at the edge of the brook, stopped, and sat on her haunches to look at them. There was about the she-wolf a peculiar blue nimbus, a soft glow that seemed to emanate from her thick fur.

The normal reaction of a horse to the presence or even the scent of a wolf would have been blind panic, but the stallion returned the blue wolf's gaze calmly, with not even so much as a hint of a tremor.

The boy knew who the wolf was, but he was surprised to meet her here. "Good morning," he said politely to her.

"It's a pleasant day, isn't it?" The wolf seemed to shimmer in the same way that Beldin shimmered as he assumed the shape of the hawk. When the air around her cleared, there stood in the animal's place a tawny-haired woman with golden eyes and a faintly amused smile on her lips. Though her gown was a plain brown such as one might see on any peasant woman, she wore it in a regal manner which any queen in jeweled brocade might envy. "Do you always greet wolves with such courtesy?" she asked him.

"I haven't met many wolves," he replied, "but I was fairly certain who you were."

"Yes, I suppose you would have been, at that."

Errand slid down off the horse's back.

"Does he know where you are this morning?"

"Belgarath? Probably not. He's talking with Beltira and Belkira, so the horse and I just came out to look at someplace new."

"It would be best perhaps if you didn't go too much farther into the Ulgo mountains," she advised. "There are creatures in these hills that are quite savage."

He nodded. "I'll keep that in mind."

"Will you do something for me?" she asked quite directly.

"If I can."

"Speak to my daughter."

"Of course."

"Tell Polgara that there is a great evil in the world and a great danger."

"Zandramas?" Errand asked.

"Zandramas is a part of it, but the Sardion is at the center of the evil. It must be destroyed. Tell my husband and my daughter to warn Belgarion. His task is not yet finished."

"I'll tell them," Errand promised, "but couldn't you just as easily tell Polgara yourself?"

The tawny-haired woman looked off down the shady ravine. "No," she replied sadly. "It causes her too much pain when I appear to her."

"Why is that?"

"It reminds her of all the lost years and brings back all the anguish of a young girl who had to grow up without her mother to guide her. All of that comes back to her each time she sees me."

"You've never told her then? Of the sacrifice you were asked to make?"

She looked at him penetratingly. "How is it that you know what even my husband and Polgara do not?"

"I'm not sure," he replied. "I do, though -just as I know that you did not die."

"And will you tell Polgara that?"

"Not if you'd rather I didn't."

She sighed. "Someday, perhaps, but not yet. I think it's best if she and her father aren't aware of it. My task still lies ahead of me and it's a thing I can face best without any distractions."

"Whatever you wish," Errand said politely.

"We'll meet again," she told him. "Warn them about the Sardion. Tell them not to become so caught up in the search for Zandramas that they lose sight of that. It is from the Sardion that the evil stems. And be a trifle wary of Cyradis when next you meet her. She means you no ill, but she has her own task as well and she will do what she must to complete it."

"I will, Poledra," he promised.

"Oh," she said, almost as an afterthought, "there's someone waiting for you just up ahead there." She gestured toward the long tongue of a rock-strewn ridge thrusting out into the grassy Vale. "He can't see you yet, but he's waiting." Then she smiled, shimmered back into the form of the blue-tinged wolf, and loped away without a backward glance.

Curiously, Errand remounted and rode up out of the ravine and continued on southward, skirting the higher hills that rose toward the glistening white peaks of the land of the Ulgos as he rode toward the ridge. Then, as his eyes searched the rocky slope, he caught a momentary flicker of sunlight reflected from something shiny in the middle of a brushy outcrop halfway up the slope. Without hesitation, he rode in that direction. The man who sat among the thick bushes wore a peculiar shirt of mail, constructed of overlapping metal scales. He was short but had powerful shoulders, and his eyes were veiled with a gauzy strip of cloth that was not so much a blindfold as it was a shield against the bright sunlight.

"Is that you, Errand?" the veiled man asked in a harsh-sounding voice.

"Yes," Errand replied. "I haven't seen you in along time, Relg."

"I need to talk with you," the harsh-voiced zealot said. "Can we get back out of the light?"

"Of course." Errand slid down off his horse and followed the Ulgo through the rustling bushes to a cave mouth running back into the hillside. Relg stooped slightly under the overhanging rock and went inside. "I thought I recognized you," he said as Errand joined him in the cool dimness within the cave, "but I couldn't be sure out there in all that light." He untied the cloth from across his eyes and peered at the boy. "You've grown."

Errand smiled. "It's been a few years. How is Taiba?"

"She has given me a son," Relg said, almost in a kind of wonder. "A very special son."

"I'm glad to hear that."

"When I was younger and filled with the notion of my own sanctity, UL spoke to me in my soul. He told me that the child who will be the new Gorim would come to Ulgo through me. In my pride I thought that he meant that I was to seek out the child and reveal him. How could I know that what he meant was a much simpler thing? It is my son that he spoke of. The mark is on my son -my son!" There was an awed pride in the zealot's voice.

"UL's ways are not the ways of men."

"How truly you speak."

"And are you happy?"

"My life is filled," Relg said simply. "But now I have another task. Our aged Gorim has sent me to seek out Belgarath. It is urgent that he come with me to Prolgu."

"He's not very far away," Errand said. He looked at Relg and saw how, even in this dim cave, the zealot kept his eyes squinted almost shut to protect them from the light. "I have a horse," he said. "I can go and bring him back here in a few hours, if you want. That way you won't have to go out into the sunlight." Relg gave him a quick, grateful look and then nodded. "Tell him that he must come. The Gorim must speak with him."

"I will," Errand promised. Then he turned and left the cave.

"What does he want?" Belgarath demanded irritably when Errand told him that Relg wanted to see him.

"He wants you to go with him to Prolgu," Errand replied. "The Gorim wants to see you -the old one."

"The old one? Is there a new one?"

Errand nodded. "Relg's son," he said.

Belgarath stared at Errand for a moment and then he suddenly began to laugh.

"What's so funny?"

"It appears that UL has a sense of humor," the old man chortled. "I wouldn't have suspected that of him."

"I don't quite follow."

"It's a very long story" Belgarath said, still laughing. "I guess that, if the Gorim wants to see me, we'd better go."

"You want me to go along?"

"Polgara would skin me alive if I left you here alone. Let's get started."

Errand led the old man back across the Vale to the ridgeline in the foothills and the cave where Relg waited. It took a few minutes to explain to the young horse that he was supposed to go back to Belgarath's tower alone. Errand spoke with him at some length, and it finally appeared that the animal had grasped the edges, at least, of the idea.

The trip through the dark galleries to Prolgu took several days. For most of the way, Errand felt that they were groping along blindly; but for Relg, whose eyes were virtually useless in open daylight, these lightless passageways were home, and his sense of direction was unerring. And so it was that they came at last to the faintly lighted cavern with its shallow glass-clear lake and the island rising in the center where the aged Gorim awaited them.

"Yad ho, Belgarath," the saintly old man in his white robe called when they reached the shore of the subterranean lake, "Groja UL."

"Gorim," Belgarath replied with a respectful bow, "Yad ho, Groja UL." Then they crossed the marble causeway to join the Gorim. Belgarath and the old man clasped each other's arms warmly.

"It's been a few years, hasn't it?" the sorcerer said. "How are you bearing up?"

"I feel almost young." The Gorim smiled. "Now that Relg has found my successor. I can at last see the end of my task."

"Found?" Belgarath asked quizzically.

"It amounts to the same thing." The Gorim looked fondly at Relg. "We had our disagreements, didn't we, my son?" he said, "But as it turned out, we were all working toward the same end."

"It took me a little longer to realize it, Holy Gorim," Relg replied wryly. "I'm a bit more stubborn than most men. Sometimes I'm amazed that UL didn't lose patience with me. Please excuse me, but I must go to my wife and son. I've been many days away from them." He turned and went quickly back across the causeway. Belgarath grinned. "A remarkably changed man."

"His wife is a marvel," the Gorim agreed.

"Are you sure that their child is the chosen one?"

The Gorim nodded. "UL has confirmed it. There were those who objected, since Taiba is a Marag rather than a daughter of Ulgo, but UL's voice silenced them."

"I'm sure it did. UL's voice is very penetrating, I've noticed. You wanted to see me?"

The Gorim's expression became grave. He gestured toward his pyramid-shaped house. "Let's go inside. There's a matter of urgency we need to discuss."

Errand followed along behind the two old men as they entered the house. The room inside was dimly lit by a glowing crystal globe hanging on a chain from the ceiling, and there was a table with low stone benches. They sat at the table, and the old Gorim looked solemnly at Belgarath. "We are not like the people who live above in the light of the sun, my friend," he said. "For them, there is the sound of the wind in the trees, of rushing streams, and of birds filling the air with song. Here in our caves, however, we hear only the sounds of the earth herself."

Belgarath nodded.

"The earth and the rocks speak to the people of Ulgo in peculiar ways," the Gorim continued. "A sound can come to us from half around the world. Such a sound has been muttering in the rocks for some years now, growing louder and more distinct with each passing month."

"A fault perhaps?" Belgarath suggested. "Some place where the stone bed of a continent is shifting?"

"I don't believe so, my friend," the Gorim disagreed. "The sound we hear is not the shifting of the restless earth. It is a sound caused by the awakening of a single stone."

"I'm not sure I follow you," Belgarath said, frowning.

"The stone we hear is alive, Belgarath."

The old sorcerer looked at his friend. "There's only one living stone, Gorim."

"I had always believed so myself. I have heard the sound of Aldur's Orb as it moves about the world, and this new sound is also the sound of a living stone. It awakens, Belgarath, and it feels its power. It is evil, my friend -so evil that earth herself groans under its weight."

"How long has this sound been coming to you?"

"It began not long after the death of accursed Torak."

Belgarath pursed his lips. "We've known that something has been moving around over in Malloreia," he said.

"We didn't know it was quite this serious, however. Can you tell me anything more about this stone?"

"Only its name," the Gorim replied. "We hear it whispered through the caves and galleries and the fissures of earth. It is called 'Sardius.'"

Belgarath's head came up. "Cthrag Sardius? The Sardion?"

"You have heard of it?"

"Beldin ran across it in Malloreia. It was connected with something called Zandramas." The Gorim gasped, and his face went deathly pale. "Belgarath!" he exclaimed in a shocked voice.

"What's the matter?"

"That's the most dreadful curse in our language."

Belgarath stared at him. "I thought I knew most of the words in the Ulgo tongue. How is it that I've never heard that one before?"

"No one would have repeated it to you."

"I didn't think Ulgos even knew how to curse. What does it mean -in general terms?"

"It means confusion -chaos- absolute negation. It's a horrible word."

Belgarath frowned. "Why would an Ulgo curse word show up in Darshiva as the name of someone or something? And why in connection with the Sardion?"

"Is it possible that they are using the two words to mean the same thing?"

"I hadn't thought of that," Belgarath admitted. "I suppose they could be. The sense seems to be similar."

Polgara had rather carefully instructed Errand that he must not interrupt when his elders were talking, but this seemed so important that he felt that the rule needed to be broken.

"They aren't the same," he told the two old men.

Belgarath gave him a strange look.

"The Sardion is a stone, isn't it?"

"Yes," the Gorim replied.

"Zandramas isn't a stone. It's a person."

"How could you know that, my boy?"

"We've met," Errand told him quietly. "Not exactly face to face, but -well-" It was a difficult thing to explain. "It was kind of like a shadow -except that the person who was casting the shadow was someplace else."

"A projection," Belgarath explained to the Gorim. "It's a fairly simple trick that the Grolims are fond of." He turned back to the boy. "Did this shadow say anything to you?"

Errand nodded. "It said that it was going to kill me."

Belgarath drew in his breath sharply. "Did you tell Polgara?" he demanded.

"No. Should I?"

"Didn't you think it was fairly significant?"

"I thought it was just a threat -meant to frighten me."

"Did it?"

"Frighten me? No, not really."

"Aren't you being just a little blase, Errand?" Belgarath asked. "Do people go around threatening to kill you so often that it bores you or something?"

"No. That was the only time. It was only a shadow, though, and a shadow can't really hurt you, can it?"

"Have you run across many more of these shadows?"

"Just Cyradis."

"And who is Cyradis?"

"I'm not really sure. She talks the way Mandorallen does -thee's and thou's and all that- and she wears a blindfold over her eyes."

"A seeress." Belgarath grunted. "And what did she tell you?"

"She said that we were going to meet again and that she sort of liked me."

"I'm sure that was comforting," Belgarath said drily. "Don't keep secrets like this, Errand. When something unusual happens, tell somebody."

"I'm sorry," Errand apologized. "I just thought that -well- you and Polgara and Durnik had other things on your minds, that's all."

"We don't really mind being interrupted all that much, boy. Share these little adventures with us."

"If you want me to."

Belgarath turned back to the Gorim. "I think we're starting to get somewhere," he said, "thanks to our reticent young friend here. We know that Zandramas, if you'll pardon the word, is a person -a person that's somehow connected to this living stone that the Angaraks call Cthrag Sardius. We've had warnings about Zandramas before, so I think we'll have to assume that the Sardion is also a direct threat."

"What must we do now, then?" the Gorim asked him.

"I think we're all going to have to concentrate on finding out just exactly what's going on over there in Mallorea -even if we have to take the place apart stone by stone. Up until now, I was only curious. Now it looks as if I'd better start taking this whole thing seriously. If the Sardion is a living stone, then it's like the Orb, and I don't want something with that kind of power in the hands of the wrong person -and from everything I've been able to gather, this Zandramas is most definitely the wrong person." He turned then to look at Errand, his expression puzzled. "What's your connection with all of this, boy?" he asked. "Why is it that everyone and everything involved in this whole thing stops by to pay you a visit?"

"I don't know, Belgarath," Errand replied truthfully.

"Maybe that's the place we should start. I've been promising myself that I was going to have a long talk with you one of these days. Maybe it's time we did just that."

"If you wish," Errand said. "I don't know how much help I'll be, though."

"That's what we're going to find out, Errand. That's what we're going to find out."

PART TWO RIVA

CHAPTER NINE

Belgarion of Riva had not actually been prepared to occupy a throne. He had grown up on a farm in Sendaria, and his childhood had been that of an ordinary farm boy.

When he had first come to the basalt throne in the Hall of the Rivan King, he had known much more about farm kitchens and stables than he had about throne rooms and council chambers. Statecraft had been a mystery to him, and he had known no more of diplomacy than he had of algebra.

Fortunately, the Isle of the Winds was not a difficult kingdom to rule. The Rivan people were orderly, sober, and had a strong regard for duty and civic responsibility. This had made things much easier for their tall, sandy-haired monarch during the trying early years of his reign while he was learning the difficult art of ruling well. He made mistakes, naturally, but the consequences of those early slips and miscalculations were never dire, and his subjects were pleased to note that this earnest, sincere young man who had come so startlingly to the throne never made the same mistake twice. Once he had settled in and had become accustomed to his job, it was probably safe to say that Belgarion -or Garion, as he preferred to be called- almost never encountered major problems in his capacity as King of Riva. He had other titles, however. Some were purely honorary, others not so much so. "Godslayer," for example, involved certain duties which were not likely to come up very often.

"Lord of the Western Sea" caused him almost no concern whatsoever, since he had concluded quite early that the waves and tides need little supervision and that fish, for the most part, were entirely capable of managing their own government. Most of Garion's headaches stemmed directly from the grand-sounding title, "Overlord of the West." He had assumed at first -since the war with the Angaraks was over- that this

title, like the others, was merely something in the nature of a formality, something impressive, but largely empty, which had been tacked on to all the rest, sort of to round them out. It earned him, after all, no tax revenue; it had no special crown or throne; and there was no administrative staff to deal with day-to-day problems.

But to his chagrin, he soon discovered that one of the peculiarities of human nature was the tendency to want to take problems to the person in charge. Had there not been an Overlord of the West, he was quite sure that his fellow monarchs would have found ways to deal with all those perplexing difficulties by themselves. But as long as he occupied that exalted position, they all seemed to take an almost childlike delight in bringing him the most difficult, the most agonizing, and the most utterly insoluble problems and then happily sitting back with trusting smiles on their faces while he struggled and floundered with them. As a case in point, there was the situation which arose in Arendia during the summer of Garion's twenty-third year. The year had gone fairly well up until that point. The misunderstanding which had marred his relationship with Ce'Nedra had been smoothed over, and Garion and his complicated little wife were living together in what might best be described as domestic felicity. The campaign of Emperor Kal Zakath of Mallorean, whose presence on this continent had been a great cause for concern, had bogged down in the mountains of western Cthol Murgos and showed some promise of grinding on for decades far from the borders of any of the Kingdoms of the West. General Varana, the Duke of Anadile, functioning as regent for the ailing Emperor Ran Borune XXIII, had clamped down quite firmly on the excesses of the great families of Tolnedra in their unseemly scramble for the Imperial Throne. All in all, Garion had been looking forward to a period of peace and tranquillity until that warm, early summer day when the letter arrived from King Korodullin of Arendia.

Garion and Ce'Nedra had been spending a quiet afternoon together in the comfortable royal apartment, talking idly of little, unimportant things -more for the pleasure of each other's company than out of any real concern for the subjects at hand. Garion lounged in a large, blue velvet armchair by the window, and Ce'Nedra sat before a gilt-edged mirror, brushing her long, copper-colored hair. Garion was very fond of Ce'Nedra's hair. Its color was exciting. It smelled good, and there was one delightfully vagrant curl that always seemed to want to tumble appealingly down the side of her smooth, white neck. When the servant brought the letter from the King of Arendia, tastefully carried on a silver tray, Garion took his eyes off his lovely wife almost regretfully.

He broke the ornately stamped wax seal and opened the crackling parchment.

"Who is it from, Garion?" Ce'Nedra asked, still pulling the brush through her hair and regarding her reflection in the mirror with a kind of dreamy contentment.

"Korodullin," he replied and then began to read.

"To his Majesty, King Belgarion of Riva, Overlord of the West, greetings:" the letter began.

"It is our fervent hope that this finds thee and thy queen in good health and tranquil spirits. Gladly would I permit my pen the leisure to dwell fulsomely upon the regard and affection my queen and I bear thee and her Majesty, but a crisis hath arisen here in Arendia; and because it doth derive directly from the actions of certain friends of thine, I have resolved to seek thy aid in meeting it.

"To our great sorrow, our dear friend the Baron of Vo Ebor succumbed at last to those grievous wounds which he received upon the battlefield at Thull Mardu. His passing this spring hath grieved us more than I can tell thee. He was a good and faithful knight. His heir, since he and the baroness Nerina were childless, is a distant nephew, one Sir Embrig, a somewhat rash knight more interested, I fear, in the title and lands of his inheritance than in the fact that he doth intrude himself upon the tragic baroness. With airs most unbecoming to one of gentle birth, he journeyed straightway to Vo Ebor to take possession of his new estates and with him he brought diverse other knights of his acquaintance, his cronies and drinking companions. When they reached Vo Ebor, Sir Embrig and his cohorts gave themselves over to unseemly carouse, and when they were all deep in their cups, one of these rude knights expressed admiration for the person of the but recently widowed Nerina. Without pausing to think or to consider the lady's bereavement, Sir Embrig promptly promised her hand to his drunken companion. Now in Arendia, by reason of certain of our laws, Sir Embrig hath indeed this right, though no true knight would so uncivilly insist on imposing his will upon a kinswoman in her time of grief.

"The news of this outrage was carried at once to Sir Mandorallen, the mighty Baron of Vo Mandor, and that great knight went immediately to horse. What transpired upon his arrival at Vo Ebor thou canst well imagine, given Sir Mandorallen's prowess and the depth of his regard for the Baroness Nerina. Sir Embrig and his

cohorts rashly attempted to stand in his path, and there were, as I understand, some fatalities and a great number of grievous injuries as a result.

Thy friend removed the baroness to his own keep at Vo Mandor, where he holds her in protective custody. Sir Embrig, who -regrettably perhaps- will recover from his wounds, hath declared that a state of war doth exist between Ebor and Mandor and he hath summoned to his cause diverse noblemen. Other noblemen flock to the banner of Sir Mandorallen, and southwestern Arendia doth stand on the brink of general war. I have even been informed that Leildorin of Wildantor, ever a rash youth, hath raised an army of Asturian bowmen and at this moment doth march southward with them, intending to aid his old comrade in arms.

"Thus it doth stand. Know that I am reluctant to bring the power of the Arendish crown to bear in this matter, since, should I be compelled to make a judgment, I would be forced by our laws to decide in favor of Sir Embrig.

"I appeal to thee, King Belgarion, to come to Arendia and to use thy influence with thy former companions and dear friends to bring them back from the precipice upon which they now stand. Only thy intercession, I fear, can avert this impending disaster.

In hope and friendship, Korodullin."

Garion stared helplessly at the letter. "Why me?" he demanded without even thinking.

"What does he say, dear?" Ce'Nedra asked, laying aside her brush and picking up an ivory comb.

"He says that- " Garion broke off. "Mandorallen and Leildorin- " He got up and began to swear. "Here," he said, thrusting the letter at her. "Read it." He began to pace up and down with his fists clenched behind his back, still muttering curse words.

Ce'Nedra read the letter as he continued pacing. "Oh dear." she said finally in dismay. "Oh dear."

"That sums it up pretty well, I'd say." He started swearing again.

"Garion, please don't use that kind of language. It makes you sound like a pirate. What are you going to do about this?"

"I haven't got the faintest idea."

"Well, you're going to have to do something."

"Why me?" he burst out. "Why do they always bring these things to me?"

"Because they all know that you can take care of these little problems better than anybody else."

"Thanks," he said drily.

"Be nice," she told him. Then she pursed her lips thoughtfully, tapping her cheek with the ivory comb. "You'll need your crown, of course -and I think the blue and silver doublet would be nice."

"What are you talking about?"

"You're going to have to go to Arendia to get this all straightened out, and I think you should look your very best -Arends are so conscious of appearances. Why don't you go see about a ship? I'll pack a few things for you." She looked out the window at the golden afternoon sunlight. "Do you think it might be too warm for you to wear your ermine?"

"I won't be wearing ermine, Ce'Nedra. I'll be wearing armor and my sword."

"Oh, don't be so dramatic, Garion. All you have to do is go there and tell them to stop."

"Maybe, but I have to get their attention first. This is Mandorallen we're talking about -and Leildorin. We're not dealing with sensible people, remember?"

A little frown creased her forehead. "That is true," she admitted. But then she gave him an encouraging little smile. "I'm sure you can fix it, though. I have every confidence in you."

"You're as bad as all the rest," he said a bit sullenly.

"But you can, Garion. Everybody says so."

"I guess I'd better go talk to Brand," he said glumly. "There are some things that need to be attended to, and this is likely to take me a few weeks."

"I'll take care of them for you, dear," she said reassuringly, reaching up and patting his cheek. "You just run along now. I can manage things here very well while you're gone."

He stared at her with a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach.

When he arrived at Vo Mandor on a cloudy morning several days later, the situation had deteriorated even further. The forces of Sir Embrig were in the field, encamped not three leagues from Mandorallen's castle, and Mandorallen and Leildorin had marched from the city to meet them.

Garion thundered up to the gates of his friend's stout fortress on the warhorse he had borrowed from an accommodating baron upon his arrival in Arendia. He wore the full suit of steel armor that had been a gift from King Korodullin, and Iron-grip's enormous sword rode in its scabbard across his back. The gates swung

wide for him, and he entered the courtyard, swung awkwardly down from his saddle, and demanded to be taken immediately to the Baroness Nerina.

He found her pale-faced and dressed all in black, standing somberly on the battlements, searching the cloudy sky to the east for the telltale columns of smoke which would announce that the battle had begun.

"It doth lie upon me, King Belgarion," she declared almost morbidly. "Strife and discord and anguish hath derived from me since the day I first wed my dear departed lord."

"There's no need to blame yourself," Garion told her. "Mendorallen can usually get himself into trouble without help from anyone. When did he and Lelldorin leave?"

"Somewhat past noon yesterday," she replied. "Methinks the battle will be joined 'ere long." She looked mournfully down at the flagstones of a courtyard lying far below and sighed.

"I guess I'd better go then," he said grimly. "Maybe if I can get there before they start, I can head this off."

"I have just had a most excellent thought, your Majesty," she declared, a bright little smile lighting up her pale face. "I can make thy task much easier."

"I hope somebody can," he said. "The way things look right now, I'm going to be in for a very bad morning."

"Make haste then, your Majesty; to the field where rude war even now doth hover above our dear friends, and advise them that the cause of their impending battle hath departed from this sad world."

"I'm not sure I follow that."

"It is most simple, your Majesty. Since I am the cause of all this strife, it doth lie upon me to end it."

He looked at her suspiciously. "Just what are we talking about here, Nerina? How do you propose to bring all those idiots to their senses?"

Her smile became actually radiant. "I have but to hurl myself from this lofty battlement, my Lord, and join my husband in the silence of the grave to end this dreadful bloodshed before it hath begun. Go quickly, my Lord. Descend to that courtyard far below and take to horse. I will descend by this shorter, happier route and await thee upon those rude stones below. Then mayest thou carry the news of my death to the battlefield. Once I am dead, no man's blood need be spilt over me." She put one hand on the rough stone of the parapet.

"Oh, stop that," he said in disgust, "and get away from there."

"Ah, nay, your Majesty," she said quite firmly. "This is the best of all possible answers. At one stroke I can avert this impending battle and rid myself of this burdensome life."

"Nerina," he said in a flat voice, "I'm not going to let you jump, and that's all there is to that."

"Surely thou wouldst not be so rude as to lay hands upon my person to prevent me," she said in a shocked tone of voice.

"I won't have to," he said. He looked at her pale, uncomprehending face and realized that she did not have the faintest idea of what he was talking about. "On second thought, maybe it's not such a bad idea after all. The trip down to that courtyard is likely to take you about a day and a half, so it should give you time to think this all the way through -besides, it might just possibly keep you out of mischief while I'm gone."

Her eyes went suddenly wide as what he was saying to her seeped ever so slowly into her mind. "Thou wouldst not use sorcery to foil my most excellent solution," she gasped.

"Try me."

She looked at him helplessly, tears coming to her eyes. "This is most unchivalrous of thee, my Lord," she accused him.

"I was raised on a farm in Sendaria, my Lady," he reminded her. "I didn't have the advantages of a noble upbringing, so I have these little lapses from time to time. I'm sure you'll forgive me for not letting you kill yourself. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to go stop that nonsense out there." He turned and clanked toward the stairs. "Oh," he said, looking over his shoulder at her, "don't get any ideas about jumping as soon as my back's turned either. I have a long arm, Nerina -a very long arm."

She stared at him, her lip trembling.

"That's better," he said and went on down the stairs.

The servants in Mendorallen's castle took one look at Garion's stormy face as he strode into the courtyard below and prudently melted out of his path. Laboriously, he hauled himself into the saddle of the huge roan warhorse upon which he had arrived, adjusted the great sword of the Rivan King in its scabbard across his back, and looked around.

"Somebody bring me a lance," he commanded.

They brought him several, stumbling over each other in their haste to comply. He selected one and then set off at a thundering gallop.

The citizens of the town of Vo Mandor, which lay just beyond the walls of Mandorallen's keep, were as prudent as the servants within the walls had been. A wide path was opened along the cobblestone streets as the angry King of Riva passed through, and the town gates stood wide open for him.

Garion knew that he was going to have to get their attention, and Arends on the verge of battle are notoriously difficult to reach. He would need to startle them with something. As he thundered through the green Arendish countryside, past neat, thatch-roofed villages and groves of beech and maple, he cast an appraising eye toward the gray, scudding clouds overhead, and the first faint hints of a plan began to form in his mind.

When he arrived, he found the two armies drawn up on opposite sides of a broad, open meadow. As was the age-old Arendish custom, a number of personal challenges had been issued, and those matters were in the process of being settled as a sort of prelude to the grand general melee which would follow. Several armored knights from either side were tilting in the center of the field as the two armies looked on approvingly. Enthusiastically, the brainless, steel-clad young nobles crashed into each other, littering the turf with splinters from the shattered remains of their lances.

Garion took in the situation at a single glance, scarcely pausing before riding directly into the middle of the fray. It must be admitted that he cheated just a little during the encounter. The lance he carried looked the same as those with which the Mimbrate knights were attempting to kill or maim each other. About the only real difference lay in the fact that his lance, unlike theirs, would not break, no matter what it encountered and was, moreover, enveloped in a kind of nimbus of sheer force. Garion had no real desire to run the sharp steel tip of that lance through anybody. He merely wanted them off their horses. On his first course through the center of the startled, milling knights, he hurled three of them from their saddles in rapid succession. Then he wheeled his charger and unhorsed two more so quickly that the vast clatter they made as they fell merged into a single sound.

It needed a bit more, however, something suitably spectacular to penetrate the solid bone Arends used for heads.

Almost negligently, Garion discarded his invincible lance, reached back over his shoulder and drew the mighty sword of the Rivan King. The Orb of Aldur blazed forth its dazzling bluelight, and the sword itself immediately burst into flame. As always, despite its vast size, the sword in his hand had no apparent weight, and he wielded it with blinding speed.

He drove directly at one startled knight, chopping the amazed man's lance into foot-long chunks as he worked his way up the weapon's shaft. When only the butt remained, Garion smashed the knight from his saddle with the flat of the burning sword. He wheeled then, chopped an upraised mace neatly in two and rode the bearer of the mace into the ground, horse and all.

Stunned by the ferocity of his attack, the wide-eyed Mimbrate knights drew back. It was not merely his overwhelming prowess in battle, however, that made them retreat. From between clenched teeth, the King of Riva was swearing sulfurously, and his choice of oaths made strong men go pale.

He looked around, his eyes ablaze, then gathered in his will. He raised his flaming sword and pointed it at the roiling sky overhead. "NOW!" he barked in a voice like the cracking of a whip.

The clouds shuddered, almost seeming to flinch as the full force of Belgarion's will smote them. A sizzling bolt of lightning as thick as the trunk of a mighty tree crashed to earth with a deafening thunderclap that shook the ground for miles in every direction. A great, smoking hole appeared in the turf where the bolt had struck. Again and again Garion called down the lightning. The noise of thunder ripped and rolled through the air, and the reek of burning sod and singed earth hung like a cloud over the suddenly terrified armies.

Then a great, howling gale struck; at the same time, the clouds ripped open to inundate the opposing forces in a deluge so intense that many knights were actually hurled from their saddles by the impact. Even as the gale shrieked and the driving downpour struck them, flickering bolts of lightning continued to stagger across the field which separated them, sizzling dreadfully and filling the air with steam and smoke. To cross that field was unthinkable.

Grimly, Garion sat his terrified charger in the very midst of that awful display, with the lightning dancing around him. He let it rain on the two armies for several minutes until he was certain that he had their full attention; then, with a negligent flick of his flaming sword, he turned off the downpour.

"I have had enough of this stupidity!" he announced in a voice as loud as the thunder had been. "Lay down your weapons at once!"

They stared at him and then distrustfully at each other.

"AT ONCE!" Garion roared, emphasizing his command with yet another lightning bolt and a shattering thunderclap.

The clatter of suddenly discarded weapons was enormous.

"I want to see Sir Embrig and Sir Mandorallen right here," Garion said then, pointing with his sword at a spot directly in front of his horse. "Immediately!"

Slowly, almost like reluctant schoolboys, the two steelclad knights warily approached him.

"Just exactly what do the two of you think you're doing?" Garion demanded of them.

"Mine honor compelled me, your Majesty." Sir Embrig declared in a faltering voice. He was a stout, florid-faced man of about forty with the purple-veined nose of one who drinks heavily. "Sir Mandorallen hath abducted my kinswoman."

"Thy concern for the lady extendeth only to thy authority over her person," Mandorallen retorted hotly. "Thou hast usurped her lands and chattels with churlish disregard for her feelings, and-"

"All right," Garion snapped, "that's enough. Your personal squabble has brought half of Arendia to the brink of war. Is that what you wanted? Are you such a pair of children that you're willing to destroy your homeland just to get your own way?"

"But-" Mandorallen tried to say.

"But nothing." Garion then proceeded -at some length- to tell them exactly what he thought of them. His tone was scornful, and his choice of language wide-ranging. The two frequently went pale as he spoke. Then he saw Lelldorin drawing cautiously near to listen.

"And you!" Garion turned his attention to the young Asturian. "What are you doing down here in Mimbres?"

"Me? Well -Mandorallen is my friend, Garion."

"Did he ask for your help?"

"Well- "

"I didn't think so. You just took it on yourself." He then included Lelldorin in his commentary, gesturing often with the burning sword in his right hand. The three watched that sword with a certain wide-eyed anxiety as he waved it in their faces.

"Very well, then," Garion said after he had cleared the air, "this is what we're going to do." He looked belligerently at Sir Embrig. "Do you want to fight me?" he challenged, thrusting out his jaw pugnaciously. Sir Embrig's face went a pasty white, and his eyes started from his head. "Me, your Majesty?" he gasped. "Thou wouldst have me take the field against the Godslayer?" He began to tremble violently.

"I didn't think so." Garion grunted. "Since that's the case, you'll immediately relinquish all claim of authority over the Baroness Nerina to me."

"Most gladly, your Majesty." Embrig's words tumbled over themselves as they came out.

"Mandorallen," Garion said, "do you want to fight me?"

"Thou art my friend, Garion," Mandorallen protested. "I would die before I raised my hand against thee."

"Good. Then you will turn all territorial claims on behalf of the baroness over to me -at once. I am her protector now."

"I agree to this," Mandorallen replied gravely.

"Sir Embrig," Garion said then, "I bestow upon you the entirety of the Barony of Vo Ebor -including those lands which would normally go to Nerina. Will you accept them?"

"I will, your Majesty."

"Sir Mandorallen, I offer you the hand in marriage of my ward, Nerina of Vo Ebor. Will you accept her?"

"With all my heart, my Lord," Mandorallen choked, with tears coming to his eyes.

"Splendid," Lelldorin said admiringly.

"Shut up, Lelldorin," Garion told him. "That's it, then, gentlemen. Your war is over. Pack up your armies and go home -and if this breaks out again, I'll come back. The next time I have to come down here, I'm going to be very angry. Do we all understand each other?"

Mutely they nodded.

That ended the war.

The Baroness Nerina, however, raised certain strenuous objections when she was informed of Garion's decisions upon the return of Mandorallen's army to Vo Mandor. "Am I some common serf girl to be bestowed upon any man who pleases my lord?" she demanded with a fine air of high drama.

"Are you questioning my authority as your guardian?" Garion asked her directly.

"Nay, my Lord. Sir Embrig hath consented to this. Thou art my guardian now. I must do as thou commandest me."

"Do you love Mandorallen?"

She looked quickly at the great knight and then blushed.

"Answer me!"

"I do, my Lord," she confessed in a small voice.

"What's the problem then? You've loved him for years, but when I order you to marry him, you object."

"My Lord," she replied stily, "there are certain proprieties to be observed. A lady may not be so churlishly disposed of. " And with that she turned her back and stormed away.

Mendorallen groaned, and a sob escaped him.

"What is it now?" Garion demanded.

"My Nerina and I will never be wed, I fear," Mendorallen declared brokenly.

"Nonsense. Lelldorin, do you understand what this is all about?"

Lelldorin frowned. "I think so, Garion. There are a whole series of rather delicate negotiations and formalities that you're leaping over here. There's the question of the dowry, the formal, written consent of the guardian - that's you, of course- and probably most important, there has to be a formal proposal -with witnesses."

"She's refusing over technicalities?" Garion asked incredulously.

"Technicalities are very important to a woman, Garion."

Garion sighed with resignation. This was going to take longer than he had thought. "Come with me," he told them.

Nerina had locked her door and refused to answer Garion's polite knock. Finally he looked at the stout oak planks barring his way. "Burst!" he said, and the door blew inward, showering the startled lady seated on the bed with splinters.

"Now," Garion said, stepping over the wreckage, "let's get down to business. How big a dowry do we think would be appropriate?"

Mendorallen was willing -more than willing- to accept some mere token, but Nerina stubbornly insisted upon something significant. Wincing slightly, Garion made an offer acceptable to the lady. He then called for pen and ink and scribbled -with Lelldorin's aid- a suitable document of consent. "Very well," he said then to Mendorallen, "ask her."

"Such proposal doth not customarily come with such unseemly haste, your Majesty," Nerina protested. "It is considered proper for the couple to have some time to acquaint themselves with each other."

"You're already acquainted, Nerina," he reminded her. "Get on with it."

Mendorallen sank to his knees before his lady, his armor clinking on the floor. "Wilt thou have me as thy husband, Nerina?" he implored her.

She stared at him helplessly. "I have not, my Lord, had time to frame a suitable reply."

"Try 'yes', Nerina," Garion suggested.

"Is such thy command, my Lord?"

"If you want to put it that way."

"I must obey, then. I will have thee, Sir Mendorallen -with all my heart."

"Splendid," Garion said briskly, rubbing his hands together. "Get up, Mendorallen, and let's go down to your chapel. We'll find a priest and get this all formalized by suppertime."

"Surely thou art not proposing such haste, my Lord," Nerina gasped.

"As a matter of fact, I am. I have to get back to Riva and I'm not going to leave here until the two of you are safely married. Things have a way of going wrong in Arendia if somebody isn't around to watch them."

"I am not suitably attired, your Majesty." Nerina protested, looking down at her black dress. "Thou wouldst not have me married in a gown of sable hue?"

"And I," Mendorallen also objected, "I am still under arms. A man should not approach his wedding clad in steel."

"I don't have the slightest concern about what either of you is wearing," Garion informed them. "It's what's in your hearts that's important, not what's on your backs."

"But-" Nerina faltered. "I do not even have a veil."

Garion gave her a long, steady look. Then he cast a quick look around the room, picked up a lace doily from a nearby table and set it neatly atop the lady's head. "Charming," he murmured. "Can anyone think of anything else?"

"A ring?" Lelldorin suggested hesitantly.

Garion turned to stare at him. "You, too?" he said.

"They really ought to have a ring, Garion," Lelldorin said defensively.

Garion considered that for a moment, concentrated, and then forged a plain gold ring out of insubstantial air.

"Will this do?" he asked, holding it out to them.

"Might I not be attended?" Nerina asked in a small, trembling voice. "It is unseemly for a noblewoman to be wed without the presence of some lady of suitable rank to support and encourage her."

"Go fetch somebody" Garion said to Lelldorin.

"Whom should I select?" Lelldorin asked helplessly.

"I don't care. Just bring a lady of noble birth to the chapel -even if you have to drag her by the hair."

Lelldorin scurried out.

"Is there anything else?" Garion asked Mandorallen and Nerina in the slightly dangerous tone that indicated that his patience was wearing very thin.

"It is customary for a bridegroom to be accompanied by a close friend, Garion," Mandorallen reminded him.

"Lelldorin will be there," Garion said, "and so will I. We won't let you fall down or faint or run away."

"Might I not have a few small flowers?" Nerina asked in a plaintive voice.

Garion looked at her. "Certainly," he replied in a deceptively mild tone. "Hold out your hand." He then began to create lilies -rapidly- popping them out of empty air and depositing them one after another in the startled lady's hand.

"Are they the right color, Nerina?" he asked her. "I can change them if you like -purple, perhaps, or chartreuse, or maybe bright blue would suit you."

And then he finally decided that he was not really getting anywhere. They were going to continue to raise objections for as long as they possibly could. They were both so accustomed to living in the very heart of their colossal tragedy that they were unwilling -unable even- to give up their mournful entertainment. The solution, of necessity, was going to be entirely up to him. Knowing that it was a trifle overdramatic, but considering the mental capabilities of the two involved, he drew his sword. "We are all now going directly to the chapel," he announced, "and the two of you are going to get married." He pointed at the splintered door with the sword. "Now march!" he commanded.

And so it was that one of the great tragic love stories of all time came at last to a happy ending. Mandorallen and his Nerina were married that very afternoon, with Garion quite literally standing over them with flaming sword to insure that no last-minute hitches could interrupt.

On the whole, Garion was rather pleased with himself and with the way he had handled things. His mood was self-congratulatory as he departed the following morning to return to Riva.

CHAPTER TEN

"Anyway," Garion was saying as he and Ce'Nedra relaxed in their blue-carpeted sitting room on the evening of his return to Riva, "when we got back to Mandorallen's castle and told Nerina that it was all right for them to get married, she raised all kinds of objections."

"I always thought she loved him," Ce'Nedra said.

"She does, but she's been in the very center of this great tragic situation for all these years, and she didn't really want to give that up. She hadn't got all that noble suffering out of her system yet."

"Don't be snide, Garion."

"Arends make my teeth ache. First she held out for a dowry -a very big one."

"That seems reasonable."

"Not when you consider the fact that I had to pay it."

"You? Why should you have to pay it?"

"I'm her guardian, remember? For all of her thee's and thou's and vaporish airs, she haggles like a Drasnian horse trader. By the time she was done, my purse was very lean. And she had to have a formal letter of consent -and a veil, a lady to attend her, a ring, and flowers. And I was getting more irritated by the minute."

"Aren't you forgetting something?"

"I don't think so."

"Didn't Mandorallen propose to her?" Ce'Nedra leaned forward, her little face very intent. "I'm certain that she would have insisted on that."

"You're right, I almost forgot that part."

She shook her head almost sadly. "Oh, Garion," she said in a disapproving tone.

"That came earlier -right after the business with the dowry. Anyway, he proposed, and I made her say yes, and then- "

"Wait a minute," Ce'Nedra said firmly, holding up one little hand. "Don't rush through that part. Exactly what did he say when he asked her?"

Garion scratched his ear. "I'm not sure I remember," he confessed.

"Try." she urged him. "Please."

"Let's see," he pondered, looking up at the ornately carved wooden beams of the ceiling. "First she objected to having the proposal come before they had gone through all the business of 'getting acquainted,' as she put it. I guess she meant all the sneaking around so that they could be alone together in secluded places - and the love poems and the flowers and all those calf-eyed looks."

Ce'Nedra gave him a hard little stare. "You know, sometimes you can be absolutely infuriating. You've got about as much sensitivity as a block of wood."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Never mind. Just tell me what happened next."

"Well, I told her straight off that I wasn't having any of that nonsense. I said that they were already acquainted and to get on with it."

"You're just full of charm, aren't you?" she said sarcastically.

"Ce'Nedra, what is the problem here?"

"Never mind. Just get on with the story. You always dawdle so when you're telling me about something like this."

"Me? You're the one who keeps interrupting."

"Just move along with it, Garion."

He shrugged. "There isn't much more. He asked her; she said yes; and then I marched them down to the chapel."

"The words, Garion," she insisted. "The words. Exactly what did he say?"

"Nothing very earth-shaking. It went sort of like 'Wilt thou have me as thy husband, Nerina?'"

"Oh," Ce'Nedra said with a catch in her voice. He was astonished to see tears in her eyes.

"What's the matter?" he demanded.

"Never mind," she replied, dabbing at her eyes with a wispy scrap of a handkerchief. "What did she say then?"

"She said that she hadn't had time to work up a suitable answer, so I told her just to say 'yes.' "

"And?"

"She said, 'I will have thee, Sir Mandorallen -with all my heart.' "

"Oh," Ce'Nedra said again, her handkerchief going once more to her brimming eyes. "That's just lovely."

"If you say so," he said. "It seemed a little drawn-out to me."

"Sometimes you're hopeless," she told him. Then she sighed a little forlornly. "I never got a formal proposal," she said.

"You most certainly did," he said indignantly. "Don't you remember all that ceremony when you and the Tolnedran Ambassador came into the throne room?"

"I did the proposing, Garion," she reminded him with a toss of her flaming curls. "I presented myself before your throne and asked you if you would consent to take me to wife. You agreed, and that's all there was to it. You never once asked me."

He frowned and thought back. "I must have."

"Not once."

"Well, as long as we got married, anyway, it doesn't really matter all that much, does it?"

Her expression turned to ice.

He caught that look. "Is it really that important, Ce'Nedra?" he asked her.

"Yes, Garion. It is."

He sighed. "All right then. I guess I'd better do it."

"Do what?"

"Propose. Will you marry me, Ce'Nedra?"

"Is that the best you can do?"

He gave her a long, steady look. She was, he had to admit, very appealing. She was wearing a pale green dress, all frilly and touched here and there with lace, and she sat rather primly in her chair, looking pouty and discontented. He arose from his chair, crossed to where she sat, and sank extravagantly to his knees. He took her small hand in both of his and looked imploringly into her face, trying to match the look of fatuous adoration that Mandorallen had worn.

"Will her Imperial Highness consent to have me as her husband?" he asked her. "I can offer little besides an honest, loving heart and boundless devotion."

"Are you making fun of me?" she asked suspiciously.

"No." he said. "You wanted a formal proposal, so I just gave you one. Well?"

"Well what?"

"Will you consent to marry me?"

She gave him an arch look, her eyes twinkling. Then she reached out fondly and tousled his hair. "I'll think about it," she replied.

"What do you mean, you'll think about it?"

"Who knows?" she said with a smirk. "I might get a better offer. Do get up, Garion. You'll make the knees of your hose all baggy if you stay down on the floor like that."

He got to his feet. "Women!" he said exasperatedly, throwing his arms in the air.

She gave him that tiny, wide-eyed look that at one time, before he had come to recognize it as pure deception, had always made his knees go weak. "Don't you love me any more?" she asked in that trembling, dishonest, little-girl voice.

"Didn't we decide that we weren't going to do that to each other any more?"

"This is a special occasion, dear," she replied. And then she laughed, sprang up from her chair, and threw her arms about his neck. "Oh, Garion," she said, still laughing. "I do love you."

"I certainly hope so," he said, wrapping his arms around her shoulders and kissing her upturned lips.

The following morning Garion dressed rather informally and then tapped on the door to Ce'Nedra's private sitting room.

"Yes?" she answered.

"It's Garion," he said. "May I come in?"

His Sendarian good manners had been so deeply ingrained in him that even though he was the King here, he always asked permission before opening the door to someone else's room.

"Of course," she said.

He turned the latch and entered her frilly private domain, a room all pink and pale-green flounces and with yards of rustling satin and brocade drapery. Ce'Nedra's favorite lady-in-waiting, Arell, rose in some confusion to perform the customary curtsy. Arell was Brand's niece, the daughter of his youngest sister, and she was one of several highborn Rivan ladies who attended the queen. She was very nearly the archetypical Alorn woman, tall, blond, and buxom, with golden braids coiled about her head, deep blue eyes and a complexion like new milk. She and Ce'Nedra were virtually inseparable, and the two spent much of their time with their heads together, whispering and giggling. For some reason, Arell always blushed rosily whenever Garion entered the room. He did not understand that at all, but privately suspected that Ce'Nedra had told her lady-in-waiting certain things that really should have remained private -things that brought a blush to the Rivan girl's cheeks whenever she looked at him.

"I'm going down into the city," Garion told his wife. "Did you want anything?"

"I prefer to do my own shopping, Garion," Ce'Nedra replied, smoothing the front of her satin dressing gown.

"You never get things right anyway."

He was about to reply to that, but decided against it. "Whatever you want. I'll see you at luncheon then."

"As my Lord commands," Ce'Nedra said with a mocking little genuflection.

"Stop that."

She made a face at him and then came over and kissed him.

Garion turned to Arell. "My Lady," he said, bowing politely.

Arell's blue eyes were filled with suppressed mirth, and there was a slightly speculative look in them as well.

She blushed and curtsied again. "Your Majesty," she said respectfully.

As Garion left the royal apartment, he wondered idly what Ce'Nedra had told Arell to cause all those blushes and peculiar looks. He was grateful to the blond girl, however. Her presence provided Ce'Nedra with company, which left him free to attend to other matters. Since Aunt Pol had intervened and healed the estrangement that had caused them both so much anguish, Ce'Nedra had become very possessive about Garion's spare time. On the whole he felt that being married was rather nice, but sometimes Ce'Nedra tended to overdo things a bit.

In the corridor outside, Brand's second son, Kail, was waiting, holding a parchment sheet in his hand. "I think this needs your immediate attention, Sire," he said formally.

Although Kail was a warrior, tall and broad-shouldered like his father and his brothers, he was nonetheless a studious man, intelligent and discreet, and he knew enough about Riva and its people to be able to sort through the voluminous petitions, appeals, and proposals directed to the throne and to separate the important from the trivial. When Garion had first come to the throne, the need for someone to manage the administrative staff had been painfully clear, and Kail had been the obvious choice for that post. He was about twenty-four years old and wore a neatly trimmed brown beard. The hours he had spent in study had

given him a slight squint and a permanent furrow between his eyebrows. Since he and Garion spent several hours a day together, they had soon become friends, and Garion greatly respected Kail's judgment and advice. "Is it serious?" he asked, taking the parchment and glancing at it.

"It could be, Sire," Kail replied. "There's a dispute over the ownership of a certain valley. The families involved are both quite powerful, and I think we'll want to set the matter before things go any further."

"Is there any clear-cut evidence of ownership on either side?"

Kail shook his head. "The two families have used the land in common for centuries. There's been some friction between them lately, however."

"I see," Garion said. He thought about it. "No matter what I decide, one side or the other is going to be unhappy with me, right?"

"Very probably, your Majesty."

"All right, then. We'll let them both be unhappy. Write up something that sounds sort of official declaring that this valley of theirs now belongs to me. We'll let them stew about that for a week or so, and then I'll divide the land right down the middle and give half to each of them. They'll be so angry with me that they'll forget that they don't like each other. I don't want this island turning into another Arendia."

Kail laughed. "Very practical, Belgarion," he said.

Garion grinned at him. "I grew up in Sendaria, remember? Oh, keep a strip of the valley -about a hundred yards wide right through the center. Call it crown land or something and forbid them to trespass on it. That should keep them from butting heads along the fence line." He handed the parchment back to Kail and went on down the corridor, rather pleased with himself.

His mission in the city that morning took him to the shop of a young glass blower of his acquaintance, a skilled artisan named Joran. Ostensibly the visit was for the purpose of inspecting a set of crystal goblets he had commissioned as a present for Ce'Nedra. Its real purpose, however, was somewhat more serious.

Because his upbringing had been humble, Garion was more aware than most monarchs that the opinions and problems of the common people seldom came to the attention of the throne. He strongly felt that he needed a pair of ears in the city -not to spy out unfavorable opinion, but rather to give him a clear, unprejudiced awareness of the real problems of his people. Joran had been his choice for that task.

After they had gone through the motions of looking at the goblets, the two of them went into a small, private room at the back of Joran's shop.

"I got your note as soon as I got back from Arendia," Garion said. "Is the matter really that serious?"

"I believe so, your Majesty," Joran replied. "The tax was poorly thought out, I think, and it's causing a great deal of unfavorable comment."

"All directed at me, I suppose?"

"You are the king, after all."

"Thanks," Garion said drily. "What's the main dissatisfaction with it?"

"All taxes are odious," Joran observed, "but they're bearable as long as everybody has to pay the same. It's the exclusion that irritates people."

"Exclusion? What's that?"

"The nobility doesn't have to pay commercial taxes. Didn't you know that?"

"No," Garion said. "I didn't."

"The theory was that nobles have other obligations -raising and supporting troops and so on. That simply doesn't hold true any more. The crown raises its own army now. If a nobleman goes into trade, though, he doesn't have to pay any commercial taxes. The only real difference between him and any other tradesman is that he happens to have a title."

His shop is the same as mine, and he spends his time the same way that I do -but I have to pay the tax, and he doesn't."

"That doesn't seem very fair," Garion agreed.

"What makes it worse is that I have to charge higher prices in order to pay the tax, but the nobleman can cut his rates and steal my customers away from me."

"That's going to have to be fixed," Garion said. "We'll eliminate that exclusion."

"The nobles won't like it," Joran warned.

"They don't have to like it," Garion said flatly.

"You're a very fair king, your Majesty."

"Fairness doesn't really have all that much to do with it," Garion disagreed. "How many nobles are in business here in the city?"

Joran shrugged. "A couple dozen, I suppose."

"And how many other businessmen are there?"

"Hundreds."

"I'd rather have two dozen people hate me than several hundred."

"I hadn't thought of it that way," Joran admitted.

"I sort of have to," Garion said wryly.

The following week a series of squalls swept in off the Sea of the Winds, raking the rocky isle with chill gales and tattered sheets of slanting rain. The weather at Riva was never really what one would call pleasant for very long, and these summer storms were so common that the Rivans accepted them as part of the natural order of things. Ce'Nedra, however, had been raised far to the south in the endless sunshine at Tol Honeth, and the damp chill which invaded the Citadel each time the sky turned gray and soggy depressed her spirits and made her irritable and out of sorts.

She customarily endured these spells of bad weather by ensconcing herself in a large green velvet armchair by the fire with a warm blanket, a cup of tea, and an oversized book -usually an Arendish romance which dwelt fulsomely on impossibly splendid knights and sighing ladies perpetually on the verge of disaster.

Prolonged confinement, however, almost always drove her at last from her book in search of other diversions.

One midmorning when the wind was moaning in the chimneys and the rain was slashing at the windows, she entered the study where Garion was carefully going over an exhaustive report on wool production on crown lands in the north. The little queen wore an ermine-trimmed gown of green velvet and a discontented expression. "What are you doing?" she asked.

"Reading about wool," he replied.

"Why?"

"I think I'm supposed to know about it. Everybody stands around talking about wool with these sober expressions on their faces. It seems to be terribly important to them."

"Do you really care that much about it?"

He shrugged. "It helps to pay the bills."

She drifted over to the window and stared out at the rain. "Will it never stop?" she demanded at last.

"Eventually, I suppose."

"I think I'll send for Arell. Maybe we can go down into the city and look around the shops."

"It's pretty wet out there, Ce'Nedra."

"I can wear a cloak, and a little rain won't make me melt. Would you give me some money?"

"I thought I gave you some just last week."

"I spent it. Now I need some more."

Garion put aside the report and went to a heavy cabinet standing against the wall. He took a key from a pocket in his doublet, unlocked the cabinet and pulled out the top drawer. Ce'Nedra came over and looked curiously into the drawer. It was about half-filled with coins, gold, silver, and copper, all jumbled together.

"Where did you get all of that?" she exclaimed.

"They give it to me from time to time," he answered. "I throw it in there because I don't want to carry it around. I thought you knew about it."

"How would I know about it? You never tell me anything. How much have you got in there?"

He shrugged. "I don't know."

"Garion!" Her voice was shocked. "Don't you even count it?"

"No. Should I?"

"You're obviously not a Tolnedran. This isn't the whole royal treasury, is it?"

"No. They keep that someplace else. This is just for personal expenses, I think."

"It has to be counted, Garion."

"I don't really have the time, Ce'Nedra."

"Well, I do. Pull that drawer out and bring it over to the table."

He did that, grunting slightly at the weight, and then stood smiling fondly as she sat down and happily started counting money. He had not realized just how much sheer pleasure she could take in handling and stacking coins. She actually glowed as the merry tinkle of money filled her ears. A few of the coins had become tarnished. She looked at those disapprovingly and stopped her count to polish them carefully on the hem of her gown.

"Were you going to go down into the city?" he asked, resuming his seat at the other end of the table.

"Not today, I guess." She kept on counting. A single lock of her hair strayed down across her face, and she absently blew at it from time to time as she concentrated on the task at hand. She dug another handful of

jingling coins out of the drawer and began to stack them carefully on the table in front of her. She looked so serious about it that Garion started to laugh.

She looked up sharply. "What's so funny?" she demanded.

"Nothing, dear," he said and went back to work to the clinking accompaniment of Ce'Nedra's counting.

As the summer wore on, the news from the southern latitudes continued to be good. King Urgit of Cthol Murgos had retreated deeper into the mountains, and the advance of the Emperor Kal Zakath of Mallorean slowed even more. The Mallorean army had suffered dreadful losses in its first efforts to pursue the Murgos in that craggy wasteland and it now moved with extreme caution. Garion received the news of the near-stalemate in the south with great satisfaction.

Toward the end of summer, word arrived from Algaria that Garion's cousin Adara had just presented Hettar with their second son. Ce'Nedra went wild with delight and dipped deeply into the drawer in Garion's study to buy suitable gifts for both mother and child.

The news which arrived in early autumn, however, was not so joyous. In a sadly worded letter, General Varana advised them that Ce'Nedra's father, Emperor Ran Borune XXIII, was sinking fast and that they should make haste to Tol Honeth. Fortunately, the autumn sky remained clear as the ship which carried the Rivan King and his desperately worried little wife ran south before a good following breeze.

They reached Tol Horb at the broad mouth of the Nedrane within a week and then began rowing upriver to the Imperial Capital at Tol Honeth.

They had gone no more than a few leagues when their ship was met by a flotilla of white and gold barges, which formed up around them to escort them to Tol Honeth. Aboard those barges was a chorus of young Tolnedran women who strewed flower petals on the broad surface of the Nedrane and caroled a formal greeting to the Imperial Princess.

Garion stood beside Ce'Nedra on the deck of their ship, frowning slightly at this choral welcome. "Is that altogether appropriate?" he asked.

"It's the custom," she said. "Members of the Imperial Family are always escorted to the city."

Garion listened to the words of the song. "Haven't they heard about your wedding yet?" he asked. "They're greeting the Imperial Princess, not the Rivan Queen."

"We're a provincial people, Garion," Ce'Nedra said. "In a Tolnedran's eyes, an Imperial Princess is much more important than the queen of some remote island."

The singing continued as they moved on upriver. As the gleaming white city of Tol Honeth came into view, a huge brazen fanfare greeted them from the walls. A detachment of burnished legionnaires, their scarlet pennons snapping in the breeze and the plumes on their helmets tossing, awaited them on the marble quay to escort them through the broad avenues to the grounds of the Imperial Palace.

General Varana, a blocky-looking professional soldier with short-cropped, curly hair and a noticeable limp, met them at the palace gate. His expression was somber.

"Are we in time, uncle?" Ce'Nedra asked with an almost frightened note in her voice.

The general nodded, then took the little queen in his arms. "You're going to have to be brave, Ce'Nedra," he told her. "Your father is very, very ill."

"Is there any hope at all?" she asked in a small voice.

"We can always hope," Varana replied, but his tone said otherwise.

"Can I see him now?"

"Of course." The general looked gravely at Garion. "Your Majesty," he said, nodding.

"Your Highness," Garion replied, remembering that Ce'Nedra's wily father had "adopted" Varana several years back, and that the general was heir apparent to the Imperial Throne.

Varana led them with his limping gait through the marble corridors of the vast palace to a quiet wing and a door flanked by a towering pair of legionnaires in burnished breastplates.

As they approached, the heavy door opened quietly, and Lord Morin, the brown-mantled Imperial Chamberlain emerged. Morin had aged since Garion had last seen him, and his concern for his failing Emperor was written clearly on his face.

"Dear Morin," Ce'Nedra said, impulsively embracing her father's closest friend.

"Little Ce'Nedra," he replied fondly. "I'm so glad you arrived in time. He's been asking for you. I think perhaps the fact you were coming is all he's been hanging on to."

"Is he awake?"

Morin nodded. "He dozes a great deal, but he's still alert most of the time."

Ce'Nedra drew herself up, squared her shoulders and carefully assumed a bright, optimistic smile. "All right," she said. "Let's go in."

Ran Borune lay in a vast canopied bed beneath a gold-colored coverlet. He had never been a large man, and his illness had wasted him down to a near-skeleton. His complexion was not so much pale as it was gray, and his beak-like nose was pinched and rose from his drawn face like the prow of a ship. His eyes were closed, and his thin chest seemed almost to flutter as he struggled to breathe.

"Father?" Ce'Nedra said so softly that her voice was hardly more than a whisper.

The Emperor opened one eye. "Well," he said testily, "I see that you finally got here."

"Nothing could have kept me away," she told him, bending over the bed to kiss his withered cheek.

"That's hardly encouraging," he grunted.

"Now that I'm here, we'll have to see about getting you well again."

"Don't patronize me, Ce'Nedra. My physicians have given up entirely "

"What do they know? We Borunes are indestructible."

"Did someone pass that law while I wasn't looking?" The Emperor looked past his daughter's shoulder at his son-in-law. "You're looking well, Garion," he said. "And please don't waste your time on platitudes by telling me how well I look. I look awful, don't I?"

"Moderately awful, yes," Garion replied.

Ran Borune flashed him a quick little grin. Then he turned back to his daughter. "Well, Ce'Nedra," he said pleasantly, "what shall we fight about today?"

"Fight? Who said we were going to fight?"

"We always fight. I've been looking forward to it. I haven't had a really good fight since you stole my legions that day."

"Borrowed, father," she corrected primly, almost in spite of herself.

"Is that what you call it?" He winked broadly at Garion. "You should have been there," he chuckled. "She goaded me into a fit and then pinched my whole army while I was frothing at the mouth."

"Pinched!" Ce'Nedra exclaimed.

Ran Borune began to chuckle, but his laughter turned into a tearing cough that left him gasping and so weak that he could not even raise his head. He closed his eyes then and dozed for a while as Ce'Nedra hovered anxiously over him. After a quarter of an hour or so, Lord Morin quietly entered with a small flask and a silver spoon. "It's time for his medicine," he said softly to Ce'Nedra. "I don't think it really helps very much, but we go through the motions anyway."

"Is that you, Morin?" the Emperor asked without opening his eyes.

"Yes, Ran Borune."

"Is there any word from Tol Rane yet?"

"Yes, your Majesty."

"What did they say?"

"I'm afraid the season's over there, too."

"There has to be one tree somewhere in the world that's still bearing fruit," the emaciated little man in the imperial bed said exasperatedly.

"His Majesty has expressed a desire for some fresh fruit," Morin told Ce'Nedra and Garion.

"Not just any fruit, Morin," Ran Borune wheezed. "Cherries. I want cherries. Right now I'd bestow a Grand Duchy on any man who could bring me ripe cherries."

"Don't be so difficult, father," Ce'Nedra chided him. "The season for cherries was over months ago. How about a nice ripe peach?"

"I don't want peaches. I want cherries!"

"Well, you can't have them."

"You're an undutiful daughter, Ce'Nedra," he accused her.

Garion leaned forward and spoke quietly to Ce'Nedra. "I'll be right back," he told her and went out of the room with Morin. In the corridor outside they met General Varana.

"How is he?" the general asked.

"Peevish," Garion replied. "He wants some cherries."

"I know," Varana said sourly. "He's been asking for them for weeks. Trust a Borune to demand the impossible."

"Are there any cherry trees here on the palace grounds?"

"There are a couple in his private garden. Why?"

"I thought I might have a word with them," Garion said innocently, "explain a few things, and give them a bit of encouragement."

Varana gave him a look of profound disapproval.

"It's not really immoral," Garion assured him.

Varana raised one hand and turned his face away. "Please, Belgarion," he said in a pained voice, "don't try to explain it to me. I don't even want to hear about it. If you're going to do it, just do it and get it over with, but please don't try to convince me that it's in any way natural or wholesome."

"All right," Garion agreed. "Which way did you say that garden was?"

It wasn't really difficult, of course. Garion had seen Belgarath the Sorcerer do it on many occasions. It was no more than ten minutes later that he returned to the corridor outside the sickroom with a small basket of dark purple cherries.

Varana looked steadily at the basket, but said nothing. Garion quietly opened the door and went inside.

Ran Borune lay propped on his pillows, his drawn face sagging with exhaustion. "I don't see why not," he was saying to Ce'Nedra. "A respectful daughter would have presented her father with a half-dozen grandchildren by now."

"We'll get to it, father," she replied. "Why is everyone so worried about it?"

"Because it's important, Ce'Nedra. Not even you could be so silly as to-" He broke off, staring incredulously at the basket in Garion's hand. "Where did you get those?" he demanded.

"I don't think you really want to know, Ran Borune. It's the kind of thing that seems to upset Tolnedrans for some reason."

"You didn't just make them, did you?" the emperor asked suspiciously.

"No. It's much harder that way. I just gave the trees in your garden a little encouragement, that's all. They were very co-operative."

"What an absolutely splendid fellow you married, Ce'Nedra," Ran Borune exclaimed, eyeing the cherries greedily. "Put those right here, my boy." He patted the bed at his side.

Ce'Nedra flashed her husband a grateful little smile, took the basket from him, and deposited it by her father's side. Almost absently she took one of the cherries and popped it into her mouth.

"Ce'Nedra! You stop eating my cherries!"

"Just checking to see if they're ripe, father."

"Any idiot can see that they're ripe," he said, clutching the basket possessively to his side. "If you want any, go get your own." He carefully selected one of the plump, glowing cherries and put it in his mouth.

"Marvelous," he said, chewing happily.

"Don't spit the seeds on the floor like that, father," Ce'Nedra reproved him.

"It's my floor," he told her. "Mind your own business. Spitting the seeds is part of the fun." He ate several more cherries. "We won't discuss how you came by these, Garion," he said magnanimously. "Technically, it's a violation of Tolnedran law to practice sorcery anywhere in the Empire, but we'll let it pass -just this once."

"Thank you, Ran Borune," Garion said. "I appreciate that."

After he had eaten about half of the cherries, the Emperor smiled and sighed contentedly. "I feel better already," he said. "Ce'Vanne used to bring me fresh cherries in that same kind of basket."

"My mother," Ce'Nedra said to Garion.

Ran Borune's eyes clouded over. "I miss her," he said very quietly. "She was impossible to live with, but I miss her more every day."

"I scarcely remember her"" Ce'Nedra said wistfully.

"I remember her very well," her father said. "I'd give my whole Empire if I could see her face just one more time."

Ce'Nedra took his wasted hand in hers and looked imploringly at Garion. "Could you?" she asked, two great tears standing in her eyes.

"I'm not entirely sure," he replied in some perplexity. "I think I know how it's done, but I never met your mother, so I'd have to-" He broke off, still trying to work it out in his mind. "I'm sure Aunt Pol could do it, but-" He came to the bedside. "We can try," he said. He took Ce'Nedra's other hand and then Ran Borune's, linking the three of them together.

It was extremely difficult. Ran Borune's memory was clouded by age and his long illness, and Ce'Nedra's remembrance of her mother was so sketchy that it could hardly be said to exist at all. Garion concentrated, bending all his will upon it. Beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead as he struggled to gather all those fleeting memories into one single image.

The light coming in through the flimsy curtains at the window seemed to darken as if a cloud had passed over the sun, and there was a faint, far-off tinkling sound, as if of small, golden bells. The room was

suddenly filled with a kind of woodland fragrance -a subtle smell of moss and leaves and green trees. The light faded a bit more, and the tinkling and the odor grew stronger.

And then there was a hazy, nebulous luminosity in the air at the foot of the dying Emperor's bed. The glow grew brighter, and she was there. Ce'Vanne had been a bit taller than her daughter, but Garion saw instantly why Ran Borune had always so doted on his only child. The hair was precisely the same deep auburn; the complexion was that same golden-tinged olive; and the eyes were of that exact same green. The face was willful, certainly, but the eyes were filled with love.

The figure came silently around the bed, reaching out briefly in passing to touch Ce'Nedra's face with lingering, phantom fingertips. Garion could suddenly see the source of that small bell sound. Ce'Nedra's mother wore the two golden acorn earrings of which her daughter was so fond, and the two tiny clappers inside them gave off that faint, musical tinkle whenever she moved her head. For no particular reason, Garion remembered that those same earrings lay on his wife's dressing table back at Riva.

Ce'Vanne reached out her hand to her husband. Ran Borune's face was filled with wonder, and his eyes with tears.

"Ce'Vanne," he said in a trembling whisper, struggling to raise himself from his pillow. He pulled his shaking hand free from Garion's grasp and reached out toward her. For a moment their hands seemed to touch, and then Ran Borune gave a long, quavering sigh, sank back on his pillows, and died.

Ce'Nedra sat for a long time holding her father's hand as the faint, woodland smell and the echo of the little golden bells slowly subsided from the room and the light from the window returned. Finally she placed the wasted hand gently back on the coverlet, rose, and looked around the room with an almost casual air. "It's going to have to be aired out, of course," she said absently. "Maybe some cut flowers to sweeten the air." she smoothed the coverlet at the side of the bed and gravely looked at her father's body. Then she turned. "Oh, Garion," she wailed, suddenly throwing herself into his arms.

Garion held her, smoothing her hair and feeling the shaking of her tiny body against him and looking all the while at the still, peaceful face of the Emperor of Tolnedra. It may have been some trick of the light, but it almost seemed that there was a smile on Ran Borune's lips.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The state funeral for Emperor Ran Borune XXIII of the Third Borune Dynasty took place a few days later in the Temple of Nedra, Lion God of the Empire. The temple was a huge marble building not far from the Imperial Palace. The altar was backed by a vast fan of pure, beaten gold, with the head of a lion in its center. Directly in front of the altar stood the simple marble bier of Ce'Nedra's father. The late Emperor lay in calm repose, covered from the neck down by a cloth of gold. The column-lined inner hall of the temple was filled to overflowing as the members of the great families vied with one another, not so much to pay their respects to Ran Borune, but rather to display the opulence of their clothing and the sheer weight of their personal adornment.

Garion and Ce'Nedra, both dressed in deepest mourning, sat beside General Varana at the front of the vast hall as the eulogies were delivered. Tolnedran politics dictated that a representative of each of the major houses should speak upon this sad occasion. The speeches, Garion suspected, had been prepared long in advance. They were all quite flowery and tiresome, and each one seemed to be directed at the point that, although Ran Borune was gone, the Empire lived on.

Many of the speakers seemed quite smug about that.

When the eulogies had at last been completed, the white-robed High Priest of Nedra, a pudgy, sweating man with a grossly sensual mouth, arose and stepped to the front of the altar to add his own contribution. Drawing upon events in the life of Ran Borune, he delivered a lengthy homily on the advantages of having wealth and using it wisely. At first Garion was shocked by the High Priest's choice of subject matter, but the rapt faces of the throng in the temple told him that a sermon about money was very moving to a Tolnedran congregation and that the High Priest, by selecting such a topic, was able thereby to slip in any number of laudatory comments about Ce'Nedra's father.

Once all the tedious speeches were completed, the little Emperor was laid to rest beside his wife under a marble slab in the Borune section of the catacombs beneath the temple.

The so-called mourners then returned to the main temple hall to express their condolences to the bereaved family.

Ce'Nedra bore up well, though she was very pale. On one occasion she swayed slightly, and Garion, without thinking, reached out to support her.

"Don't touch me!" she whispered sharply under her breath, raising her chin sharply.

"What?" Garion was startled.

"We can not show any sign of weakness in the presence of our enemies. I will not break down for the entertainment of the Honeths or the Horbites or the Vordues. My father would rise from his grave in disgust if I did."

The nobles of all the great houses continued to file past to offer their extensive and obviously counterfeit sympathy to the sable-gowned little Rivan Queen. Garion found their half-concealed smirks contemptible and their barbed jibes disgusting. His face grew more stern and disapproving as the moments passed. His threatening presence soon dampened the enjoyment of the Grand Dukes and their ladies and sycophants. The Tolnedrans were genuinely afraid of this tall, mysterious Alorn monarch who had come out of nowhere to assume Riva's throne and to shake the very earth with his footsteps. Even as they approached Ce'Nedra to deliver their poisonous observations, his cold, grim face made them falter, and many carefully prepared impertinences went unsaid.

At last, disgusted so much that even his Sendarian good manners deserted him, he placed his hand firmly on his wife's elbow. "We will leave now" he said to her in a voice which could be clearly heard by everyone in the vast temple. "The air in this place has turned a trifle rancid."

Ce'Nedra cast him one startled glance, then lifted her chin in her most regal and imperious manner, laid her hand lightly on his arm, and walked with him toward the huge bronze doors. The silence was vast as they moved with stately pace through the throng, and a wide path opened for them.

"That was very nicely done, dear," Ce'Nedra complimented him warmly as they rode in the gold-inlaid imperial carriage back toward the palace.

"It seemed appropriate," he replied. "I'd reached the point where I either had to say something rather pointed or turn the whole lot of them into toads."

"My, what an enchanting thought," she exclaimed. "We could go back, if you want."

When Varana arrived back at the palace an hour or so later, he was positively gloating. "Belgarion," he said with a broad grin, "you're a splendid young fellow, do you know that? With that one word you mortally offended virtually the entire nobility of northern Tolnedra."

"Which word was that?"

"Rancid."

"I'm sorry about that one."

"Don't be. It perfectly describes them."

"It is a bit coarse, though."

"Not under the circumstances. It did manage to make you any number of lifelong enemies, however."

"That's all I need," Garion replied sourly. "Give me just a few more years, and I'll have enemies in all parts of the world."

"A king isn't really doing his job if he doesn't make enemies, Belgarion. Any jackass can go through life without offending people."

"Thanks."

There had been some uncertainty about which course Varana would follow once Ran Borune was gone. His 'adoption', by the late Emperor had clearly been a ruse with very little in the way of legality to back it up. The candidates for the throne, blinded by their own lust for the Imperial Crown, had convinced themselves that he would merely serve as a kind of caretaker until the question of the succession had been settled in the usual fashion.

The issue remained in doubt until his official coronation, which took place two days after Ran Borune's funeral. The gloating exultation among the contenders for the throne was almost audible when the general limped into the Temple of Nedra dressed in his uniform, rather than the traditional gold mantle which only the Emperor was allowed to wear. Obviously this man did not intend to take his elevation seriously. It might cost a bit to bribe him, but the way to the Imperial Palace was still open. The grins were broad as Varana, gleaming in his gold-inlaid breastplate, approached the altar.

The pudgy High Priest bent forward for a moment of whispered consultation. Varana replied, and the ecclesiast's face suddenly went deathly pale. Trembling violently, he opened the gold and crystal cask on the altar and removed the jewel-encrusted Imperial Crown. Varana's short-cropped hair was anointed with the traditional unguent, and the High Priest raised the crown with shaking hands. "I crown thee," he declared in a voice almost squeaky with fright. " - I crown thee Emperor Ran Borune XXIV, Lord of all Tolnedra."

It took a moment for that to sink in. Then the temple was filled with howls of anguished protest as the Tolnedran nobility grasped the fact that by the choice of his imperial name, Varana was clearly announcing that he intended to keep the crown for himself. Those howls were cut off sharply as the Tolnedran

legionnaires, who had quietly filed into place along the colonnade surrounding the main temple floor, drew their swords with a huge, steely rasp. The gleaming swords raised in salute.

"Hail Ran Borune!" the legions thundered. "Hail Emperor of Tolnedra!" And that was that.

That evening as Garion, Ce'Nedra, and the newly crowned Emperor sat together in a crimson-draped private chamber filled with the golden glow of dozens of candles, Varana exclaimed. "Surprise is as important in politics as it is in military tactics, Belgarion. If your opponent doesn't know what you're going to do, there's no way he can prepare countermeasures." The general now openly wore the gold mantle of the Emperor.

"That makes sense," Garion replied, sipping at a goblet of Tolnedran wine. "Wearing your breastplate instead of the Imperial Mantle kept them guessing right up until the last minute."

"That was for a much more practical reason." Varana laughed. "Many of those young nobles have had military training, and we teach our legionnaires how to throw daggers. Since my back was going to be toward them, I wanted a good, solid layer of steel covering the area between my shoulder blades."

"Tolnedran politics are very nervous, aren't they?"

Varana nodded his agreement. "Fun, though," he added.

"You have a peculiar notion of fun. I've had a few daggers thrown at me and I didn't find it all that amusing."

"We Anadiles have always had a peculiar sense of humor."

"Borune, uncle," Ce'Nedra corrected primly.

"What was that, dear?"

"You're a Borune now, not an Anadile -and you should start acting like one."

"Bad-tempered, you mean? That's not really in my nature."

"Ce'Nedra could give you lessons, if you like," Garion offered, grinning fondly at his wife.

"What?" Ce'Nedra exclaimed indignantly, her voice going up an octave or so.

"I suppose she could at that," Varana agreed blandly. "She's always been very good at it."

Ce'Nedra sighed mournfully, eyeing the pair of grinning monarchs. Then her expression became artfully tragic. "What's a poor little girl to do?" she asked in a trembling voice. "Here I am, maltreated and abused by both my husband and my brother."

Varana blinked. "You know, I hadn't even thought of that. You are my sister now, aren't you?"

"Perhaps you aren't quite as clever as I thought, brother dear," she purred at him. "I know that Garion's not quite bright, but I thought better of you."

Garion and Varana exchanged rueful glances.

"Would you gentlemen like to play some more?" Ce'Nedra asked them, her eyes twinkling and a smug smile hovering about her lips.

There was a light tap on the door.

"Yes?" Varana said.

"Lord Morin to see you, your Majesty" the guard outside the door announced.

"Send him in, please."

The Imperial Chamberlain entered quietly. His face was marked by the sorrow he felt at the passing of the man he had served so long and faithfully, but he still performed his duties with the quiet efficiency that had always been his outstanding characteristic.

"Yes, Morin?" Varana said.

"There's someone waiting outside, your Majesty. She's rather notorious, so I thought I should speak to you privately before I presented her to you."

"Notorious?"

"It's the courtesan Bethra, your Majesty." Morin said with a faintly embarrassed look at Ce'Nedra. "She's been -ah- shall we say, useful to the crown in the past. She has access to a great deal of information as a result of her professional activities and she was a longtime friend of Ran Borune's. From time to time she kept him advised of the activities of certain unfriendly nobles. He made arrangements for there to be a way by which she could enter the palace unnoticed so that they could -ah- talk, among other things."

"Why, that sly old fox."

"I have never known her information to be inaccurate, your Majesty." Morin continued. "She says she has something very important to tell you."

"You'd better bring her in, then, Morin," Varana said, "With your permission, of course, dear sister," he added to Ce'Nedra.

"Certainly," Ce'Nedra agreed, her eyes afire with curiosity.

When Morin brought the woman in, she was wearing a light, hooded cloak, but when, with one smooth, round arm, she reached up and pushed the hood back, Garion started slightly. He knew her. He recalled

that when he and Aunt Pol and the others had been passing through Tol Honeth during their pursuit of Zedar the Apostate and the stolen Orb, this same woman had accosted Silk for a bantering exchange.

As she unfastened the neck of her cloak and let it slide almost sensuously from her creamy shoulders, he saw that she had not changed in the nearly ten years since he had last seen her. Her lustrous, blue-black hair was untouched by any hint of gray. Her startlingly beautiful face was still as smooth as a girl's, and her heavy-lidded eyes were still filled with a sultry wickedness. Her gown was of palest lavender and cut in such a way as to enhance rather than conceal the lush, almost overripe body it enclosed. It was the kind of body that was a direct challenge to every man she met. Garion stared openly at her until he caught Ce'Nedra's green eyes, agate-hard, boring into him, and he quickly looked away.

"Your Majesty," Bethra said in a throaty contralto as she curtsied gracefully to the new Emperor, "I would have waited a time before introducing myself, but I've heard a few things I thought you should know immediately."

"I appreciate your friendship, Lady Bethra," Varana replied with exquisite courtesy.

She laughed a warm, wicked laugh. "I'm not a lady, your Majesty," she corrected him. "Most definitely not a lady." She made a small curtsy to Ce'Nedra. "Princess," she murmured.

"Madame," Ce'Nedra responded with a faint chill in her voice and a very slight inclination of her head.

"Ah," Bethra said almost sadly. Then she turned back to Varana. "Late this afternoon I was entertaining Count Ergon and the Baron Kelbor at my establishment."

"A pair of powerful Honethite nobles," Varana explained to Garion.

"The gentlemen from the house of Honeth are less than pleased with your Majesty's choice of an official name," Bethra continued. "They spoke hastily and in some heat, but I think that you might want to take what they said seriously. Ergon is an unmitigated ass, all bluster and pomposity, but Baron Kelbor is not the sort to be taken lightly. At any rate, they concluded that, with the legions all around the palace, it would be unlikely that an assassin could reach you; but then Kelbor said, 'If you want to kill a snake, you cut off its tail -just behind the head. We can't reach Varana, but we can reach his son. Without an heir, Varana's line dies with him.'"

"My son?" Varana said sharply.

"His life is in danger, your Majesty. I thought you should know."

"Thank you, Bethra," Varana replied gravely. Then he turned to Morin. "Send a detachment of the third legion to my son's house," he said. "No one is to go in or out until I've had time to make other arrangements."

"At once, your Majesty."

"I would also like to speak with the two gentlemen from the House of Honeth. Send some troops to invite them to the palace. Have them wait in that little room adjoining the torture chamber down in the dungeons until I have the time to discuss this with them."

"You wouldn't," Ce'Nedra gasped.

"Probably not," Varana admitted, "but they don't have to know that, do they? Let's give them a nervous hour or two."

"I'll see to it immediately, your Majesty!" Morin said. He bowed and quietly left the room.

"I'm told that you knew my father," Ce'Nedra said to the lushly curved woman standing in the center of the room.

"Yes, Princess," Bethra responded. "Quite well, actually. We were friends for years."

Ce'Nedra's eyes narrowed.

"Your father was a vigorous man, Princess," Bethra told her calmly. "I'm told that many people prefer not to believe that kind of thing about their parents, but it does happen now and again. I was quite fond of him and I'll miss him very much, I think."

"I don't believe you," Ce'Nedra said bluntly.

"That's up to you, of course."

"My father would not have done that."

"Whatever you say, Princess," Bethra said with a faint smile.

"You're lying!" Ce'Nedra snapped.

A momentary glint came into Bethra's eyes. "No, Princess. I don't lie. I might conceal the truth at times, but I never lie. Lies are too easily found out. Ran Borune and I were intimate friends and we enjoyed each other's company in many ways." Her look became faintly amused. "Your upbringing has sheltered you from certain facts, Princess Ce'Nedra. Tol Honeth is an extremely corrupt city, and I am fully at home here. Let's face a certain blunt truth. I'm a harlot and I make no apology for that fact. The work is easy -even pleasant at times-

and the pay is very good. I'm on the best of terms with some of the richest and most powerful men in the world. We talk, and they value my conversation, but when they come to my house, it's not the talk they're interested in. The talk comes later. It was much the same when I visited your father. We did talk, Princess, but it was usually later."

Ce'Nedra's face was flaming, and her eyes were wide with shock. "No one has ever talked to me that way before," she gasped.

"Then it was probably overdue," Bethra said calmly. "You're much wiser now -not happier, perhaps, but wiser. Now, if you'll excuse me, I should probably leave. The Honeths have spies everywhere, and I think it might not be a good idea for them to find out about this visit."

"I want to thank you for the information you've just brought me, Bethra," Varana said to her. "Let me give you something for your trouble."

"That has never been necessary, your Majesty," she replied with an arch little smile. "Information is not what I sell. I'll go now -unless you want to talk business, of course." She paused in the act of putting her cloak back on and gave him a very direct look.

"Ah -this might not be the best time, Bethra," Varana said with a faintly regretful note in his voice and a quick sidelong glance at Ce'Nedra.

"Some other time then, perhaps." She curtsied again and quietly left the room, the musky fragrance of the scent she wore lingering in the air behind her.

Ce'Nedra was still blushing furiously, and her eyes were outraged. She spun to face Garion and Varana.

"Don't either of you dare say anything," she commanded. "Not one single word."

The sad visit to Tol Honeth ended a few days later, and Garion and Ce'Nedra took ship again for the voyage back to the Isle of the Winds. Though Ce'Nedra seldom gave any outward hints of her grief, Garion knew her well enough to understand that her father's death had hurt her deeply. Because he loved her and was sensitive to her emotions, he treated her with a certain extra tenderness and consideration for the next several months.

In mid-autumn that year, the Alorn Kings and Queen Porenn, Regent of Drasnia, arrived at Riva for the traditional meeting of the Alorn Council. The meeting had none of the urgency which had marked those meetings previously. Torak was dead, the Angaraks were convulsed by war, and a king sat upon the Rivan throne. The entire affair was almost purely social, though the kings did make some pretense at holding business sessions in the blue-draped council chamber high in the south tower of the Citadel. They gravely talked about the stalemated war in southern Cthol Murgos and about the troubles Varana was having with the Vordue family of northern Tolnedra.

Warned perhaps by the failure of the Honeths in their attempts at assassination, the Vordues decided to try secession. Shortly after Varana's coronation as Ran Borune XXIV, the Vordue family declared that their Grand Duchy was no longer a part of Tolnedra but rather was a separate, independent kingdom -although they had not yet decided which of their number was to ascend the throne.

"Varana's going to have to move the legions against them," King Anheg declared, wiping the ale foam from his mouth with his sleeve. "Otherwise, the other families will secede too, and Tolnedra will fly apart like a broken spring."

"It's not really that simple, Anheg," Queen Porenn told him smoothly, turning back from the window out of which she had been watching the activity in the harbor far below. The Queen of Drasnia still wore deep mourning, and her black gown seemed to enhance her blonde loveliness. "The legions will gladly fight any foreign enemy, but Varana can't ask them to attack their own people."

Anheg shrugged. "He could bring up legions from the south. They're all Borunes or Anadiles or Ranites. They wouldn't mind trampling over the Vordues."

"But then the northern legions would step in to stop them. Once the legions start fighting each other, the Empire will really disintegrate."

"I guess I really hadn't thought of it that way," Anheg admitted. "You know, Porenn, you're extremely intelligent -for a woman."

"And you're extremely perceptive -for a man," she replied with a sweet smile.

"That's one for her side," King Cho-Hag said quietly.

"Were we keeping score?" Garion asked mildly.

"It helps us to keep track, sort of," the Chief of the Clan-Chiefs of Algaria answered with a straight face.

It was not until several days later that word reached Riva concerning Varana's rather novel approach to his problem with the Vordues. A Drasnian ship sailed into the harbor one morning, and an agent of the Drasnian Intelligence Service brought a sheaf of dispatches to Queen Porenn. After she read them, she entered the

council chamber with a smug little smile. "I believe we can set our minds at rest about Varana's abilities, gentlemen," she told the Alorn Kings. "He appears to have found a solution to the Vordue question."

"Oh?" Brand rumbled. "What is it?"

"My informants advise me that he has made a secret arrangement with King Korodullin of Arendia. This so-called Kingdom of Vordue has suddenly become absolutely infested with Arendish bandits -most of them in full armor, oddly enough."

"Wait a minute, Porenn," Anheg interrupted. "If it's a secret arrangement, how is it that you know about it?" The little blonde Queen of Drasnia lowered her eyelids demurely. "Why, Anheg, dear, weren't you aware of the fact that I know everything?"

"Another one for her side," King Cho-Hag said to Garion.

"I'd say so, yes," Garion agreed.

"At any rate," the Drasnian Queen continued, "there are now whole battalions of brainless young Mimbrate knights in Vordue, all posing as bandits and plundering and burning at will. The Vordues don't have what you could call an army, so they've been screaming for aid from the legions. My people managed to get their hands on a copy of Varana's reply." She unfolded a document. "'To the government of the Kingdom of Vordue,'" she read, "'Greetings: Your recent appeal for help came as a great surprise to me. Surely the esteemed gentlemen in Tol Vordue would not want me to violate the sovereignty of their newly established kingdom by sending Tolnedran legions across their borders to deal with a few Arendish brigands. The maintenance of public order is the paramount responsibility of any government, and I would not dream of intruding my forces into so fundamental an area. To do so would raise grave doubts in the minds of reasonable men the world over as to the viability of your new state. I do, however, send you my best wishes in your efforts to deal with what is, after all, a strictly internal matter.'"

Anheg began to laugh, pounding his heavy fist on the table in his glee. "I think that calls for a drink," he chortled.

"I think it might call for several," Garion agreed. "We can toast the efforts of the Vordues to maintain order."

"I trust you gentlemen will excuse me then," Queen Porenn said. "No mere woman could ever hope to compete with the Kings of Aloria when it comes to really serious drinking."

"Of course, Porenn," Anheg agreed magnanimously. "We'll even drink your share for you."

"You're too kind," she murmured and withdrew.

Much of the evening that followed was lost in a hazy fog of ale fumes for Garion. He seemed to remember weaving down a corridor with Anheg on one side and Brand on the other. The three of them had their arms about one another's shoulders, and they staggered in a peculiar kind of unison. He also seemed to remember that they were singing. When he was sober, Garion never sang. That night, however, it seemed like the most natural and enjoyable thing in the world.

He had not been drunk before. Aunt Pol had always disapproved of drinking, and, as he did in most things, he had deferred to her opinions about the matter. Thus, he was totally unprepared for the way he felt the next morning.

Ce'Nedra was unsympathetic, to say the very least. Like every woman who had ever lived since the beginning of time, she smugly enjoyed her husband's suffering. "I told you that you were drinking too much," she reminded him.

"Please don't," he said, holding his head between his hands.

"It's your own fault," she smirked.

"Just leave me alone," he begged. "I'm trying to die."

"Oh, I don't think you'll die, Garion. You might wish you could, but you won't."

"Do you have to talk so loud?"

"We all just loved your singing," she congratulated him brightly. "I actually think you invented notes that didn't even exist before."

Garion groaned and once more buried his face between his trembling hands.

The Alorn Council lasted for perhaps another week. It might have continued longer had not a savage autumn storm announced with a howling gale that it was time for the assembled guests to return to the mainland while the Sea of the Winds was still navigable.

Not too many days later, Brand, the tall, aging Rivan Warder, requested a private audience with Garion. It was raining gustily outside, and sheets of water intermittently clawed at the windows of Garion's study as the two men sat down in comfortable chairs across the table from each other. "May I speak frankly, Belgarion?" the big, sad-eyed man asked.

"You know you don't have to ask that."

"The matter at hand is a personal one. I don't want you to be offended."

"Say what you think needs to be said. I promise not to be offended."

Brand glanced out the window at the gray sky and the wind-driven rain. "Belgarion, it's been almost eight years now since you married Princess Ce'Nedra."

Garion nodded.

"I'm not trying to intrude on your privacy, but the fact that your wife has not yet produced an heir to the throne is, after all, a state matter."

Garion pursed his lips. "I know that you and Anheg and the others are very concerned. I think your concern is premature, though."

"Eight years is a long time, Belgarion. We all know how much you love your wife. We're all fond of her."

Brand smiled briefly. "Even though she's a little difficult at times."

"You've noticed."

"We followed her willingly to the battlefield at Thull Mardu -and probably would again if she asked us to- but I think we'd better face the possibility that she may be barren."

"I'm positive that she's not," Garion said firmly.

"Then why isn't she having children?"

Garion couldn't answer that.

"Belgarion, the fate of this kingdom -and of all Aloria- hangs on your weakest breath. There's virtually no other topic of conversation in all the northern kingdoms."

"I didn't know that," Garion admitted.

"Grodeg and his henchmen were virtually wiped out at Thull Mardu, but there's been a resurgence of the Bear-cult in remote parts of Cherek, Drasnia, and Algaria. You knew that, didn't you?"

Garion nodded.

"And even in the cities there are those elements that sympathize with the cult's aims and beliefs. Those people were not happy that you chose a Tolnedran princess for your wife. Rumors are already abroad that Ce'Nedra's inability to have children is a sign of Belar's disapproval of your marriage to her."

"That's superstitious nonsense," Garion scoffed.

"Of course it is, but if that kind of thinking begins to take hold, it's ultimately going to have some unpleasant effects. Other elements in Alorn society -friendly to you- are very concerned about it. To put it bluntly, there's a rather widely held opinion that the time has come for you to divorce Ce'Nedra."

"What?"

"You do have that power, you know. The way they all see it, the best solution might be for you to put aside your barren Tolnedran queen and take some nice, fertile Alorn girl, who'll present you with babies by the dozen."

"That's absolutely out of the question," Garion said hotly. "I won't do it. Didn't those idiots ever hear about the Accords of Vo Mimbri? Even if I wanted to divorce Ce'Nedra, I couldn't. Our marriage was agreed upon five hundred years ago."

"The Bear-cult feels that the arrangement was forced on the Alorns by Belgarath and Polgara," Brand replied. "Since those two are loyal to Aldur, the cult feels that it might have been done without Belar's approval."

"Nonsense," Garion snapped.

"There's a lot of nonsense in any religion, Belgarion. The point remains, however, that Ce'Nedra has few friends in any part of Alorn society. Even those who are friendly to you aren't very fond of her. Both your enemies and your friends would like to see you divorce her. They all know how fond of her you are, so they'll probably never approach you with the idea. They're likely to take more direct action instead."

"Such as?"

"Since they know that you can't be persuaded to divorce her, someone may try to remove her permanently."

"They wouldn't dare!"

"Alorns are almost as emotional as Arends are, Belgarion -and sometimes almost as thick-headed. We're all aware of it. Anheg and Cho-Hag both urged me to warn you about this possibility, and Porenn has put whole platoons of her spies to work on it so that we'll at least have some advance warning if someone starts plotting against the queen."

"And just where do you stand in this, Brand?" Garion asked quietly.

"Belgarion," the big man said firmly, "I love you as if you were my own son, and Ce'Nedra is as dear to me as the daughter I never had. Nothing in this world would make me happier than to see the floor of that nursery next to your bedroom absolutely littered with children. But it's been eight years. Things have

reached the point where we must do something -if for no other reason, then to protect that tiny, brave girl we both love."

"What can we do?" Garion asked helplessly.

"You and I are only men, Garion. How can we know why a woman does or does not have children? And that's the crux of the whole situation. I implore you, Garion -I beg you- send for Polgara. We need her advice and help -and we need it now."

After the Warder had quietly left, Garion sat for a long while staring out at the rain. All in all, he decided that it might be wiser not to tell Ce'Nedra about the conversation. He did not want to frighten her with talk of assassins lurking in the dim corridors, and any hint that political expediency might compel consideration of divorce would not be well received. After careful thought, he concluded that the best course would be just to keep his mouth shut and send for Aunt Pol. Unfortunately, he had forgotten something rather important. When he entered the cheery, candlelit royal apartment that evening, he wore a carefully assumed smile designed to indicate that nothing untoward had happened during the day.

The frosty silence which greeted him should have warned him; even had he missed that danger sign, he certainly should have noticed the scars on the door casing and the broken shards of several vases and assorted porcelain figurines that lay in the corners where they had been missed in the hasty clean-up following an explosion of some sort. The Rivan King, however, sometimes tended to be slightly unobservant.

"Good evening, dear" he greeted his icy little wife in a cheerful voice.

"Really?"

"How did your day go?"

She turned to regard him with a look filled with daggers. "How can you possibly have the nerve to ask that?" Garion blinked.

"Tell me," she said, "just when is it that I am to be put aside so that my Lord can marry the blonde-headed brood sow who's going to replace me in my Lord's bed and fill the entire Citadel with litters of runny-nosed Alorn brats?"

"How-?"

"My Lord appears to have forgotten the gift he chained about my neck when we were betrothed," she said.

"My Lord also appears to have forgotten just exactly what Beldaran's amulet can do."

"Oh," Garion said, suddenly remembering. "Oh, my."

"Unfortunately, the amulet won't come off," Ce'Nedra told him biting. "You won't be able to give it to your next wife -unless you plan to have my head cut off so that you can reclaim it."

"Will you stop that?"

"As my Lord commands me. Did you plan to ship me back to Tolnedra -or am I just to be shoved out the front gate into the rain and left to fend for myself?"

"You heard the discussion I had with Brand, then, I take it."

"Obviously."

"If you heard part of it, then I'm sure you heard it all. Brand was only reporting a danger to you caused by the absurd notions of a group of frothing fanatics."

"You should not have even listened to him."

"When he's trying to warn me that somebody might attempt to kill you? Ce'Nedra, be serious."

"The thought is there now, Garion," she said accusingly. "Now you know that you can get rid of me any time you want. I've seen you ogling those empty-headed Alorn girls with their long blonde braids and their overdeveloped bosoms. Now's your chance, Garion. Which one will you choose?"

"Are you about finished with all of this?"

Her eyes narrowed. "I see," she said. "Now I'm not merely barren, I'm also hysterical."

"No, you're just a little silly now and then, that's all."

"Silly?"

"Everybody's silly once in a while," he added quite calmly. "It's part of being human. I'm actually a little surprised that you aren't throwing things."

She threw a quick, guilty glance in the direction of some of the broken fragments in the corner.

"Oh," he said, catching the glance. "You did that earlier, I see. I'm glad I missed that part. It's hard to try to reason with somebody when you're dodging flying crockery and the other person is shrieking curses."

Ce'Nedra blushed slightly.

"You did that too?" he asked mildly. "Sometimes I wonder where you managed to pick up all those words. How did you ever find out what they mean?"

"You swear all the time," she accused.

"I know," he admitted. "It's terribly unfair. I'm allowed to, but you're not."

"I'd like to know who made up that rule," she started, and then her eyes narrowed. "You're trying to change the subject," she accused him.

"No, Ce'Nedra, I already did. We weren't getting anywhere with the other topic. You are not barren, and I am not going to divorce you, no matter how long somebody else's braids are, or how -well, never mind."

She looked at him. "Oh, Garion, what if I am?" she said in a small voice. "Barren, I mean?"

"That's absurd, Ce'Nedra. We won't even discuss that."

The lingering doubt in the eyes of the Rivan Queen, however, said quite clearly that, even if they did not discuss it, she would continue to worry about it.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The season made the Sea of the Winds extremely hazardous, and Garion was forced to wait for a full month before he could dispatch a messenger to the Vale of Aldur. By then the late autumn snowstorms had clogged the passes in the mountains of eastern Sendaria, and the royal messenger was obliged literally to wade his way across the plains of Algaria.

With all these delays, it was very nearly Erastide by the time Aunt Pol, Durnik, and Errand arrived at the snowy quay in the harbor at Riva. Durnik admitted to Garion that it had only been a chance meeting with the wayward Captain Gredlik, who feared no storm that any sea could hurl at him, that had made the trip possible at all. Polgara spoke briefly with the vagabond seaman before they began the long climb up to the Citadel, and Garion noted with some surprise that Gredlik slipped his hawsers immediately and sailed back out to sea.

Polgara seemed quite unconcerned about the gravity of the problem that had impelled Garion to send for her. She spoke with him only a couple of times about it, asking a few rather direct questions that set his ears to flaming. Her discussions with Ce'Nedra were a bit more lengthy, but only slightly so.

Garion received the distinct impression that she was waiting for someone or something before proceeding. The Erastide celebration at Riva that year was somewhat subdued. Although it was very pleasant to have Polgara, Durnik, and Errand with them to join in the festivities, Garion's concern over the problem Brand had raised dampened his enjoyment of the holiday.

Several weeks afterward, Garion entered the royal apartment one snowy midafternoon to find Polgara and Ce'Nedra seated by a cozy fire sipping tea and chatting together quietly. The curiosity which had been growing in him since the arrival of his visitors finally boiled to a head.

"Aunt Pol," he began.

"Yes dear?"

"You've been here for almost a month now."

"Has it been that long? The time certainly passes quickly when you're with people you love."

"There's still this little problem, you know," he reminded her.

"Yes, Garion," she replied patiently. "I'm aware of that."

"Are we doing anything about it?"

"No," she said placidly, "not yet, anyhow."

"It's sort of important, Aunt Pol. I don't want to seem to be trying to rush you or anything, but- " He broke off helplessly.

Polgara rose from her chair, went to the window, and looked out at the small private garden just outside. The garden was clogged with snow, and the pair of intertwined oak trees Ce'Nedra had planted there at the time of her betrothal to Garion were bowed slightly beneath the weight on their limbs. "One of the things you'll learn as you grow older, Garion," she said to him, gravely looking out at the snowy garden, "is patience. Everything has its proper season. The solution to your problem isn't all that complicated, but it's just not the proper time to come to grips with it yet."

"I don't understand at all, Aunt Pol."

"Then you'll just have to trust me, won't you?"

"Of course I trust you, Aunt Pol. It's just- "

"Just what, dear?"

"Nothing."

It was late winter before Captain Gredlik returned from the south. A storm had sprung one of the seams of his ship, and she was taking water as she wallowed heavily around the headland and made for the quay. "I thought for a while there that I might have to swim," the bearded Cherek growled as he limped across to the quay. "Where's the best place to beach this poor old cow of mine? I'm going to have to chalk her bottom."

"Most sailors use that inlet there," Garion replied, pointing.

"I hate to beach a ship in the winter," Gredlik said bitterly. "Is there someplace where I can get a drink?"

"Up at the Citadel," Garion offered.

"Thanks. Oh, I brought that visitor Polgara wanted."

"Visitor?"

Gredlik stepped back, squinted at his ship to determine the location of the aft cabin, then went over and kicked the planking several times. "We're here!" he bellowed. He turned back to Garion. "I really hate to sail with women on board. I'm not superstitious, but sometimes I really think they do bring bad luck -and you've always got to watch your manners."

"You have a woman aboard?" Garion asked curiously.

Gredlik grunted sourly. "Pretty little thing, but she seems to expect deferential treatment; and when your whole crew is busy bailing seawater out of your bilges, you don't have much time for that."

"Hello, Garion," a light voice said from up on deck.

"Xera?" Garion stared up into the small face of his wife's cousin. "Is that really you?"

"Yes, Garion," the red-haired Dryad replied calmly. She was bundled up to the ears in thick, warm furs, and her breath steamed in the frosty air. "I got here as quickly as I could when I received Lady Polgara's summons." She smiled sweetly down at the sour-faced Gredlik. "Captain," she said, "could you have some of your men bring those bales along for me?"

"Dirt," Gredlik snorted. "I sail two thousand leagues in the dead of winter to carry one small girl, two casks of water, and four bales of dirt."

"Loam, Captain," Xera corrected meticulously, "loam. There's a difference, you know."

"I'm a sailor!" Gredlik said. "To me, dirt is dirt."

"Whatever you wish, Captain," Xera said winsomely. "Now do be a dear and have the bales carried up to the Citadel for me -and I'll need the casks as well."

Grumbling, Captain Gredlik gave the orders.

Ce'Nedra was ecstatic when she learned that her cousin had arrived in Riva. The two of them flew into each other's arms and dashed off immediately to find Polgara.

"They're very fond of each other, aren't they?" Durnik observed. The smith was dressed in furs and wore a pair of well-tarred boots. Shortly after his arrival, despite the fact that it was in the dead of winter, Durnik had discovered a large, swirling pool in the river that dropped out of the mountains and ran just to the north of the city. With astounding self-restraint, he had actually stared at that ice-rimmed pool for a full ten minutes before going in search of a fishing pole. Now he happily spent most of each day probing those dark, churning waters with a waxed line and a bright lure in search of the silvery-sided salmon that lurked beneath the turbulent surface. The closest Garion had ever seen his Aunt Pol actually come to scolding her husband had been on the day when she had intercepted him on his way out of the Citadel into the very teeth of a screaming blizzard, whistling, and with his fishing pole over his shoulder.

"What am I supposed to do with all of this?" Gredlik demanded, pointing at the six burly sailors who had carried Xera's bales and casks up the long stairway to the grim fortress brooding over the city.

"Oh," Garion said, "just have your men put them over there." He pointed toward a corner of the antechamber they had just entered. "I'll find out what the ladies want done with them later."

Gredlik grunted. "Good." Then he rubbed his hands together. "Now, about that drink-"

Garion did not have the faintest idea what his wife and her cousin and Polgara were up to. Most of the time, their conversations broke off as soon as he entered the room. To his astonishment, the four bales of loam and the two casks of what seemed to be water were stacked rather untidily in one corner of the royal bedroom. Ce'Nedra adamantly refused to explain, but the look she gave him when he asked why they needed to be so close to the royal bed was not only mysterious, but actually faintly naughty.

It was perhaps a week or two after Xera's arrival that a sudden break in the weather brought the sun out, and the temperature soared up to almost freezing. Shortly before noon, Garion was in conference with the Drasnian ambassador when a wide-eyed servant hesitantly entered the royal study. "Please, your Majesty," the poor man stammered. "Please forgive me for interrupting, but Lady Polgara told me to bring you to her at once. I tried to tell her that we don't bother you when you're busy, but she -well, she sort of insisted."

"You'd better go see what she wants, your Majesty," the Drasnian ambassador suggested. "If the Lady Polgara had just summoned me, I'd be running toward her door already."

"You don't really have to be afraid of her, Margrave," Garion told him. "She wouldn't actually hurt you."

"That's a chance I'd prefer not to take, your Majesty. We can talk about the matter we were discussing some other time."

Frowning slightly, Garion went down the hall to the door of Aunt Pol's apartment. He tapped gently and then went in.

"Ah, there you are," she said crisply. "I was about to send another servant after you." She wore a fur-lined cloak with a deep hood pulled up until it framed her face. Ce'Nedra and Xera, similarly garbed, were standing just behind her.

"I want you to go find Durnik," she said. "He's probably fishing. Find him and bring him back to the Citadel. Get a shovel and a pick from someplace and then bring Durnik and the tools to that little garden just outside your apartment window."

He stared at her.

She made a kind of flipping motion with one hand.

"Quickly, quickly, Garion," she said. "The day is wearing on."

"Yes, Aunt Pol," he said without even thinking. He turned and went back out, half-running. He was nearly to the end of the hallway before he remembered that he was the king here, and that people probably shouldn't order him around like that.

Durnik, of course, responded immediately to his wife's summons -well, almost immediately. He did make one last cast before carefully coiling up his fishing line and following Garion back to the Citadel. When the two of them entered the small private garden adjoining the royal apartment, Aunt Pol, Ce'Nedra, and Xera were already there, standing beneath the intertwined oak trees.

"Here's what we're going to do," Aunt Pol said in a businesslike fashion. "I'd like to have the area around these tree trunks opened up to a depth of about two feet."

"Uh -Aunt Pol," Garion interposed, "the ground is sort of frozen. Digging is going to be a little difficult."

"That's what the pick is for, dear," she said patiently.

"Wouldn't it be easier to wait until the ground thaws?"

"Probably, but it needs to be done now. Dig, Garion."

"I've got gardeners, Aunt Pol. We could send for a couple of them." He eyed the pick and shovel uncomfortably.

"It's probably better if we keep it in the family, dear. You can start digging right here." She pointed.

Garion sighed and took up the pick.

What followed made no sense at all. Garion and Durnik picked and spaded at the frozen ground until late afternoon, opening up the area Aunt Pol had indicated. Then they dumped the four bales of loam into the hole they had prepared, tamped down the loose earth, and watered the dark soil liberally with the water from the two casks. After that, Aunt Pol instructed them to cover everything back up again with snow.

"Did you understand any of that?" Garion asked Durnik as the two of them returned their tools to the gardener's shed in the courtyard near the stables.

"No," Durnik admitted, "but I'm sure she knows what she's doing." He glanced at the evening sky and then sighed. "It's probably a little late to go back to that pool," he said regretfully.

Aunt Pol and the two girls visited the garden daily, but Garion could never discover exactly what they were doing, and the following week his attention was diverted by the sudden appearance of his grandfather, Belgarath the Sorcerer. The young king was sitting in his study with Errand as the boy described in some detail the training of the horse Garion had given him a few years back when the door banged unceremoniously open and Belgarath, travel-stained and with a face like a thundercloud, strode in.

"Grandfather!" Garion exclaimed, starting to his feet. "What are- "

"Shut up and sit down!" Belgarath shouted at him.

"What?"

"Do as I tell you. We are going to have a talk, Garion -that is, I'm going to talk, and you're going to listen." He paused as if to get control of what appeared to be a towering anger. "Do you have any idea of what you've done?" he demanded at last.

"Me? What are we talking about, Grandfather?" Garion asked.

"We're talking about your little display of pyrotechnics on the plains of Mimbres," Belgarath replied icily. "That impromptu thunderstorm of yours."

"Grandfather." Garion explained as mildly as possible, "they were right on the brink of war. All Arendia would probably have gotten involved. You've said yourself that we didn't want that to happen. I had to stop them."
"We aren't talking about your motives, Garion. We're talking about your methods. What possessed you to use a thunderstorm?"

"It seemed like the best way to get their attention."

"You couldn't think of anything else?"

"They were already charging, Grandfather. I didn't have a lot of time to consider alternatives."

"Haven't I told you again and again that we don't tamper with the weather?"

"Well -it was sort of an emergency."

"If you thought that was an emergency, you should have seen the blizzard you touched off in the Vale with your foolishness -and the hurricanes it spawned in the Sea of the East- not to mention the droughts and tornadoes you kicked up all over the world. Don't you have any sense of responsibility at all?"

"I didn't know it was going to do that." Garion was aghast.

"Boy, it's your business to know!" Belgarath suddenly roared at him, his face mottled with rage. "It's taken Beldin and me six months of constant travel and the Gods only know how much effort to quiet things down. Do you realize that with that one thoughtless storm of yours you came very close to changing the weather patterns of the entire globe? And that change would have been a universal disaster!"

"One tiny little storm?"

"Yes, one tiny little storm," Belgarath said scathingly. "Your one tiny little storm in the right place at the right time came very close to altering the weather for the next several eons -all over the world- you blockhead!"

"Grandfather," Garion protested.

"Do you know what the term ice age means?"

Garion shook his head, his face blank.

"It's a time when the average temperature drops -just a bit. In the extreme north, that means that the snow doesn't melt in the summer. It keeps piling up, year after year. It forms glaciers, and the glaciers start to move farther and farther south. In just a few centuries, that little display of yours could have had a wall of ice two hundred feet high moving down across the moors of Drasnia. You'd have buried Boktor and Val Alorn under solid ice, you idiot. Is that what you wanted?"

"Of course not. Grandfather, I honestly didn't know. I wouldn't have started it if I'd known."

"That would have been a great comfort to the millions of people you very nearly entombed in ice," Belgarath retorted with a vast sarcasm. "Don't ever do that again! Don't even think about putting your hands on something until you're absolutely certain you know everything there is to know about it. Even then, it's best not to gamble."

"But -but- you and Aunt Pol called down the rainstorm in the Wood of the Dryads," Garion pointed out defensively.

"We knew what we were doing," Belgarath almost screamed. "There was no danger there." With an enormous effort, the old man got control of himself. "Don't ever touch the weather again, Garion -not until you've had at least a thousand years of study."

"A thousand years!"

"At least. In your case, maybe two thousand. You seem to have this extraordinary luck. You always manage to be in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"I won't do it again, Grandfather," Garion promised fervently, shuddering at the thought of towering ice walls creeping inexorably across the world.

Belgarath gave him a long, hard look and then let the matter drop. Later, when he had regained his composure, he lounged in a chair by the fire with a tankard of ale in one hand. Garion knew his Grandfather well enough to be aware of the fact that ale mellowed the old man's disposition and he had prudently sent for some as soon as the initial explosion had subsided. "How are your studies going, boy?" the old sorcerer asked.

"I've been a little pressed for time lately, Grandfather," Garion replied guiltily.

Belgarath gave him a long, cold stare, and Garion could clearly see the mottling on his neck that indicated that the old man's interior temperature was rising again.

"I'm sorry Grandfather," he apologized quickly. "From now on, I'll make the time to study."

Belgarath's eyes widened slightly. "Don't do that," he said quickly. "You got into enough trouble fooling around with the weather. If you start in on time, not even the Gods could predict the outcome."

"I didn't exactly mean it that way, Grandfather."

"Say what you mean, then. This isn't a good area for misunderstandings, you know." He turned his attention then to Errand. "What are you doing here, boy?" he asked.

"Durnik and Polgara are here," Errand replied. "They thought I ought to come along."

"Polgara's here?" Belgarath seemed surprised.

"I asked her to come," Garion told him. "There's a little bit of a problem she's fixing for me -at least I think she's fixing it. She's been acting sort of mysterious."

"She overdramatizes things sometimes. Exactly what is this problem she's working on?"

"Uh- " Garion glanced at Errand, who sat watching the two of them with polite interest. Garion flushed slightly.

"It -uh- has to do with the -uh- heir to the Rivan Throne," he explained delicately.

"What's the problem there?" Belgarath demanded obtusely "You're the heir to the Rivan Throne."

"No, I mean the next one."

"I still don't see any problem."

"Grandfather, there isn't one -not yet, at least."

"There isn't? What have you been doing, boy?"

"Never mind," Garion said, giving up.

When spring arrived at last, Polgara's attention to the two embracing oak-trees became all-consuming. She went to the garden at least a dozen times a day to examine every twig meticulously for signs of budding.

When at last the twig ends began to swell, a look of strange satisfaction became apparent on her face. Once again she and the two young women, Ce'Nedra and Xera, began puttering in the garden.

Garion found all these botanical pastimes baffling -even a little irritating. He had, after all, asked Aunt Pol to come to Riva to deal with a much more serious problem.

Xera returned home to the Wood of the Dryads at the first break in the weather. Not long afterward, Aunt Pol calmly announced that she and Durnik and Errand would also be leaving soon. "We'll take father with us," she declared, looking disapprovingly over at the old sorcerer, who was drinking ale and bantering outrageously with Brand's niece, the blushing Lady Arell.

"Aunt Pol," Garion protested, "what about that little -uh- difficulty Ce'Nedra and I were having?"

"What about it, dear?"

"Aren't you going to do something about it?"

"I did, Garion," she replied blandly.

"Aunt Pol, you spent all your time in that garden."

"Yes, dear. I know."

Garion brooded about the whole matter for several weeks after they had all left. He even began to wonder if he had somehow failed to explain fully the problem or if Aunt Pol had somehow misunderstood.

When spring was in full flower and the meadows rising steeply behind the city had turned bright green, touched here and there with vibrantly colored patches of wildflowers, Ce'Nedra began behaving peculiarly. He frequently found her seated in their garden, looking with an odd, tender expression at her oak trees, and quite often she was gone from the Citadel entirely, to return at the end of the day in the company of Lady Arell all bedecked with wildflowers.

Before each meal, she took a sip from a small, silver flagon and made a dreadful face.

"What's that you're drinking?" he asked her curiously one morning.

"It's a sort of a tonic," she replied, shuddering. "It has oak buds in it and it tastes absolutely vile."

"Aunt Pol made it for you."

"How did you know that?"

"Her medicines always taste awful."

"Mmm," she said absently. Then she gave him a long look. "Are you going to be very busy today?"

"Not really. Why?"

"I thought that we might stop by the kitchen, pick up some meat, bread, and cheese, and then go spend a day out in the forest."

"In the forest? What for?"

"Garion," she said almost crossly, "I've been cooped up in this dreary old castle all winter. I'd like some fresh air and sunshine -and the smell of trees and wildflowers around me instead of damp stone."

"Why don't you ask Arell to go with you? I probably shouldn't really be gone all day."

She gave him an exasperated look. "You just said you didn't have anything important to do."

"You never know. Something might come up."

"It can wait," she said from between clenched teeth.

Garion shot her a quick glance, recognized the danger signals, and then replied as mildly as he could, "I suppose you're right, dear. I don't see any reason why we shouldn't have a little outing together. We could ask Arell -and maybe Kail- if they'd like to join us."

"No. Garion," she said quite firmly.

"No?"

"Definitely not."

And so it was that, shortly after breakfast, the Rivan King, hand in hand with his little queen, left the Citadel with a well-stocked basket, crossed the broad meadow behind the city, and strolled into the sunlight-dappled shade beneath the evergreens that mounted steeply toward the glistening, snow-capped peaks that formed the spine of the island.

Once they entered the woods, all traces of discontent dropped away from Ce'Nedra's face. She picked wildflowers as they wandered among the tall pines and firs and wove them into a garland for herself. The morning sun slanted down through the limbs high overhead, dappling the mossy forest floor with golden light and blue shadows. The resinous smell of the tall evergreens was a heady perfume, and birds swooped and spiraled among the tall, columnlike trunks, caroling to greet the sun.

After a time, they found a glade, a mossy, open clearing embraced by trees, where a brook gurgled and murmured over shining stones to drop into a gleaming forest pool and where a single, soft-eyed deer stood to drink. The deer raised her head from the water swirling about her delicate brown legs, looked at them quite unafraid, and then picked her way back into the forest, her hooves clicking on the stones and her tail flicking.

"Oh, this is just perfect," Ce'Nedra declared with a soft little smile on her face. She sat on a round boulder and began to unlace her shoes.

Garion put down the basket and stretched, feeling the cares of the past several weeks slowly draining out of him.

"I'm glad you thought of this," he said, sprawling comfortably on the sun-warmed moss. "It's really a very good idea."

"Naturally" she said. "All my ideas are good ones."

"I don't know if I'd go that far." Then a thought occurred to him. "Ce'Nedra," he said.

"What?"

"I've been meaning to ask you something. All the Dryads have names that begin with an X, don't they? Xera, Xantha -like that."

"It's our custom," she replied, continuing to work on her shoelaces.

"Why doesn't yours, then? Begin with an X, I mean?"

"It does." She pulled off one of her shoes. "Tolnedrans just pronounce it a little differently, that's all. So they spell it that way. Dryads don't read or write very much, so they don't worry too much about spelling."

"X'Nedra?"

"That's fairly close. Make the X a little softer, though."

"You know, I've been wondering about that for the longest time."

"Why didn't you ask, then?"

"I don't know. I just never got around to it."

"There's a reason for everything, Garion," she told him, "but you'll never find it out if you don't ask."

"Now you sound just like Aunt Pol."

"Yes, dear. I know." She smiled, pulled off her other shoe and wriggled her toes contentedly.

"Why barefoot?" he asked idly.

"I like the feel of the moss on my feet -and I think that in a little bit I might go swimming."

"It's too cold. That brook comes right out of a glacier."

"A little cold water won't hurt me." She shrugged. Then, almost as if responding to a dare, she stood up and began to take off her clothes.

"Ce'Nedra! What if someone comes along?"

She laughed a silvery laugh. "What if they do? I'm not going to soak my clothes just for the sake of propriety. Don't be such a prude, Garion."

"It's not that. It's- "

"It's what?"

"Never mind."

She ran on light feet into the pool, squealing delightedly as the icy water splashed up around her. With a long clean dive, she disappeared beneath the surface of the pool, swam to the far side, where a large,

mossy log angled down into the crystal-clear water, and surfaced with streaming hair and an impish grin.

"Well?" she said to him.

"Well what?"

"Aren't you coming in?"

"Of course I'm not."

"Is the mighty Overlord of the West afraid of cold water?"

"The mighty Overlord of the West has better sense than to catch cold for the sake of a little splashing around."

"Garion, you're getting positively stodgy. Take off your crown and relax."

"I'm not wearing my crown."

"Take off something else, then."

"Ce'Nedra!"

She laughed another silvery peal of laughter and began kicking her bare feet, sending up showers of sparkling water drops that gleamed like jewels in the midmorning sunlight. Then she lay back and her hair spread like a deep copper fan upon the surface of the pool. The garland of flowers she had woven for herself earlier had come apart as a result of her swimming, and the individual blossoms floated on the water, bobbing in the ripples.

Garion sat on a mossy hummock with his back resting comfortably against a tree trunk. The sun was warm, and the smell of trees and grass and wildflowers filled his nostrils. A breeze carrying the salt tang of the sea sighed among the green limbs of the tall fir trees surrounding the little glade, and golden sunlight fell in patches on the floor of the forest.

An errant butterfly, its patterned wings a blaze of iridescent blue and gold, flitted out from among the tall tree trunks into the sunlight. Drawn by color or scent or some other, more mysterious urge, it wavered through the lucid air to the pool and the flowers bobbing there. Curiously it moved from flower to floating flower, touching each of them lightly with its wings. With a breathless expression Ce'Nedra slowly sank her head into the water until only her upturned face was above the surface. The butterfly continued its curious investigation, coming closer and closer to the waiting queen. And then it hovered over her face, its soft wings brushing her lips ecstatically.

"Oh, fine." Garion laughed. "Now my wife is consorting with butterflies."

"I'll do whatever it takes in order to get a kiss," she replied, giving him an arch look.

"If it's kisses you want, I'll take care of that for you," he said.

"That's an interesting thought. I think I'd like one right now. My other lover seems to have lost interest." She pointed at the butterfly, which had settled with quivering wings on a bush near the foot of the pool. "Come and kiss me, Garion."

"You're right in the middle of the deepest part of the pool," he pointed out.

"So?"

"I don't suppose you'd consider coming out."

"You offered kisses, Garion. You didn't make any conditions."

Garion sighed, stood up, and began to remove his clothing. "We're both going to regret this," he predicted.

"A cold in the summertime lasts for months."

"You're not going to catch cold, Garion. Come along now."

He groaned and then waded manfully into the icy water. "You're a cruel woman, Ce'Nedra," he accused, wincing at the shocking chill.

"Don't be such a baby. Come over here."

Gritting his teeth, he plowed through the water toward her, stubbing his toe on a large rock in the process. When he reached her, she slid her cold, wet little arms around his neck and glued her lips to his. Her kiss was lingering and it pulled him slightly off balance. He felt her lips tighten slightly as she grinned impishly, even in the midst of the kiss, and then without any warning, she lifted her legs, and her weight pulled him under.

He came up sputtering and swearing.

"Wasn't that fun?" she giggled.

"Not really" he grumbled. "Drowning isn't one of my favorite sports." She ignored that. "Now that you're all wet, you might as well swim with me."

They swam together for about a quarter of an hour and then emerged from the pool, shivering and with their lips turning blue.

"Make a fire, Garion," Ce'Nedra said through chattering teeth.

"I didn't bring any tinder," he said "or a flint."

"Do it the other way, then."

"What other way?" he asked blankly.

"You know-" She made a sort of mysterious gesture.

"Oh. I forgot about that."

"Hurry, Garion. I'm freezing."

He gathered some twigs and fallen branches, cleared a space in the moss, and concentrated his will on the pile of wood. At first, a small tendril of smoke arose, then a tongue of bright orange flame. Within a few minutes, a goodly little fire was crackling just beside the moss-covered hummock upon which the shivering Ce'Nedra was huddled.

"Oh, that's much better," she said, stretching her hands out to the fire. "You're a useful person to have around, my Lord."

"Thank you, my Lady. Would my Lady like to consider putting on some clothes?"

"Not until she's dry, she wouldn't. I hate pulling on dry clothes over wet skin."

"Let's hope nobody comes along, then. We're not really dressed for company, you know."

"You're so conventional, Garion."

"I suppose so," he admitted.

"Why don't you come over here beside me?" she invited. "It's much warmer here."

He couldn't really think of any reason why he shouldn't, so he joined her on the warm moss.

"See," she said, putting her arms about his neck. "Isn't this much nicer?" She kissed him -a serious kind of kiss that made his breath catch in his throat and his heart pound. When she finally released her grip about his neck, he looked around the glade nervously. A fluttering movement near the foot of the pool caught his eye. He coughed, looking slightly embarrassed.

"What's the matter?" she asked him.

"I think that butterfly is watching," he said with a slight flush.

"That's all right," she smiled, sliding her arms about his neck and kissing him again.

The world seemed unusually quiet as spring gently slipped into summer that year. The secession of the Vordues crumbled under the onslaughts of the armored Mimbrate "brigands", and the Vordue family finally capitulated, pleading with an almost genuine humility to be readmitted to the Empire. While they were not fond of Varana's tax collectors, they all ran out into the streets to greet his legions as they returned.

The news from Cthol Murgos was sketchy at best, but it appeared that things in the far south remained at an impasse, with Kal Zakath's Malloreans holding the plains and Urgit's Murgos firmly entrenched in the mountains.

Periodic reports forwarded to Garion by Drasnian Intelligence seemed to indicate that the re-emergent Bear-cult was doing little more than milling around out in the countryside.

Garion enjoyed this respite from crisis and, since there was no really pressing business, he took to sleeping late, sometimes lying in bed in a kind of luxurious doze until two or three hours past sunrise.

On one such morning about midsummer, he was having an absolutely splendid dream. He and Ce'Nedra were leaping from the loft in the barn at Faldor's farm into the soft hay piled below. He was awakened rather rudely as his wife bolted from the bed and ran into an adjoining chamber where she was violently and noisily sick.

"Ce'Nedra!" he exclaimed, jumping out of bed to follow her. "What are you doing?"

"I'm throwing up," she replied, raising her pale face from the basin she was holding on her knees.

"Are you sick?"

"No," she drawled sarcastically. "I'm doing it for fun."

"I'll get one of the physicians," he said, grabbing, up a robe.

"Never mind."

"But you're sick."

"Of course I am, but I don't need a physician."

"That doesn't make any sense, Ce'Nedra. If you're sick, you need a doctor."

"I'm supposed to be sick," she told him.

"What?"

"Don't you know anything, Garion? I'll probably get sick every morning for the next several months."

"I don't understand you at all, Ce'Nedra."

"You're impossibly dense. People in my condition always get sick in the morning."

"Condition? What condition?"

She rolled her eyes upward almost in despair. "Garion," she said with exaggerated patience, "do you remember that little problem we had last fall? The problem that made us send for Lady Polgara?"

"Well -yes."

"I'm so glad. Well, we don't have that problem any more."

He stared at her, slowly comprehending. "You mean-?"

"Yes, dear," she said with a pale smile. "You're going to be a father. Now, if you'll excuse me, I think I'll throw up again."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

They did not match. Now matter how hard Garion twisted and turned the sense of the two passages, there was no apparent way to make them match. Despite the fact that they both seemed to describe the same period of time, they simply went off in opposite directions. It was a bright, golden autumn morning outside, but the dusty library seemed somehow dim, chill, and uninviting.

Garion did not think of himself as a scholar and he had approached the task that Belgarath had laid upon him with some reluctance. The sheer volume of the documents he was obliged to read was intimidating, for one thing, and this gloomy little room with its smell of ancient parchment and mildewed leather bindings always depressed him. He had done unpleasant things before, however, and, although he was a bit grim about it, he nonetheless dutifully spent at least two hours a day confined in this prisonlike cell, struggling with ancient books and scrolls written in often-times difficult script. At least, he told himself, it was better than scrubbing pots in a scullery.

He set his teeth together and laid the two scrolls side by side on the table to compare them again. He read slowly and aloud, hoping perhaps to catch with his ears what his eyes might miss. The Darine Codex seemed relatively clear and straightforward. "Behold," it said, "in the day that Aldur's Orb burns hot with crimson fire shall the name of the Child of Dark be revealed. Guard well the son of the Child of Light for he shall have no brother. And it shall come to pass that those which once were one and now are two shall be rejoined, and in that rejoining shall one of them be no more."

The Orb had turned crimson, and the name of the Child of Dark -Zandramas- had been revealed. That matched what had taken place. The information that the son of the Child of Light -his son- would have no brother had concerned Garion a bit. At first he had taken it to mean that he and Ce'Nedra would only have one child, but the more he thought about that, the more he realized that his reasoning there was flawed. All it really said was that they would only have one son. It said nothing about daughters. The more he thought about it, the more the notion of a whole cluster of chattering little girls gathered about his knee appealed to him.

The last passage, however -the one about the two which once were one- didn't really make any sense yet, but he was quite certain that it would, eventually.

He moved his hand over to trace the lines of the Mrin Codex, peering hard at them in the flickering yellow candlelight. He read slowly and carefully once more. "And the Child of Light shall meet with the Child of Dark and shall overcome him- " That obviously referred to the meeting with Torak. " -and the Darkness shall flee." The Dark Prophecy had fled when Torak had died. "But behold, the stone which lies at the center of the light- " The Orb, obviously, " -shall- " One word seemed to be blotted at that point. Garion frowned, trying to make out what word might lie beneath that irregular splotch of ink. Even as he stared at it, a strange kind of weariness came over him, as if the effort to push aside that blot to see what lay beneath were as difficult as moving a mountain. He shrugged and went on, " -and this meeting will come to pass in a place which is no more, and there will the choice be made." That last fragment made him want to howl in frustration.

How could a meeting -or anything else- happen in a place which is no more? And what was the meaning of the word "choice"? What choice? Whose choice? Choice between what and what?

He swore and read it again. Once again he felt that peculiar lassitude when his eyes reached the blot on the page. He shrugged it off and went on. No matter what the word under the blot might be, it was still only one word, and one single word could not be that important. Irritably he put the scroll aside and considered the discrepancy. The most immediate explanation was that this spot, like so many others, was a place where the Mrin Prophet's well-known insanity had simply got the best of him. Another possibility was that this particular copy was not precisely accurate. The scribe who had copied it off had perhaps inadvertently skipped a line or two at the time when he had blotted the page. Garion recalled an occasion when he had

done that himself, turning a perfectly bland proclamation into a horrendous declaration that he was on the verge of naming himself military dictator of all the kingdoms lying on this side of the Eastern Escarpment. When he had caught the blunder, he had not just erased the offending lines, he had shudderingly burned the whole sheet to make sure that no one ever saw it.

He stood up, stretching to relieve his cramped muscles and going to the small, barred window of the library. The autumn sky was a crisp blue. The nights had turned chilly in the past few weeks, and the higher meadows lying above the city were touched with frost when the sun arose. The days, however, were warm and golden. He checked the position of the sun to gauge the time. He had promised to meet with Count Valgon, the Tolnedran ambassador, at midday and he did not want to be late. Aunt Pol had stressed the importance of punctuality, and Garion always did his best to be on time.

He turned back to the table and absently rerolled the two scrolls, his mind still wrestling with the problem of the conflicting passages. Then he blew out the candles and left the library, carefully closing the door behind him.

Valgon, as always, was tedious. Garion felt that there was an innate pomposity in the Tolnedran character that made it impossible for them to say what they meant without extensive embellishment. The discussion that day had to do with "prioritizing" the unloading of merchant vessels in the harbor at Riva. Valgon seemed terribly fond of the word "prioritizing," finding a way to insert it into the discussion at least once in every other sentence. The essence of Valgon's presentation seemed to be a request -or a demand- that Tolnedran merchantmen should always have first access to the somewhat limited wharves at the foot of the city.

"My dear Valgon," Garion began, seeking some diplomatic way to refuse, "I actually believe that this matter needs- " He broke off, looking up as the great carved doors to the throne room swung inward.

One of the towering, gray-cloaked sentries who always stood guard outside when Garion was in the throne room stepped in, cleared his throat, and announced in a voice that probably could have been heard on the other side of the island, "Her Royal Majesty, Queen Ce'Nedra of Riva, Imperial Princess of the Tolnedran Empire, Commander of the Armies of the West, and beloved wife of his Majesty, Belgarion of Riva, Godslayer, Lord of the Western Sea, and Overlord of the West!"

Ce'Nedra, demure and tiny, entered on the sentry's heels, her shoulders unbowed by the weight of all those vast titles. She wore a teal-green velvet gown, gathered beneath the bodice to conceal her expanding waistline, and her eyes were sparkling mischievously.

Valgon turned and bowed smoothly.

Ce'Nedra touched the sentry's arm, strained up on tiptoe, and whispered to him. The sentry nodded, turned back toward the throne at the front of the hall, and cleared his throat again. "His Highness, Prince Kheldar of Drasnia, nephew of the beloved late King Rhodar, and cousin to King Kheva, Lord of the Marches of the North!"

Garion started up from the throne in astonishment.

Silk entered grandly. His doublet was a rich pearl gray, his fingers glittered with rings, and a heavy gold chain with a large pendant sapphire hung about his neck. "That's all right, gentlemen," he said to Garion and Count Valgon with an airy wave of his hand, "you needn't rise." He extended his arm grandly to Ce'Nedra, and the two of them came down the broad, carpeted aisle past the three glowing firepits in the floor.

"Silk!" Garion exclaimed.

"The very same," Silk replied with a mocking little bow. "Your Majesty is looking well -considering."

"Considering what?"

Silk winked at him.

"I am quite overwhelmed to meet so famous a merchant prince again," Valgon murmured politely. "Your Highness has become a legend in recent years. Your exploits in the East are the absolute despair of the great commercial houses in Tol Honeth."

"One has had certain modest success," Silk responded, breathing on a large ruby ring on his left hand and then polishing it on the front of his doublet. "In your next report, please convey my regards to your new Emperor. His handling of the Vordue situation was masterly."

Valgon permitted himself a faint smile. "I'm sure his Imperial Majesty will appreciate your good opinion, Prince Kheldar." He turned to Garion. "I know that your Majesty and his old friend will have many things to discuss," he said. "We can take up this other matter at a later date, perhaps." He bowed. "With your Majesty's permission, I will withdraw."

"Of course, Valgon," Garion replied. "And thank you." The Tolnedran bowed again and quietly left the throne room.

Ce'Nedra came down to the foot of the throne and linked her arm affectionately with Silk's. "I hope you didn't mind being interrupted, Garion," she said. "I know that you and Valgon were having an absolutely fascinating talk."

Garion made a face. "What was the idea behind all that formality?" he asked curiously. "The business with all those titles, I mean?"

Silk grinned. "Ce'Nedra's idea. She felt that if we overwhelmed Valgon with enough titles, we could persuade him to go away. Did we interrupt anything important?"

Garion gave him a sour look. "He was talking about the problem of getting Tolnedran merchant vessels unloaded. I think that, if he'd thrown the word 'prioritizing' at me about one more time, I'd have jumped up and strangled him."

"Oh?" Ce'Nedra said, all wide-eyed and girlish. "Let's call him back, then."

"I take it that you're unfond of him," Silk suggested.

"He's a Honethite," Ce'Nedra replied, making an indelicate little sound. "I despise the Honeths."

"Let's go someplace where we can talk," Garion said, looking around at the formal throne room.

"Whatever your Majesty wishes," Silk said with a grand bow.

"Oh, stop that!" Garion said, coming down from the dais and leading the way to the side door.

When they reached the quiet, sunlit sanctuary of the royal apartment, Garion sighed with relief as he took off his crown and shrugged out of his formal state robes. "You have no idea how hot that thing gets," he said, tossing the robe in a heap on a chair in the corner.

"It also wrinkles, dear," Ce'Nedra reminded him, picking up the robe, folding it carefully, and hanging it over the chair back.

"Perhaps I could find one for you in Mallorean satin -suitable color and interwoven with silver thread," Silk suggested. "It would look very rich -tastefully understated- and not nearly so heavy."

"That's a thought," Garion said.

"And I'm sure I could offer it to you at a very attractive price."

Garion gave him a startled look, and Silk laughed.

"You never change, do you, Silk?" Ce'Nedra said.

"Of course not," the little thief replied, sprawling unasked in a chair.

"What brings you to Riva?" Garion asked him, taking a chair across the table from his friend.

"Affection -at least mostly. I haven't seen you two for several years now." He looked around. "I don't suppose you've got anything to drink handy?"

"We could probably find something," Garion grinned at him.

"We have a rather pleasant little wine," Ce'Nedra offered, going to a dark, polished sideboard. "We've been trying to keep Garion here away from ale."

One of Silk's eyebrows went up.

"He has an unfortunate tendency to want to sing when he drinks ale," the Queen explained. "I wouldn't really want to put you through that."

"All right," Garion said to her.

"It's not so much his voice," Ce'Nedra went on relentlessly. "It's the way he goes looking for the right notes - and doesn't find them."

"Do you mind?" Garion asked her.

She laughed a shimmering laugh and filled two silver goblets with a blood-red Tolnedran wine.

"Aren't you joining us?" Silk asked.

She made a face. "The heir to the Rivan Throne doesn't care much for wine," she replied, delicately placing one hand on her swelling abdomen. "Or perhaps he enjoys it too much. It makes him start kicking, and I'd rather that he didn't break too many of my ribs."

"Ah," Silk said delicately.

She brought the goblets to the table and set them down. "Now, if you two gentlemen will excuse me, it's time for my visit to the baths."

"Her hobby?" Garion said. "She spends at least two hours of every afternoon down in the women's baths - even when she isn't dirty."

She shrugged. "It relaxes my back. I've been carrying this burden lately." Once again she touched her abdomen. "And it seems to get heavier every day."

"I'm glad that it's the women who have the babies," Silk said. "I'm sure I wouldn't really have the strength for it."

"You're a nasty little man, Kheldar!" she retorted tartly.

"Of course I am." He smirked.

She gave him a withering look and went in search of Lady Arell, her usual companion in the baths.

"She looks absolutely blooming," Silk observed, "and she's not nearly as bad-tempered as I'd expected."

"You should have been around a few months ago."

"Bad?"

"You can't imagine."

"It happens, I suppose -or so I've been told."

"What have you been up to lately?" Garion asked, leaning back in his chair. "We haven't heard much about you."

"I've been in Mallorea," Silk replied, sipping at his wine. "The fur trade isn't very challenging any more, and Yablek's been handling that end of the business. We felt that there was a great deal of money to be made in Malloorean silks, carpets, and uncut gemstones, so I went over to investigate."

"Isn't it a little dangerous for a Western merchant in Mallorea?"

Silk shrugged. "No worse than Rak Goska -or Tol Honeth, for that matter. I've spent my whole life in dangerous places, Garion."

"Couldn't you just buy your goods at Yar Marak or Thull Zelik when they come off the Malloorean ships?"

"The prices are better at the source. Everytime an article goes through another pair of hands, the price doubles."

"That makes sense, I suppose." Garion looked at his friend, envying the freedom that made it possible for Silk to go anywhere in the world he wanted to go. "What's Mallorea really like?" he asked. "We hear stories, but I think that's all they are most of the time."

"It's in turmoil just now." Silk replied gravely. "Kal Zakath's off fighting his war with the Murgos, and the Grolims went all to pieces when they heard about the death of Torak. Malloorean society has always been directed from either Mal Zeth or Mal Yaska -the emperor or the church- but now nobody seems to be in charge. The government bureaucracy tries to hold things together, but Mallooreans need strong leadership and right now they don't have it. All sorts of strange things are beginning to surface -rebellions, new religions, that kind of thing."

A thought occurred to Garion. "Have you run across the name Zandramas?" he asked curiously.

Silk looked at him sharply. "It's odd you should ask that," he said. "When I was in Boktor, just before Rhodar died, I was talking with Javelin. Errand happened to be there and he asked Javelin the same question.

Javelin told him that it's a Darshivan name and that was about all he knew. When I went back to Mallorea, I asked in a few places, but people got very tight-lipped and white-knuckled every time I mentioned it, so I let it drop. I gathered that it has something to do with one of those new religions I mentioned before."

"Did you happen to hear anything about something called the Sardion -or Cthrag Sardius, maybe?"

Silk frowned, tapping the rim of his goblet thoughtfully against his lower lip. "It's got a familiar ring to it, but I can't quite put my finger on where I heard it."

"If you happen to remember, I'd appreciate your telling me anything you can find out about it."

"Is it important?"

"I think it might be. Grandfather and Beldin have been trying to track it down."

"I've got some contacts in Mal Zeth and Melcene," Silk noted. "When I get back, I'll see what I can find out."

"You're going back soon, then?"

Silk nodded. "I'd have stayed there, but a little crisis came up in Yar Nadrak. King Drosta started to get greedy. We've been paying him some very healthy bribes to persuade him to look the other way about some of our activities in his kingdom. He got the notion that we were making a great deal of money and he was toying with the idea of expropriating our holdings in Gar og Nadrak. I had to come back and talk him out of that notion."

"How did you manage that? I've always had the impression that Drosta does pretty much what he wants in Gar og Nadrak."

"I threatened him," Silk said. "I pointed out that I'm closely related to the King of Drasnica and hinted that I was on very good terms with Kal Zakath. The prospect of an invasion from either the East or the West didn't appeal to him, so he dropped the idea."

"Are you on good terms with 'Zakath?"

"I've never met him -but Drosta doesn't know that."

"You lied? Isn't that dangerous?"

Silk laughed. "Lots of things are dangerous, Garion. We've both been in tight spots before. Rak Cthol wasn't the safest place in the world, if you'll recall, and Cthol Mishrak made me definitely edgy."

Garion toyed with his goblet. "You know something, Silk?" he said. "I sort of miss all that."

"All what?"

"I don't know -the danger, the excitement. Things have settled down pretty much for me. About the only excitement I get these days is in trying to maneuver my way around the Tolnedran ambassador. Sometimes I wish- " He left it hanging there.

"You can come to Malloreia with me, if you'd like," Silk offered. "I could find interesting work for a man of your talents."

"I don't think Ce'Nedra would be too pleased if I left just now."

"That's one of the reasons I never married," Silk told him. "I don't have to worry about things like that."

"Are you going to stop in Boktor on your way back?"

"Briefly, maybe. I visited the people I needed to see on my way here from Yar Nadrak. Porenn's doing very well with Kheva. He's probably going to be a good king when he grows up. And I stopped by to see Javelin, of course. It's more or less expected. He likes to get our impressions of foreign countries -even when we're not acting in any official capacity."

"Javelin's very good, isn't he?"

"He's the best."

"I always thought you were."

"Not by a long way, Garion." Silk smiled. "I'm too erratic -brilliant, maybe, but erratic. I get sidetracked too easily. When Javelin goes after something, he doesn't let anything distract him until he gets it. Right now, he's trying to get to the bottom of this Bear-cult thing."

"Is he having any luck?"

"Not yet. He's been trying for several years to get somebody into the inner councils of the cult, but he hasn't been able to manage it. I told him that he ought to send in Hunter, but he told me that Hunter's busy with something else and to mind my own business."

"Hunter? Who's Hunter?"

"I have no idea," Silk admitted. "It's not really a who, you see. It's a name that's applied to the most secret of our spies, and it changes from time to time. Only Javelin knows who Hunter is and he won't tell anybody -not even Porenn. Javelin himself was Hunter for a time -about fifteen years ago. It's not always necessarily a Drasnian, though -or even a man. It can be anybody in the world. It might even be somebody we know - Barak, maybe, or Relg- or maybe somebody in Nyissa."

"Mandorallen, perhaps?" Garion suggested, smiling.

Silk considered that. "No, Garion," he concluded. "I don't think Mandorallen has the right equipment. It can surprise you though. On several occasions, Hunter has even been a Murgo."

"A Murgo? How could you possibly trust a Murgo?"

"I didn't say we always have to trust Hunter."

Garion shook his head helplessly. "I'll never understand spies and spying."

"It's a game," Silk told him. "After you've played for a while, the game itself gets to be more important than which side you're on. Our reasons for doing things sometimes get pretty obscure."

"I've noticed that," Garion said. "And as long as the subject has come up, what's your real reason for coming to Riva?"

"It's nothing all that secret, Garion," Silk replied urbanely, adjusting the cuffs of his gray doublet. "I realized a few years ago that a traveling merchant tends to lose track of things. If you want to stay on top of a local situation, you need to have an agent on the scene -somebody who can take advantage of opportunities when they arise. I've located some markets for certain Rivan products- glass, good boots, those wool capes, that sort of thing- and I decided that it might not be a bad idea to have a representative here."

"That's really a very good idea, Silk. Things are a little static down in the city. We could use some new businesses to liven things up."

Silk beamed at him.

"And I can always use the additional revenue," Garion added.

"What?"

"There are a few taxes, Silk -nothing too burdensome, but I'm sure you understand. A kingdom is very expensive to run."

"Garion!" Silk's voice was anguished.

"It's one of the first things I learned. People don't mind taxes so much if they're sure that everybody's paying the same. I can't really make exceptions at all -not even for an old friend. I'll introduce you to Kail. He's my chief administrator. He'll set things up for you."

"I'm terribly disappointed in you, Garion," Silk said with a crestfallen look.

"As you've said so many times, business is business, after all."

There was a light tap on the door.

"Yes?" Garion answered.

"The Rivan Warder, your Majesty," the sentry outside announced.

"Send him in."

The tall, graying Rivan Warder entered quietly. "Prince Kheldar," he greeted Silk with a brief nod, then turned to Garion. "I wouldn't bother you, your Majesty," he apologized, "but a matter of some urgency has come up."

"Of course, Brand," Garion replied politely. "Sit down."

"Thank you, Belgarion," Brand said gratefully, sinking into a chair. "My legs aren't what they used to be."

"Isn't it a joy to grow older?" Silk said. "The mind gets better, but everything else starts to fall apart."

Brand smiled briefly. "There's been a bit of a squabble in the garrison here in the Citadel, Belgarion," he said, getting directly to the point. "I'll discipline the two young men involved myself, but I thought that perhaps if you spoke to them, it might head off bloodshed."

"Bloodshed?"

"They were bickering over something quite unimportant, and one thing led to another. They scuffled a bit and knocked a few of each other's teeth loose. That should have been the end of it, but they started issuing each other formal challenges. I was fairly sure that you would want to keep the swords out of it."

"Definitely."

"I can order them to withdraw the challenges, but there's always the possibility that they'll sneak out some night and find a private place to do war on each other. I think that if the king spoke with them, we might be able to head off that sort of foolishness. They're a couple of fairly good young men, and I don't think we want to have them chop each other into dog meat."

Garion nodded his agreement. "Send the pair of them to me first thing in the- "

The medallion he always wore gave a peculiar little twitch, and he broke off what he was saying, startled by the flutter against his chest. The amulet suddenly seemed to grow very hot, and there was a strange humming sound in his ears.

"What is it, Garion?" Silk asked him curiously.

Garion started to hold up one hand as he tried to pinpoint the source of the humming sound. Then his amulet gave a violent lurch that was almost like a blow to his chest. The humming shattered, and he heard Ce'Nedra's voice crying to him. "Garion! Help me!"

He sprang to his feet as Brand and Silk stared at him in amazement. "Ce'Nedra?" he shouted. "Where are you?"

"Help me, Garion! The baths!"

"Quick!" Garion exclaimed to the others. "Ce'Nedra needs us -in the baths!" and he ran from the room, grabbing up a plain sword standing sheathed in the corner as he passed.

"What is it?" Silk demanded, running along behind as they burst into the outer corridor.

"I don't know," Garion shouted. "She called me for help." He shook his sword as he ran, trying to free it of its sheath. "Something's happening down in the baths."

It was a long way down seemingly endless flights of torchlit stairs to the baths in the cellars of the Citadel.

Garion went down those stairs three and four at a time with Silk and Brand hot on his heels. Startled servants and officials jumped out of their way as they rushed down, faces grim and with drawn weapons in their hands.

At the bottom of the last flight of stairs they found the heavy door to the women's baths bolted from the inside.

Instantly summoning his will, Garion focused it and commanded, "Burst!" The ironbound door blasted inward off its hinges.

The scene inside was one of horror. The Lady Arell lay in a crumpled heap on the tile floor with the hilt of a dagger protruding from between her shoulders. In the center of the steaming pool, a tall, raw-boned woman in a dark cloak was grimly holding something under the water -something that struggled weakly- and floating on the surface above that struggling form was a great fan of coppery red hair.

"Ce'Nedra!" Garion shouted, leaping feet first into the pool with his sword aloft.

The cloaked woman gave him one startled glance and fled, splashing frantically away from the enraged king.

Ce'Nedra's tiny body rose limply to the surface of the pool, and she floated facedown and bobbing slightly in the water. With a cry of anguish, Garion dropped his sword and struggled through the warm, waist-deep water -his desperate arms reaching out toward the limp body floating just beyond his grasp.

Roaring with rage, Brand ran around the tiled walkway surrounding the pool with his sword aloft to pursue the tall woman, who was fleeing through a narrow doorway on the far side of the bath, but Silk was already ahead of him, running swiftly after the woman with a long-bladed dagger held low.

Garion caught up the body of his wife in his arms and struggled toward the edge of the pool. With horror he realized that she was not breathing.

"What can I do?" he cried desperately. "Aunt Pol, what can I do?" But Aunt Pol was not there. He laid Ce'Nedra on the tiles on the edge of the pool. There was no sign of movement, no flutter of breath, and her face was a ghastly blue-gray color.

"Somebody help me!" Garion cried out, catching the tiny, lifeless form in his arms and holding it very close to him.

Something throbbed, sharply against his chest, and he looked into his wife's still face, desperately searching for some sign of life. But Ce'Nedra did not move, and her little body was limp. Again he caught her to him.

Once again he felt that sharp throb -almost like a blow against his heart. He held Ce'Nedra away from him again, searching with tear-filled eyes for the source of that strange, jolting throb. The flickering light of one of the torches stuck in iron rings around the marble walls of the pool seemed to dance on the polished surface of the silver amulet at her throat. Could it have been- ? With a trembling hand he put his fingertips to the amulet. He felt a tingling shock in his fingers. Startled, he jerked his hand away. Then he closed his fist about the amulet. He could feel it in his palm, throbbing like a silver heart, beating with a faltering rhythm.

"Ce'Nedra!" he said sharply. "You've got to wake up. Please don't die, Ce'Nedra!" But there was no sign, no movement from his wife. Still holding the amulet, Garion began to weep. "Aunt Pol," he cried brokenly, "what can I do?"

"Garion?" It was Aunt Pol's startled voice, coming to him across the empty miles.

"Aunt Pol," he sobbed, "help me!"

"What is it? What's wrong?"

"It's Ce'Nedra. She -she's been drowned!" And the full horror of it struck him like some great, overwhelming blow, and he began to sob again, great, tearing sobs.

"Stop that!" Aunt Pol's voice cracked like a whip. "Where?" she demanded. "When did this happen?"

"Here in the baths. She's not breathing, Aunt Pol. I think she's dead."

"Stop babbling, Garion!" Her voice was like a slap in the face. "How long has it been since her breathing stopped?"

"A few minutes -I don't know."

"You don't have any time to lose. Have you got her out of the water?"

"Yes -but she's not breathing, and her face is like ashes."

"Listen carefully. You've got to force the water out of her lungs. Put her down on her face and push on her back. Try to do it in the same rhythm as normal breathing, and be careful not to push too hard. You don't want to hurt the baby."

"But- "

"Do as I say, Garion!"

He turned his silent wife over and began to carefully push down on her ribs. An astonishing amount of water came out of the tiny girl's mouth, but she remained still and unmoving.

Garion stopped and took hold of the amulet again. "Nothing's happening, Aunt Pol."

"Don't stop."

He began pushing on Ce'Nedra's ribs again. He was about ready to despair, but then she coughed, and he almost wept with relief. He continued to push at her back. She coughed again, and then she began to cry weakly. Garion put his hand on the amulet. "She's crying, Aunt Pol! She's alive!"

"Good. You can stop now. What happened?"

"Some woman tried to kill her here in the baths. Silk and Brand are chasing the woman now."

There was a long silence. "I see," Aunt Pol said finally. "Now listen, Garion -carefully. Ce'Nedra's lungs will be very weak after this. The main danger right now is congestion and fever. You've got to keep her warm and quiet. Her life -and the baby's- depend on that. As soon as her breathing is stronger, get her into bed. I'll be there as soon as I can."

Garion moved quickly, gathering up every towel and robe he could find to make a bed for his weakly crying wife. As he covered her with a cloak, Silk returned, his face grim, and Brand, puffing noticeably, was right behind him.

"Is she all right?" the big Warder asked, his face desperately concerned.

"I think so," Garion said. "I got her breathing started again. Did the woman get away?"

"Not exactly," Silk replied. "She ran upstairs until she reached the battlements. When she got up there, I was right behind her. She saw that there was no way to escape, so she threw herself off."

Garion felt a surge of satisfaction at that. "Good," he said without thinking.

"No. Not really. We needed to question her. Now we'll never find out who sent her here to do this."

"I hadn't thought of that."

Brand had gone sadly to the silent body of his niece. "My poor Arell," he said, his voice full of tears. He knelt beside her and took hold of the dagger protruding from her back.

"Even in death, she served her queen," he said almost proudly.

Garion looked at him.

"The dagger's stuck," Brand explained, tugging at it. "The woman who killed her couldn't get it out. That's why she was trying to drown Ce'Nedra. If she'd been able to use this knife, we'd have been too late."

"I'm going to find out who's responsible for this," Garion declared from between clenched teeth. "I think I'll have him flayed."

"Flaying is good," Silk agreed. "Or boiling. Boiling has always been my favorite."

"Garion," Ce'Nedra said weakly, and all thoughts of vengeance fled from Garion's mind as he turned to her.

While he held his wife close to him, he dimly heard Silk speaking quietly to Brand.

"After somebody picks up what's left of our would-be assassin," the little man was saying in a terse voice,

"I'd like to have all of her clothing brought to me."

"Her clothing?"

"Right. The woman isn't able to talk anymore, but her clothing might. You'd be surprised at how much you can learn about someone by looking at his undergarments. We want to find out who was behind this, and that dead woman out there is our only clue. I want to find out who she was and where she came from. The quicker I can do that, the quicker we can start heating up the oil."

"Oil?"

"I'm going to simmer the man who was behind this -slowly and with a great deal of attention to every exquisite detail."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Polgara arrived late that same afternoon. No one saw fit to raise the question of how she had crossed the hundreds of intervening leagues in the space of hours instead of weeks.

The sentry who had been standing watch atop the battlements and who escorted her to the sickroom, however, had a slightly wild look in his eyes, as if he had just seen something about which he would prefer not to speak.

Garion, at the moment she arrived, was in the midst of a discussion with one of the court physicians about the therapeutic value of bleeding, and the conversation had reached the point where he had just picked up a sword to confront the startled medical man who was approaching the bed with lancet in hand.

"If you try to open my wife's veins with that," the young king declared firmly, "I'm going to open yours with this."

"All right," Polgara said crisply, "that will do, Garion." She removed her cloak and laid it across the back of a chair.

"Aunt Pol," he gasped with relief.

She had already turned to face the four physicians who had been tending the little queen. "Thank you for your efforts, gentlemen," she told them. "I'll send for you if I need you." The note of dismissal in her voice was final, and the four quietly filed out.

"Lady Polgara," Ce'Nedra said weakly from the bed.

Polgara turned to her immediately. "Yes, dear," she said, taking Ce'Nedra's tiny hand in hers. "How do you feel?"

"My chest hurts, and I can't seem to stay awake."

"We'll have you up and about in no time at all, dear," Polgara assured her. She looked critically at the bed. "I think I'm going to need more pillows, Garion," she said. "I want to prop her up into a sitting position." Garion quickly went through the sitting room to the door leading to the corridor outside.

"Yes, your Majesty?" the sentry said as Garion opened the door.

"Do you want to get me about a dozen or so pillows?"

"Of course, your Majesty." The sentry started down the corridor.

"On second thought, make that two dozen." Garion called after him. Then he went back to the bedroom.

"I mean it, Lady Polgara," Ce'Nedra was saying in a weak little voice. "If it ever gets to the point where you have to make a choice, save my baby. Don't even think about me."

"I see," Polgara replied gravely. "I hope you've purged yourself of that particular nonsense now."

Ce'Nedra stared at her.

"Melodrama has always made me just ever so faintly nauseous."

A slow flush crept up Ce'Nedra's cheeks.

"That's a very good sign," Aunt Pol encouraged her. "If you can blush, it means that you're well enough to take final note of trivial things."

"Trivial?"

"Such as being embarrassed about how truly stupid that last statement of yours really was. Your baby's fine, Ce'Nedra. In fact, he's better off right now than you are. He's sleeping at the moment."

Ce'Nedra's eyes had gone wide, and her hands were placed protectively over her abdomen. "You can see him?" she asked incredulously.

"See isn't exactly the right word, dear," Polgara said as she mixed two powders together in a glass. "I know what he's doing and what he's thinking about." She added water to the mixture in the glass and watched critically as the contents bubbled and fumed. "Here," she instructed, handing the glass to her patient, "Drink this." Then she turned to Garion. "Build up the fire, dear. It's autumn, after all, and we don't want her getting chilled."

Brand and Silk had rather carefully examined the broken body of the would-be assassin and had shifted their attention to her clothing by the time Garion joined them late that evening.

"Have you found out anything yet?" he asked as he entered the room.

"We know that she was an Alorn," Brand replied in his rumbling voice. "About thirty-five years old, and she didn't work for a living. At least she didn't do anything strenuous enough to put calluses on her hands."

"That's not very much to go on," Garion said.

"It's a start," Silk told him, carefully examining the hem of a bloodstained dress.

"It sort of points at the Bear-cult then, doesn't it?"

"Not necessarily," Silk replied, laying aside the dress and picking up a linen shift. "When you're trying to hide your identity, you pick an assassin from another country. Of course, that kind of thinking might be a little too subtle for the Bear-cult." He frowned. "Now, where have I seen this stitch before?" he muttered, still looking at the dead woman's undergarment.

"I'm so very sorry about Arell," Garion said to Brand. "We were all very fond of her." It seemed like such an inadequate thing to say.

"She would have appreciated that, Belgarion," Brand said quietly. "She loved Ce'Nedra very much."

Garion turned back to Silk with a feeling of frustration boiling up in him. "What are we going to do?" he demanded. "If we can't find out who was behind this, he'll probably just try again."

"I certainly hope so," Silk said.

"You what?"

"We can save a lot of time if we can catch somebody who's still alive. You can only get so much out of dead people."

"I wish we'd been a little more thorough when we wiped out the Bear-cult at Thull Mardu," Brand said.

"I wouldn't get my mind too set on the notion that the Bear-cult was responsible for this," Silk told him.

"There are some other possibilities."

"Who else would want to hurt Ce'Nedra?" Garion asked.

Silk sprawled in a chair, scratching absently at his cheek and with his forehead furrowed with thought.

"Maybe it wasn't Ce'Nedra," he mused.

"What?"

"It's altogether possible, you know, that the attempt was directed at the baby she's carrying. There could be people out there in the world who do not want there to be an heir to Iron-grip's throne."

"Who?"

"The Grolims come to mind rather quickly," Silk replied. "Or the Nyissans -or even a few Tolnedrans. I want to keep an open mind on the matter -until I find out a few more things." He held up the stained undergarment. "I'm going to start with this. Tomorrow morning, I'm going to take it down to the city and show it to every tailor and seamstress I can find. I might be able to get something out of the weave, and there's a

peculiar kind of stitching along the hem. If I can find somebody to identify it for me, it might give us something to work on."

Brand looked thoughtfully over at the still, blanket-draped form of the woman who had tried to kill Ce'Nedra. "She would have had to have entered the Citadel by way of one of the gates," he mused. "That means that she passed a sentry and that she had to have given him some kind of excuse for coming in. I'll round up every man who's been on sentry duty for the past week and bring them all down here to have a look at her. Once we know exactly when she got in, maybe we can start to backtrack her. I'd like to find the ship she arrived on and have a talk with the captain."

"What can I do?" Garion asked quickly.

"Probably you should stay close to Ce'Nedra's room," Silk suggested. "Any time Polgara leaves for any reason at all, you ought to go in and take her place. There could be other attempts, you know, and I think we'll all feel better if Ce'Nedra's guarded rather closely."

Under Polgara's watchful eyes, Ce'Nedra spent a quiet night, and her breathing was much stronger the next day. She complained bitterly about the taste of the medicines she was required to drink, and Polgara listened with a great show of interest to the queen's extensive tirade. "Yes, dear," she agreed pleasantly. "Now drink it all down."

"Does it have to taste so awful?" Ce'Nedra said with a shudder.

"Of course it does. If medicine tasted good, sick people might be tempted to stay sick so that they could enjoy the medicine. The worse it tastes, the quicker you get well."

Late that afternoon, Silk returned with a disgusted look on his face. "I hadn't realized how many ways it's possible to attach two pieces of cloth together," he grumbled.

"No luck, I take it," Garion said.

"Not really," Silk replied, throwing himself into a chair. "I managed to pick up all sorts of educated guesses, though."

"Oh?"

"One tailor was willing to stake his reputation on the fact that this particular stitch is used exclusively in Nyissa. A seamstress told me very confidently that this was an Ulgo garment. And one half-wit went so far as to say that the owner of the garment was a sailor, since this stitch is always used to repair torn sails."

"What are you talking about, Silk?" Polgara asked curiously as she passed through the sitting room on her way back to Ce'Nedra's bedside.

"I've been trying to get someone to identify the stitching on the hem of this thing," he said in a disgusted tone, waving the bloodstained shift.

"Here. Let me see it."

Silk wordlessly handed her the garment. She glanced at it almost casually. "Northeastern Drasnian," she told him, "from somewhere near the town of Rheon."

"Are you sure?" Silk came to his feet quickly.

She nodded. "That kind of stitching was developed centuries ago -back in the days when all the garments up there were made from reindeer skin."

"That's disgusting," Silk said.

"What is?"

"I ran around with this thing all day long -up and down all those stairs and in and out of every tailor shop in Riva -and all I had to do to find out what I wanted to know was show it to you."

"That's not my fault, Prince Kheldar," she told him, handing back the shift. "If you don't know enough to bring these little problems to me by now, then there probably isn't much hope for you."

"Thanks, Polgara," he said drily.

"Then the assassin was a Drasnian," Garion said.

"A northeastern Drasnian," Silk corrected. "Those people up there are a strange sort -almost worse than the ones who live in the fens."

"Strange?"

"Standoffish, closemouthed, unfriendly, clannish, secretive. Everybody in northeast Drasnian behaves as if he had all the state secrets in the kingdom tucked up his sleeve."

"Why would they hate Ce'Nedra so much?" Garion asked with a puzzled frown.

"I wouldn't make too much of the fact that this assassin was a Drasnian, Garion," Silk told him. "People who hire other people to do their killing for them don't always go looking for their hirelings close to home -and, although there are a lot of assassins in the world, very few of them are women." He pursed his lips thoughtfully. "I do think that I'll take a trip up to Rheon and have a look around, however."

As the chill of winter set in, Polgara finally declared that Ce'Nedra was out of all danger. "I think I'll stay, though," she added. "Durnik and Errand can manage at home for a few months, and I'd probably no sooner get home than I'd have to turn around and come back."

Garion looked at her blankly.

"You didn't actually think that I was going to let anybody else deliver Ce'Nedra's first baby, did you?"

It snowed heavily just before Erastide, and the steep streets of the city of Riva became virtually impassable.

Ce'Nedra's disposition soured noticeably. Her increasing girth made her awkward, and the depth of the snow in the city streets had rather effectively confined her to the Citadel.

Polgara took the little queen's outbursts and crying fits calmly, scarcely changing expression, even at the height of the eruptions. "You do want to have this baby, don't you?" she asked pointedly on one such occasion.

"Of course I do," Ce'Nedra replied indignantly.

"Well then, you have to go through this. It's the only way I know of to fill the nursery."

"Don't try to be reasonable with me, Lady Polgara," Ce'Nedra flared. "I'm not in the mood for reasonableness right now."

Polgara gave her a faintly amused look, and Ce'Nedra, in spite of herself, began to laugh. "I'm being silly, aren't I?"

"A bit, yes."

"It's just that I feel so huge and ugly."

"That will pass, Ce'Nedra."

"Sometimes I wish I could just lay eggs -the way birds do."

"I'd stick to doing it the old way, dear. I don't think you have the disposition for sitting on a nest."

Erastide came and passed quietly. The celebration on the island was warm, but somewhat restrained. It seemed as if the whole population was holding its breath, waiting for a much larger reason for celebration.

Winter ground on with each week adding more snow to the already high-piled drifts. A month or so after Erastide there was a brief thaw, lasting for perhaps two days, and then the frigid chill locked in again, turning the sodden snowbanks into blocks of ice. The weeks plodded by tediously, and everybody waited.

"Would you just look at that?" Ce'Nedra said angrily to Garion one morning shortly after they had arisen.

"At what, dear?" he replied mildly.

"At that!" She pointed disgustedly at the window. "It's snowing again." There was a note of accusation in her voice.

"It's not my fault," he said defensively.

"Did I say that it was?" She turned awkwardly to glare at him. Her tininess made her swollen belly appear all the larger, and she sometimes seemed to thrust it out at him as if it were entirely his doing.

"This is just absolutely insupportable," she declared. "Why have you brought me to this frozen- " She stopped in mid-tirade, a strange look crossing her face.

"Are you all right, dear?" Garion asked.

"Don't 'dear' me, Garion. I-" She stopped again. "Oh, my." she said breathlessly.

"What is it?" He got to his feet.

"Oh, dear," Ce'Nedra said, putting her hands to the small of her back. "Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear."

"Ce'Nedra, that's not very helpful. What's the matter?"

"I think perhaps I'd better go lie down," she said almost absently. She started across the room, moving at a stately waddle. She stopped. "Oh, dear," she said with much more vehemence. Her face was pale, and she put one hand on a chairback to support herself. "I think that it might be a good idea if you sent for Lady Polgara, Garion."

"Is it- ?, I mean, are you- ?"

"Don't babble, Garion," she said tensely. "Just open the door and scream for your Aunt Pol."

"Are you trying to say that- ?"

"I'm not trying, Garion. I'm saying it. Get her in here right now." She waddled to the bedroom door and stopped again with a little gasp. "Oh, my goodness," she said.

Garion stumbled to the door and jerked it open. "Get Lady Polgara!" he said to the startled sentry.

"Immediately! Run!"

"Yes, your Majesty!" the man replied, dropping his spear and sprinting down the hall.

Garion slammed the door and dashed to Ce'Nedra's side. "Can I do anything?" he asked, wringing his hands.

"Help me to bed," she told him.

"Bed!" he said. "Right!" He grabbed her arm and began to tug at her.

"What are you doing?"

"Bed," he blurted, pointing at the royal four-poster.

"I know what it is, Garion. Help me. Don't yank on me."

"Oh." He took her hand, slipped his other arm about her, and lifted her off her feet. He stumbled toward the bed, his eyes wide and his mind completely blank.

"Put me down, you great oaf!"

"Bed," he urged her, trying with all the eloquence at his command to explain. He carefully set her back down on her feet and rushed on ahead. "Nice bed," he said, patting the coverlets encouragingly.

Ce'Nedra closed her eyes and sighed. "Just step out of my way, Garion," she said with resignation.

"But-"

"Why don't you build up the fire?" she suggested.

"What?" He stared around blankly.

"The fireplace -that opening in the wall with the burning logs in it. Put some more wood in there. We want it nice and warm for the baby, don't we?" She reached the bed and leaned against it.

Garion dashed to the fireplace and stood staring at it stupidly.

"What's the matter now?"

"Wood," he replied. "No wood."

"Bring some in from the other room."

What an absolutely brilliant suggestion she had just made! He stared at her gratefully.

"Go into the other room, Garion," she said, speaking very slowly and distinctly. "Pick up some wood. Carry it back in here. Put it on the fire. Have you got all that so far?"

"Right!" he said excitedly. He dashed into the other room, picked up a stick of firewood, and dashed back in with it.

"Wood," he said, holding the stick up proudly.

"Very nice, Garion," she said, climbing laboriously into the bed. "Now put it on the fire and go back out and bring in some more."

"More," he agreed, flinging the stick into the fireplace and dashing out the door again.

After he had emptied the woodbin in the sitting room -one stick at a time- he stared around wildly, trying to decide what to do next. He picked up a chair. If he were to swing it against the wall, he reasoned, it ought to break up into manageable pieces.

The door to the apartment opened, and Polgara came in. She stopped to stare at the wild-eyed Garion.

"What on earth are you doing with that chair?" she demanded.

"Wood," he explained, brandishing the heavy piece of furniture. "Need wood -for the fire."

She gave him a long look, smoothing down the front of her white apron. "I see," she said. "It's going to be one of those. Put the chair down, Garion. Where's Ce'Nedra?"

"Bed," he replied, regretfully setting down the polished chair. Then he looked at her brightly. "Baby," he informed her.

She rolled her eyes toward the ceiling. "Garion," she said, speaking carefully as if to a child, "it's much too early for Ce'Nedra to be taking to her bed. She needs to walk around -keep moving."

He shook his head stubbornly. "Bed," he repeated. "Baby." He looked around and picked up the chair again.

Polgara sighed, opened the door, and beckoned to the sentry. "Young man," she said, "why don't you take his Majesty here down to that courtyard just outside the kitchen? There's a large pile of logs there. Get him an axe so that he can cut up some firewood."

Everybody was being absolutely brilliant today. Garion marveled at the suggestion Aunt Pol had just made. He set down the chair again and dashed out with the baffled sentry in tow.

He chopped up what seemed like a cord of wood in the first hour, sending out a positive blizzard of chips as he swung the axe so fast that it seemed almost to blur in the air. Then he paused, pulled off his doublet, and really got down to work. About noon, a respectful cook brought him a slab of freshly roasted beef, a large chunk of bread, and some ale. Garion wolfed down three or four bites, took a couple of gulps of the ale, and then picked up his axe to attack another log. It was altogether possible that he might have finished up with the woodpile outside the kitchen and then gone in search of more trees had not Brand interrupted him shortly before the sun went down.

The big, gray-haired Warder had a broad grin on his face.

"Congratulations, Belgarion," he said. "You have a son."

Garion paused, looking almost regretfully at the remaining logs. Then what Brand had just said finally seeped into his awareness. The axe slid from his fingers. "A son?" he said. "What an amazing thing. And so quickly, too." He looked at the woodpile. "I only just now got here. I always thought that it took much longer." Brand looked at him carefully, then gently took him by the arm. "Come along now, Belgarion," he said. "Let's go up and meet your son." Garion bent and carefully picked up an armload of wood.

"For the fire," he explained. "Ce'Nedra wants a nice fire."

"She'll be very proud of you, Belgarion," Brand assured him.

When they reached the royal bedchamber, Garion carefully put his armload of wood on the polished table by the window and approached the bed on tiptoe.

Ce'Nedra looked very tired and wan, but there was, nonetheless, a contented little smile on her face.

Nestled beside her in a soft blanket was a very small person. The newcomer had a red face and almost no hair. He seemed to be asleep, but as Garion approached, his eyes opened. Gravely, the crown prince looked at his father, then sighed, burped, and went back to sleep.

"Oh, isn't he just beautiful, Garion?" Ce'Nedra said in a wondering little voice.

"Yes," Garion replied with a great lump coming up into his throat. "And so are you." He knelt beside the bed and put his arms about them both.

"Very nice, children," Polgara said from the other side of the bed. "You both did just fine."

The following day Garion and his newborn son went through a very ancient ceremony. With Polgara at his side in a splendid blue and silver gown, he carried the baby to the Hall of the Rivan King, where the nobles of the island kingdom awaited them. As the three of them entered the Hall, the Orb of Aldur, standing on the pommel of Iron-grip's sword, blazed forth with a great shimmer of blue light. Almost bemused, Garion approached his throne. "This is my son, Geran," he announced -in part to the gathered throng, but also, in a peculiar way, to the Orb itself. The choice of his son's name had not been difficult. Though he could not remember his father, Garion had wanted to honor him, and no way seemed more appropriate than to give his son his father's name.

He carefully handed the baby to Polgara, reached up, and took down the great sword. Holding it by the blade, he extended it toward the blanket-wrapped infant in Polgara's arms. The shimmering glow of the Orb grew brighter. And then, as if attracted by that light, Geran stretched forth his tiny pink hand and put it on the glowing jewel. A great aura of many-colored light burst from the Orb at the infant's touch, surrounding the three of them with a pulsating rainbow that illuminated the entire Hall. A vast chorus filled Garion's ears, rising to an enormous chord that seemed to shake the whole world.

"Hail Geran!" Brand boomed in a great voice, "heir to the throne of Iron-grip and keeper of the Orb of Aldur!"

"Hail Geran!" the throng echoed in a thunderous shout.

"Hail Geran," the dry voice in Garion's mind added quietly.

Polgara said nothing. She did not need to speak, since the look in her eyes said everything that needed saying.

Although it was winter and the Sea of the Winds was lashed by storms, the Alorn Kings all journeyed to Riva to celebrate the birth of Geran. Many others, friends and old acquaintances, joined with Anheg, Cho-Hag, and Queen Poren on the journey to Riva. Barak was there, of course, accompanied by his wife Merel. Hettar and Adara arrived.

Lelldorin and Mandorallen came up from Arendia with Ariana and Nerina.

Garion, now somewhat more sensitive to such things, was amazed at how many children his friends had produced. No matter which way he turned, there seemed to be babies, and the sound of little boys and girls running and laughing filled the sober halls of the Citadel. The boy-king Kheva of Drasnia and Barak's son Unrak soon became the closest of friends.

Nerina's daughters romped with Adara's sons in endless games involving much giggling. Barak's eldest daughter, Gundred, now a ravishing young lady, cut a broad track through the hearts of whole platoons of young Rivan nobles, all the while under the watchful eye of her huge, red-bearded father, who never actually threatened any of his daughter's suitors, but whose looks said quite plainly that he would tolerate no foolishness. Little Terzie, Gundred's younger sister, hovered on the very brink of womanhood -romping one moment with the younger children and looking the next with devastating eyes at the group of adolescent Rivan boys who always seemed to be around.

King Fulrach and General Brendig sailed over from Sendaria about midway through the celebration. Queen Layla sent her fondest congratulations, but she did not make the trip with her husband. "She almost got on board the ship," Fulrach reported, "but then a gust of wind made a wave break over the stones of the quay, and she fainted. We decided not to subject her to the voyage at that point."

"It's probably best," Garion agreed.

Durnik and Errand came up from the Vale, naturally, and with them came Belgarath.

The celebration went on for weeks. There were banquets and formal presentations of gifts, both by the visitors and by the ambassadors of various friendly kingdoms. And, of course, there were hours of reminiscences and a fair amount of serious drinking. Ce'Nedra was in her glory, since she and her infant son were the absolute center of attention. Garion found that the festivities, coupled with his normal duties, left him almost no free time at all. He wished that he could find an hour or two to talk with Barak, Hettar, Mandorallen, and Lelldorin; but no matter how he tried to rearrange his days, the time simply was not there. Very late one evening, however, Belgarath came looking for him. Garion looked up from a report he had been reading as the old sorcerer entered his study. "I thought we might want to talk for a bit," the old man said.

Garion tossed aside the report. "I haven't meant to neglect you, Grandfather," he apologized, "but they're keeping my days pretty well filled up."

Belgarath shrugged. "Things are bound to settle down in a while. Did I ever get around to congratulating you?"

"I think so."

"Good. That's taken care of, then. People always make such a fuss about babies. I don't really care that much for them myself. They're all squally and wet, most of the time, and it's almost impossible to talk to them. You don't mind if I help myself, do you?" He pointed at a crystal decanter of pale wine standing on a table.

"No. Go ahead."

"You want some?"

"No thanks, Grandfather."

Belgarath poured himself a goblet of wine and then settled down in a chair across from Garion's. "How's the king business?" he asked.

"Tedious," Garion replied ruefully.

"Actually, that's not a bad thing, you know. When it gets exciting, that usually means that something pretty awful is happening."

"I suppose you're right."

"Have you been studying?"

Garion sat up quickly. "I'm glad you brought that up. Things have been so hectic that something sort of important had almost slipped my mind. " "Oh?"

"How careful were people when they made copies of those prophecies?"

Belgarath shrugged. "Fairly careful, I suppose. Why do you ask?"

"I think that something got left out of my copy of the Mrin Codex."

"What makes you think so?"

"There's a passage in there that just doesn't make sense."

"Maybe not to you, but you haven't been studying all that long."

"That's not what I mean, Grandfather. I'm not talking about an obscure meaning. When I'm getting at is a sentence that starts out and then just stops without going anywhere. I mean, it doesn't have any ending the way it should."

"You're concerned about grammar?"

Garion scratched at his head. "It's the only passage I found in there that breaks off that way. It goes, 'But behold, the stone which lies at the center of the light shall- ' And then there's a blot, and it takes up again with '-and this meeting will come to pass in a place which is no more, and there will the choice be made.' "

Belgarath frowned. "I think I know the passage," he said.

"The two just don't fit together, Grandfather. The first part is talking about the Orb -at least that's the way I read it- and the second part is talking about a meeting. I don't know what word is under that blot, but I can't for the life of me figure out how the two parts could be hooked together. I think there's something missing. That's why I was asking about how they went about copying these things. Could the scribe who was doing it have skipped a couple of lines?"

"I don't think so, Garion," Belgarath said. "The new copy is always compared with the old one by somebody other than the scribe. We are fairly careful about things like that."

"Then what's under the blot?"

Belgarath scratched his beard thoughtfully. "I can't quite recall," he admitted. "Anheg's here. Maybe he remembers -or you can ask him to transcribe that part from his copy and send it to you when he gets back to Val Alorn."

"That's a good idea."

"I wouldn't worry too much about it, Garion. It's only part of one passage, after all."

"There are a lot of things in there that are only one passage, Grandfather, and they turned out to be sort of important."

"If it bothers you so much, chase it down. That's a good way to learn."

"Aren't you the least bit curious about it?"

"I have other things on my mind. You're the one who found this discrepancy, so I'll give you all the glory of exposing it to the world and working out the solution."

"You're not being very much help, Grandfather."

Belgarath grinned at him. "I'm not really trying to be, Garion. You're grown up enough now to solve your own problems." He looked over at the decanter. "I believe I'll have just another little touch of that," he said.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

" . . . And they shall number twelve, for twelve is a number which is pleasing to the Gods. I know this to be true, for a raven once came to me in a dream and told me so. I have always loved the number twelve, and it is for this reason that the Gods have chosen me to reveal this truth to all the nations. . . ."

Garion scowled at the musty-smelling book. There had been some hope in the earlier pages -some obscure references to Light and Dark and a tantalizing fragment which had stated quite clearly that, "The holiest of things will always be the color of the sky, save only when it perceives great evil, and then will it burn hot with scarlet flame." When he had found that passage, he had read on avidly, convinced that he had stumbled across a genuine and hitherto undiscovered prophecy. The rest of the book, unfortunately, proved to be absolute gibberish. The brief biographical note at the beginning of the book indicated that its author had been a Drasnian merchant of some substance during the third millennium and that these secret jottings had been found only after his death. Garion wondered how a man with so disturbed a mind could have even functioned in a normal society.

He closed the book in disgust and added it to the growing pile of ravings that was accumulating on the table in front of him. Next he picked up a slender volume that had been found in a deserted house in Arendia. The first few pages were devoted to the household accounts of a very minor Arendish nobleman. Then, on the fourth page, the mundane broke off quite suddenly. "The Child of Light shall take up the sword and go in search of that which is hidden," Garion read. This was immediately followed by a tediously detailed account of the purchase of a dozen or so pigs from a neighbor. Then once again the unknown writer jumped into prophecy. "The quest of the Child of Light shall be for one whose soul has been reft away, for a stone that is empty at its center and for the babe who will hold the Light in one hand and the Dark in the other." That definitely seemed to be getting somewhere. Garion pulled one of his guttering candles closer and hunched over the book, reading each page carefully.

Those two passages, however, proved to be the only ones in the entire volume that did not speak of the day-to-day business of that forgotten farm somewhere in Arendia.

Garion sighed, leaned back, and looked around at the dimly lighted library. The bound books stood in their dusty rows on the dark shelves, and the linen-covered scrolls lay along the top of each bookcase. The light of his two candles flickered, making the room seem almost to dance.

"There has to be a faster way to do this," he muttered.

"Actually there is," the dry voice in his mind said to him.

"What?"

"You said that there had to be a faster way. I said that there is."

"Where have you been?"

"Here and there."

Garion knew this other awareness well enough by now to be certain that it would tell him only what it wanted him to know.

"All right," he said, "what is this faster way?"

"You don't have to read every single word the way you have been doing. Open your mind and just leaf through the pages. The things I put in each book will sort of leap out at you."

"Are the prophecies always mixed right in with all this other nonsense?"

"Usually, yes."

"Why did you do it that way?"

"Several reasons. Most of the time I didn't want the man who was doing the actual writing even to know what I was hiding in his book. Then, of course, it's a good way to keep things from falling into unfriendly hands."

"And friendly ones too, for that matter."

"Did you want me to explain, or were you just looking for an excuse to make clever remarks?"

"All right." Garion sighed, giving up.

"I think I've told you before that the word gives meaning to the event. The word has to be there, but it doesn't have to be right out in the open where just anybody can find it."

Garion frowned. "Do you mean that you put all these things in all these books for just a few people to read?"

"The term 'a few' isn't really accurate. Try 'one' instead."

"One? Who?"

"You, obviously."

"Me? Why me?"

"Are we going to go through that again?"

"Are you trying to say that all of this was sort of like a personal letter -just to me?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes."

"What if I hadn't gotten around to reading it?"

"Why are you reading it now?"

"Because Belgarath told me to."

"Why do you think Belgarath told you that?"

"Because-" Garion broke off. "... You told him to say it to me?" "Naturally. He didn't know about it, of course, but I nudged him. All sorts of people have access to the Mrin Codex. That's why I made it so cryptic. These personal instructions to you, however, should be fairly clear -if you pay attention."

"Why don't you just tell me what I'm supposed to do?"

"I'm not permitted to do that."

"Permitted?"

"We have our rules, my opposite and I. We're very carefully balanced and we have to stay that way. We agreed only to act through our instruments, and if I intervene in person -with such things as telling you directly what you must do- then my opposite will also be free to step over the line. That's why we both work through what are called prophecies."

"Isn't that a little complicated?"

"The alternative would be absolute chaos. My opposite and I are limitless. If we confront each other directly, whole suns will be destroyed." Garion shuddered and swallowed hard. "I didn't realize that," he admitted. Then an idea occurred to him. "Would you be permitted to tell me about that line in the Mrin Codex -the one that's got the blotted word in the middle of it?"

"That depends on how much you want to know about it."

"What's the word under the blot?"

"There are several words there. If you look at it in the right kind of light, you should be able to see them. As for these other books, try reading them the way I told you to. I think you'll find that it saves a lot of time -and you really don't have all that much time to spare."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

But the voice was gone.

The door to the library opened, and Ce'Nedra came in, wearing her nightdress and a warm robe. "Garion," she said, "aren't you ever coming to bed?"

"What?" He looked up. "Oh -yes. Right away."

"Who was in here with you?"

"Nobody. Why?"

"I heard you talking to someone."

"I was just reading, that's all."

"Come to bed, Garion," she said firmly. "You can't read the whole library in one evening."

"Yes, dear," he agreed.

Not long after that, when spring had begun to touch the lower meadows of the slopes behind the Citadel, the promised letter from King Anheg arrived. Garion immediately took the copy of that baffling passage in the Mrin Codex to the library to compare it with his copy. When he put the two side by side, he began to swear.

Anheg's copy was blotted in exactly the same place. "I told him!" Garion fumed. "I told him specifically that I needed to see that particular spot! I even showed him!" Swearing angrily, he began to pace up and down, waving both arms in the air.

Rather surprisingly, Ce'Nedra took her husband's near obsession with the Mrin Codex in stride. Of course, the little queen's attention was almost totally riveted on her new son, and Garion was fairly certain that anything he said or did was only on the very edge of her awareness. Young Prince Geran was grossly overmothered. Ce'Nedra held him in her arms almost every minute that he was awake and frequently even when he was asleep. He was a good-natured baby and seldom cried or fussed. He took his mother's constant attention quite calmly and accepted all the cuddling and cooing and impulsive kisses with equanimity. Garion, however, felt that Ce'Nedra really overdid things just a bit. Since she insisted on holding Geran constantly, it definitely cut into the time when he might be able to hold his son. Once he almost asked her when his turn was going to come, but decided at the last minute not to. The thing that he really felt was unfair was Ce'Nedra's sense of timing. Whenever she did put Geran in his cradle for a few moments and Garion finally got the chance to pick him up, the little queen's hands seemed almost automatically to go to the buttons on the front of her dress, and she would placidly announce that it was time for Geran to nurse. Garion certainly did not begrudge his son his lunch, but the baby really didn't look all that hungry most of the time.

After a time, however, when he finally became adjusted to Geran's undeniable presence in their lives, the call of the dim, musty library began to reassert itself. The procedure that had been suggested to him by the dry voice worked surprisingly well. After a little practice, he found that he could skim rapidly over page after page of mundane material and that his eye would stop automatically at the prophetic passages buried in the midst of ordinary text. He was surprised to find so many of these passages hidden away in the most unlikely places. In most cases it was obvious that the writers had not even been aware of what they had inserted. A sentence would frequently break off, leap into prophecy, and then take up again exactly where it had stopped. Garion was positive that upon rereading the text, the unconscious prophet who had inserted the material would not even see what he had just written.

The Mrin Codex, however, and to a lesser degree the Darine, remained the core of the whole thing. Passages from other works clarified or expanded, but the two major prophecies put it all down in uncontaminated form. Garion began to cross index as he went along, identifying each new passage with a number and then linking those numbers to the series of letter codes he had assigned to the paragraphs of the Mrin scroll. Each paragraph of the Mrin, he discovered, usually had three or four corroborating or explanatory lines gleaned from other works -all except that crucial blotted passage.

"And how did the search go today, dear?" Ce'Nedra asked brightly one evening when he returned, grouchy and out of sorts, to the royal apartment. She was nursing Geran at the time, and her face was aglow with tenderness as she held her baby to her breast.

"I'm just about to give it all up," he declared, flinging himself into a chair. "I think it might be better just to lock up that library and throw away the key."

She looked at him fondly and smiled. "Now you know that wouldn't do any good, Garion. You know that after a day or so you wouldn't be able to stand it, and no door is so stout that you can't break it down."

"Maybe I should just burn all those books and scrolls," he said morosely. "I can't concentrate on anything else any more. I know there's something hidden under that blot, but I can't find a single clue anywhere to what it might be."

"If you burn that library, Belgarath will probably turn you into a radish," she warned with a smile. "He's very fond of books, you know."

"It might be nice to be a radish for a while," he replied.

"It's really very simple, Garion," she said with that infuriating placidity. "Since all the copies are blotted, why don't you go look at the original?"

He stared at her.

"It has to be somewhere, doesn't it?"

"Well -I suppose so, yes."

"Find out where it is, then, and go look -or send for it."

"I never thought of that."

"Obviously. It's much more fun to rant and rave and be unpleasant about it."

"You know, that's really a very good idea, Ce'Nedra."

"Naturally. You men always want to complicate things so much. Next time you have a problem, dear, just bring it to me. I'll tell you how to solve it."

He let that pass.

The first thing the following morning, Garion went down into the city and called on the Rivan Deacon in the Temple of Belar. The Rivan Deacon was a sober-faced, gentle man. Unlike the priests of Belar in the major temples on the continent, who were frequently more involved in politics than in the care of their flocks, the leader of the Rivan Church concerned himself almost exclusively with the well-being -physical as well as spiritual- of the common people. Garion had always rather liked him.

"I've never actually seen it myself, your Majesty," the Deacon replied in response to Garion's question, "but I've always been told that it's kept in that shrine on the banks of the Mrin River -between the edge of the fens and Boktor."

"Shrine?"

"The ancient Drasnians erected it on the site where the Mrin Prophet was kept chained," the Deacon explained. "After the poor man died, King Bull-neck directed that a memorial of some sort be put up there. They built the shrine directly over his grave. The original scroll is kept there in a large crystal case. A group of priests is there to protect it. Most people wouldn't be allowed to touch it; but considering the fact that you're the Rivan King, I'm sure that they'll make an exception."

"Then it's always been there?"

"Except during the time of the Angarak invasion during the fourth millennium. It was taken by ship to Val Alorn for safekeeping just before Boktor was burned. Torak wanted to get his hands on it, so it was felt wiser to get it out of the country."

"That makes sense," Garion said. "Thank you for the information, your Reverence."

"Glad to be of help, your Majesty."

It was going to be hard to get away. This week was completely out of the question, since there was that meeting with the port authorities the day after tomorrow. And next week would be even worse. There were always so many official meetings and state functions. Garion sighed as he climbed back up the long stairs to the Citadel with his inevitable guard at his side. It somehow seemed that he was almost a prisoner here on this island. There were always so many demands on his time. He could remember a time, not really that long ago, when he started each day on horseback and seldom slept in the same bed two nights in a row. Upon consideration, however, he was forced to admit that even then he had not been free to do as he wished. Though he had not known it, this burden of responsibility had descended upon him on that windy autumn night so many years ago when he, Aunt Pol, Belgarath, and Durnik had crept through the gate at Faldor's farm and out into the wide world that lay before them.

"Well," he muttered under his breath, "this is important too. Brand can manage here. They'll just have to get along without me for a while."

"What was that, your Majesty?" the guard asked politely.

"Just thinking out loud," Garion replied, a little embarrassed.

Ce'Nedra seemed moody and out of sorts that evening. She held Geran almost abstractedly, paying scant attention to him as he played with the amulet at her throat with a look of serious concentration on his face.

"What's the matter, dear?" Garion asked her.

"Just a headache, that's all," she replied shortly. "And a strange sort of ringing in my ears."

"You're tired."

"Maybe that's it." She arose. "I think I'll put Geran in his cradle and go to bed," she declared. "Maybe a good night's sleep will make me feel better."

"I can put him to bed," Garion offered.

"No," she said with a strange look. "I want to be sure that he's safely in his cradle."

"Safe?" Garion laughed. "Ce'Nedra, this is Riva. It's the safest place in the world."

"Go tell that to Arell," she told him and went into the small room adjoining their bedchamber where Geran's cradle stood.

Garion sat up and read until rather late that evening. Ce'Nedra's restless moodiness had somehow communicated itself to him, and he did not feel ready for bed. Finally, he put aside his book and went to the window to look out across the moon-touched waters of the Sea of the Winds lying far below. The long, slow waves seemed almost like molten silver in the pale light, and their stately pace was oddly hypnotic. Finally he blew out the candles and went quietly into the bedroom.

Ce'Nedra was tossing restlessly in her sleep and muttering half-formed phrases -meaningless snatches of fragmentary conversation. Garion undressed and slipped into bed, trying not to disturb her.

"No," she said in a peremptory tone of voice. "I won't let you do that." Then she moaned and tossed her head on the pillow.

Garion lay in the soft darkness, listening to his wife talking in her sleep.

"Garion!" she gasped, coming suddenly awake. "Your feet are cold!"

"Oh," he said, "Sorry."

She drifted almost immediately back into sleep, and the muttering resumed.

It was the sound of a different voice that awoke him several hours later. The voice was oddly familiar, and Garion lay, still almost asleep, trying to remember exactly where he had heard it before. It was a woman's voice, low and musical and speaking in a peculiarly soothing tone.

Then he suddenly realized that Ce'Nedra was not in the bed beside him and he came fully awake instantly.

"But I have to hide him so that they can't find him," he heard Ce'Nedra say in a strangely numb voice. He tossed back the covers and slid out of bed.

A faint light gleamed through the open door to the nursery, and the voices seemed to be coming from there.

Garion moved quickly to that door, his bare feet making no sound on the carpet.

"Uncover your baby, Ce'Nedra," the other woman was saying in a calm, persuasive voice. "You'll hurt him."

Garion looked through the doorway. Ce'Nedra was standing by the cradle in her white nightdress, her eyes vacant and staring, with another figure beside her. On the chair at the foot of the cradle was a great heap of blankets and pillows. Dreamily, the Rivan Queen was methodically piling the bedclothes on top of her baby.

"Ce'Nedra," the woman said to her. "Stop. Listen to me."

"I have to hide him," Ce'Nedra replied stubbornly. "They want to kill him."

"Ce'Nedra. You'll smother him. Now take all the blankets and pillows out again."

"But--"

"Do as I said, Ce'Nedra," the woman said firmly. "Now."

Ce'Nedra made a little whimpering sound and began to remove the bedding from the cradle.

"That's better. Now listen to me. You must ignore him when he tells you things like this. He is not your friend."

Ce'Nedra's face grew puzzled. "He isn't?"

"He's your enemy. He is the one who wants to hurt Geran."

"My baby?"

"Your baby's all right, Ce'Nedra, but you have to fight this voice that comes to you in the night."

"Who-" Garion started, but then the woman turned to look at him, and he broke off, his mouth agape with astonishment. The woman had tawny-colored hair and warm, golden eyes. Her dress was plain and brown, almost earth-colored. Garion knew her. He had met her once before on the moors of eastern Drasnia when he and Belgarath and Silk had been on their way to that dreadful meeting in the haunted ruins of Cthol Mishrak.

Aunt Pol's mother closely resembled her daughter. Her face had that same calm, flawless beauty, and her head that same proud, erect carriage. There was about this timeless face, however, a strange, almost eternal kind of regret that caught at Garion's throat. "Poledra!" he gasped.

"What- "

Aunt Pol's mother put one finger to her lips. "Don't wake her, Belgarion," she cautioned. "Let's get her back to bed."

"Geran-?"

"He's all right. I arrived in time. Just lead her gently back to bed. She'll sleep now without any more of these adventures."

Garion went to his wife's side and put his arm about her shoulders. "Come along now, Ce'Nedra," he said gently to her.

She nodded, her eyes still vacant, and obediently went with him back into the royal bedroom.

"Could you pull back that bolster for me?" he quietly asked Poledra.

She laughed. "As a matter of fact, I can't," she said. "You forget that I'm not really here, Belgarion."

"Oh," he said. "I'm sorry. It just seemed-" He pushed the bolster out of the way, carefully laid Ce'Nedra in bed, and pulled the coverlets up around her chin. She sighed and snuggled down to sleep.

"Let's go into the other room," Poledra suggested.

He nodded and quietly followed her into the adjoining room which was still dimly lighted by the glowing embers of the dying fire. "What was that all about?" he asked, softly closing the door.

"There's someone who hates and fears your son, Belgarion," she told him gravely.

"He's only a baby," Garion protested.

"His enemy fears him for what he may become -not for what he is now. It's happened that way before, you'll recall."

"You mean when Asharak killed my parents?"

She nodded. "He was actually trying to get at you."

"But how can I protect Geran from his own mother? I mean -if this man can come to Ce'Nedra in her sleep like that and make her do things, how can I possibly-?"

"It won't happen again, Belgarion. I took care of that."

"But how could you? I mean, you're -well-"

"Dead? That's not altogether accurate, but no matter. Geran is safe for the moment, and Ce'Nedra won't do this again. There's something else we need to discuss."

"All right."

"You're getting very close to something important. I can't tell you everything, but you do need to look at the Mrin Codex -the real one, not one of the copies. You must see what's hidden there."

"I can't leave Ce'Nedra -not now."

"She's going to be all right, and this is something that only you can do. Go to that shrine on the River Mrin and look at the Codex. It's desperately important."

Garion squared his shoulders. "All right," he said. "I'll leave in the morning."

"One other thing."

"What?"

"You must take the Orb with you."

"The Orb?"

"You won't be able to see what you have to see without it."

"I don't quite understand."

"You will when you get there."

"All right, Poledra," he said. Then he made a rueful face. "I don't know why I'm objecting. I've been doing things I didn't understand all my life now."

"Everything will become clear in time," she assured him. Then she looked at him rather critically. "Garion," she said in a tone so like Aunt Pol's that he answered automatically.

"Yes?"

"You really shouldn't run around at night without a robe, you know. You'll catch cold."

The ship he hired at Kotu was small, but well designed for river travel. It was a shallow-draft, broad-beamed little ship that sometimes bobbed like a chip of wood. The oarsmen were sturdy fellows and they made good time rowing against the sluggish current of the Mrin River as it meandered its slow way through the fens. By nightfall they were ten leagues upriver from Kotu, and the captain prudently moored his ship to a dead snag with one of the tar-smeared hawsers. "It's not a good idea to try to find the channel in the dark," he told Garion. "One wrong turn and we could spend the next month wandering around in the fens."

"You know what you're doing, Captain," Garion told him. "I'm not going to interfere."

"Would you like a tankard of ale, your Majesty?" the captain offered.

"That might not be a bad idea," Garion agreed.

Later, he leaned against the railing with his tankard in hand, watching the darting lights of the fireflies and listening to the endless chorus of the frogs. It was a warm spring night, and the damp, rich odor of the fens filled his nostrils.

He heard a faint splash, a fish maybe, or perhaps a diving otter.

"Belgarion?" It was a strange, piping kind of voice, but it was quite distinct. It was also coming from the other side of the railing.

Garion peered out into the velvet darkness.

"Belgarion?" The voice came again. It was somewhere below him.

"Yes?" Garion answered cautiously.

"I need to tell you something." There was another small splash, and the ship rocked slightly. The hawser that moored her to the snag dipped, and a scampering shadow ran quickly up it and slid over the railing in a curiously fluid way. The shadow stood up, and Garion could clearly hear the water dripping from it. The figure was short, scarcely more than four feet tall, and it moved toward Garion with a peculiarly shuffling gait.

"You are older," it said.

"That happens," Garion replied, peering at the form as he tried to make out its face. Then the moon slid out from behind a cloud, and Garion found himself staring directly into the furry, wide-eyed face of a fenling.

"Tupik?" he asked incredulously. "Is that you?"

"You remember." The small, furry creature seemed pleased.

"Of course I remember."

The ship rocked again, and another furry shadow ran up the hawser. Tupik turned with irritation. "Poppi!" he chittered angrily. "Go home!"

"No," she answered quite calmly.

"You must do as I say!" he told her, stamping his feet on the deck.

"Why?"

Tupik stared at her in obvious frustration. "Are they all like that?" he demanded of Garion.

"All what?"

"Females." Tupik said the word with a certain disgust.

"Most of them, yes."

Tupik sighed.

"How is Vordai?" Garion asked them.

Poppi made a peculiarly disconsolate whimpering sound. "Our mother is gone," she said sadly.

"I'm sorry."

"She was very tired," Tupik said.

"We covered her with flowers," Poppi said. "And then we closed up her house."

"She would have liked that."

"She said that one day you would come back," Tupik told him. "She was very wise."

"Yes."

"She said that we should wait until you came and then we were to give you a message."

"Oh?"

"There is an evil that moves against you."

"I was beginning to suspect that."

"Mother said to tell you that the evil has many faces and that the faces do not always agree, but that which is behind it all has no face and that it comes from much farther than you think."

"I don't quite follow."

"It is from beyond the stars."

Garion stared at him.

"That is what we were told to say," Poppi assured him.

"Tupik said it exactly as mother told it to him."

"Tell Belgarath about mother." Tupik said then. "And tell him that she sent him her thanks."

"I will."

"Good-bye, Belgarion," the fenling said. Poppi made a small, affectionate sound in her throat, pattered over, and nuzzled briefly at Garion's hand.

And then the two of them slipped over the side and vanished in the dark waters of the fens.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

It was a dreary-looking place. The village huddled on the riverbank at the edge of a flat, featureless plain covered with coarse, dark-green grass. The underlying soil was alluvial clay, slick, gray, and unwholesome looking, and just beyond the wide bend in the Mrin River lay the endless green and brown expanse of the fens. The village itself consisted of perhaps two dozen dun-colored houses, huddled all together about the square stone structure of the shrine. Rickety docks, constructed of bone-white driftwood, stuck out into the river like skeletal fingers, and fishing nets hung on poles, drying and smelling in the humid, mosquito-infested air.

Garion's ship arrived about noon, and he went immediately up from the creaking dock along the muddy, rutted street to the shrine itself, walking carefully to avoid slipping, and feeling the curious stares of the dull-eyed villagers directed at him and at the great sword of the Rivan King strapped to his back.

The priests of Belar who guarded the shrine were obsequious, almost fawning, when he arrived at the tarnished bronze gates and requested entry. They led him through a flagstone-covered courtyard, pointing proudly at the rotting kennel and the stout, tar-smeared post with its fragment of heavy, rusting chain where the mad prophet of Mrin had spent his last days.

Within the shrine itself stood the customary altar with its great carved-stone bear-head. Garion noted that the interior of the shrine stood in need of a good cleaning and that the priest-guardians themselves were rumpled and unwashed.

One of the first manifestations of religious enthusiasm, he had noted, was a powerful aversion to soap and water. Holy places -and those who attended them- always seemed to smell bad.

There was some small problem when they reached the vaulted sanctorum where the yellowed parchment scroll of the original Mrin Codex lay in its crystal case with two manhigh candles flanking it. One of the priests, a wild-eyed fanatic whose hair and beard resembled a wind-ravaged straw-stack, objected shrilly - almost hysterically- when Garion politely requested that the case be opened. The ranking priest, however, was enough of a politician to recognize the pre-eminent claim of the Rivan King -particularly since he bore Aldur's Orb- to examine any holy object he pleased.

Garion realized once again that, in a peculiar way, he himself was a holy object in the minds of many Alorns. The fanatic at last retreated, muttering the word "blasphemy", over and over again. The crystal case was opened with a rusty iron key, and a small table and chair were brought into the circle of candlelight so that Garion might examine the Codex.

"I think I can manage now, your Reverences," he told them rather pointedly. He did not like having people read over his shoulder and he felt no particular need of company. He sat at the table, put his hand on the scroll, and looked directly at the little clot of priests. "I'll call if I need anything," he added.

Their expressions were disapproving, but the overpowering presence of the Rivan King made them too timid to protest his peremptory dismissal; they quietly filed out, leaving him alone with the scroll.

Garion was excited. The solution to the problem that had plagued him for all these months lay at last in his hands. With nervous fingers, he untied the silken cord and began to unroll the crackling parchment. The script was archaic, but gorgeously done. The individual letters had not so much been written as they had been meticulously drawn. He perceived almost at once that an entire lifetime had been devoted to the production of this single manuscript. His hands actually trembling with his eagerness, Garion carefully unrolled the scroll, his eyes running over the now-familiar words and phrases, searching for the line that would once and for all clear up the mystery.

And there it was! Garion stared at it incredulously, not believing what he saw. The blot was exactly the same as it was on all the copies. He almost screamed with frustration. With a sick feeling of defeat, he read once again that fatal line: "And the Child of Light shall meet with the Child of Dark and shall overcome him, and the Darkness shall flee.

But behold, the Stone which lies at the center of the Light shall-" And there was that accursed blot again.

A peculiar thing happened as he read it again. An odd sort of indifference seemed to come over him. Why was he making such a fuss about a single blotted word? What difference could one word make? He almost rose from his chair with the intention of putting the scroll back in its case and leaving this foul-smelling place for home. Then he stopped quite suddenly, remembering all the hours he had spent trying to puzzle out the meaning of that blot on the page. Perhaps it wouldn't hurt to read it one more time. He had, after all, come a very long way.

He started over again, but his distaste became so acute that he could hardly stand it. Why was he wasting his time with this nonsense? He had traveled all this way to wear out his eyes on this moldering scrap of insane gibberish -this stinking, half-rotten sheet of poorly tanned sheepskin. He shoved the Codex away in disgust. This was sheer idiocy. He pushed back the chair and stood up, shifting Iron-grip's great sword on his back. His ship would still be there, moored to that rickety dock. He could be halfway to Kotu by nightfall and back at Riva within the week. He would lock the library once and for all and tend to his business. A king, after all, did not have time for all this idle, brainsickly speculation. Decisively, he turned his back on the scroll and started toward the door.

As soon as he was no longer looking at the scroll, however, he stopped. What was he doing? The puzzle was still there. He had made no effort to solve it. He had to find out. But as he turned back and looked at the scroll again, that same wave of insupportable disgust almost overwhelmed him. It was so strong that it made him feel faint. Once again he turned his back, and once again the feeling vanished. There was something about the scroll itself that was trying to drive him away.

He began to pace up and down, carefully keeping his eyes away from the scroll. What had the dry voice in his mind told him? "There are several words there. If you look at them in the right kind of light, you should be able to see them." What kind of light? The candles in this vaulted room obviously weren't what the voice had meant. Sunlight? That hardly seemed likely. Poledra had said that he must read the hidden words, but how could he, when the Codex literally drove him away each time he looked at it?

Then he stopped. What else had she said? Something about not being able to see without . . .

The wave of disgust which struck him was so strong that he felt his stomach constrict. He spun quickly so that his back was toward that hateful document; as he did so, the hilt of Iron-grip's sword jabbed him

painfully in the side of the head. Angrily he reached over his shoulder to grasp the handle and push it back, but instead, his hand touched the Orb. The feeling of revulsion evaporated instantly, and his mind became clear, and his thoughts lucid. The light! Of course! He had to read the Codex by the light of the Orb! That is what both Poledra and the dry voice had been trying to tell him. Awkwardly, he reached up and back, seizing the Orb. "Come off," he muttered to it. With a faint click, the Orb came free in his hand. The sudden weight of the huge sword strapped across his back very nearly drove him to his knees. In astonishment, he realized that the seeming weightlessness of the great weapon had been the work of the Orb itself. Struggling under that gross weight, he fumbled with the buckle at his chest, unfastened it, and felt the enormous bulk slide free. Iron-grip's sword fell to the floor with a loud clatter.

Holding the Orb in front of him, Garion turned and looked directly at the scroll. He could almost hear an angry snarl hovering in the air, but his mind remained clear. He stepped to the table and pulled the scroll open with one hand, holding the glowing Orb above it with the other.

At last he saw the meaning of the blot that had frustrated him for so long. It was not some random splotch of spilled ink. The message was there -all of it, but the words had all been written down on top of one another! The entire prophecy lay in that one single spot! By the blue, unwavering light of Aldur's Orb, his eyes seemed actually to plunge down and down beneath the surface of the parchment, and the words, hidden for eons, rose like bubbles out of the substance of the scroll.

"But Behold," the crucial passage read, "the Stone which lies at the center of the Light shall burn red, and my voice shall speak unto the Child of Light and reveal the name of the Child of Dark. And the Child of Light will take up the Guardian's sword and go forth to seek out that which is hidden. Long will be his quest, and it shall be threefold. And ye shall know that the quest hath begun when the Keeper's Line is renewed. Guard well the seed of the Keeper, for there shall be no other. Guard it well, for should that seed fall into the hands of the Child of Dark and be taken to the place where the evil dwells, then blind choice alone can decide the outcome. Should the Keeper's seed be reft away, then must the Beloved and Eternal lead the way. And he shall find the path to the place where the evil dwells in the Mysteries. And in each Mystery shall lie but a part of the path, and he must find them all -all- or the path will lead awry, and the Dark shall triumph. Hasten therefore to the meeting where the three-fold quest will end. And this meeting will come to pass in a place which is no more, and there will the choice be made."

Garion read it again, and then a third time, feeling an ominous chill as the words echoed and thundered through his consciousness. Finally he rose and went to the door of the candlelit, vaulted chamber. "I'll need something to write with," he told the priest standing just outside. "And send someone down to the river. Have him tell the captain of my ship to get things ready. Just as soon as I finish here, I have to leave for Kotu." The priest was staring wide-eyed at the incandescently glowing Orb in Garion's hand. "Don't just stand there, man, move!" Garion told him. "The whole world's hanging on this!" The priest blinked and then scurried away.

The following day, Garion was in Kotu, and about a day and a half later, he reached Aldurford in northern Algaria. As luck had it, a herd of half-wild Algarian cattle was being driven across that wide, shallow place in the mighty river on their way to Muros, and Garion went immediately in search of the herdmaster.

"I'm going to need two horses," he said, skipping the customary courtesies. "The best you have. I have to be in the Vale of Aldur before the week is out."

The herd master, a fierce-looking Algar warrior in black leather, looked at him speculatively. "Good horses are expensive, your Majesty," he ventured, his eyes coming alight.

"That's beside the point. Please have them ready in a quarter of an hour -and throw some food in a saddlebag for me."

"Doesn't your Majesty even want to discuss the price?" The herd master's voice betrayed his profound disappointment.

"Not particularly," Garion told him. "Just add it all up, and I'll pay it."

The herd master sighed. "Take them as a gift, your Majesty," he said. Then he looked mournfully at the Rivan King. "You do realize, of course, that you've absolutely ruined my whole afternoon."

Garion gave him a tight, knowing grin. "If I had the time, good herd master, I'd haggle with you for the whole day -right down to the last penny- but I have urgent business in the south."

The herd master shook his head sadly.

"Don't take it so hard, my friend," Garion told him. "If you like, I'll curse your name to everyone I meet and tell them all how badly you cheated me."

The herd master's eyes brightened. "That would be extremely kind of your Majesty," he said. He caught Garion's amused look. "One does have a certain reputation to maintain, after all. The horses will be ready whenever you are. I'll select them for you myself."

Garion made good time as he galloped south. He kept his horses fresh and strong by changing mounts every two or three leagues. The long journey in quest of the Orb had taught him many ways to conserve the strength of a good horse, and he utilized them all. When a steep hill stood in his path, he slowed to a walk and made up the lost time on the long downhill slope on the other side. When he could, he went around rough terrain. He stopped for the night late and was on the move again at first light in the morning.

Steadily he moved south through the knee-high sea of waving prairie grass lying lush and green under the warm spring sun. He avoided the man-made mountain of the Algarian Stronghold, knowing that King Chohag and Queen Silar, and certainly Hettar and Adara, would insist that he stop over for a day or so.

Regretfully, he also passed a league or so to the west of Poledra's cottage. He hoped that there would be time later to visit Aunt Pol, Durnik, and Errand.

Right now he had to get to Belgarath with the passage of the Codex he had so carefully copied and which now rode in the inside pocket of his doublet.

When at last he arrived at Belgarath's squat, round tower, his legs were so tired that they trembled under him as he swung down from his lathered horse. He went immediately to the large, flat-faced rock that was the door to the tower.

"Grandfather!" he shouted at the windows above, "Grandfather, it's me!"

There was no answer. The squat tower loomed silently up out of the tall grass, etched sharply against the sky. Garion had not even considered the possibility that the old man might not be here. "Grandfather!" he called again. There was still no answer. A red-winged blackbird swooped in, landed atop the tower, and peered curiously down at Garion. Then it began to preen its feathers.

Almost sick with disappointment, Garion stared at the silent rock that always swung aside for Belgarath. Although he knew that it was a serious breach of etiquette, he pulled in his concentration, looked at the rock, and said, "Open."

The stone gave a startled little lurch and swung obediently aside. Garion went in and quickly mounted the stairs, remembering at the last instant to step up over the one where the loose stone still lay unrepaired.

"Grandfather!" he called up the stairway.

"Garion?" the old man's voice coming from above sounded startled. "Is that you?"

"I called," Garion said, coming up the cluttered, round room at the top of the stairs. "Didn't you hear me?"

"I was concentrating on something," the old man replied. "What's the matter? What are you doing here?"

"I finally found that passage," Garion told him.

"What passage?"

"The one in the Mrin Codex -the one that was missing."

Belgarath's expression grew suddenly tense, even wary. "What are you talking about, boy? There's no missing passage in the Mrin Codex."

"We talked about it at Riva. Don't you remember? It's the place where there's a blot on that page. I pointed it out to you."

Belgarath's look grew disgusted. "You came here and interrupted me over that?" His tone was scathing. Garion stared at him. This was not the Belgarath he knew. The old man had never treated him so coldly before.

"Grandfather," he said, "what's wrong with you? This is very important. Somebody has somehow obscured a part of the Codex. When you read it, there's a part you don't see."

"But you can see it?" Belgarath said in a voice filled almost with contempt. "You? A boy who couldn't even read until he was almost grown? The rest of us have been studying that Codex for thousands of years, and now you come along and tell us that we've been missing something?"

"Listen to me, Grandfather. I'm trying to explain. When you come to that place, something happens to your mind. You don't pay any attention to it because, for some reason, you don't want to."

"Nonsense!" Belgarath snorted. "I don't need some rank beginner trying to tell me how to study."

"Won't you at least look at what I found?" Garion begged, taking the parchment out of his inside pocket and holding it out.

"No!" Belgarath shouted, slapping the parchment away. "Take that nonsense away from me. Get out of my tower, Garion!"

"Grandfather!"

"Get out of here!" The old man's face was pale with anger, and his eyes flashed.

Garion was so hurt by his Grandfather's words that tears actually welled up in his eyes. How could Belgarath talk to him this way? The old man became even more agitated. He began to pace up and down, muttering angrily to himself. "I have to work to do -important work- and you come bursting in here with this wild tale about something being missing. How dare you? How dare you interrupt me with this idiocy? Don't you know who I am?" He gestured at the parchment Garion had picked up and was holding again. "Get that disgusting thing out of my sight!"

And then Garion suddenly understood. Whatever or whoever it was that was trying to conceal the words hidden in that strange blot of ink was growing desperate, driving Belgarath into this uncharacteristic rage to keep him from reading the passage. There was only one way to break that strange compulsion not to see. Garion laid the parchment on a table, then coldly and deliberately unbuckled the heavy belt running across his chest, removed Iron-grip's sword from his back, and stood it against the wall. He put his hand to the Orb on the pommel of the sword and said, "Come off." The Orb came free in his hand, glowing at his touch.

"What are you doing?" Belgarath demanded of him.

"I'm going to have to make you see what I'm talking about, Grandfather." Garion said unhappily. "I don't want to hurt you, but you have to look." He walked slowly and deliberately toward Belgarath, the Orb extended before him.

"Garion," Belgarath said, backing away apprehensively, "Be careful with that."

"Go to the table, Grandfather," Garion told him grimly. "Go to the table and read what I found."

"Are you threatening me?" Belgarath demanded incredulously.

"Just do it, Grandfather."

"We don't behave this way toward each other, Garion," the old man said, still backing away from the glowing Orb.

"The table," Garion repeated. "Go over there and read."

Sweat was standing out on Belgarath's forehead. Reluctantly, almost as if it were causing him some obscure kind of pain, he went to the table and bent over the parchment sheet. Then he shook his head. "I can't see it," he declared, though a burning candle stood right beside the sheet. "It's too dark in here."

"Here," Garion said, reaching forth with the glowing Orb, "I'll light it for you." The Orb flared, and its blue light fell across the sheet and filled the room. "Read it, Grandfather," Garion said implacably.

Belgarath stared at him with an almost pleading expression. "Garion-"

"Read it."

Belgarath dropped his eyes to the page lying before him, and suddenly he gasped. "Where-? How did you get this?"

"It was under that blot. Can you see it now?"

"Of course I can see it." Excitedly Belgarath picked up the sheet and read it again. His hands were actually trembling. "Are you sure this is exactly what it said?"

"I copied it word for word, Grandfather -right off the original scroll."

"How were you able to see it?"

"The same way you are -by the light of the Orb. Somehow that makes it clear."

"Astonishing," the old man said. "I wonder-" He went quickly to a cabinet standing by the wall, rummaged around for a moment, and then came back to the table with a scroll in his hands. He quickly unrolled it. "Hold the Orb closer, boy," he said.

Garion held out the Orb and watched with his Grandfather as the buried words slowly rose to the surface just as they had in the shrine.

"Absolutely amazing," Belgarath marveled. "It's blurred, and some of the words aren't clear, but it's there. It's all there. How is it possible that none of us noticed this before -and how did you discover it?"

"I had help, Grandfather. The voice told me that I had to read it in a certain kind of light." He hesitated, knowing how much pain what he had to say would cause the old man. "And then, Poledra came to visit us."

"Poledra?" Belgarath spoke his wife's name with a little catch in his voice.

"Someone was making Ce'Nedra do something in her sleep -something very dangerous- and Poledra came and stopped her. Then she told me that I had to go to the shrine in Drasnia and read the Codex and she specifically told me to take the Orb along. When I got there and started reading, I almost left. It all seemed so stupid somehow. Then I remembered what they had told me and I put it together. As soon as I started reading by the light of the Orb, that feeling that I was wasting my time disappeared. Grandfather, what causes that? I thought it was only me, but it affected you, too."

Belgarath thought a moment, frowning. "It was an interdiction," he explained finally. "Someone at some time put his will to that one spot and made it so repulsive that no one could even see it."

"But it's right there -even on your copy. How is it that the scribe who copied it could see it well enough to write it down, but we couldn't?"

"Many of the scribes in the old days were illiterate," Belgarath explained. "You don't have to be able to read in order to copy something. All those scribes were doing was drawing exact duplicates of the letters on the page."

"But this -what was it you called it?"

"Interdiction. It's a fancy word for what happens. I think Beldin invented it. He's terribly impressed by his own cleverness sometimes."

"The interdiction made the scribes pile all the words on top of each other -even though they didn't know what the words meant?"

Belgarath grunted, his eyes lost in thought. "Whoever did this is very strong -and very subtle. I didn't even suspect that someone was tampering with my mind."

"When did it happen?"

"Probably at the same time the Mrin Prophet was speaking the words originally."

"Would the interdiction keep working after the person who caused it was dead?"

"No."

"Then-"

"Right. He's still around somewhere."

"Could it be this Zandramas we keep bearing about?"

"That's possible, I suppose." Belgarath picked up the sheet Garion had copied. "I can see it by ordinary light now," he said. "Apparently once you break the interdiction for somebody, it stays broken." He carefully read the sheet again. "This is really important, Garion."

"I was fairly sure it was," Garion replied. "I don't understand it all, though. The first part is fairly simple -the part about the Orb turning red and the name of the Child of Dark being revealed. It sort of looks as if I'm going to have to make another one of those trips."

"A long one, if this is right."

"What's this next part mean?"

"Well, as nearly as I can make it out, this quest of yours -whatever it is- has already started. It began when Geran was born." The old man frowned. "I don't like this part that says that blind choice might make the decision, though. That's the sort of thing that makes me very nervous."

"Who is the Beloved and Eternal?"

"Probably me."

Garion looked at him.

Belgarath shrugged. "It's a little ostentatious," he admitted, "but some people do call me 'the Eternal Man' and when my Master changed my name, he added the syllable 'Bel' to my old one. In the old language 'Bel' meant 'beloved'. He smiled a bit sadly. "My master had a way with words sometimes."

"What are these mysteries it talks about?"

"It's an archaic term. In the old days they used the word 'mystery' instead of 'prophecy'. As cryptic as some of them are, it sort of makes sense, I guess."

"Ho! Garion! Belgarath!" The voice came to them from outside the tower.

"Who's that?" Belgarath asked. "Did you tell anybody you were coming here?"

"No," Garion frowned, "not really." He went to the window and looked down. A tall, hawk-faced Algar with a flowing back scalp lock sat astride a lathered and exhausted looking horse. "Hettar!" Garion called down to him. "What's the matter?"

"Let me in, Garion," Hettar replied. "I have to talk with you."

Belgarath joined Garion at the window. "The door's around on the other side," he called down. "I'll open it for you. Be careful of the stone on that fifth step," he cautioned, as the tall man started around the tower. "It's loose."

"When are you going to fix that, Grandfather?" Garion asked. He felt the faint, familiar surge as the old man opened the door.

"Oh, I'll get to it one of these days."

Hettar's hawk-like face was bleak as he came up into the round room at the top of the tower.

"What's all the urgency, Hettar?" Garion asked. "I've never seen you ride a horse into the ground like that."

Hettar took a deep breath. "You've got to go back to Riva immediately, Garion," he said.

"Is something wrong there?" Garion asked, a sudden chill coming over him.

Hettar sighed. "I hate to be the one to have to tell you this, Garion, but Ce'Nedra sent word for me to get you as fast as I possibly could. You've got to go back to Riva at once."

Garion steeled himself, a dozen dreadful possibilities arising in his imagination. "Why?" he asked quietly. "I'm sorry, Garion -more sorry than I can possibly say- but Brand has been murdered."

PART THREE - ALORIA

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Lieutenant Bledik was one of those sober-minded young Sendarian officers who took everything very seriously. He arrived at the Lion Inn in the port city of Camaar promptly on time and was escorted upstairs by the aproned innkeeper. The rooms in which Garion and the others were staying were airy and well furnished and looked out over the harbor. Garion stood at the window holding aside one of the green drapes and looking out as if it might be possible to penetrate all those leagues of open water and see what was happening at Riva.

"You sent for me, your Majesty?" Bledik asked with a respectful bow.

"Ah, Lieutenant, come in," Garion said, turning from the window. "I have an urgent message for King Fulrach. How fast do you think you can get to Sendar?"

The lieutenant considered it. One look at his sober face told Garion that the young man always considered everything. Bledik pursed his lips, absently adjusting the collar of his scarlet uniform. "If I ride straight through and change horses at every hostel along the way, I can be at the palace by late tomorrow afternoon."

"Good," Garion said. He handed the young officer the folded and sealed letter to the Sendarian king. "When you see King Fulrach, tell him that I've sent Lord Hettar of Algaria to all of the Alorn Kings to tell them that I'm calling a meeting of the Alorn Council at Riva and that I'd like to have him there as well."

"Yes, your Majesty."

"And tell him that the Rivan Warder has been murdered."

Bledik's eyes widened, and his face went pale. "No!" he gasped. "Who was responsible?"

"I don't know any of the details yet, but, as soon as we can hire a ship, we're going across to the island."

"Garion, dear," Polgara said from her chair by the window, "you explained everything in the letter. The lieutenant has a long way to go, and you're delaying him."

"You're probably right, Aunt Pol," he admitted. He turned back to Bledik. "Will you need any money or anything?" he asked.

"No, your Majesty."

"You'd better get started then."

"At once, your Majesty." The lieutenant saluted and went out.

Garion began to pace up and down on the costly Mallolean carpet while Polgara, dressed in a plain blue traveling gown, continued to mend one of Errand's tunics, her needle flashing in the sunlight streaming through the window. "How can you be so calm?" he demanded of her.

"I'm not, dear," she replied. "That's why I'm sewing."

"What's taking them so long?" he fretted.

"Hiring a ship takes time, Garion. It's not exactly like buying a loaf of bread."

"Who could possibly have wanted to hurt Brand?" he burst out. He had asked that same question over and over in the week or more since they had left the Vale. The big, sad-faced Warder had been so totally devoted to Garion and the Rivan Throne that he had possessed virtually no separate identity. So far as Garion knew, Brand had not had an enemy in the world.

"That's one of the first things we'll want to find out when we get to Riva," she said. "Now please try to calm yourself. Pacing about doesn't accomplish anything and it's very distracting."

It was almost evening when Belgarath, Durnik, and Errand returned, bringing with them a tall, gray-haired Rivan whose clothing carried those distinctive smells of salt-water and tar that identified him as a sailor.

"This is Captain Jandra," Belgarath introduced him. "He's agreed to ferry us across to the Isle."

"Thank you, Captain," Garion said simply.

"My pleasure, your Majesty." Jandra replied with a stiff bow.

"Have you just come in from Riva?" Polgara asked him.

"Yesterday afternoon, my Lady."

"Have you any idea at all about what happened there?"

"We didn't get too many details down at the harbor, my Lady. Sometimes the people up at the Citadel are sort of secretive -no offense, your Majesty. There are all kinds of rumors going about the city, though -most of them pretty farfetched. About all I can say for certain is that the Warder was attacked and killed by a group of Chereks."

"Chereks!" Garion exclaimed.

"Everyone agrees on that point, your Majesty. Some people say that all the assassins were killed. Others say that there were some survivors. I couldn't really say for sure, but I know that they did bury six of them."

"Good," Belgarath grunted.

"Not if there were only six to begin with, father," Polgara told him. "We need answers, not bodies."

"Uh -pardon me, your Majesty." Jandra said a little uncomfortably. "It might not be my place to say this, but some of the rumors in the city say that the Chereks were officials of some kind from Val Alorn and that they were sent by King Anheg."

"Anheg? That's absurd."

"That's what some people are saying, your Majesty. I don't put much stock in it myself, but it might just be the kind of talk you wouldn't want going much further. The Warder was well-liked in Riva, and a lot of people have taken to polishing their swords -if you take my meaning."

"I think I'd better get home as soon as possible," Garion said. "How long will it take us to get to Riva?"

The captain thought it over. "My ship isn't as fast as a Cherek warship," he apologized. "Let's say three days -if the weather holds. We can leave on the morning tide, if you can be ready."

"We'll do that, then," Garion said.

It was late summer on the Sea of the Winds, and the weather held clear and sunny. Jandra's ship plowed steadily through the sparkling, sun-touched waves, heeling to one side under a quartering wind. Garion spent most of the voyage pacing moodily up and down the deck. When, on the third day out from Camaar, the jagged shape of the Isle of the Winds appeared low on the horizon ahead, a kind of desperate impatience came over him. There were so many questions that had to be answered and so many things that had to be done that even the hour or so that it would take to reach the harbor seemed an intolerable delay. It was midafternoon when Jandra's ship rounded the headland at the harbor mouth and made for the stone quays at the foot of the city. "I'm going on ahead," Garion told the others. "Follow me as soon as you can." And even as the sailors were making fast the hawsers, he leaped across to the salt-crusted stones of the quay and started up toward the Citadel, taking the steps two at a time.

Ce'Nedra was waiting for him at the massive main doors of the Citadel, garbed in a black mourning dress. Her face was pale, and her eyes full of tears. "Oh, Garion," she cried as he reached her. She threw her arms about his neck and began to sob against his chest.

"How long ago did it happen, Ce'Nedra?" he asked, holding her in his arms. "Hettar didn't have too many details."

"It was about three weeks ago," she sobbed. "Poor Brand. That poor, dear man."

"Do you know where I can find Kail?"

"He's been working at Brand's desk," she replied. "I don't think he's slept for more than a few hours any night since it happened."

"Aunt Pol and the others should be along shortly. I'm going to talk with Kail. Would you bring them as soon as they get here?"

"Of course, dear," she replied, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand.

"We'll talk later," he said. "Right now I've got to find out what happened."

"Garion," she said gravely, "they were Chereks."

"That's what I'd heard," he said, "and that's why I've got to get to the bottom of this as quickly as possible."

The corridors of the Citadel were muted and oddly silent. As Garion strode toward that group of rooms in the west wing from which Brand had always conducted the day-to-day business of the kingdom, the servants and functionaries he encountered bowed soberly and stood aside for him.

Kail was dressed in deepest black, and his face was gray with fatigue and deep sorrow. The orderly stacks of documents on the top of Brand's heavy desk, however, gave evidence that despite his grief he had been working not only at his own duties but at his father's as well. He looked up as Garion entered the room and started to rise.

"Don't," Garion said. "We have too much to do for formalities." He looked at his weary friend. "I'm sorry, Kail," he said sadly. "I'm more sorry than I can possibly tell you."

"Thank you, your Majesty."

Garion sank into the chair across the desk from him, his own weariness coming over him in a wave. "I haven't been able to get any details," he said. "Could you tell me exactly what happened?"

Kail nodded and leaned back in his chair. "It was about a month ago," he began, "not long after you left for Drasnia. A trade deputation from King Anheg arrived. All their credentials seemed to be in order, but they were a bit vague about exactly what the purpose of their visit was. We extended them the customary courtesies, and most of the time they stayed in the rooms we assigned them. Then, late one night, my father had been discussing some matters with Queen Ce'Nedra and was on his way back to his own quarters when he encountered them in the corridor leading to the royal apartments. He asked if he could help them, and they attacked him without any warning whatsoever." Kail stopped, and Garion could see his jaws tightly clenched. He drew in a deep breath -and passed one weary hand across his eyes. "Your Majesty, my father wasn't even armed. He did his best to defend himself, and he was able to call for help before they cut him down. My brothers and I ran to his aid along with several of the Citadel guards -and we all did our best to capture the assassins, but they absolutely refused to surrender." He frowned. "It was almost as if they were deliberately throwing their lives away. We had no choice but to kill them."

"All of them?" Garion asked with a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"All but one," Kail replied. "My brother, Brin, hit him across the back of the head with the butt of an axe. He's been unconscious ever since."

"Aunt Pol's with me," Garion said. "She'll wake him -if anybody can." His face went bleak. "And when he does wake up, he and I are going to have a little talk."

"I want some answers, too," Kail agreed. He paused, his face troubled. "Belgarion, they carried a letter from King Anheg. That's why we let them into the Citadel."

"I'm sure there's a logical explanation."

"I have the letter. It's over his seal and his signature."

"I've called a meeting of the Alorn Council," Garion told him. "As soon as Anheg gets here, we'll be able to clear this up."

"If he comes," Kail added somberly.

The door opened quietly, and Ce'Nedra led the others into the room.

"All right," Belgarath said crisply, "Let's see if we can sort this out. Did any of them survive?"

"One, Ancient One," Kail replied, "but he's unconscious."

"Where is he?" Polgara asked.

"We put him in a room in the north tower, my Lady. The physicians have been tending his injuries, but they haven't been able to revive him yet."

"I'll go at once," she said.

Errand crossed the room to where Kail sat and wordlessly laid a sympathetic hand on the young Rivan's shoulder. Kail's jaws clenched again, and tears suddenly welled up in his eyes.

"They had a letter from Anheg, Grandfather," Garion told the old man. "That's how they got inside the Citadel."

"Do you have the letter anywhere?" Belgarath asked Kail.

"Yes, Ancient One. It's right here," Kail began to leaf through a stack of documents.

"That seems to be the best place to start," the old man said. "The entire Alorn alliance is hanging on this, so we'd better get it straightened out fast."

It was late evening by the time Polgara completed her examination of the lone surviving assassin. When she came into the royal apartment where the discussions had been continuing, her face was bleak. "I'm sorry, but there's absolutely nothing I can do with him," she reported. "The entire back of his skull has been crushed. He's only barely alive; if I try to wake him, he'll die immediately."

"I need some answers, Aunt Pol," Garion said. "How long do you think it's going to be until he wakes up?"

She shook her head. "I doubt that he ever will -and even if he does, it's unlikely that he's going to be able to say anything coherent. About all that's holding his brains together right now is his scalp."

He looked at her helplessly. "Couldn't you-"

"No, Garion. There's nothing left of his mind to work with."

Two days later, King Cho-Hag, Chief of the Clan-Chiefs of the Algar horsemen, arrived, accompanied by Queen Silar and Adara, Garion's tall, dark-haired cousin. "A very sad occasion," Cho-Hag said to Garion in his quiet voice as they clasped hands on the quay.

"It seems lately that about the only time we all get together is to attend funerals," Garion agreed. "Where's Hettar?"

"I think he's at Val Alorn," Cho-Hag replied. "He'll probably come here with Anheg."

"That's something we're going to have to talk about," Garion said.

Cho-Hag lifted one eyebrow.

"The people who killed Brand were Chereks," Garion explained quietly. "They had a letter from Anheg."

"Anheg could not have had anything to do with it," Cho-Hag declared. "He loved Brand like a brother. There had to be somebody else behind it."

"I'm sure you're right, but there's a great deal of suspicion here in Riva right now. There are some people who are even talking war."

Cho-Hag's face went grim.

"That's why we have to get to the truth in a hurry," Garion told him. "We've got to head that kind of thinking off before it gets completely out of hand."

The next day King Fulrach of Sendaria arrived in the harbor; with him on their stout, broad-beamed ship was the one-armed General Brendig, the ancient but still-vigorous Earl of Seline, and, surprisingly, Queen Layla herself, the lady whose fear of sea travel had become almost legendary. That same afternoon, Queen Porenn, still in deepest mourning for her husband, disembarked from the black-painted Drasnian vessel that had carried her from Boktor, along with her son, the boy-king Kheva and the bone-thin Margrave Khendon, the man known as Javelin.

"Oh, my dear Garion," Porenn said, embracing him at the foot of the gangway. "I cannot tell you how sorry I am."

"We've all lost one of our dearest friends," he replied. He turned to Kheva. "Your Majesty," he said with a formal bow.

"Your Majesty," Kheva replied, also bowing.

"We heard that there's some mystery surrounding the assassination," Porenn said. "Khendon here is very good at clearing up mysteries."

"Margrave," Garion greeted the Drasnian Chief of Intelligence.

"Your Majesty," Javelin responded. He turned and extended one hand to a young woman with honey-blond hair and soft brown eyes who was coming down the gangway. "You do remember my niece, don't you?"

"Margravine Liselle," Garion greeted her.

"Your Majesty," she replied with a formal curtsy. Although she was probably not even aware of it, the hint of a dimple in each of her cheeks gave her expression a slightly impish cast. "My uncle has pressed me into service as his secretary. He pretends failing eyesight, but I think perhaps it's just an excuse to avoid giving me a genuine assignment. Older relatives tend to be overprotective sometimes, don't you think?"

Garion smiled briefly. "Has anyone heard from Silk?" he asked.

"He's at Rheon," Javelin replied, "trying to gather information about the activities of the Bear-cult. We've sent messengers, but sometimes he can be hard to find. I expect he'll be along soon, though."

"Has Anheg arrived yet?" Queen Porenn asked.

Garion shook his head. "Cho-Hag and Fulrach are here, but there's no word from Anheg yet."

"We've heard that some people suspect him," the little blond queen said. "It simply cannot be true, Garion."

"I'm sure he'll be able to explain everything as soon as he arrives."

"Did any of the assassins survive?" Javelin asked.

"One," Garion told him, "but I'm afraid that he won't be much help to us. One of Brand's sons bashed in his head. It doesn't appear that he's ever going to wake up."

"Pity," Javelin murmured briefly, "but a man doesn't always have to be able to talk in order to provide information."

"I hope you're right," Garion said fervently.

The discussions at supper and later that evening were subdued. Though no one stated it openly, they were all reluctant to speak of the bleak possibility which faced them. To raise that question without Anheg's being present might have solidified the doubts and suspicions and given the entire meeting a tone none of them were willing to assume.

"When is Brand's funeral to be held?" Porenn asked quietly.

"As soon as Anheg arrives, I guess," Garion replied.

"Have you made any decisions concerning his office?" Fulrach asked.

"I don't quite follow you."

"The position of Warder originated a long time ago in order to fill the vacuum that existed after the Nyissans murdered King Gorek and his family. Now that you occupy the throne, do you really need a Warder?"

"To be honest with you, I hadn't really thought about it. Brand's always been here. He seemed as permanent as the stones of the Citadel itself."

"Who's been doing his work since he was killed, your Majesty?" the silvery haired old Earl of Seline asked.

"His second son, Kail."

"You have many other responsibilities, Belgarion," the Earl pointed out. "You really do need someone here to manage the day-to-day details -at least until the present crisis has passed. I don't think, however, that any final decision about the post of Warder needs to be made just now. I'm sure that if you asked him, Kail would continue to perform his father's duties without a formal appointment."

"He's right, Garion," Ce'Nedra said. "Kail's absolutely devoted to you. He'll do anything you ask him to do."

"If this young man is doing an adequate job, it's probably best to let him continue," Seline suggested. Then he smiled briefly. "There's an old Sendarian adage that says, 'If it isn't broken, don't try to fix it.'"

The following morning an ungainly-looking ship with elaborate structures fore and aft wallowed into the harbor under an obviously top-heavy spread of sail. Garion, who stood atop the battlements of the Citadel talking quietly with Javelin, frowned as he looked down at it. "What kind of ship is that?" he asked. "I don't recognize the construction."

"It's Arendish, your Majesty. They feel the need to make everything look like a castle."

"I didn't know that the Arends even had any ships."

"They don't have very many," Javelin replied. "Their vessels have a tendency to capsize whenever they encounter a stiff breeze."

"I guess we'd better go down and see who it is."

"Right," Javelin agreed.

The passengers aboard the clumsy Arendish vessel proved to be old friends. Mandorallen, the mighty Baron of Vo Mandor, stood at the rail, gleaming in full armor. At his side stood Lelldorin of Wildantor, and with them were their wives, Nerina and Ariana, both ornately gowned in dark, rich brocades.

"We came instantly upon our receipt of the news of thy tragedy, Garion," Mandorallen shouted across the intervening water as the Arendish crew laboriously maneuvered their awkward ship toward the quay upon which Garion and Javelin waited. "Duty and affection, both for thee and they foully murdered Warder, impel us to aid thee in thy rightful search for vengeance. Korodullin himself would have joined us but for an illness which hath laid him low."

"I suppose I should have expected this," Garion murmured.

"Are they likely to complicate matters?" Javelin asked quietly.

Garion shuddered. "You have no idea."

It was not until two days later that the Seabird, with Barak at the tiller, rounded the headland and sailed into the harbor. The rails were lined with burly Cherek warriors in chainmail shirts. Their faces were alert, and their eyes were wary as Barak steered his ship up to the quay.

When Garion reached the foot of the long flight of stone steps leading down from the Citadel, a sizable crowd had gathered. The mood of that crowd was ugly, and most of the men who stood there with grim faces had weapons at their sides.

"It looks as if we've got a situation on our hands here," Garion said quietly to Kail, who had accompanied him. "I think we'd better try to put the best face on this meeting."

Kail looked at the angry faces of the townspeople pressing toward the wharves. "Perhaps you're right, Belgarion," he agreed.

"We're going to have to put on a show of cordiality when we greet Anheg."

"You ask a great deal, Belgarion."

"I hate to put it this way, Kail, but I'm not asking. Those Chereks along the rail are Anheg's personal bodyguard. If anything starts here, there's going to be a lot of bloodshed -and probably the beginning of a war that none of us wants. Now smile, and let's go welcome the King of Cherek."

To give it the best possible appearance, Garion led Kail up the gangway to the deck of Barak's ship so that his meeting with King Anheg could take place in fullview of the angry crowd. Barak, clad in a formal green doublet and looking even larger than he had the last time Garion had seen him, strode down the deck to meet them. "This is a very bleak time for us all," he declared as he shook hands first with Garion and then with Kail. "Anheg and Hettar are below with the ladies."

"Ladies?" Garion asked.

"Islena and Merel."

"You've heard the rumors?" Garion asked him.

Barak nodded. "That's one of the reasons we brought our wives."

"Good idea," Garion said approvingly. "A man who's coming someplace to pick a fight doesn't usually bring his wife along, and we all want to give this the best possible appearance."

"I'll go down and get Anheg," Barak said, casting a quick glance at the ugly crowd gathered at the foot of his gangway.

King Anheg's brutish, black-bearded face was haggard and drawn when he emerged from below-decks in his usual blue robe.

"Anheg, my friend," Garion said in a voice intended to carry to the crowd. He hurried forward and caught the Cherek king in a rough embrace. "I think we should smile," he whispered. "We want to let those people know we're still the best of friends."

"Are we, Garion?" Anheg asked in a subdued voice.

"Nothing has changed at all, Anheg," Garion said firmly.

"Let's get on with this, then." Anheg raised his voice. "The royal house of Cherek extends its condolences to the Rivan Throne in this hour of grief," he declared formally.

"Hypocrite!" a voice from the crowd bellowed.

Anheg's face went bleak, but Garion moved quickly to the rail, his eyes angry. "Any man who insults my friend insults me," he said in a dreadfully quiet voice. "Does anyone here want to say anything to me?"

The crowd drew back nervously.

Garion turned back to Anheg. "You look tired," he said.

"I've been tearing the palace apart -and most of Val Alorn as well- ever since I heard about what happened, but I haven't been able to find a single clue." The black-bearded Cherek king stopped and looked straight into Garion's face. His eyes had a pleading look in them. "I swear to you, Garion, upon my life, that I had nothing whatsoever to do with the death of Brand."

"I know that, Anheg," Garion said simply. He glanced at the still-angry crowd. "Maybe we'd better get Hettar and the ladies and go up to the Citadel. The others are all there, and we want to get started." He turned to Kail. "As soon as we get there, I want you to send down some men to disperse these people. Have them seal off the foot of this quay. I don't want any trouble here."

"Is it that bad?" Anheg asked very quietly.

"Just a precaution," Garion said. "I want to keep things under control until we get to the bottom of this."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The funeral of Brand, the Rivan Warder, took place the following day in the Hall of the Rivan King. Garion, dressed all in black, sat on the basalt throne with Ce'Nedra at his side as the Rivan Deacon delivered the eulogy to the crowded Hall.

The presence of King Anheg of Cherek at that sorrowful ceremony caused an angry undertone among the members of the Rivan nobility, and it was only their profound respect for Brand and Garion's flinty gaze that prevented the whispers at the back of the Hall from becoming open accusations.

Anheg, seated between Poren and Cho-Hag, remained stony-faced throughout the services and he left the Hall immediately upon their conclusion.

"I've never seen him like this," Barak said quietly to Garion after the ceremony. "No one has ever accused him of murder before, and he doesn't know how to deal with it."

"No one's accusing him now," Garion replied quickly.

"Turn around and look at the faces of your subjects, Garion," Barak said sadly. "There's an accusation in every single eye."

Garion sighed. "I don't have to look. I know exactly what they're thinking."

"When do you want to start the meetings?"

"Let's wait a bit," Garion decided. "I don't particularly want Anheg going through the corridors of the Citadel while all these mourners are drifting about with daggers in their belts."

"Sound thinking," Barak agreed.

They gathered about midafternoon in the blue-draped council chamber in the south tower. As soon as Kail had closed the door, Anheg rose and faced them. "I want to state right at the outset that I had absolutely nothing to do with what happened here," he declared. "Brand was always one of my closest friends, and I'd have cut off my arm before I'd have hurt him. You have my word for that -both as a king and as an Alorn."

"No one's accusing you of anything, Anheg," Cho-Hag said quietly.

"Ha! I'm not nearly as stupid as I look, Cho-Hag -and even if I were, I still have ears. The people here in Riva have done everything short of spitting in my face."

The silvery-haired Earl of Seline leaned back in his chair, "I think perhaps that all of these suspicions -totally unfounded, of course- stem from that letter the assassins presented when they came here. Might it not be the quickest way to proceed to begin by examining that document?"

"Not a bad idea," Garion said. He turned to Kail. "Could we see the letter?"

"Ah -I- Ancient Belgarath has it, Sire," Kail said.

"Oh -that's right," Belgarath said. "I'd almost forgotten." He reached inside his gray tunic, drew out a folded parchment, and handed it to the old Sendarian nobleman.

"It looks more or less in order," the Earl mused after he had read it.

"Let me see that," Anheg demanded. He held the document distastefully, scowling as he read. "That's my signature, all right", he admitted, "and my seal, but I certainly didn't write this."

Garion had a thought. "Do you always read everything they bring you to sign?" he asked. "I know that there are times when they bring me whole stacks of things to sign, and I just write my name at the bottom of each one. What I'm getting at is -could someone have slipped this into a pile of other documents so that you signed it without knowing what it said?"

Anheg shook his head. "That happened to me once," he said. "Now I read everything before I sign it. Not only that, I dictate every document I put my name to. That way I know it says exactly what I want it to say." He thrust the letter toward Garion. "Look at this," he said, pointing at the second paragraph. "Foreasmuch as trade is the lifeblood of both our kingdoms- and so on. Blast it, Garion! I've never used the word 'foreasmuch' in my entire life."

"How do we reconcile this, then?" the Earl of Seline asked. "We have authenticated the signature and seal. King Anheg declares that he not only reads everything he signs but that he also dictates every letter and proclamation personally. And yet we find textual inconsistencies in the document."

"Seline," Anheg said acidly, "did you ever dabble in law? You sound a great deal like a lawyer."

The Earl laughed. "Merely trying to be concise, your Majesty," he said.

"I hate lawyers."

The damning letter was central to the discussions for the remainder of the day, but nothing was resolved. Garion went wearily to bed that night as confused and filled with doubts as he had been when they started. He slept badly and woke late. As he lay in the canopied royal bed, still trying to sort out his thoughts, he could hear voices coming from the adjoining room. Almost idly he began to identify those voices. Ce'Nedra was there, of course, and Aunt Pol. Queen Layla's giddy laugh made her easily identifiable. Nerina and Ariana, because of their Mimbrate dialect, were as easy. There were others as well, but the individuality of their voices was lost in the general chatter.

Garion slowly sat up, feeling almost as if he had not slept at all. He pushed the down-filled comforter aside and swung his feet to the floor. He did not really want to face this day.

He sighed and stood up. Briefly he looked at the solid black doublet and hose he had worn the day before, then shook his head. To continue to dress in mourning might in some obscure way be taken as a silent accusation. That must be avoided at all costs. The situation involving King Anheg was so delicate at the moment that the slightest hint could push it into crisis. He crossed to the heavy wardrobe where he kept his clothes, selected one of his customary blue doublets, and began to dress.

The conversation in the adjoining room broke off suddenly at the sound of a knock on the door.

"Am I welcome here?" he heard Queen Islena ask in a subdued voice.

"Of course you are," Aunt Pol replied.

"I had thought that-" Islena faltered, then began again. "Considering everything, I had thought that perhaps it might be better if I stayed away."

"Nonsense," Queen Layla declared. "Do come in, Islena." There was a general murmur of agreement.

"I swear to you all that my husband is innocent of this atrocity," Islena said in a clear voice.

"No one is saying that he was not, Islena," Aunt Pol replied quietly.

"Not openly perhaps, but there are ugly suspicions everywhere."

"I'm certain that Garion and the others will get to the bottom of it," Ce'Nedra said firmly. "Then everything will be cleared up."

"My poor Anheg did not sleep at all last night," Islena told them sadly. "I know that he looks brutish, but inside he's really very sensitive. This has hurt him deeply. Once he even cried."

"Our lords will requite the tears thy husband hath shed upon the body of the foul villain who lurks behind this monstrous act," the Baroness Nerina declared. "And the foolish men who doubt his true fidelity shall be covered with shame for their lack of trust, once the truth is out."

"I can only hope that you're right," Islena said.

"This is a mournful topic, ladies," Garion's cousin Adara told the rest of them, "and it has nothing to do with the real reason we're all here."

"And what reason is that, gentle Adara?" Ariana asked.

"The baby, Ariana," Adara replied. "We've come to see your baby again, Ce'Nedra. I'm sure he's not still sleeping, so why don't you bring him in here so that we can all fuss over him?"

Ce'Nedra laughed. "I thought you'd never ask."

The council meeting began about midmorning. The kings and their advisors gathered once more in a blue-draped council chamber. The golden sunlight of a late summer morning streamed in through the windows and a gentle sea breeze stirred the draperies. There was no particular formality in these sessions, and the monarchs and the others lounged comfortably in the velvet-upholstered chairs scattered about the room.

"I really don't think we'll accomplish too much by chewing on that letter for another day," Belgarath began.

"Let's agree that it's obviously a forgery of some kind and move on." He looked at Kail. "Did your father have any enemies here on the island?" he asked, "Someone wealthy enough and powerful enough to hire Cherek assassins?"

Kail frowned. "No one can go through life without stepping on a few toes, Ancient One," he replied, "but I don't think anybody was holding that kind of grudge."

"In truth, my friend," Mandorallen told him, "some men, when they feel that they have been offended, will nurture their rancor in silence and with dissembling guise conceal their enmity until opportunity doth present itself to revenge themselves. The history of Arendia is replete with stories of such acts."

"It's a possibility," King Fulrach agreed. "And it might be better if we start close to home before we begin to go further afield."

"A list might be useful," Javelin suggested. "If we write down the name of every man on the Isle of the Winds whom Brand might possibly have offended, we can start eliminating them. Once we have the list narrowed down, we can start investigating. If the man behind this is a Rivan, he'd either have had to visit Cherek or had some contact with Chereks sometime in the recent past."

It took the remainder of the morning to compile the list.

Kail sent for certain documents, and they all considered each of the decisions Brand had made during the past five years.

Since the Warder had functioned as the kingdom's chief-magistrate, there had been many decisions and usually a winner and a loser in each case.

After lunch, they began the winnowing process, discarding the names of those men without sufficient wealth or power to be able to obtain the services of paid assassins.

"It's narrowing down a bit," Javelin said as he struck off another name. He held up the list. "We've got this down to almost manageable proportions."

There was a respectful knock on the door. One of the guards posted there spoke briefly with someone outside, then came over to Barak and murmured something to him. The big red-bearded man nodded, rose, and followed him from the room.

"How about this one?" Javelin asked Kail, pointing at another name.

Kail scratched at one cheek. "I don't think so," he replied.

"It was a dispute over land," Javelin pointed out, "and some people get very intense where land is concerned."

"It was only a pasture," Kail recalled, "and not a very big one. The man has more land than he can keep track of anyway."

"Why did he go to the law, then?"

"It was the other man who brought the matter to my father."

Barak came back into the room. "Anheg," he said to his cousin, "Gredlik's here. He's got something fairly important to tell you."

Anheg started to rise, then looked around. "Have him come in here," he said shortly. "I don't want anybody thinking that I've got any secrets."

"We've all got secrets, Anheg," Queen Porenn murmured.

"My situation is somewhat peculiar, Porenn." He pushed his dented crown back into place from where it had slipped down over one ear.

The bearded and fur-clad Gredlik pushed past the guards and came into the chamber at that point. "You've got trouble at home, Anheg," he growled bluntly.

"What kind of trouble?"

"I just came back from Jarviksholm," Gredlik replied. "They're very unfriendly there."

"There's nothing new about that."

"They tried to sink me," Gredlik said. "They've lined the tops of the cliffs on both sides of the inlet leading up to the city with catapults. The boulders were coming down like hailstones for a while."

Anheg scowled. "Why would they do that?"

"Probably because they didn't want me to see what they're doing."

"What could they be doing that they'd want to keep that secret?"

"They're building a fleet."

Anheg shrugged. "Lots of people build ships in Cherek."

"A hundred at a time?"

"How many?"

"I was busy dodging boulders, so I couldn't get an exact count, but the entire upper end of the inlet is lined with yards. The keels have all been laid, and they're starting on the ribs. Oh, they're working on the city walls, too."

"The walls? They're already higher than the walls of Val Alorn."

"They're even higher now."

Anheg scowled. "What are they up to?"

"Anheg, when you build a fleet and start strengthening your fortifications, it usually means that you're getting ready for a war. And when you try to sink the ship of a man known to be friendly to the crown, that usually means that the war is going to be with your king."

"He does have a point, Anheg," Barak said.

"Who's in control at Jarviksholm right now?" Garion asked curiously.

"The Bear-cult," Anheg said in disgust. "They've been filtering into the town from all over Cherek for the past ten years."

"This is very serious, Anheg," Barak said.

"It's also totally out of character," Javelin pointed out. "The cult has never been interested in confrontational politics before."

"What kind of politics?" Anheg asked.

"Another way of saying open war with the crown," the Drasnian Chief of Intelligence explained.

"Say what you mean, man."

"An occupational peculiarity," Javelin shrugged. "Always before, the cult has tried to work from within -trying to gather enough support to be able to coerce the kings of the Alorn nations to follow their policies. I don't think they've ever even considered open rebellion before."

"There's a first time for everything, I guess," Hettar suggested.

Javelin was frowning. "It's not at all like them," he mused, "and it's a direct reversal of a policy they've followed for the past three thousand years."

"People change sometimes," General Brendig said.

"Not the Bear-cult," Barak told him. "There isn't room enough in a cultist's mind for more than one idea."

"I think you'd better get off your behind and get back to Val Alorn, Anheg," Gredlik suggested. "If they get those ships in the water, they'll control the whole west coast of Cherek."

Anheg shook his head. "I have to stay here," he declared. "I've got another matter that's more important right now."

Gredlik shrugged. "It's your kingdom," he said, "at least for the time being."

"Thanks, Gredlik," Anheg said drily. "You have no idea how that notion comforts me. How long will it take you to get to Val Alorn?"

"Three -maybe four days. It depends on how I catch the tides at the Bore."

"Go there," Anheg told him. "Tell the fleet admirals that I want them to move out of Val Alorn and take up stations off the Halberg straits. I think that when this council is over, I'll want to take a little journey up to Jarviksholm. It shouldn't take much to burn out those shipyards."

Gredlik's answering grin was positively vicious.

After the council adjourned for the evening, Kail caught up with Garion in the torchlit corridor. "I think there's something you should consider, Belgarion," he said quietly.

"Oh?"

"This moving of the Cherek fleet concerns me."

"It's Anheg's fleet," Garion replied, "and his kingdom."

"There is only this Gredlik's unsupported word about the shipyards at Jarviksholm," Kail pointed out. "And the Halberg straits are only three days from Riva."

"Aren't we being overly suspicious, Kail?"

"Your Majesty, I agree completely that King Anheg deserves every benefit of doubt concerning the assassination of my father, but this coincidence that puts the Cherek fleet within striking distance of Riva is an altogether different matter. I think we should quietly look to our defenses -just to be on the safe side."

"I'll think about it," Garion said shortly and moved on down the corridor.

About noon on the following day, Silk arrived. The little man was richly dressed in a gray velvet doublet; as had become his custom of late, his fingers glittered with costly jewels. After only the briefest of greetings to his friends, he went into private discussions with Javelin.

When Belgarath entered the council chamber that afternoon, he had a self-satisfied smirk on his face and the letter from King Anheg in his hand.

"What is it, father?" Polgara asked curiously. "You look like the ship's cat on a fishing boat."

"I'm always pleased when I solve a riddle, Pol." He turned to the rest of them. "As it turns out, Anheg did write this letter."

King Anheg jumped to his feet, his face livid.

Belgarath held up one hand. "But," he continued, "what Anheg wrote is not what the letter seems to say." He laid the sheet of parchment on the table. "Have a look," he invited them.

When Garion looked at the letter, he could clearly see red-colored letters lying behind the ones which spelled out the message that seemed to place responsibility for Brand's death at Anheg's door.

"What is this, Belgarath?" King Fulrach asked.

"Actually, it's a letter to the Earl of Maelorg," the old man replied. "It has to do with Anheg's decision to raise the taxes on the herring fishery."

"I wrote that letter four years ago," Anheg declared, a baffled look crossing his face.

"Exactly," Belgarath said. "And if memory serves me, didn't the Earl of Maelorg die last spring?"

"Yes," Anheg said. "I attended the funeral."

"It appears that, after his death, someone got into his papers and filched this letter. Then they went to a great deal of trouble to bleach out the original message -all but the signature, of course- and to write one that introduced this so-called trade deputation."

"Why couldn't we see it before?" Barak asked.

"I had to tamper with it a bit," the old man admitted.

"Sorcery?"

"No. Actually I used a solution of certain salts. Sorcery might have raised the old message, but it probably would have erased the new one, and we might need that later on for evidence."

Barak's expression was slightly disappointed.

"Sorcery is not the only way to do things, Barak."

"How did you find out?" Garion asked the old man, "That there was another message, I mean?"

"The bleach the fellow used leaves a very faint odor on the page." The sorcerer made a wry face. "It wasn't until this morning that I finally realized what I was smelling." He turned to Anheg. "I'm sorry it took me so long to exonerate you," he said.

"That's quite all right, Belgarath," Anheg said expansively. "It gave me the chance to find out who my real friends are."

Kail rose to his feet, his face a study in conflicting emotions. He went to Anheg's chair and dropped to one knee. "Forgive me, your Majesty," he said simply. "I must confess that I suspected you."

"Of course I forgive you." Anheg laughed suddenly. "Belar's teeth," he said. "After I read that letter, I even suspected myself. Get up, young man. Always stand on your feet -even when you've made a mistake."

"Kail," Garion said, "would you see to it that word of this discovery gets the widest possible circulation? Tell the people down in the city to stop sharpening their swords."

"I'll see to it at once, your Majesty."

"That still leaves us with an unsolved riddle," the Earl of Seline noted. "We know that King Anheg wasn't behind this, but who was?"

"We already have a good start on that," Lelldorin declared. "We've got that list of men who might have had reason to hate Brand."

"I think we're following the wrong track there," Queen Porenn disagreed. "The murder of the Rivan Warder was one thing, but trying to make it look as if Anheg had been responsible is something else entirely."

"I don't quite follow you, Porenn," Anheg admitted.

"If you had a very close friend -you do have a few friends, don't you, Anheg, dear?- and if this friend of yours was also a high-ranking official in your government, and the king of another country had him murdered, what would you do?"

"My warships would sail on the next tide," he replied.

"Exactly. The murder of Brand may not have been the result of a personal grudge. It might have been an attempt to start a war between Riva and Cherek."

Anheg blinked. "Porenn, you are an extraordinary woman."

"Why, thank you, Anheg."

The door opened, and Silk and Javelin entered. "Our most excellent Prince Kheldar here has a very interesting report for us," Javelin announced.

Silk stepped forward and bowed grandiosely. "Your Majesties," he said, "and dear friends. I can't say for certain just how relevant this is to your current discussions, but it's a matter that should be brought to your attention, I think."

"Have you ever noticed how a little prosperity makes certain people very pompous?" Barak asked Hettar.

"I noticed that," Hettar agreed mildly.

"I thought you might have."

Silk flashed his two friends a quick grin. "Anyway," he continued in a more conversational tone. "I've spent the past several months in the town of Rheon on the eastern frontier of dear old dreary Drasnia. Interesting town, Rheon. Very picturesque- particularly now that they've doubled the height of the walls."

"Kheldar," Queen Porenn said, tapping her fingers impatiently on the arm of her chair, "you do plan to get to the point eventually, don't you?"

"Why, of course, Auntie dear," he replied mockingly. "Rheon has always been a fortified town, largely because of its proximity to the Nadrak border. It is also filled with a citizenry so archconservative that most of them disapprove of the use of fire. It's a natural breeding ground for the Bear-cult. After the attempt on Ce'Nedra's life last summer, I sort of drifted into town to do a bit of snooping."

"That's an honest way to put it," Barak said.

"I'm going through an honest phase," Silk shrugged. "Enjoy it while you can, because it's starting to bore me. Now, it seems that the Bear-cult has a new leader -a man named Ulfgar. After Grodeg got that Murgo axe stuck in his back at Thull Mardu, the cult was pretty well demoralized. Then this Ulfgar comes out of nowhere and begins to pull them all together. This man can quite literally talk the birds out of the trees. Always before the leadership of the cult was in the hands of the priesthood, and always before it was centered in Cherek."

"Tell me something new," Anheg growled sourly.

"Ulfgar does not appear to be a priest of Belar," Silk continued, "and his center of power is at Rheon in eastern Drasnia."

"Kheldar, please come to the point," Porenn said.

"I'm getting there, your Majesty," he assured her. "In the last few months, very quietly, our friend Ulfgar has been calling in his cohorts. Cultists have been drifting up from Algaria and filtering into Rheon from all over Drasnia. The town is literally bulging with armed men. I'd guess that Ulfgar currently has a force at Rheon at least equal to the entire Drasnian army." He looked at young King Kheva. "Sorry, cousin," he said, "but it rather looks as if you now have only the second biggest army in Drasnia."

"I can correct that if I have to, cousin," Kheva replied firmly.

"You're doing a wonderful job with this boy, Auntie," Silk congratulated Porenn.

"Kheldar," she said acidly, "am I going to have to put you on the rack to pull this story out of you?"

"Why, Auntie dearest, what a shocking thing to suggest. This mysterious Ulfgar has resurrected a number of very ancient rituals and ceremonies -among them a permanent means of identifying kindred spirits -so to speak. At his orders, every cultist in Aloria has had a distinctive mark branded on the sole of his right foot. The chances are rather good that anyone you see limping is a new convert to the Bear-cult."

Barak winced. "That would really hurt," he said.

"They wear it rather proudly," Silk told him, "Once it heals, anyway."

"What does this mark look like?" King Cho-Hag asked.

"It's a symbolic representation of a bear paw," Silk explained. "It's shaped sort of like the letter U with a couple of marks at its open end to represent claws."

"After Kheldar told me this," Javelin took up the story, "we paid a short visit to that surviving assassin. His right foot has been branded with that particular mark."

"So now we know," Hettar said.

"We do indeed," Belgarath replied.

"Prithee," Mandorallen said, frowning in perplexity, "I have always been advised that the aim of this obscure religious denomination hath been the reunification of Aloria, that titanic empire of the north which existed under the reign of King Cherek Bear-shoulders, the mightiest ruler of antiquity.

"It may very well still be," Belgarath told him, "but if this Ulfgar had succeeded in putting Riva and Cherek at each other's throats, he might have been able to topple Drasnia and possibly Algaria as well. With Anheg and Garion concentrating on destroying each other, it probably wouldn't have been all that difficult for him to have taken their two kingdoms as well."

"Particularly with that fleet his people are building at Jarviksholm," Anheg added.

"His strategy seems at once very simple and yet very complex," General Brendig mused, "and I think it came very close to working."

"Too close," Polgara said. "What are we going to do about this, father?"

"I think we'll have to take steps," Belgarath replied. "This fellow Ulfgar still wants to reunite Aloria -but with himself as the successor to Bear-shoulders. The cult has tried subversion for three millennia. Now apparently they're going to try open war."

Garion's face grew bleak. "Well," he said, "if it's a war they want, they've come to the right place."

"I might drink to that," Anheg agreed. He thought for a moment. "If you're open to any suggestions, I think it might be a good idea if we destroy Jarviksholm before we move on Rheon. We don't want those Cherek cultists coming up behind us on the moors of eastern Drasnia and we definitely don't want a cult fleet in the Sea of the Winds. If even half of what Gredrik says is true, we're going to have to burn out those shipyards before they get their warships into the water. You could mount a very successful attack on Rheon, Garion, and then come home to find a hostile force occupying Riva itself."

Garion considered that. "All right, then," he agreed. "We'll go to Jarviksholm first. Then we'll go to Rheon and have a little chat with this Ulfgar. I really want to look at a man who thinks he's big enough to fill Bear-shoulders' shoes."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

"I'm sorry, Kail," Garion told his friend as they sat together in Garion's study with the morning sun streaming golden through the window, "but I have to have you and your brothers here at Riva. I'm taking most of our forces with me, and someone has to stay here to defend the city in case some of the cultists' ships slip around behind us."

Kail's face was angry. "That's not the real reason is it?" he accused.

"Not entirely, no," Garion admitted. "I know how much you all loved your father and I know how much you want revenge on the people responsible for his murder."

"Isn't that only natural?"

"Of course it is, but people caught up in those feelings don't think clearly. They get rash and do things that put them in danger. Your family has shed enough blood already -first your brother Olban, then Arell, and now your father- so I'm not taking any chances with the rest of you."

Kail stood up, his face red with suppressed anger. "Does your Majesty have any further instructions for me?" he asked.

Garion sighed. "No, Kail," he said, "not at the moment. You know what to do here."

"Yes, your Majesty." Kail bowed curtly, turned and left the room.

Belgarath came into Garion's study through the other door.

"He didn't like it," Garion said.

"I didn't think he would." The old man shrugged, scratching at one bearded cheek. "But he's too important here in the Citadel for us to be risking his life. He'll be angry for a while, but he'll get over it."

"Is Aunt Pol staying behind, too?"

Belgarath made a face. "No. She insists on going. At least the other ladies have sense enough to realize that a battlefield is no place for a woman! I think we ought to leave Errand here, too. He has no sense of personal danger, and that's not a good trait when the fighting starts. You'd better finish here. The morning tide's turning, and we're almost ready to start."

As the Seabird moved out of the harbor that sunny morning with a flotilla of stout Rivan ships following her, Garion and the others gathered in the spacious, low-beamed aft cabin, poring over maps and discussing strategy.

"The inlet that runs up to Jarviksholm is very narrow," Anheg advised them, "and it's got more twists and turns to it than a Tolnedran trade agreement. It's going to slow us to a crawl."

"And then those catapults on top of the cliffs will sink half the fleet," Barak added gloomily.

"Is there any way we can come to the city from behind?" Hettar asked.

"There's a road coming up from Halberg," Barak replied, "but it goes through several passes fifteen leagues or so to the south of the city. Those passes are ideal for ambushes."

General Brendig had been studying the map. "What's this terrain like?" he asked, pointing at a spot on the south side of the mouth of the inlet.

"Rough," Barak said, "and steep."

"That's a description of most of Cherek," Silk observed.

"Is it passable?" Brendig persisted.

"Oh, you could climb it," Barak said, "but you'd be in plain view of the catapultists up on the cliffs. There's be a whole army waiting for you by the time you got to the top."

"Not if you did it at night," Brendig said.

"At night?" the big man scoffed. "Brendig, do you really want to take up nighttime mountain climbing at your age?"

Brendig shrugged. "If it's the only way to get there."

Mandorallen had also been studying the map. "Prithee, my Lord," he said to Barak, "is this slope to the north also gentle enough to afford access to the cliff-top?"

Barak shook his head. "It's a sheer face."

"Then we must needs seek other means to neutralize the catapults on that side." The knight thought a moment, then he smiled. "We have the means at our immediate disposal," he declared.

"I'd be interested to know what they are," King Fulrach said to him.

"It is the simplest possible solution, your Majesty," Mandorallen beamed. "To convey siege engines up the south slope would be tiresome - particularly during the hours of darkness. It would, moreover, be totally unnecessary, since the means of destroying the engines on the north side are already in place."

"I don't quite follow what you're suggesting," Garion admitted.

"I do," Hettar said. "All we have to do is climb the south slope at night, capture the catapults on top and then start lobbing boulders at the engines across the inlet."

"And once you distract those people, I can sweep up the inlet with fireboats and burn out the shipyards," Anheg added.

"But doesn't that still leave the city intact?" King Fulrach asked dubiously.

Garion stood up and began to pace up and down, thinking hard. "Once we start throwing rocks back and forth across the inlet and the fireboats start moving up toward the yards, it's going to attract quite a bit of attention from the city, wouldn't you say?"

"I could almost guarantee that," Brendig replied.

"Then wouldn't that be a perfect time to mount an attack on the landward side of the town? Everybody's going to be lining the front wall. The backside will be only lightly defended. If we strike fast enough, we could be inside before most of the defenders knew we were coming."

"Very good, Belgarion," King Cho-Hag murmured.

"It's all going to have to be carefully timed, though," Barak said thoughtfully. "We'll have to work out a way to pass signals back and forth."

"That's not really a problem, Barak," Aunt Pol told the big man. "We can take care of that."

"You know," Anheg said, "I think it might work. If we get lucky, we could take Jarviksholm in a single day."

"I never cared much for long sieges anyway," Silk noted, carefully polishing one of his rings.

Two days later they found the Cherek fleet standing at anchor off the Halberg straits, a narrow passage leading through a cluster of small, rocky islets jutting up out of the coastal waters of the west coast of the Cherek peninsula.

The islets were topped with scrubby trees and they stood out, green against the snow-fields covering the higher mountains lying inland. Garion stood at the rail of the Seabird, drinking in the beauty of that wild coast. A light step behind him and a familiar fragrance announced his Aunt Pol's approach.

"It's lovely, isn't it, Garion?" she said.

"Breathtaking," he agreed.

"It always seems this way," she mused. "Somehow it's when you're on your way to something very ugly that you come across these glimpses of beauty." She looked at him gravely. "You will be careful at Jarviksholm, won't you?"

"I'm always careful, Aunt Pol."

"Really? I seem to remember a number of incidents not too many years ago."

"I was a child then."

"Some things never change, I'm afraid." She suddenly put her arms about his neck and sighed. "Oh, my Garion," she said, "I've missed you in the past few years, do you know that?"

"I've missed you, too, Aunt Pol. Sometimes I wish-" He left it hanging.

"That we could have just stayed at Faldor's farm?"

"It really wasn't such a bad place, was it?"

"No. It was a very good place -for a child. But you're grown now. Would you really have been content there? Life was quite placid at Faldor's."

"If we hadn't left, I'd never have known what it was like to live any other way."

"But if we hadn't left, you never would have met Ce'Nedra, would you?"

"I suppose I hadn't thought about that."

"Let's go below, shall we?" she suggested. "That breeze is really rather brisk."

They encountered King Anheg and Barak in a narrow companionway just outside the main cabin belowdecks.

"Barak," Anheg was saying acidly, "you're getting to be worse than an old woman."

"I don't care what you say, Anheg," the red-bearded Barak growled. "You're not going to take the Seabird up that inlet until all those catapults have been cleared. I didn't spend that much money on her to have somebody drop boulders on her decks from those cliffs. My boat, my rules."

The lean-faced Javelin approached from down the companionway. "Is there some problem, my Lords?" he asked.

"I was just laying down a few rules for Anheg here," Barak replied. "He's going to be in charge of my ship while I'm gone."

"Were you going somewhere, my Lord of Trellheim?"

"I'll be going with Garion when he mounts his attack on the city."

"As you think best, my Lord. How long do you think it's going to take to reach the mouth of the inlet?"

Barak tugged at his luxuriant red beard. "Those Rivan ships carrying Garion's troops aren't quite as fast as our warships," he mused. "I make it about a day and a half. Wouldn't you agree, Anheg?"

"About that, yes."

"That should put us there tomorrow evening, then?" Javelin asked.

"Right," Barak said, "and that's when the fun starts."

Aunt Pol sighed. "Alorns!"

After a few shouted conferences from ship to ship, the combined fleet heeled over sharply in the quickening breeze and beat northward along the rugged west coast of the Cherek peninsula toward Jarviksholm.

The following morning, Garion went up on deck with Barak and Hettar to watch the sun come up above the forested and snow-capped peaks of Cherek. The shadows back in the wooded valleys were a kind of misty blue, and the sun sparkled on the waves.

A mail-shirted Cherek sailor, who had been ostensibly coiling a rope, turned from his task, then suddenly plunged a dagger directly at Garion's unprotected back as the King stood at the rail.

The attack might well have proved fatal had Durnik not shouted a quick warning. Garion half-turned in time to see the dagger go skittering across the deck. At the same time, he heard a startled exclamation and a splash. He wheeled about to see a desperately clutching hand sink beneath the waves about thirty yards to port. He looked questioningly at Polgara, but she shook her head.

"I forgot about the mailshirt," Durnik said apologetically, "It's sort of hard to swim with one of those on, isn't it?"

"More than sort of," Barak assured him.

"You'll want to question him, I suppose," Durnik said, "I can fish him out, if you like."

"What do you think, Hettar?" Barak asked.

Hettar considered the notion for several moments, looking out at the bubbles coming up from somewhere far beneath the surface. "These are Cherek waters, aren't they?"

Barak nodded.

"Then I think we should consult King Anheg and get his opinion."

"Anheg's sleeping late this morning," Barak told him, also looking out at the bubbles.

"I'd hate to wake him," Hettar said. "He's had a lot on his mind lately, and I'm sure he needs his rest." The tall Algar turned to Durnik with an absolutely straight face. "I'll tell you what, Durnik. The very moment King Anheg wakes up, we'll bring the matter immediately to his attention."

"Have you ever translocated anything before, Durnik?" Polgara asked her husband.

"No, not really. I knew how it was done, of course, but I've never had the occasion to try it myself. I threw him just a little farther than I'd intended, I'm afraid."

"You'll get better with practice, dear," she assured him.

Then she turned to Garion. "Are you all right?" she asked,

"I'm fine, Aunt Pol. He didn't even get close to me -thanks to Durnik."

"He's always been very useful to have around," she replied, giving Durnik a warm smile.

"Where did the fellow come from, Barak?" Hettar asked.

"Val Alorn, of all places. He always seemed like a good man, too. He did his work and kept his mouth shut.

I'd never have suspected that he might have had religious convictions.

"Maybe it's time for us to examine everybody's feet," Hettar suggested.

Barak looked at him quizzically.

"If Silk's right, then all the Bear-cultists have that brand on the soles of their right feet. It's probably easier in the long run to examine feet rather than have Garion offer his back to every dagger aboard your ship."

"You might be right," Barak agreed.

They sailed into the wide mouth of the inlet that wound its way up to Jarviksholm just as the sun was setting.

"Shouldn't we have waited until after dark to come this close?" Garion asked as he and the other kings stood on the foredeck of the Seabird.

Anheg shrugged. "They knew we were coming. They've been watching us ever since we left the Halberg straits. Besides, now that they know that we're here, those catapultists up there will concentrate on watching the ships. That ought to make it easier for you and Brendig to slip up behind them when the time comes."

"That makes sense, I guess."

Barak came forward with the one-armed General Brendig. "As close as we can figure it, we ought to start about midnight," he said. "Garion and the rest of us will climb up first and circle around until we're behind the city. Brendig and his men can follow us up and start taking over the catapults. As soon as it gets light enough to see, he's going to start throwing boulders across the inlet."

"Will that give Garion time enough to get into position?" King Fulrach asked.

"It should be plenty of time, your Majesty," Brendig assured him. "Lord Barak says that once we get to the top, the terrain is fairly flat."

"There are trees, too," Barak told them. "That should give us plenty of concealment."

"How much open space are we going to have to charge across when we attack the city?" Garion asked.

"Oh, maybe five hundred yards," Barak replied.

"That's quite a ways."

"It's about as far as I want to run."

Evening settled slowly over the calm waters of the inlet, purpling the sheer cliffs rising on either side. Garion used the last bit of light carefully to examine every inch of the steep slope which he and his men would be climbing in just a few hours. A flicker of movement just overhead caught his eye, and he looked up in time to see a ghostly white shape sliding silently through the calm, purple air. A single soft white feather slowly sifted down to settle on the deck not far away. Gravely, Hettar went over and picked it up.

A moment or two later, Aunt Pol, wrapped in her blue cloak, came down the deck and joined them. "You're going to have to be very careful when you approach the shipyards," she told Anheg, who stood nearby with Brendig. "They've moved catapults down to the beaches to try to bold you off."

"I expected that," he replied with an indifferent shrug.

"You'd better pay attention to her, Anheg," Barak said in a threatening tone, "because if you get my ship sunk, I'll pull out your beard one whisker at a time."

"What a novel way to address one's king," Silk murmured to Javelin.

"How heavily is the rear of the city defended?" Garion asked Polgara.

"The walls are high," she answered, "and the gate looks impressive. There aren't very many men there, though."

"Good."

Hettar silently handed her the feather.

"Why, thank you," she said to him. "I would have missed that."

The slope of the hill leading to the rolling plateau high above was even steeper than Garion's examination from the deck of the Seabird had led him to believe. Clumps of broken rock, almost invisible in the midnight darkness, rolled treacherously underfoot, and the stiff limbs of the scrubby bushes that choked the hillside seemed almost to push deliberately at his face and chest as he struggled upward. His mail shirt was heavy, and he was soon dripping with sweat.

"Rough going," Hettar observed laconically.

A pale sliver of a moon had risen when they finally crested that brutal slope. As they reached the top, they found that the plateau above was covered with a dense forest of fir and spruce trees.

"This might take us a little longer than I'd thought," Barak muttered, eyeing the thick undergrowth.

Garion paused to get his breath. "Let's stop for a moment," he told his friends. He stared glumly at the forest barring their way. "If all of us start crashing through that, we're going to alert the catapultists along the top of the cliff," he said. "I think we'd better send out some scouts to see if we can find a path or a track of some kind."

"Give me a while," Silk told him.

"You'd better take some men with you."

"They'd just slow me down. I'll be back before long." The little man vanished into the trees.

"He never changes, does he?" Hettar murmured.

Barak laughed shortly. "Did you really think he would?"

"How long thinkest thou it will be until dawn, my Lord?", Mandorallen asked the big Cherek.

"Two- maybe three hours," Barak replied. "That hill took a long time."

Lelldorin, his bow slung across his back, joined them at the edge of the dark wood. "General Brendig's started up," he told them.

"I wonder how he's going to manage that climb with only one arm," Barak said.

"I don't think you need to worry too much about Brendig," Hettar replied. "He usually does what he sets out to do."

"He's a good man," Barak agreed.

They waited in the warm summer darkness as the moon slowly climbed the eastern sky. From far below Garion could hear the calls of Anheg's men and the rasp of windlasses as the sailors strove to make enough noise to cover any inadvertent sounds Brendig's men might make as they struggled up the brushy slope. Finally Silk returned, appearing soundlessly out of the bushes. "There's a road about a quarter of a mile south of here," he reported quietly. "It seems to go toward Jarviksholm."

"Excellent," Mandorallen said gaily. "Let us proceed, my Lords. The city doth await our coming."

"I hope not," Garion said. "The whole idea is to surprise them."

The narrow road Silk had found proved to be a woodcutter's track and it meandered in a more or less easterly direction, leading them inland. Behind him Garion could hear the jingle of mail shirts and the steady, shuffling tread of his soldiers as they moved through the tag end of night in the deep shadows of the surrounding forest. There was a sense of inexorable purpose involved in this -leading a mass of faceless men through the darkness. A tense excitement had been building in him since they had left the ships. His impatience to begin the attack was so strong now that it was all he could do to keep himself from breaking into a run.

They reached a large cleared area. At the far side of that open field, the white ribbon of a well-traveled highway cut due north across the moonlit pasture-land.

"That's the Halberg road," Barak told them. "We're almost there."

"I'd better see how Brendig's doing," Garion said. He carefully reached out, skirting the thoughts of the troops massed at his back and seeking the familiar touch of Durnik's mind. "Durnik," he said silently, "can you hear me?"

"Garion?" the smith's thought came back.

"Right," Garion replied. "Have you captured the catapults yet?"

"We've still got a dozen or so to take. Brendig's moving slowly to keep down unnecessary noise."

"Will you have them all by the time it starts getting light?"

"I'm sure we will."

"Good. Let me know when you capture the last one."

"I will."

"How are they doing?" Lelldorin asked. The young bowman's voice was tight with excitement.

"They'll be ready when it's time," Garion replied.

"What thinkest thou, my Lord?" Mandorallen asked Barak. "Might it not be the proper moment to select some few stout trees to serve as rams to reduce the city gates?"

"I'll deal with the gate," Garion told them firmly.

Barak stared at him. "You mean that you're going to-?" He made a gesture with one thick-fingered hand. Garion nodded.

"That hardly seems proper, Garion," Barak objected disapprovingly.

"Proper?"

"There are certain ways that things are done. City gates are supposed to be knocked in with battering rams."

"While the people inside pour boiling pitch down on the men trying to break in?"

"That's part of the risk," Barak explained. "Without a little risk, a battle isn't very much fun."

Hettar laughed quietly.

"I hate to fly in the face of tradition," Garion said, "but I'm not going to let a lot of people get killed unnecessarily just for the sake of an old custom."

A hazy ground fog, glowing in the moonlight, lay low on the broad, open expanse between the edge of the forest and the towering walls of Jarviksholm. Off to the east, the first pale glimmer of the approaching dawn stained the velvet sky. There were ruddy torches along the top of the heavy battlements of the city. By their light Garion could see a number of armed men.

"How close do you need to get to break in the gate?" Silk whispered to Garion.

"The closer the better," Garion replied.

"All right. We'll have to move up a bit, then. The fog and the tall grass should help."

"I'll go along with you," Barak said. "Is it likely to make much noise?"

"Probably," Garion said.

The big man turned to Hettar and Mandorallen. "Use that as your signal. When Garion knocks the gate down, you start the charge."

Hettar nodded.

Garion drew in a deep breath. "All right," he said, "let's go." Crouched low, the three of them started across the open field toward the city. When they were no more than a hundred yards from the gate, they sank down in the tall grass.

"Garion," Durnik's thought came from out of the growing light, "we've captured all the catapults."

"Can you see the ones on the north cliffs yet?"

"It's probably going to be just a few more minutes."

"Tell Brendig to start just as soon as he can make them out."

They waited as the eastern sky grew steadily lighter. Then a series of solid thuds came from beyond the city, followed after an interval by the sound of heavy rocks crashing through timbers and by startled shouts and cries of pain.

"We've started," Durnik reported.

"Garion," Polgara's thought came to him, "are you in position?"

"Yes, Aunt Pol."

"We're going to start up the inlet now."

"Let me know when you're in sight of the city."

"Be carefully, Garion."

"I will."

"What's happening?" Barak whispered, eyeing the men atop the city walls.

"They've started dropping rocks on the north cliff," Garion replied softly, "and Anheg's got the fleet moving."

Barak ground his teeth together. "I told him to wait until all the catapults were out of action."

"Don't worry so much about that ship of yours," Silk murmured. "It's very hard to aim a catapult when you're dodging boulders."

"Somebody might get lucky."

They waited tensely as the light slowly grew stronger. Garion could smell the salt tang of the sea and the heavy odor of evergreens as he surveyed the stout gate.

"We can see the city now, Garion," Aunt Pol reported.

Shouts of alarm came from inside the city, and Garion saw the armed men atop the walls running along the parapet, making for the seaward side of Jarviksholm. "Are we ready?" he whispered to his two friends.

"Let's do it," Silk said tensely.

Garion rose to his feet and concentrated. He felt something that was almost like an inrushing of air as he drew in and concentrated his will. He seemed to be tingling all over as the enormous force built up in him.

Grimly he drew Iron-grip's sword, which he had left sheathed until now in order to conceal that telltale blue fire. The Orb leaped joyously into flame. "Here we go," he said from between clenched teeth. He pointed the sword at the gate, standing solid and impenetrable-looking a hundred yards in front of him. "Burst!" he commanded, and all his clenched-in will surged into the sword and out through its flaming tip.

The one thing that he had overlooked, of course, was the Orb's desire to be helpful. The force which struck the gates of Jarviksholm was, to put it very mildly, excessive. The logs disappeared entirely, and chunks and splinters of that tar-smeared gate were later found as much as five miles distant.

The solid stone wall in which the gate had been mounted also blew apart, and many of the huge, rough-hewn blocks sailed like pebbles to splash into the harbor and the inlet far from the city. Most of the back wall of Jarviksholm crumbled and fell in on itself. The noise was awful.

"Belar!" Barak swore in amazement as he watched the nearly absolute destruction.

There was a stunned silence for a moment, and then a great shout came from the edge of the woods as Hettar and Mandorallen led the charge of the massed Rivans and Chereks into the stunned city.

It was not what warriors call a good fight. The Bear-cult was not composed entirely of able-bodied men. It had also attracted into its ranks old men, women, and children. Because of the raging fanaticism of the cult, the warriors entering the city frequently found it necessary to kill those who might otherwise have been spared. By late afternoon, there were only a few small pockets of resistance remaining in the northwest quarter of Jarviksholm, and much of the rest of the city was on fire.

Garion, half-sickened by the smoke and the slaughter, stumbled back through the burning city, over that shattered wall, and out into the open fields beyond. He wandered, tired and sick, for a time until he came across Silk, seated comfortably on a large rock, casually watching the destruction of the city.

"Is it just about finished?" the little man asked.

"Nearly," Garion replied. "They only have a few buildings left in their control."

"How was it?"

"Unpleasant. A lot of old people and women and children got killed."

"That happens sometimes."

"Did Anheg say what he was going to do with the survivors? I think there's been enough killing already."

"It's hard to say," Silk replied. "Our Cherek cousins tend sometimes to be a bit savage, though. Some things are likely to happen in the next day or so that you probably won't want to watch -like that." He pointed toward the edge of the wood where a crowd of Chereks were working on something. A long pole was raised and set into the ground. A crosspiece was attached to the top of the pole, and a man was tied by his outspread arms to that crosspiece.

"No!" Garion exclaimed.

"I wouldn't interfere, Garion," Silk advised. "It is Anheg's kingdom, after all, and he can deal with traitors and criminals in any way he sees fit."

"That's barbaric!"

"Moderately so, yes. As I said, though, Chereks have a certain casual brutality in their nature."

"But shouldn't we at least question the prisoners first?"

"Javelin's attending to that."

Garion stared at the crowd of soldiers working in the last ruddy light of the setting sun. "I'm sorry," he said, choking in revulsion, "but that's going entirely too far. I'm going to put a stop to it right now."

"I'd stay out of it, Garion."

"Oh, no -not when he starts crucifying women!"

"He's what?" Silk turned to stare at the soldiers. Suddenly the blood drained from the little man's face, and he sprang to his feet. With Garion close on his heels, he ran across the intervening turf. "Have you lost your mind entirely?" he demanded hotly of the bony Chief of Drasnian Intelligence, who sat calmly at a rough table in the center of a group of soldiers.

"What seems to be your problem, Kheldar?"

"Do you know who that is that you just crucified?"

"Naturally. I questioned her myself." His fingers moved almost idly, but Silk stood directly in front of the table, cutting off Garion's view of the thin man's hands.

"Get her down from there!" Silk said, though his voice seemed for some reason to have lost the edge of its outrage.

"Why don't you attend to your own business, Kheldar?" Javelin suggested. "Leave me to mine." He turned to a burly Cherek standing nearby. "Prince Kheldar and the Rivan King will be leaving now." he said coldly.

"Would you escort them, please. I think that they should be somewhere at least a quarter of a mile from here."

"I'll kill him," Silk fumed as he and Garion were herded away. "I'll kill him with my own two bare hands." As soon as the soldiers had led them to a spot some distance from Javelin and had turned to go back to their grisly work, however, the little man regained his composure with astonishing speed.

"What was that all about?" Garion asked.

"The girl he just crucified is his own niece, Liselle," Silk replied quite calmly.

"You can't be serious!"

"I've known her since she was a child. He promised to explain later. His explanation had better be very good, though, or I'm going to carve out his tripe." He removed a long dagger from under his pearl-gray doublet and tested the edge with his thumb.

It was after dark when Javelin came looking for them. "Oh, put that away, Kheldar," he said disgustedly, looking at Silk's dagger.

"I may need it in a minute," Silk replied. "Start talking, Javelin, and you'd better make it very convincing, or I'll have your guts in a pile right between your feet."

"You seem upset."

"You noticed. How clever of you."

"I did what I did for a very specific reason."

"Wonderful. I thought you were just amusing yourself."

"I can do without the sarcasm, Silk. You should know by now that I never do anything without a reason. You can put your mind at rest about Liselle. She's probably already been released."

"Released?"

"Escaped, actually. There were a dozen of cultists hiding in those woods. Your eyes must be going bad on you if you didn't see them. Anyway, by now, every prisoner we crucified has been released and is on the way to safety back in the mountains."

"Exactly what is this all about, Javelin?"

"It's really very simple. We've been trying for years to get someone into the upper echelons of the Bear-cult. They have just rescued a genuine heroine -a martyr to the cause. Liselle's clever enough to use that to work her way into their higher councils."

"How did she get here in the first place?"

Javelin shrugged. "She put on a mail shirt, and I slipped her on board Trelheim's ship. After the fighting was nearly over, I just slipped her in with the other prisoners."

"Won't the others who were just rescued say that she was never in the city?" Garion asked.

"No, your Majesty, I don't think so," Javelin replied. "She's going to say that she lived in the northeast quarter of Jarviksholm. The others we crucified all came from the southwest quarter. Jarviksholm is a fairly good-sized town. Nobody could really say for sure that she wasn't there all along."

"I still can't believe that you would actually do that to her," Silk said.

"It took a fair amount of convincing and a great deal of fast talking on her part to persuade me," Javelin admitted.

Silk stared at him.

"Oh, yes," Javelin said. "H hadn't you guessed? The whole thing was her idea in the first place."

Suddenly Garion heard a hollow rushing sound, and a moment later Ce'Nedra's voice came to him quite clearly.

"Garion!" she cried out in anguish. "Garion, come home immediately! Someone has stolen our baby!"

CHAPTER TWENTY

Polgara looked at Garion critically as they stood together in a high, open meadow above the still-burning city of Jarviksholm while the pale light of dawn washed the stars out of the sky. "Your wing feathers are too short," she told him.

Garion made the feathers longer.

"Much better," she said. Then her look became intense, and she also shimmered into the shape of a speckled falcon, "I've never liked these hard feathers," she murmured, clicking her hooked beak. Then she looked at Garion, her golden eyes fierce. "Try to remember everything I told you, dear. We won't go too high

on your first flight." She spread her wings, took a few short steps with her taloned feet, and lifted herself effortlessly into the air.

Garion tried to imitate what she had just done and drove himself beak-first into the turf.

She swooped back in. "You have to use your tail, too, Garion," she said. "The wings give the power, but the tail gives direction. Try it again." The second attempt was a bit smoother. He actually flew for about fifty yards before he crashed into a tree.

"That was very nice, dear. Just try to watch where you're going."

Garion shook his head, trying to clear the ringing from his ears and the speckles of light from in front of his eyes.

"Straighten your feathers, dear, and let's try it again."

"It's going to take months for me to learn this, Aunt Pol. Wouldn't it just be faster to sail to Riva on the Seabird?"

"No, dear," she said firmly. "You just need a bit of practice, that's all." His third attempt was somewhat more successful. He was beginning to get the knack of coordinating his wings and, tail, but he still felt clumsy and he seemed to do a great deal of clawing ineffectually at the air.

"Garion, don't fight with it. Let it lift you."

They circled the meadow several times in the shadowless luminosity of dawn. Garion could see the smoke rising black from the city and the burned-out shipyards in the harbor as he followed Polgara in a steady upward spiral. As his confidence increased, he began to feel a fierce exhilaration. The rush of cool morning air through his feathers was intoxicating, and he found that he could lift himself higher and higher almost effortlessly. By the time the sun was fully up, the air was no longer an enemy, and he had begun to master the hundreds of minute muscular adjustments necessary to get the greatest possible efficiency out of his feathers.

Belgarath swooped in to join them with Durnik not far behind. "How's he doing?" the fierce-looking falcon asked Polgara.

"He's almost ready, father."

Good. Let him practice for another fifteen minutes or so, and then we'll get started. There's a column of warm air rising off that lake over there. That always makes it easier." He tilted on one wing and veered away in a long, smooth arc.

"This is really very fine, Pol," Durnik said. "I should have learned how to do this years ago."

When they moved into the column of air rising from the surface of the warm waters of the lake, Garion learned the secret of effortless flight. With his wings spread and unmoving, he let the air lift him up and up. Objects on the far below shrank as he rose higher and higher. Jarviksholm now looked like a toy village, and its harbor was thick with miniature ships. The hills and forests were bright green in the morning sunshine. The sea was azure, and the snowfields on the higher peaks were so intensely white that they almost hurt his eyes.

"How high would you say we are?" he heard Durnik ask Belgarath.

"Several thousand feet."

"It's sort of like swimming, isn't it? It doesn't really matter how deep the water is, because you're only using the top of it anyway."

"I never really thought of it that way." Belgarath looked over at Aunt Pol. "This should be high enough", he said in the shrill, falcon's whistle. "Let's go to Riva." The four of them beat steadily southwest, leaving the Cherek coast behind and flying out over the Sea of the Winds. For a time, a following breeze aided them, but at the breeze dropped, and they had to work for every mile. Garion's shoulders ached, and the unaccustomed effort of flying made the muscles in his chest burn. Grimly, he flew below him he could see the miles-long waves on the Sea of the Winds, looking from this height almost like ripples the surface in the afternoon sunlight.

The sun was low over the western horizon when the rocky coast of the Isle of the Winds came into view. They flew southward along the east coast and spiraled down at last toward the uplifted towers and battlements of the Citadel, grim and gray over the city of Riva.

A sentry, leaning idly on his spear atop the highest parapet, startled as the four speckled falcons swooped in to around him, and his eyes bulged with astonishment as they shimmered into human form. "Y-your Majesty," he stammered to Garion, awkwardly trying to bow and hold on to his spear at the same time.

"What happened here?" Garion demanded.

"Someone has abducted your son, Sire," the sentry reported. "We've sealed off the island, but we haven't caught him yet."

"Let's go down," Garion said to the others. "I want to talk to Ce'Nedra." But that, of course, was nearly impossible. As soon as Garion entered the blue-carpeted royal apartment, she flew into his arms and collapsed in a storm of hysterical weeping. He could feel her tiny body trembling violently against him, and her fingers dug into his arms as she clung to him.

"Ce'Nedra," he pleaded with her, "you've got to stop. You have to tell us what happened."

"He's gone, Garion," she wailed. "S-somebody came into the n-nursery and t-took him!" She began to cry again.

Ariana, Lelldorin's blond Mimbrate wife, stood not far away, and the dark-haired Adara stood at the window, looking on with a grieved expression.

"Why don't you see what you can do, Pol," Belgarath said quietly. "Try to get her calmed down. I'll need to talk to her -but probably later. Right now, I think the rest of us should go talk to Kail."

Polgara had gravely removed her cloak, folded it carefully, and laid it across the back of a chair. "All right, father," she replied. She came over and gently took the sobbing little queen out of Garion's arms. "It's all right, Ce'Nedra," she said soothingly. "We're here now. We'll take care of everything."

Ce'Nedra clung to her. "Oh, Lady Polgara," she cried.

"Have you given her anything?" Aunt Pol asked Ariana.

"Nay, my Lady Polgara," the blond girl replied. "I feared that in her distraught condition those potions which most usually have a calming effect might do her in jury."

"Let me have a look at your medicine kit."

"At once, Lady Polgara."

"Come along," Belgarath said to Garion and Durnik, a steely glint coming into his eyes. "Let's go find Kail and see if we can get to the bottom of this."

They found Kail sitting wearily at a table in his father's office. Spread before him was a large map of the island, and he was pouring over it intently.

"It happened sometime yesterday morning, Belgarion," he said gravely after they had exchanged the briefest of greetings. "It was before daybreak. Queen Ce'Nedra looked in on the prince a few hours past midnight, and everything was fine. A couple of hours later, he was gone."

"What have you done so far?" Belgarath asked him.

"I ordered the island sealed," Kail replied, "and then we searched the Citadel from one end to the other. Whoever took the prince was nowhere in the fortress, but no ship has arrived or departed since I gave that order, and the harbor master reports that nobody sailed after midnight yesterday. So far as I know, the abductor has not left the Isle of the Winds."

"Good," Garion said, a sudden hope welling up in him.

"At the moment, I have troops searching house by house in the city, and ships are patrolling every inch of the coastline. The island is completely sealed off."

"Have you searched the forests and mountains?" the old man asked. "We want to finish the search of the city first," Kail said. "Then we'll seal the city and move the troops out into the surrounding countryside."

Belgarath nodded, staring at the map. "We want to move carefully," he said. "Let's not back this child stealer into a corner -at least not until we have my great-grandson safely back where he belongs."

Kail nodded his agreement. "The safety of the prince is our primary concern," he said.

Polgara quietly entered the room. "I gave her something that will make her sleep," she said, "and Ariana's watching her. I don't think it would do any good to try to question her just yet, and sleep is what she needs right now."

"You're probably right, Aunt Pol," Garion said, "but I'm not going to sleep -not until I find what happened to my son."

Early the following morning, they gathered again in Kail's orderly study to pore once again over the map.

Garion was about to ask Kail about the search of the city, but he stopped as he felt a sudden tug of the great sword strapped across his back. Absently, still staring at the yellowed parchment map on Kail's desk, he adjusted the strap. It tugged at him again, more insistently this time.

"Garion," Durnik said curiously, "does the Orb sometimes glow like that when you aren't actually holding the sword?"

Garion looked over his shoulder at the flaring Orb.

"What's it doing that for?" he asked, baffled.

The next tug nearly jerked him off his feet. "Grandfather," he said, a bit alarmed.

Belgarath's expression grew careful. "Garion," he said in a level voice, "I want you to take the sword out of its scabbard. I think the Orb is trying to tell you something."

Garion reached back over his shoulder and drew Irongrip's great sword from its sheath with a steely slither. Without even stopping to think how irrational it might sound, he spoke directly to the glowing stone on the pommel. "I'm awfully busy right now. Can't this wait?"

The answer was a steady pull toward the door. "What is it doing?" Garion demanded irritably.

"Let's just follow it," Belgarath told him.

Helplessly, Garion followed the powerful urging through the door and out into the torchlit corridor, with the others trailing curiously along behind him. He could sense the peculiarly crystalline awareness of the Orb and feel its overwhelming anger. Not since the dreadful night in Cthol Mishrak when he had faced the maimed God of Angarak had he felt so much outrage emanating from that living stone.

The sword continued to pull him down the corridor, moving faster and faster until he was half running to keep up.

"What's it trying to do, father?" Polgara asked in a puzzled tone. "It's never done anything like this before."

"I'm not sure," the old man replied. "We'll just have to follow it and find out. I think it might be important, though."

Kail stopped briefly in front of a sentry posted in the corridor. "Would you go get my brothers?" he asked the man. "Have them come to the royal apartment."

"Yes sir," the sentry replied, with a quick salute.

Garion stopped at the dark, polished door to the apartment, opened it, and went inside with the sword still pulling at him.

Queen Layla was just in the act of drawing a blanket over the exhausted Adara, who lay asleep on the couch, and she looked up with astonishment. "What on earth-?" she began.

"Hush, Layla," Polgara told her. "Something's happening that we don't quite understand."

Garion steeled himself and went on into the bedroom. Ce'Nedra lay in the bed, tossing and whimpering in her sleep. At her bedside sat Queen Islena and Barak's wife Merel. Ariana dozed in a deep chair near the window. He was only able to give the ladies attending his wife the briefest of glances, however, before the sword pulled him on into the nursery, where the sight of the empty cradle wrenched at his heart. The great sword dipped over the cradle, and the Orb glowed. Then the stone flickered with a pulsating light for a moment.

"I think I'm starting to understand," Belgarath said. "I won't absolutely swear to this, but I think it wants to follow Geran's trail."

"Can it do that?" Durnik asked.

"It can do almost anything, and it's totally committed to the Rivan line. Let it go, Garion. Let's see where it leads you."

In the corridor outside, Kail's two brothers, Verdan and Brin, met them. Verdan, the eldest of the three, was as burly as an ox, and Brin, the youngest, only slightly less so. Both men wore mail shirts and helmets and had heavy broadswords belted to their sides.

"We think that the Orb may be trying to lead us to the prince," Kail explained tersely to them. "We might need you two when we find him."

Brin flashed a broad, almost boyish grin. "We'll have the abductor's head on a pole before nightfall, then," he said.

"Let's not be too hasty about removing heads," Belgarath told him. "I want the answers to some questions first."

"One of you stays with Ce'Nedra at all times," Aunt Pol told Queen Layla, who had curiously trailed along behind them. "She'll probably wake up sometime this afternoon. Let Ariana sleep for now. Ce'Nedra might need her when she awakens."

"Of course, Polgara," the plump queen of Sendaria replied.

"And you," Aunt Pol said firmly to Errand, who was just coming down the hall. "I want you to stay in the royal apartment and do exactly what Layla tells you to do."

"But-" he started to protest.

"No buts, Errand. What we have to do might be dangerous, and that's something you haven't quite learned to understand yet."

He sighed. "All right, Polgara," he said disconsolately.

With the Orb on the pommel of the massive sword pulling him along, Garion followed the unseen track of his son's abductor out through one of the side gates with the rest of them close on his heels.

"It seems to want to go toward the mountains," Garion said. "I thought the trail would lead down into the city."

"Don't think, Garion," Polgara told him. "Just go where the Orb leads you."

The trailed across the meadow rising steeply behind the Citadel and then into the forest of dark fir and spruce where Garion and Ce'Nedra had often strolled on their summer outings.

"Are you sure it knows what it's doing?" Garion asked as he pushed his way through a tangled patch of undergrowth. "There's no path here at all. I don't think anyone would have come this way."

"It's following some kind of trail, Garion," Belgarath assured him. "Just keep up with it."

They struggled through the thick underbrush for an hour or so. Once a covey of grouse exploded from under Garion's feet with a heart-stopping thunder of wings.

"I'll have to remember this place," Brin said to Kail. "The hunting here might be very good."

"We're hunting other game at the moment. Keep your mind on your work."

When they reached the upper edge of the forest, Garion stared up at the steep, rock-strewn meadow rising above the timberline. "Is there a pass of any kind through these mountains?" he asked.

"Off to the left of that big peak," Brin replied, pointing. "I use it when I go out to hunt wild stags, and the shepherds take their flocks through it to the pastures in the interior valleys."

"Also the shepherdesses," Verdan added drily. "Sometimes the game my brother chases doesn't have horns."

Brin threw a quick, nervous glance at Polgara, and a slow blush mounted his cheeks.

"I've always been rather fond of shepherdesses," Belgarath noted blandly. "For the most part, they're gentle, understanding girls -and frequently lonely, aren't they, Brin?"

"That will do, father," Aunt Pol said primly.

It took the better part of the day to go over the pass and through the green meadows lying in the hidden valleys among the mountains beyond. The sun hovered just above the gleaming, almost molten-looking sea on the western side of the Isle when they crested a boulder-covered ridge and started down the long, rocky slope toward the cliffs and the frothy surf pounding endlessly against the western coast.

"Could a ship have landed on this side?" Garion asked Kail as they went downhill.

Kail was puffing noticeably from the strenuous trek across the island and he mopped his streaming face with his sleeve.

"There are a few places where it's possible, Belgarion -if you know what you're doing. It's difficult and dangerous, but it is possible."

Garion's heart sank. "Then he could very well have gotten away," he said.

"I had ships out there, Belgarion," Kail said to him, pointing at the sea. "I sent them out as soon as we found out that the prince had been taken. About the only way someone could have gotten all the way across the island to this side in time to sail away before those ships got around here would be if he could fly."

"We've got him, then," the irrepressible Brin exclaimed, loosening his sword in its scabbard and searching the boulder-strewn slope and the brink of the cliffs with a hunter's trained eye.

"Hold it a second," Durnik said sharply. He lifted his head and sniffed at the onshore breeze. "There's somebody up ahead."

"What?" Garion said, a sudden excitement building up in him.

"I just caught a distinct whiff of somebody who doesn't bathe regularly."

Belgarath's face took on an intense expression. "Pol," he said, "why don't you take a quick look down there?"

She nodded tersely, and her forehead furrowed with concentration. Garion felt and heard the whispered surge as she probed the empty-looking terrain ahead. "Chereks," she said after a moment. "About a dozen of them. They're hiding behind those boulders at the edge of the cliffs. They're watching us and planning an ambush."

"Chereks?" Brin exclaimed. "Why would Chereks want to attack us?" "They're Bear-cultists," she told him, "and nobody knows why those madmen do anything."

"What do we do?" Brin asked in a half whisper.

"An ambusher always has the advantage," Verdan replied, "unless the person about to be ambushed knows that he's there. Then it's the other way around." He looked down the slope grimly, his big hand on his sword hilt.

"Then we just go down there and spring their trap?" Brin asked eagerly.

Kail looked at Belgarath. "What do you think, Ancient One? We have the advantage now. They're going to expect us to be startled when they jump out at us, but we'll be ready for them. We could have half of them down before they realize their mistake."

Belgarath squinted at the setting sun. "Normally, I'd say no," he said. "These little incidental fights aren't usually very productive, but we're losing the light." He turned to Aunt Pol. "Is Geran anywhere in the vicinity?"

"No," she replied. "There's no sign of him."

Belgarath scratched at his beard. "If we leave the Chereks there, they're going to follow us, and I don't think I want them creeping along behind -particularly once it gets dark." His lined old face tightened into a wolfish grin. "All right, let's indulge ourselves."

"Save a few of them, though, father," Polgara said. "I have some questions I'd like answered. And try not to get yourselves hurt, gentlemen. I'm a little tired for surgery today."

"No surgery today, Lady Polgara," Brin promised blithely. "A few funerals, perhaps, but no surgery." She raised her eyes toward the sky. "Alorns," she sighed.

The ambush did not turn out at all as the hidden Bear-cultists had anticipated. The fur-clad Cherek who leaped at Garion was met in midair by the flaming sword of the Rivan King and was sheared nearly in two at the waist by the great blade. He fell to the suddenly blood-drenched grass, writhing and squealing. Kail coolly split a charging cultist's head while his brothers fell on the startled attackers and savagely but methodically began to hack them to pieces.

One cultist leaped atop a large rock, drawing a bow with his arrow pointed directly at Garion, but Belgarath made a short gesture with his left hand, and the bowman was suddenly hurled backward in a long, graceful arc that carried him out over the edge of the nearby cliff. His arrow went harmlessly into the air as he fell shrieking toward the foamy breakers five hundred feet below.

"Remember, I need a few of them alive!" Polgara sharply reminded them, as the carnage threatened to get completely out of hand.

Kail grunted, then neatly parried the thrust of a desperate Cherek. His big left fist swung in a broad arc and smashed solidly into the side of the Cherek's head, sending him spinning to the turf.

Durnik was using his favorite weapon, a stout cudgel perhaps three feet long. Expertly, he slapped a cultist's sword out of his hand and cracked him sharply alongside the head. The man's eyes glazed, and he tumbled limply to the ground.

Belgarath surveyed the fight, selected a likely candidate and then levitated him about fifty feet into the air. The suspended man was at first apparently unaware of his new location and kept slashing ineffectually at the surrounding emptiness.

The fight was soon over. The last crimson rays of the setting sun mingled with the scarlet blood staining the grass near the edge of the cliff, and the ground was littered with broken swords and scraps of bloody bearskin.

"For some reason, that makes me feel better," Garion declared, wiping his sword on the fallen body of one of the cultists. The Orb, he noted, was also blazing with a kind of fiery satisfaction.

Polgara was coolly inspecting a couple of unconscious survivors. "These two will sleep for a while," she noted, rolling back an eyelid to examine the glazed eye underneath. "Bring that one down, father," she said, pointing at the man Belgarath had suspended in midair, "In one piece, if you can manage it. I'd like to question him."

"Of course, Pol." The old man's eyes were sparkling, and his grin very nearly split his face.

"Father," she said, "when are you ever going to grow up?"

"Why, Polgara," he said mockingly, "what a thing to say."

The floating cultist had finally realized his situation and had dropped his sword. He stood trembling on the insubstantial air, with his eyes bulging in terror and his limbs twitching violently. When Belgarath gently lowered him to the ground, he immediately collapsed in a quivering heap.

The old man firmly grasped him by the front of his fur tunic and hauled him roughly into a half-standing position. "Do you know who I am?" he demanded, thrusting his face into that of the cringing captive.

"You-I-"

"Do you?" Belgarath's voice cracked like a whip.

"Yes," the man choked.

"Then you know that if you try to run away, I'll just hang you back up in the air again and leave you there. You know that I can do that, don't you?" "Yes."

"That won't be necessary, father," Polgara said coolly. "This man is going to be very co-operative."

"I will say nothing, witch-woman," the captive declared, though his eyes were still a bit wild.

"Ah, no, my friend," she told him with a chilly little smile. "You will say everything. You'll talk for weeks if I need you to." She gave him a hard stare and made a small gesture in front of his face with her left hand.

"Look closely, friend," she said. "Enjoy every single detail."

The bearded Bear-cultist stared at the empty air directly in front of his face, and the blood drained from his cheeks. His eyes started from his head in horror, and he shrieked, staggering back. Grimly, she made a sort of hooking gesture with her still-extended hand, and his retreat stopped instantly. "You can't run away from it," she said, "and unless you talk -right now- it will stand in front of your face until the day you die."

"Take it away!" he begged in an insane shriek. "Please, I'll do anything -anything!"

"I wonder where she learned to do that," Belgarath murmured to Garion. "I could never do it to anybody -and I've tried."

"He'll tell you whatever he knows now, Garion," Polgara said then. "He's aware of what will happen if he doesn't."

"What have you done with my son?" Garion demanded of the terrified man.

The prisoner swallowed hard, and then he straightened defiantly. "He's far beyond your reach now, King of Riva."

The rage welled up in Garion again, and, without thinking, he reached over his shoulder for his sword.

"Garion!" Polgara said sharply.

The cultist flinched back, his face going pale. "Your son is alive," he said hastily. Then a smug look crossed his face. "But the next time you meet him, he will kill you."

"What are you talking about?"

"Ulfgar has consulted the oracles. You are not the Rivan King we have awaited for all these centuries. It's the next King of Riva who will unite Aloria and lead us against the kingdoms of the south. It is your son, Belgarion, and he will lead us because he will be raised to share our beliefs."

"Where is my son?" Garion shouted at him.

"Where you will never find him," the prisoner taunted. "We will raise and nurture him in the true faith, as befits an Alorn monarch. And when he is grown, he will come and kill you and take his crown and his sword and his Orb from your usurping hand." The man's eyes were bulging, his limbs shook with religious ecstasy, and there was foam on his lips. "You will die by your own son's hand, Belgarion of Riva," he shrieked, "and King Geran will lead all Alorns against the unbelievers of the south, as Belar commanded."

"We're not getting too far with this line of questioning," Belgarath said. "Let me try for a while." He turned to the wild-eyed captive. "How much do you know about this Ulfgar?" he asked.

"Ulfgar is the Bear-lord, and he has even more power than you, old man."

"Interesting notion," Belgarath murmured. "Have you ever met this master sorcerer -or even seen him, for that matter?"

"Well-" the captive hedged.

"I didn't think so. How did you know he wanted you to come here and abduct Belgarion's son, then?"

The captive bit his lip.

"Answer me!"

"He sent a messenger," the man replied sullenly.

A sudden thought occurred to Garion. "Was this Ulfgar of yours behind the attempt to kill my wife?" he demanded.

"Wife!" The cultist sneered. "No Alorn takes a Tolnedran mongrel to wife. You -Iron-grip's heir- should know that better than any man. Naturally we tried to kill the Tolnedran wench. It was the only way to rid Aloria of the infection you brought here."

"You're starting to irritate me, friend," Garion said bleakly. "Don't do that."

"Let's get back to this messenger," Belgarath said. "You say that the baby is where we can't reach him, but you're still here, aren't you? Could it just possibly be that it was the messenger who was the actual abductor and that you and your friends are merely underlings?"

The cultist's eyes grew wild, and he looked this way and that like a trapped animal. His limbs began to tremble violently.

"I think we're approaching a question that you don't want to answer, friend," Belgarath suggested.

It came almost like a blow. There was a wrenching kind of feeling to it, almost as if someone were reaching inside a skull to twist and crush the brain within. The captive shrieked, gave Belgarath one wild look, then spun, took three quick steps, and hurled himself off the edge of the cliff behind him.

"Question me now!" he shrieked as he plummeted down into the twilight that was rising out of the dark, angry waters surging about the rocks at the foot of the cliff. Then, even as he fell, Garion heard peal upon peal of insane laughter fading horribly as the fanatic dropped away from them.

Aunt Pol started quickly toward the edge, but Belgarath reached out and took her arm. "Let him go, Pol," he said.

"It wouldn't be a kindness to save him now. Someone put something in his mind that crushed out his sanity as soon as he was asked that certain question."

"Who could possibly do that?" she asked.

"I don't know, but I'm certainly going to find out."

The shrieking laughter, still fading, continued to echo up to where they stood. And then it ended abruptly far below.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

A sudden summer storm had come howling in off the Great Western Sea two days after the fight on the cliffs and it raked the island with shrieking winds and sheets of rain that rattled against the windows of the council chamber high in the south tower. The bone-thin Javelin, who had arrived with the others aboard the Seabird that morning, slouched in his chair, looking out at the raging storm and thoughtfully tapping his fingers together. "Where did the trail finally lead?" he asked.

"Right down to the water's edge in a secluded cove," Garion replied.

"Then I think we'll have to assume that this abductor made a clean escape with the prince. The timing might have been a little tight, but the men aboard the ships that were patrolling the coast would have been concentrating on the shore line, and a ship that had gotten well out to sea before they arrived could have escaped their notice."

Barak was piling an armload of logs in the cavernous fireplace. "Why were those others left behind, then?" he asked. "That doesn't make any sense at all."

"We're talking about Bear-cultists, Barak," Silk told him. "They're not supposed to make sense."

"There's a certain logic to it, though," the Earl of Seline pointed out. "If what the cultist said before he died is true, this Ulfgar has declared war on Belgarion. Isn't it entirely possible that those men were left behind specifically to waylay him? One way or another, he was certain to follow that trail."

"There's still something that doesn't quite ring true," Javelin frowned. "Let me think about it for a bit."

"We can sort out their motives later," Garion said. "The important thing right now is to find out where they've taken my son."

"Rheon, most likely," Anheg said. "We've destroyed Jarviksholm. Rheon's the only strong point they've got left."

"That's not entirely certain, Anheg," Queen Porenne disagreed. "This scheme to abduct Prince Geran was obviously planned quite some time ago, and you destroyed Jarviksholm only last week. It's unlikely that the abductors even knew about it. I don't think we can rule out the possibility that the prince was taken to Cherek."

Anheg rose and began pacing up and down, a dark scowl on his face. "She's got a point," he admitted finally. "These child stealers were Chereks, after all. It's quite possible that they tried to take him to Jarviksholm, but when they found the city destroyed, they had to go someplace else. We could very well find them holed up in a fishing village somewhere on the west coast."

"What do we do now, then?" Garion asked helplessly.

"We split up," King Cho-Hag said quietly. "Anheg turns out all his forces, and they search every village and farm in Cherek. The rest of us go to Rheon and deal with those people there."

"There's only one difficulty with that," Anheg said. "A baby is a baby. How do my men recognize Garion's son if they do run across him?" "That's no real problem, Anheg," Polgara told him from her chair by the fire where she sat sipping a cup of tea. "Show them your palm, Garion."

Garion held up his right hand to show the King of Cherek the silvery mark there.

"I'd almost forgotten that," Anheg grunted. "Does Prince Geran have the same mark?"

"All heirs to the Rivan Throne have that mark on their palms," she replied. "It's been that way since the birth of Iron-grip's first son."

"All right," Anheg said. "My men will know what to look for, but will the rest of you have enough men to take Rheon? With the Algar and Drasnian cultists there, Ulfgar's got quite an army."

General Brendig rose and went over to a large map tacked up on one of the walls. "If I leave immediately for Sendar, I can put together a sizeable army in a few days. A forced march could put us in Darine within a week."

"I'll have ships waiting there to ferry you and your men to Boktor, then," Anheg promised.

"And I'll go south and raise the clans," Hettar said. "We'll ride straight north to Rheon."

Garion was also peering at the map. "If Anheg's ships take me and my troops to Boktor, we can join with the Drasnian pikemen there and march toward Rheon from the west," he said. "Then the ships can go back to Darine and pick up Brendig."

"That would save some time," Brendig agreed.

"With the Rivans and Drasnians, you're going to have enough troops to encircle Rheon," Silk said. "You might not have enough men to take the city, but you will have enough to keep anybody from going in or out. Then all you have to do is sit and wait for Brendig and Hettar. Once they join you, you'll have an overwhelming force."

"It's a sound plan, Garion," Barak said approvingly.

Mandorallen stood up. "And when we arrive at this fortified city on the moors of eastern Drasnia, I will undertake with siege engines and diverse other means to weaken the walls so that we may more easily gain access when we make our final assault," he noted. "Rheon will fall, and we will bring this miscreant Ulfgar to swift and terrible justice."

"Not too swift, I hope," Hettar murmured. "I was thinking along the lines of something more lingering."

"We'll have time to think about that after we catch him," Barak said.

The door opened, and Ce'Nedra, pale and wan-looking and accompanied by Queen Layla and the other ladies, entered. "Why are you all still here?" she demanded. "Why aren't you taking the world apart to find my baby?"

"That's hardly fair, Ce'Nedra," Garion chided her gently.

"I'm not trying to be fair. I want my baby."

"So do I, but we're not going to accomplish much by dashing around in circles, are we?"

"I'll raise an army myself, if I have to," she declared hotly. "I did it before and I can certainly do it again."

"And just where would you take them, dear?" Polgara asked her.

"Wherever it is that they've got my baby."

"And where is that? If you know something that we don't, shouldn't you share it with us?"

Ce'Nedra stared at her helplessly, her eyes filling with tears.

Belgarath had not contributed anything to the discussions, but rather had sat brooding out at the storm from a deep-cushioned chair by the window. "I've got the feeling that I'm missing something," he muttered as Adara and Nerina led the distraught Ce'Nedra to a chair near the council table.

"What did you say, Belgarath?" Anheg asked, removing his dented crown and tossing it on the table.

"I said that I think I'm missing something," the old man replied. "Anheg, just how extensive is your library?"

The Cherek King shrugged, scratching at his head. "I don't know that I could match the university library at Tol Honeth," he admitted, "but I've gathered most of the significant books in the world."

"How does your collection stack up in the area of the mysteries?"

"Of what?"

"Prophecies -not so much the Mrin Codex or the Darine- but the others: the Gospels of the Seers at Kell, the Grolim Prophecies of Rak Cthol, the Oracles of Ashaba."

"I've got that one," Anheg told him. "the Ashaba thing. I picked it up about a dozen years ago."

"I think I'd better go to Val Alorn and have a look at it."

"This is hardly the time for side trips, Grandfather," Garion objected.

"Garion, we know that something's happening that goes beyond an insurrection by a group of religious fanatics. That passage you found in the Mrin Codex was very specific. It instructed me to look into the mysteries, and I think that if I don't do exactly that, we're all likely to regret it." He turned to Anheg. "Where's your copy of the Ashabine Oracles?"

"In the library -up on the top shelf. I couldn't make any sense out of it, so I stuck it up there. I always meant to get back to it one day." Then a thought occurred to him. "Oh, by the way, there's a copy of the Malloreal Gospels in the monastery at Mar Terrin."

Belgarath blinked.

"That's one of the other books you wanted to see, wasn't it? The one by the Seers of Kell?"

"How could you possibly know what's in the library at Mar Terrin?"

"I heard about it a few years back. I have people who keep their eyes open for rare books. Anyway, I made the monks an offer for it -quite generous, I thought- but the negotiations fell through."

"You're a positive sink of information, Anheg. Can you think of anything else?"

"I can't help you with the Grolim Prophecies of Rak Cthol, I'm afraid. The only copy I know of was in Ctuchik's library, and that was probably buried when you blew Rak Cthol off its mountaintop. You could go dig for it, I suppose."

"Thanks, Anheg," Belgarath said drily. "You have no idea how much I appreciate your help."

"I can't believe that I'm hearing this," Ce'Nedra said accusingly to Belgarath. "Someone has stolen my baby - your great-grandson- and instead of trying to find him, you're planning to go off chasing obscure manuscripts."

"I'm not abandoning the child, Ce'Nedra. I'm just looking for him in a different place, that's all." He looked at her with a great sympathy in his eyes. "You're still very young," he said, "and all you can see is the one reality that your baby has been taken from you. There are two kinds of reality, however. Garion is going to follow your child in this reality. I'm going to follow him in the other. We're all after the same thing and this way we cover all the possibilities."

She stared at him for a moment, and then she suddenly covered her face with her hands and began to cry. Garion rose, went to her, and put her arms around her. "Ce'Nedra," he said soothingly, "Ce'Nedra, it's going to be All right."

"Nothing will be All right," she sobbed brokenly. "I'm so afraid for my baby, Garion. Nothing will ever be all right again."

Mandorallen rose to his feet, tears standing in his eyes. "As I am thy true knight and champion, dearest Ce'Nedra, I vow upon my life that the villain Ulfgar will never see another summer."

"That sort of gets to the point," Hettar murmured. "Why don't we all go to Rheon and nail Ulfgar to a post someplace -with very long nails?" Anheg looked at Cho-Hag. "Your son has a remarkably firm grasp of the realities of this situation," he observed.

"He's the delight of my twilight years," Cho-Hag said proudly.

The argument with Ce'Nedra began immediately upon their return to the royal apartment. Garion tried reason first, then commands. Finally, he resorted to threats.

"I don't care what you say, Garion, I am going to Rheon."

"You are not!"

"I am so!"

"I'll have you locked in the bedroom."

"And as soon as you leave, I'll order someone to unlock the door -or I'll chop it down- and I'll be on the next boat out of the harbor."

"Ce'Nedra, it's too dangerous."

"So was Thull Mardu -and Cthol Mishrak- and I didn't flinch from either one. I'm going to Rheon, Garion - either with you or by myself. I'm going to get my baby back- even if I have to tear down the city walls with my bare hands."

"Ce'Nedra, please."

"No!" she exclaimed, stamping her foot. "I'm going, Garion, and nothing you can say or do is going to stop me!"

Garion threw his arms in the air. "Women!" he said in a despairing tone.

The fleet left at dawn the following morning, sailing out of the harbor into rough seas and the dirty scud and wrack of the tail-end of the storm.

Garion stood on the aft deck of the Seabird beside Barak, whose thick hands firmly grasped the tiller. "I didn't think I was ever going to have to do this again," he said morosely.

"Oh, sailing in rough weather isn't all that bad." Barak shrugged as the wind tossed his red beard.

"That's not what I meant. I thought that after Torak died, I could live out my life in peace."

"You got lucky," Barak told him.

"Are you trying to be funny?"

"All anybody ever got out of peace was a fat behind and cobwebs in his head," the big man said sagely.

"Give me a nice friendly little war any time."

When they were some leagues at sea, a detachment of ships separated from the fleet to sail due east toward Sendar, bearing with them King Fulrach, General Brendig, the Earl of Seline, and the heavily sedated Queen Layla.

"I hope Brendig gets to Darine on time," Anheg said, standing at the rail. "I'm really going to need those ships during the search."

"Where do you plan to start?" Queen Porenn asked him.

"The cult's largely concentrated on the west coast," he replied. "If Prince Geran's abductors went to Cherek, they'd most likely head for a cult stronghold. I'll start along the coast and work my way inland."

"That seems like sound strategy," she agreed. "Deploy your men and sweep the area."

"Porenn," he said with a pained look, "I love you like a sister, but please don't use military terms when you talk to me. It sets my teeth on edge to hear that sort of language in a woman's mouth."

The passage through the Cherek Bore delayed them for two days. Although Grelidik and a few other hardy souls were willing -even eager- to attempt the Great Maelstrom in the heavy seas that were the aftermath of the storm, cooler and more prudent heads prevailed.

"I'm sure the sea will quiet down in a bit," Barak shouted across to his friend, "and Rheon isn't going anywhere. Let's not lose any ships if we don't have to."

"Barak," Grelidik shouted back, "you're turning into an old woman."

"Anheg said the same thing just before Jarviksholm," Barak noted.

"He's a wise king."

"It isn't his ship."

After they passed the Bore and entered the calmer waters of the Gulf of Cherek, King Anheg took a sizeable portion of the fleet and sailed northward toward Val Alorn. Before making the transfer to one of Anheg's ships, Belgarath stood on deck, talking quietly with Garion and Polgara. "As soon as I finish at Val Alorn, I'll go on down to Mar Terrin," he told them. "If I don't get back before you arrive at Rheon, be careful. The cult's pretty fanatic, and this war they've started is directed at you personally, Garion."

"I'll watch out for him, father," Polgara assured him.

"I can more or less take care of myself, Aunt Pol," Garion told her.

"I'm sure you can, dear," she replied, "but old habits die hard."

"How old am I going to have to be before you realize that I'm grown up?"

"Why don't you check back with me in a thousand years or so?" she said. "Maybe we can talk about it then."

He smiled, then sighed. "Aunt Pol," he said, "I love you."

"Yes, dear," she replied, patting his cheek, "I know, and I love you, too."

At Kotu, the ship carrying Hettar and his wife and parents turned south toward Aldurford. "I'll meet you at Rheon in about three weeks," the hawk-faced Algar called across to the Seabird. "Save a little bit of the fighting for me."

"Only if you hurry." Leildorin shouted back blithely.

"I'm not sure which are worse," Polgara murmured to Ce'Nedra, "Arends or Alorns."

"Could they possibly be related?" Ce'Nedra asked.

Aunt Pol laughed, then wrinkled her nose as she looked at the wharves of Kotu. "Come, dear," she said, "let's go below. Harbors always have the most distressing odors about them."

The fleet passed Kotu and filed into the mouth of the Mrin River. The current was sluggish, and the fens lay green and soggy on either side. Garion stood near the bow of the Seabird, idly watching the gray-green reeds and scrubby bushes slide by as the oarsmen pulled steadily upstream.

"Ah, there you are, Garion," Queen Porenn said, coming up behind him. "I thought we might talk for a few minutes."

"Of course." He had a rather special feeling for this small, blonde woman, whose courage and devotion bespoke at once an enormous affection and an iron-clad resolve.

"When we reach Boktor, I want to leave Kheva at the palace. I don't think he's going to like it very much, but he's just a little young for battles. If he gets stubborn about it, could you order him to stay behind?"

"Me?"

"You're the Overlord of the West, Garion," she reminded him. "I'm only his mother."

"Overlord of the West is an over-rated title, I'm afraid." He tugged absently at one ear. "I wonder if I could possibly persuade Ce'Nedra to stay in Boktor as well," he mused.

"I doubt it," she said. "Kheva might accept you as his superior, but Ce'Nedra looks upon you as her husband. There's a difference, you know."

He made a wry face. "You're probably right," he admitted. "It's worth a try, though. How far up the Mrin can we go by boat?"

"The north fork runs into a series of shallows about twenty leagues above Boktor," she replied. "I suppose we could portage around them, but it wouldn't accomplish very much. Ten leagues farther upstream you

come to another stretch of shallows, and then there are the rapids. We could spend a great deal of time pulling the boats out of the water and then putting them back in again."

"Then it would be faster just to start marching when we get to the first shallows?"

She nodded. "It's likely to take several days for my generals to assemble their troops and get their supplies together," she added. "I'll instruct them to follow us as quickly as they can. Once they join us, we can go on to Rheon and lay siege until Brendig and Hettar arrive."

"You know, you're really very good at this, Porenn."

She smiled sadly. "Rhodar was a very good teacher."

"You loved him very much, didn't you?"

She sighed. "More than you can possibly imagine, Garion."

They reached Bektor the following afternoon, and Garion accompanied Queen Porenn and her slightly sullen son to the palace, with Silk tagging along behind. As soon as they arrived, Porenn sent a messenger to the headquarters of the Drasnian military forces.

"Shall we take some tea while we're waiting, gentlemen?" the little blonde queen offered as the three of them sat comfortably in a large, airy chamber with red velvet drapes at the windows.

"Only if you can't find anything stronger." Silk replied with an impudent grin.

"Isn't it a trifle early in the day for that, Prince Kheldar?" she asked him reprovingly.

"I'm an Alorn, Auntie dear. It's never too early in the day."

"Kheldar, please don't call me that. It makes me feel positively antique."

But you are, Porenn -my aunt, I mean, not antique, of course."

"Are you ever serious about anything?"

"Not if I can help it."

She sighed and then laughed a warm tinkle of a laugh.

Perhaps a quarter of an hour later, a stocky man with a red face and a somewhat gaudy orange uniform was shown into the room. "Your Majesty sent for me?" he asked, bowing respectfully.

"Ah, General Haldar," she replied. "Are you acquainted with his Majesty, King Belgarion?"

"We met briefly, ma'am -at your late husband's funeral." He bowed floridly to Garion. "Your Majesty."

"General."

"And of course you've met Prince Kheldar."

"Of course," the general replied. "Your Highness."

"General." Silk looked at him closely "Isn't that a new decoration, Haldar?" he asked.

The red-faced general touched the cluster of medals on his chest somewhat deprecatingly. "That's what generals do in peacetime, Prince Kheldar. We give each other medals."

"I'm afraid that the peacetime is at an end, General Haldar," Porenn said rather crisply. "You've heard what happened at Jarviksholm in Cherek, I presume."

"Yes, your Majesty," he replied. "It was a well-executed campaign."

"We are now going to proceed against Rheon. The Bear-cult has abducted King Belgarion's son."

"Abducted?" Haldar's expression was incredulous.

"I'm afraid so. I think the time has come to eliminate the cult entirely. That's why we're moving on Rheon. We have a fleet in the harbor loaded with Belgarion's Rivans. Tomorrow, we'll sail up to the shallows and disembark. We'll march overland toward Rheon. I want you to muster the army and follow us as quickly as you possibly can."

Haldar was frowning as if something he had heard had distracted him. "Are you sure that the Rivan Prince was abducted, your Majesty?" he asked. "He was not killed?"

"No," Garion answered firmly. "It was clearly an abduction."

Haldar began to pace up and down agitatedly. "That doesn't make any sense," he muttered, almost to himself.

"Do you understand your instructions, General?" Porenn asked him.

"What? Oh yes, your Majesty. I'm to gather the army and catch up with King Belgarion's Rivans before they reach Rheon."

"Precisely. We'll besiege the town until the rest of our forces arrive. We'll be joined at Rheon by Algars and elements of the Sendarian army."

"I'll start at once, your Majesty," he assured her. His expression was still slightly abstracted, and his frown was worried.

"Is there anything wrong, General?" she asked him.

"What? Oh, no, your Majesty. I'll go to headquarters and issue the necessary orders immediately "

"Thank you, General Haldar. That will be all."

"He certainly heard something he didn't like," Silk observed after the general had left.

"We've all heard things lately that we haven't liked," Garion said.

"It wasn't quite the same, though," Silk muttered. "Excuse me for a bit. I think I'm going to go ask a few questions." He rose from his chair and quietly left the room.

Early the next morning, the fleet weighed anchor and began to move slowly upstream from Boktor. Though the day had dawned clear and sunny, by noon a heavy cloud cover had swept in off the Gulf of Cherek to turn the Drasnian countryside gray and depressing.

"I hope it doesn't rain," Barak growled from his place at the tiller. "I hate slogging through mud on my way to a fight."

The shallows of the Mrin proved to be a very wide stretch of river where the water rippled over gravel bars.

"Have you ever considered dredging this?" Garion asked the Queen of Drasnia.

"No," she replied. "As a matter of policy I don't want the Mrin navigable beyond this point. I'd rather not have Tolnedran merchantmen bypassing Boktor." She smiled sweetly at Ce'Nedra. "I'm not trying to be offensive, dear," she said, "but your countrymen always seem to want to avoid customs. As things now stand, I control the North Caravan Route and I need that customs revenue."

"I understand, Porenn," Ce'Nedra assured her. "I'd do it that way myself."

They beached the fleet on the northern bank of the river, and Garion's forces began to disembark. "You'll lead the ships back down-river and across to Darine, then?" Barak said to the bearded Gredlik.

"Right," Gredlik said. "I'll have Brendig and his Sendars back here within a week."

"Good. Tell him to follow us to Rheon as quickly as he can. I've never been happy with the idea of long sieges."

"Are you going to send Seabird back with me?"

Barak scratched at his beard thoughtfully. "No," he said finally. "I think I'll leave her here."

"Believe me, I'm not going to get her sunk, Barak."

"I know, but I just feel better about the idea of having her here in case I need her. Will you come to Rheon with Brendig? There's bound to be some good fighting."

Gredlik's face grew mournful. "No," he replied. "Anheg ordered me to come back to Val Alorn when I finish freighting the Sendars here."

"Oh. That's too bad."

Gredlik grunted sourly. "Have fun at Rheon," he said, "and try not to get yourself killed."

"I'll make a special point of it."

By the time the troops and supplies had all been unloaded, it was late afternoon. The clouds continued to roll in, though there was as yet no rain. "I think we may as well set up a camp here," Garion said to the others as they all stood on the gently sloping riverbank. "We wouldn't get too far before dark anyway, and if we get a good night's sleep, we can start early in the morning."

"That makes sense," Silk agreed.

"Did you find out anything about Haldar?" Queen Porenn asked the rat-faced little man. "I know there was something about him that was bothering you."

"Nothing really very specific," Silk shrugged. "He's been doing a lot of traveling lately, though."

"He's a general, Kheldar, and my Chief-of-Staff. Generals do have to make inspection tours from time to time, you know."

"But usually not alone," Silk replied. "When he makes these trips, he doesn't even take his aide along."

"I think you're just being overly suspicious."

"It's my nature to be suspicious, Auntie dear."

She stamped her foot. "Will you stop calling me that?"

He looked at her mildly. "Does it really bother you, Porenn?" he asked.

"I've told you that it bothers me."

"Maybe I ought to try to remember that, then."

"You're absolutely impossible, do you know that?"

"Of course I do, Auntie dear."

For the next two days the Rivan army marched steadily eastward across the desolate, gray-green moors, a wasteland of barren, sparsely vegetated hills interspersed with rank patches of thorn and bramble springing up around dark pools of stagnant water. The sky remained gray and threatening, but there was as yet no rain.

Garion rode at the head of the column with a bleakly determined look on his face, speaking infrequently except to issue commands. His scouts reported at intervals, announcing that there was no sign of cult forces ahead and with equal certainty that there was as yet no evidence that the Drasnian pikemen under General Haldar were coming up from the rear.

When they stopped for a hasty midday meal on that second day, Polgara approached him gravely. Her blue cloak seemed to whisper through the tall grass as she came, and her familiar fragrance came to him on the vagrant breeze. "Let's walk a bit, Garion," she said quietly. "There's something we need to discuss."

"All right." His reply was short, even curt.

She did something then that she had rarely done in the past several years. With a kind of solemn affection, she linked her arm in his, and together they walked away from the army and the rest of their friends, moving up a grassy knoll.

"You've grown very grim in the past few weeks, dear," she said as they stopped at the crest of the knoll.

"I think I've got reason enough, Aunt Pol."

"I know that you've been hurt deeply by all of this, Garion, and that you're filled with a great rage; but don't let it turn you into a savage."

"Aunt Pol, I didn't start this," he reminded her. "They tried to kill my wife. Then they murdered one of my closest friends and tried to start a war between me and Anheg. And now they've stolen my son. Don't you think that a little punishment might be in order?"

"Perhaps," she replied, looking directly into his face, "but you must not allow your sense of outrage to run away with you and make you decide to start wading in blood. You have tremendous power, Garion, and you could very easily use it to do unspeakable things to your enemies. If you do that, the power will turn you into something as vile as Torak was. You'll begin to take pleasure in the horrors you inflict. In time, that pleasure will come to own you."

He stared at her, startled by the intensity in her voice and by the way the single white lock at her brow seemed to blaze up suddenly.

"It's a very real danger, Garion. In a peculiar way, you're in more peril right now than you were when you faced Torak."

"I'm not going to let them get away with what they've done," he said stubbornly. "I'm not just going to let them go."

"I'm not suggesting that, dear. We'll be at Rheon soon, and there'll be fighting. You're an Alorn, and I'm sure that you'll be very enthusiastic about the fighting. I want you to promise me that you won't let that enthusiasm and your sense of outrage push you over the line into wanton slaughter."

"Not if they surrender," he replied stiffly.

"And what then? What will you do with your prisoners?"

He frowned. He hadn't really considered that.

"For the most part, the Bear-cult is composed of the ignorant and the misguided. They're so obsessed with a single idea that they can't even comprehend the enormity of what they've done. Will you butcher them for stupidity? Stupidity is unfortunate, but it hardly deserves that kind of punishment."

"What about Ulfgar?" he demanded.

She smiled a bleak little smile. "Now that," she said, "is another matter."

A large, blue-banded hawk spiraled down out of the murky sky. "Are we having a little family get-together?"

Beldin asked harshly, even as he shimmered into his own form.

"Where have you been, uncle?" Aunt Pol asked him quite calmly. "I left word with the twins for you to catch up with us."

"I just got back from Mallorean," he grunted, scratching at his stomach. "Where's Belgarath?"

"At Val Alorn," she replied, "and then he's going on to Mar Terrin. He's trying to follow the trail that's supposed to be hidden in the mysteries. You've heard about what's happened?"

"Most of it, I think. The twins showed me the passage that was hidden in the Mrin Codex, and I heard about the Rivan Warder and Belgarion's son. You're moving against Rheon, right?"

"Naturally," she answered. "That's the source of the infection."

The hunchback looked speculatively at Garion. "I'm sure you're an expert tactician, Belgarion," he said, "but your reasoning escapes me this time."

Garion looked at him blankly.

"You're moving to attack a superior force in a fortified city, right?"

"I suppose you could put it that way."

"Then why is more than half your army camped at the shallows of the Mrin, two days behind you? Don't you think you might need them?"

"What are you talking about, uncle?" Aunt Pol asked sharply.

"I thought I was speaking quite plainly. The Drasnian army's camped at the shallows. They don't show signs of planning to move at any time in the near future. They're even fortifying their positions."

"That's impossible."

He shrugged. "Fly back and have a look for yourself."

"We'd better go tell the others, Garion," Aunt Pol said gravely. "Something has gone terribly wrong somewhere."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

"What is that man thinking of?" Queen Porenn burst out in a sudden uncharacteristic fury. "I specifically ordered him to catch up with us."

Silk's face was bleak. "I think we should have checked the inestimable General Haldar's feet for that telltale brand," he said.

"You're not serious!" Porenn exclaimed.

"He's deliberately disobeying your orders, Porenn, and he's doing it in such a way as to endanger you and all the rest of us."

"Believe me, I'll get to the bottom of this as soon as I get back to Boktor."

"Unfortunately, we're not going in that direction just now."

"Then I'll go back to the shallows alone," she declared. "If necessary, I'll relieve him of his command."

"No," he said firmly, "you won't."

She stared at him incredulously. "Kheldar, do you realize to whom you're speaking?"

"Perfectly, Porenn, but it's too dangerous."

"It's my duty."

"No," he corrected. "Actually, your duty is to stay alive long enough to raise Kheva to be King of Drasnia."

She bit her lip. "That's unfair, Kheldar."

"Life is hard, Porenn."

"He's right, your Majesty," Javelin said. "General Haldar has already committed treason by disobeying you. I don't think he'd hesitate to add your murder to that crime."

"We're going to need some men," Barak rumbled, "A few anyway. Otherwise we're going to have to stop and wait for Brendig."

Silk shook his head. "Haldar 's camped at the shallows. If what we suspect is true, he can keep Brendig from ever disembarking his troops."

"Well," Ce'Nedra demanded angrily, "what do we do now?"

"I don't think we've got much choice," Barak said. "We'll have to turn around and go back to the shallows and arrest Haldar for treason. Then we turn around and come back with the pikemen."

"That could take almost a week," she protested.

"What other alternatives do we have? We have to have those pikemen."

"I think you're overlooking something, Barak," Silk said, "Have you noticed a slight chill in the air the last two days?"

"A little -in the mornings."

"We're in northeastern Drasnia. Winter comes very early up here."

"Winter? But it's only early autumn."

"We're along way north, my friend. We could get the first snowfall at any time now."

Barak started to swear.

Silk motioned Javelin aside, and the two of them spoke together briefly.

"It's all falling apart, isn't it, Garion?" Ce'Nedra said, her lower lip trembling.

"We'll fix it, Ce'Nedra," he said, taking her in his arms.

"But how?"

"I haven't quite worked that out yet."

"We're vulnerable, Garion," Barak said seriously. "We're marching directly into cult territory with a vastly inferior force. We're wide open to ambush."

"You'll need somebody to scout on ahead," Beldin said, looking up from the piece of cold meat he had been tearing with his teeth. He stuffed the rest of the chunk in his mouth and wiped his fingers on the front of his filthy tunic. "I can be fairly unobtrusive if I want to be."

"I'll take care of that, uncle," Polgara told him. "Hettar's coming north with the Algar clans. Could you go to him and tell him what's happened? We need him as quickly as he can get here."

He gave her an appraising look, still chewing on the chunk of meat. "Not a bad idea, Pol," he admitted. "I thought that married life might have made your wits soft, but it looks as if it's only your behind that's getting flabby."

"Do you mind, uncle?" she asked acidly.

"I'd better get started," he said. He crouched, spread his arms, and shimmered into the form of a hawk.

"I'll be away for a few days," Silk said, coming back to join them. "We might be able to salvage this yet."

Then he turned on his heel and went directly to his horse.

"Where's he going?" Garion asked Javelin.

"We need men," Javelin replied. "He's going after some."

"Porenn," Polgara said, trying to look back down over her shoulder, "does it seem to you that I've been putting on a few extra pounds in the past months?"

Porenn smiled gently. "Of course not, Polgara," she said. "He was only teasing you."

Polgara, however, still had a slightly worried look on her face as she removed her blue cloak. "I'll go on ahead," she told Garion. "Keep your troops moving, but don't run. I don't want you to blunder into something before I have a chance to warn you." Then she blurred, and the great snowy owl drifted away on soft, noiseless wings.

Garion moved his forces carefully after that, deploying them into the best possible defensive posture as they marched. He doubled his scouts and rode personally to the top of every hill along the way to search the terrain ahead.

The pace of their march slowed to be no more than five leagues a day; though the delay fretted him, he felt that he had no real choice in the matter.

Polgara returned each morning to report that no apparent dangers lay ahead and then she flew away again on noiseless wings.

"How does she manage that?" Ce'Nedra asked. "I don't think she's sleeping at all."

"Pol can go for weeks without sleep," Durnik told her. "She'll be all right -if it doesn't go on for too long."

"Belgarion," Errand said in his light voice, pulling his chestnut stallion in beside Garion's mount, "you did know that we're being watched, didn't you?"

"What?"

"There are men watching us."

"Where?"

"Several places. They're awfully well hidden. And there are other men galloping back and forth between that town we're going to and the army back at the river."

"I don't like that very much," Barak said. "It sounds as if they're trying to co-ordinate something."

Garion looked back over his shoulder at Queen Porenn, who rode beside Ce'Nedra. "Would the Drasnian army attack us if Haldar ordered them to?" he asked.

"No," she said quite finally. "The troops are absolutely loyal to me. They'd refuse that kind of order."

"What if they thought they were rescuing you?" Errand asked. "Rescuing?"

"That's what Ulfgar is suggesting," the young man replied. "The general's supposed to tell his troops that our army here is holding you prisoner."

"I think they would attack under those circumstances, your Majesty," Javelin said, "and if the cult and the army catch us between them, we could be in very deep trouble."

"What else can go wrong?" Garion fumed.

"At least it isn't snowing," Lelldorin said. "Not yet, anyway."

The army seemed almost to crawl across the barren landscape as the clouds continued to roll ponderously overhead.

The world seemed locked in a chill, colorless gray, and each morning the scum of ice lying on the stagnant pools was thicker.

"We're never going to get there at this rate, Garion," Ce'Nedra said impatiently one gloomy midday as she rode beside him.

"If we get ambushed, we might not get there at all, Ce'Nedra," he replied. "I don't like this any more than you do, but I don't think we've really got much choice."

"I want my baby."

"So do I."

"Well, do something then."

"I'm open to suggestions."

"Can't you-?" She made a vague sort of gesture with one hand.

He shook his head. "You know that there are limits to that sort of thing, Ce'Nedra."

"What good is it then?" she demanded bitterly, pulling her gray Rivan cloak more tightly about her against the chill.

The great white owl awaited them just over the next rise. She sat on a broken limb of a dead-white snag, observing them with her unblinking golden eyes.

"Lady Polgara," Ce'Nedra greeted her with a formal inclination of her head.

Gravely the white owl returned her a stiff little bow. Garion suddenly laughed.

The owl blurred, and the air around it wavered briefly. Then Polgara was there, seated sedately on the limb with her ankles crossed. "What's so amusing, Garion?" she asked him.

"I've never seen a bird bow before," he replied. "It just struck me as funny, that's all."

"Try not to let it overwhelm you, dear," she said primly. "Come over here and help me down."

"Yes, Aunt Pol."

After he had helped her to the ground, she looked at him soberly. "There's a large cult force lying in wait two leagues ahead of you," she told him.

"How large?"

"Half again as large as yours."

"We'd better go tell the others," he said grimly, turning his horse.

"Is there any way we could slip around them?" Durnik asked after Polgara had told them all of the cultists lying in ambush ahead.

"I don't think so, Durnik," she replied. "They know we're here, and I'm sure we're being watched."

"We must needs attack them, then," Mandorallen asserted. "Our cause is just, and we must inevitably prevail."

"That's an interesting superstition, Mandorallen," Barak told him, "but I'd prefer to have the numbers on my side." The big man turned to Polgara. "How are they deployed? What I mean is—"

"I know what the word means, Barak." She scraped a patch of ground bare with her foot and picked up a stick.

"This trail we're following runs through a ravine that cuts through that low range of hills just ahead. At about the deepest part of the ravine, there are several gullies running up the sides. There are four separate groups of cultists, each one hiding in a different gully." She sketched out the terrain ahead with her stick. "They obviously plan to let us march right into the middle of them and then attack us from all sides at once."

Durnik was frowning as he studied her sketch. "We could easily defeat any one of those groups," he suggested, rubbing thoughtfully at one cheek. "All we really need is some way to keep the other three groups out of the fight."

"That sort of sums it up," Barak said, "but I don't think they'll stay away just because they weren't invited."

"No," the smith agreed, "so we'll probably have to put up some kind of barrier to prevent their joining in."

"You've thought of something, haven't you, Durnik?" Queen Porenn observed.

"What manner of barrier could possibly keep the villains from rushing to the aid of their comrades?"

Mandorallen asked.

Durnik shrugged. "Fire would probably work."

Javelin shook his head and pointed at the low gorse bushes in the field beside them. "Everything in this area is still green," he said. "I don't think it's going to burn very well."

Durnik smiled. "It doesn't have to be a real fire."

"Could you do that, Polgara?" Barak asked, his eyes coming alight.

She considered it a moment. "Not in three places at once," she replied.

"But there are three of us, Pol," the smith reminded her. "You could block one group with an illusion of fire; I could take the second; and Garion the third. We could pen all three groups in their separate gullies, and then, after we've finished with the first group, we could move on to the next." He frowned slightly. "The only problem with it is that I'm not sure exactly how to go about creating the illusion."

"It's not too difficult, dear " Aunt Pol assured him. "It shouldn't take long for you and Garion to get the knack of it."

"What do you think?" Queen Porenn asked Javelin.

"It's dangerous," he told her, "very dangerous."

"Do we have any choice?"

"Not that I can think of right offhand."

That's it, then," Garion said. "If the rest of you will tell the troops what we're going to do, Durnik and I can start learning how to build imaginary bonfires."

It was perhaps an hour later when the Rivan troops moved out tensely, each man walking through the gray-green gorse with his hand close to his weapon. The low range of hills lay dark ahead of them, and the weedy track they followed led directly into the boulder-strewn ravine where the unseen Bear-cultists waited in ambush. Garion steeled himself as they entered that ravine, drawing in his will and carefully remembering everything Aunt Pol had taught him.

The plan worked surprisingly well. As the first group of cultists dashed from the concealment of their gully with their weapons aloft and shouts of triumph on their lips, Garion, Durnik, and Polgara instantly blocked the mouths of the other three gullies. The charging cult members faltered, their triumph changing to chagrin as they gaped at the sudden flames that prevented their comrades from joining the fray.

Garion's Rivans moved immediately to take advantage of that momentary hesitation. Step by step the first group of cultists were pushed back into the narrow confines of the gully that had concealed them.

Garion could pay only scant attention to the progress of the fight. He sat astride his horse with Lelldorin at his side, concentrating entirely upon projecting the images of flame and the sense of heat and the crackle of fire across the mouth of the gully opposite the one where the fight was in progress.

Dimly through the leaping flames, he could see the members of the cult trying to shield their faces from an intense heat that was not really there. And then the one thing that had not occurred to any of them happened. The trapped cult-members in Garion's gully began to throw buckets full of water hastily dipped from a stagnant pond on the imaginary flames. There was, of course, no hiss of steam nor any other visible effect of that attempt to quench the illusion. After several moments a cult member, cringing and wincing, stepped through the fire. "It isn't real!" he shouted back over his shoulder. "The fire isn't real!"

"This is, though," Lelldorin muttered grimly, sinking an arrow into the man's chest. The cultist threw up his arms and toppled over backward into the fire -which had no effect on his limp body. That, of course, gave the whole thing away. First a few and then a score or more cult members ran directly through Garion's illusion. Lelldorin's hands blurred as he shot arrow after arrow into the milling ranks at the mouth of the gully.

"There're too many of them, Garion," he shouted. "I can't hold them. We'll have to fall back."

"Aunt Pol!" Garion yelled. "They're breaking through!"

"Push them back," she called to him. "Use your will."

He concentrated even more and pushed a solid barrier of his will at the men emerging from the gully. At first it seemed that it might even work, but the effort he was exerting was enormous, and he soon began to tire. The edges of his hastily erected barrier began to fray and tatter, and the men he was trying so desperately to hold back began to find those weak spots.

Dimly, even as he bent all of his concentration on maintaining the barrier, he heard a sullen rumble, almost like distant thunder.

"Garion!" Lelldorin cried. "Horsemen -hundreds of them!"

In dismay, Garion looked quickly up the ravine and saw a sudden horde of riders coming down the steep cut from the east. "Aunt Pol!" he shouted, even as he reached back over his shoulder to draw Iron-grip's great sword.

The wave of riders, however, veered sharply just as they reached him and crashed directly into the front ranks of the cultists who were on the verge of breaking through his barrier. This new force was composed of lean, leather-tough men in black, and their eyes had a peculiar angularity to them.

"Nadraks! By the Gods, they're Nadraks!" Garion heard Barak shout from somewhere across the ravine.

"What are they doing here?" Garion muttered, half to himself.

"Garion!" Lelldorin exclaimed. "That man in the middle of the riders -isn't that Prince Kheldar?"

The new troops charging into the furious melee quickly turned the tide of battle. They charged directly into the faces of the startled cultists who were emerging from the mouths of the gullies, inflicting dreadful casualties.

Once he had committed his horsemen, Silk dropped back to join Garion and Lelldorin in the center of the ravine.

"Good day, gentlemen," he greeted them with aplomb. "I hope I didn't keep you waiting."

"Where did you get all the Nadraks?" Garion demanded, trembling with sudden relief.

"In Gar og Nadrak, of course."

"Why would they want to help us?"

"Because I paid them." Silk shrugged. "You owe me a great deal of money, Garion."

"How did you find so many so fast?" Lelldorin asked.

"Yarblek and I have a fur-trading station just across the border. The trappers who brought in their furs last spring were just lying around, drinking and gambling, so I hired them."

"You got here just in time," Garion said.

"I noticed that. Those fires of yours were a nice touch."

"Up until the point where they started throwing water on them. That's when things started to get tense."

A few hundred of the trapped cultists managed to escape the general destruction by scrambling up the steep sides of the gullies and fleeing out onto the barren moors; but for most of their fellows, there was no escape. Barak rode out of the gully where the Rivan troops were mopping up the few survivors of the initial charge.

"Do you want to give them the chance to surrender?" he asked Garion.

Garion remembered the conversation he and Polgara had had several days previously. "I suppose we should," he said after a moment's thought.

"You don't have to, you know," Barak told him. "Under the circumstances, no one would blame you if you wiped them out to the very last man."

No," Garion said, "I don't think I really want to do that. Tell the ones that are left that we'll spare their lives if they throw down their weapons."

Barak shrugged. "It's up to you."

"Silk, you lying little thief!" a tall Nadrak in a felt coat and an outrageous fur hat exclaimed. He was roughly searching the body of a slain cultist. "You said that they all had money on them and that they were loaded down with gold chains and bracelets. All this one has on him is fleas."

"Perhaps I exaggerated just a trifle, Yarblek," Silk said urbanely to his partner.

"I ought to gut you, do you know that?"

"Why, Yarblek," Silk replied with feigned astonishment, "is that any way to talk to your brother?"

"Brother!" the Nadrak snorted, rising and planting a solid kick in the side of the body that had so sorely disappointed him.

"That's what we agreed when we went into partnership -that we were going to treat each other like brothers."

"Don't twist words on me, you little weasel. Besides, I stuck a knife in my brother twenty years ago -for lying to me."

As the last of the trapped and outnumbered cultists threw down their arms in surrender, Polgara, Ce'Nedra, and Errand came cautiously up the ravine, accompanied by the filthy, hunchbacked Beldin.

"Your Algar reinforcements are still several days away," the ugly little sorcerer told Garion. "I tried to hurry them along, but they're very tenderhearted with their horses. Where did you get all the Nadraks?"

"Silk hired them."

Beldin nodded approvingly. "Mercenaries always make the best soldiers," he said.

The coarse-faced Yarblek had been looking at Polgara, his eyes alight with recognition. "You're still as handsome as ever, girl," he said to her. "Have you changed your mind about letting me buy you?"

"No, Yarblek," she replied. "Not yet, anyway. You arrived at an excellent time."

"Only because some lying little thief told me there was loot to be had." He glared at Silk and then nudged the body he was standing over with his foot. "Frankly, I'd make more money plucking dead chickens."

Beldin looked at Garion. "If you intend to see your son again before he has a full beard, you'd better get moving," he said.

"I've got to make some arrangements about the prisoners," Garion replied.

"What's to arrange?" Yarblek shrugged. "Line them up and chop off their heads."

"Absolutely not!"

"What's the point of fighting if you can't butcher the prisoners when it's over?"

"Someday when we have some time, I'll explain it to you," Silk told him.

"Alorns!" Yarblek sighed, casting his eyes toward the murky sky.

"Yarblek, you mangy son of a dog!" It was a raven-haired woman in leather breeches and a tight-fitting leather vest.

There was at once a vast anger and an overwhelming physical presence about her. "I thought you said we could make a profit by picking over the dead. These vermin don't have a thing on them."

"We were misled, Vella," he replied somberly, giving Silk a flinty look.

"I told you not to trust that rat-faced little sneak. You're not only ugly, Yarblek, you're stupid as well."

Garion had been looking curiously at the angry woman.

"Isn't that the girl who danced in the tavern that time in Gar og Nadrak?" he asked Silk, remembering the girl's overwhelming sensuality that had stirred the blood of every man in that wayside drinking establishment.

The little man nodded. "She married that trapper -Tekk- but he came out second best in an argument with a bear a few years back, and his brother sold her to Yarblek."

"Worst mistake I ever made," Yarblek said mournfully. "She's almost as fast with her knives as she is with her tongue." He pulled back one sleeve and showed them an angry red scar. "And all I was trying to do was to be friendly."

She laughed. "Ha! You know the rules, Yarblek. If you want to keep your guts on the inside, you keep your hands to yourself."

Beldin's eyes had a peculiar expression in them as he looked at her. "Spirited wench, isn't she?" he murmured to Yarblek. "I admire a woman with a quick wit and a ready tongue."

A wild hope suddenly flared in Yarblek's eyes. "Do you like her?" he asked eagerly. "I'll sell her to you, if you want."

"Have you lost your mind entirely, Yarblek?" Vella demanded indignantly.

"Please, Vella, I'm talking business."

"This shabby old troll couldn't buy a tankard of cheap ale, much less me." She turned to Beldin. "Have you even got two coins to rub together, you jackass?" she demanded.

"Now you've gone and spoiled the whole negotiation," Yarblek accused her plaintively.

Beldin, however, gave the dark-haired woman a wicked, lopsided grin. "You interest me, girl," he told her, "and nobody's done that for longer than I can remember. Try to work on your threats and curses a bit, though. The rhythm isn't quite right." He turned to Polgara. "I think I'll go back and see what those Drasnian pikemen are up to. Somehow I don't believe that we want them creeping up behind us." Then he spread his arms, crouched, and became a hawk.

Vella stared incredulously after him as he soared away. "How did he do that?" she gasped.

"He's very talented," Silk replied.

"He is indeed." She turned on Yarblek with fire in her eyes. "Why did you let me talk to him like that?" she demanded. "You know how important first impressions are. Now he'll never make a decent offer for me."

"You can tell for yourself that he doesn't have any money."

"There are other things than money, Yarblek."

Yarblek shook his head and walked away muttering to himself.

Ce'Nedra's eyes were as hard as green agates. "Garion," she said in a deceptively quiet voice, "one day very soon we'll want to talk about these taverns you mentioned -and dancing girls- and a few other matters as well."

"It was a long time ago, dear." he said quickly.

"Not nearly long enough."

"Does anybody have anything to eat?" Vella demanded, looking around. "I'm as hungry as a bitch wolf with ten puppies."

"I can probably find something for you," Polgara replied.

Vella looked at her, and her eyes slowly widened. "Are you who I think you are?" she asked in an awed voice.

"That depends on who you think I am, dear."

"I understand that you dance," Ce'Nedra said in a chilly voice.

Vella shrugged. "All women dance. I'm just the best, that's all."

"You seem very sure of yourself, Mistress Vella."

"I just recognize facts." Vella looked curiously at Ce'Nedra. "My, you're a tiny one, aren't you?" she asked.

"Are you really full-grown?"

"I am the Queen of Riva," Ce'Nedra replied, drawing herself up to her full height.

"Good for you, girl," Vella said warmly, clapping her on the shoulder. "I always enjoy seeing a woman get ahead."

* * * *

It was midmorning of a gray, cloudy day when Garion crested a hill and looked across a shallow valley at the imposing bulk of Rheon. The town stood atop a steep hill, and its walls reared up sharply out of the rank gorse covering the slopes.

"Well," Barak said quietly as he joined Garion, "there it is."

"I didn't realize the walls were quite so high," Garion admitted.

"They've been working on them," Barak said, pointing. "You can see that new stonework on the parapet."

Flying defiantly above the city, the scarlet banner of the Bear-cult, a blood-red flag with the black outline of a shambling bear in the center, snapped in the chill breeze. For some reason that flag raised an almost irrational rage in Garion.

"I want that thing down," he said from between clenched teeth.

"That's why we came," Barak told him.

Mendorallen, burnished in his armor, joined them.

"This isn't going to be easy, is it?" Garion said to them.

"It won't be so bad," Barak replied, "once Hettar gets here." Mendorallen had been assessing the town's fortifications with a professional eye. "I foresee no insurmountable difficulties," he declared confidently.

"Immediately upon the return of the several hundred men I dispatched to procure timbers from the forest lying some leagues to the north, I shall begin the construction of siege engines."

"Can you actually throw a rock big enough to hock a hole in walls that thick?" Garion asked dubiously.

" 'Tis not the single stroke that reduces them, Garion," the knight replied. " 'Tis the repetition of blow after blow. I will ring the town with engines and rain stones upon their walls. I doubt not that there will be a breach or two 'ere my Lord Hettar arrives."

"Won't the people inside repair them as fast as you break them?" Garion asked.

"Not if you've got other catapults throwing burning pitch at them," Barak told him. "It's very hard to concentrate on anything when you're on fire."

Garion winced. "I hate using fire on people," he said, briefly remembering Asharak the Murgo.

"It's the only way, Garion," Barak said soberly. "Otherwise you're going to lose a lot of good men."

Garion sighed. "All right," he said. "Let's get started then."

Reinforced by Yablek's trappers, the Rivans drew up in a wide circle around the fortified town. Though their combined numbers were not yet sufficient to mount a successful assault on those high, grim walls, they were nonetheless enough to seal the town effectively. The construction of Mendorallen's siege engines took but a few days; once they were completed and moved into position, the steady twang of tightly twisted ropes uncoiling with terrific force and the sharp crack of heavy rocks shattering against the walls of Rheon was almost continual.

Garion watched from a vantage point atop a nearby hill as rock after rock lofted high into the air to smash down on those seemingly impregnable walls.

"It's a sad thing to watch," Queen Porenn noted as she joined him. A stiff breeze tugged at her black gown and stirred her flaxen hair as she moodily watched Mendorallen's engines pound relentlessly at the walls.

"Rheon has stood here for almost three thousand years. It's been like a rock guarding the frontier. It seems very strange to attack one of my own cities -particularly when you consider the fact that half of our forces are Nadraks, the very people Rheon was built to hold off in the first place."

"Wars are always a little absurd, Porenn," Garion agreed.

"More than just a little. Oh, Polgara asked me to tell you that Beldin has come back. He has something to tell you."

"All right. Shall we go back down, then?" He offered the Queen of Drasnia his arm.

Beldin was lounging on the grass near the tents, gnawing the shreds of meat off a soup bone and exchanging casual insults with Vella. "You've got a bit of a problem, Belgarion," he told Garion. "Those Drasnian pikemen have broken camp and they're marching this way."

Garion frowned. "How far away is Hettar?" he asked.

"Far enough to turn it into a race," the little hunchback replied. "I expect that the whole outcome is going to depend on which army gets here first."

The Drasnians wouldn't really attack us, would they?" Ce'Nedra asked.

"It's hard to say," Porenn replied. "If Haldar has convinced them that Garion is holding me prisoner, they might. Javelin took a horse and rode back to see if he could find out exactly what's going on."

Garion began to pace up and down, gnawing worriedly on one fingernail.

"Don't bite your nails, dear," Polgara told him.

"Yes, ma'am," he replied automatically, still lost in thought. "Is Hettar coming as fast as he can?" he asked Beldin.

"He's pushing his horses about as hard as they can be pushed."

"If there was only some way to slow down the pikemen."

"I've got a couple of ideas," Beldin said. He looked at Polgara. "What do you say to a bit of flying, Pol?" he asked her. "I might need some help with this."

"I don't want you to hurt those men," Queen Porenn said firmly. "They're my people -even if they are being misled."

"If what I've got in mind works, nobody's going to get hurt," Beldin assured her. He rose to his feet and dusted off the back of his filthy tunic. "I've enjoyed chatting with you, girl," he said to Vella.

She unleashed a string of expletives at him that turned Ce'Nedra's face pale.

"You're getting better at that," he approved. "I think you're starting to get the hang of it. Coming, Pol?" Vella's expression was indecipherable as she watched the blue-banded hawk and the snowy owl spiral upward.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Later that day, Garion rode out to continue his observations of the ongoing siege of the town of Rheon and he found Barak, Mandorallen, and Durnik in the midst of a discussion. "It has to do with the way walls are built, Mandorallen," Durnik was trying to explain. "A city wall is put together to withstand exactly what you're trying to do to that one." Mandorallen shrugged. "It becomes a test then, Goodman, a test to discover which is the stronger -their walls or mine engines."

"That's the kind of test that could take months," Durnik pointed out. "But, if instead of throwing rocks at the outside of the wall, you lobbed them all the way over to hit the inside of the wall on the far side, you'd stand a pretty fair chance of toppling them outward."

Mandorallen frowned, mulling it over in his mind.

"He could be right, Mandorallen," Barak said. "City walls are usually buttressed from the inside. They're built to keep people out, not in. If you bang rocks against the inside of the walls, you won't have the strength of the buttresses to contend with. Not only that -if the walls fall outward, they'll provide us with natural ramps in the city. That way we won't need scaling ladders."

Yarblek sauntered over to join the discussion, his fur cap at a jaunty angle. After Durnik had explained his idea, the rangy-looking Nadrak's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "He's got a point, Arend," he said to Mandorallen. "And after you've pounded the walls from the inside for a while, we can throw a few grappling hooks over the tops of them. If the walls have already been weakened, we should be able to pull them down."

"I must admit the feasibility of these most unorthodox approaches to the art of the siege," Mandorallen said.

"Though they both do fly in the face of long-established tradition, they show promise of shortening the tedious procedure of reducing the walls." He looked curiously at Yarblek. "I had not previously considered this notion of using grappling hooks so," he admitted.

Yarblek laughed coarsely. "That's probably because you're not a Nadrak. We're an impatient people, so we don't build very good walls. I've pulled down some pretty stout-looking houses in my time -for one reason or another."

"I think, though, that we don't want to yank down the walls too soon," Barak cautioned. "The people inside out-number us just now, and we don't want to give them any reason to come swarming out of that place -and if you pull a man's walls down, it usually makes him very grouchy." The siege of Rheon continued for two more days before Javelin returned astride an exhausted horse. "Haldar's put his own people in most of the positions of authority in the army," he reported, once they had all gathered in the large, dun-colored tent that served as the headquarters of the besieging army. "They're all going around making speeches about Belgarion taking Queen Porenn prisoner. They've about halfway persuaded the troops that they're coming to her rescue."

"Was there any sign of Brendig and the Sendars yet?" Garion asked him.

"I didn't see them personally, but Haldar has his troops moving at a forced march, and he's got a lot of scouts out behind him. I think he believes that Brendig's right on his heels. On the way back, I ran into Lady Polgara and the sorcerer Beldin. They seem to be planning something, but I didn't have time to get any details." He slumped in his chair with a look of exhaustion on his face.

"You're tired, Khendon," Queen Porenn said. "Why don't you get a few hours' sleep, and we'll gather here again this evening."

"I'm all right, your Majesty," he said quickly.

"Go to bed, Javelin," she said firmly. "Your contributions to our discussions won't be very coherent if you keep falling asleep in your chair."

"You might as well do as she says, Javelin," Silk advised. "She's going to mother you whether you like it or not."

"That will do, Silk," Porenn said.

"But you will, Auntie. You're known far and wide as the little mother of Drasnia."

"I said, that will do."

Yes, mother."

"I think you're walking on very thin ice, Silk," Yarblek said.

"I always walk on thin ice. It gives my life a certain zest."

The gloomy days were slowly settling into an even gloomier evening as Garion and his friends gathered once more in the large tent near the center of the encampment. Yarblek had brought a number of rolled-up rugs with him and several iron braziers, and these contributions to their headquarters added certain garish, even barbaric, touches to the interior of the tent.

"Where's Silk?" Garion asked, looking around as they all seated themselves around the glowing braziers.

"I think he's out snooping," Barak replied.

Garion made a face. "I wish that just once he'd be where he's supposed to be."

Javelin looked much more alert after his few hours' sleep.

His expression, however, was grave. "We're starting to run out of time," he told them. "We've got three armies converging on this place. Lord Hettar is coming up from the south, and General Brendig is coming in from the west. Unfortunately, the Drasnian pikemen are very likely to get here first."

"Unless Pol and Beldin can slow them down," Durnik added.

"I have every confidence in Lady Polgara and Master Beldin," Javelin said, "but I think we should decide what we're going to do in the event that they aren't successful. It's always best to prepare for the worst."

"Wisely spoken, my Lord," Mandorallen murmured.

"Now " the Chief of Drasnian Intelligence continued, "we don't truly want to fight the pikemen. First of all, they aren't really our enemies; secondly, a battle with them is going to weaken our forces to the point that a sortie in force from the city could conceivably defeat us."

"What are you leading up to, Javelin?" Porenn asked him.

"I think we're going to have to get into the city."

"We haven't got enough men," Barak said flatly.

"And it will take several more days to reduce the walls," Mandorallen added.

Javelin held up one hand. "If we concentrate the siege engines on one section of wall, we should be able to bring it down within one day," he declared.

"But that just announces which quarter we'll attack from," Lelldorin protested. "The forces in the city will be concentrated there to repel us."

"Not if the rest of the city's on fire," Javelin replied.

"Absolutely out of the question," Garion said flatly. "My son could be in that town, and I'm not going to risk his life setting the whole place on fire."

"I still say that we haven't got enough men to take the city," Barak maintained.

"We don't have to take the whole city, my Lord of Trelheim," Javelin said. "All we need to do is get our men inside. If we take one quarter of the town and fortify it, we can hold off the cult from the inside and Haldar from the outside. Then we simply sit tight and wait for Lord Hettar and General Brendig."

"It's got some possibilities," Yarblek said. "The way things stand right now, we're caught in a nutcracker. If those pikemen get here first, about all your friends are going to be able to do when they arrive is to pick up the pieces."

"No fire," Garion declared adamantly.

"I do fear me that however we proceed, we may not gain entry into the city 'ere the walls are breached," Mandorallen observed.

"The walls aren't really any problem," Durnik said quietly. "No wall is any better than its foundation."

"It is quite impossible, Goodman," Mandorallen told him. "A wall's foundation hath the entire weight resting upon it. No engine in the world can move such a mass."

"I wasn't talking about an engine," Durnik said.

"What have you got in mind, Durnik?" Garion asked him.

"It's not really going to be that hard, Garion," Durnik said. "I did a bit of looking around. The wall's aren't resting on rock. They're resting on packed dirt. All we have to do is soften that dirt a bit. There's plenty of underground water in this region. If we put our heads together, you and I ought to be able to bring it up under one section of wall without anybody inside the city knowing what we've done. Once the ground is soft enough, a few dozen of Yarblek's grappling hooks ought to be enough to topple it."

"Can it be done, Garion?" Lelldorin asked doubtfully.

Garion thought it through. "It's possible," he conceded. "It's very possible."

"And if we did it at night, we could be in position to rush into the city just as soon as the wall falls," Barak said. "We could get inside without losing a single man."

"It's a novel solution," Silk observed from the doorway of the tent. "A little unethical, perhaps, but novel all the same."

"Where have you been, you little sneak?" Yarblek demanded.

"In Rheon, actually," Silk replied.

"You were inside the city?" Barak asked in surprise.

Silk shrugged. "Of course. I thought it might be appropriate to get a friend of ours out of there before we took the place apart." He stepped aside with a mocking little bow to admit the honey-blond Margravine Liselle.

"Now that is a splendid-looking young woman," Yarblek breathed in admiration.

Liselle smiled at him, the dimples dancing in her cheeks.

"How did you get inside?" Garion asked the rat-faced little man.

"You really wouldn't want to know, Garion," Silk told him. "There's always a way in or out of a city, if you're really serious about it."

"You two don't smell too good," Yarblek noted.

"It has to do with the route we took," Liselle replied, wrinkling her nose.

"You're looking well," Javelin said conversationally to his niece, "all things considered."

"Thank you, uncle," she replied. Then she turned to Garion. "Are the rumors going about the city true, your Majesty?" she asked. "Has your son been abducted?"

Garion nodded grimly. "It happened just after we took Jarviksholm. That's why we're here."

"But Prince Geran doesn't seem to be in Rheon," she told him.

"Are you sure?" Ce'Nedra demanded.

"I think so, your Majesty. The cultists inside the city are baffled. They seem to have no idea who took your son."

Ulfgar may be keeping it secret," Javelin said. "Only a small group may know."

"Perhaps, but it doesn't look that way. I wasn't able to get close enough to him to make sure, but he has the look of a man whose plans have gone all awry. I don't think he expected this attack on Rheon. His fortifications are not nearly as complete as they might appear from the outside. The north wall in particular is rather flimsy. His reinforcement of the walls seems a desperation move. He was not expecting a siege. If he'd been behind the abduction, he would have been prepared for the attack -unless he thought you could never trace it to him."

"This is most excellent news, my Lady," Mandorallen praised her. "Since we know of the weakness of the north fortifications, we can concentrate our efforts there. If Goodman Durnik's plan proves workable, a weakening of the foundations of the north wall should bring it down most speedily."

"What can't you tell us about Ulfgar?" Barak asked the girl.

"I only saw him briefly at a distance. He spends most of his time inside his house, and only his closest cohorts are allowed near him. He made a speech, though, just before he sent his forces to attack you. He speaks very passionately and he had the crowd absolutely under his control. I can tell you one thing about him, though. He's not an Alorn."

"He's not?" Barak looked dumfounded.

"His face doesn't give away his nationality, but his speech is not that of an Alorn."

"Why would the cult accept an outsider as their leader?" Garion demanded.

"They aren't aware of the fact that he is an outsider. He mispronounces a few words -just a couple, actually, and only a trained ear would catch them. If I'd been able to get closer to him, I might have been able to steer him toward those words that would have betrayed his origins. I'm sorry that I can't be of more help."

"How strong is his grip on the cult?" Javelin asked.

"It's absolute," she replied. "They'll do anything he tells them to do. They look upon him as something very akin to a God."

"We're going to have to take him alive," Garion said grimly. "I have to have some answers."

"That may be extremely difficult, your Majesty," she said gravely. "It's widely believed in Rheon that he's a sorcerer. I didn't actually see any evidence of it myself, but I talked with a number of people who have, or at least who claimed they have done so."

"You have performed a great service for us, Margravine," Queen Porenne said gratefully. "It shall not be forgotten."

"Thank you, your Majesty," Liselle replied simply, with a formal little curtsy. Then she turned back to Garion. "What information I was able to glean says quite strongly that the cult forces within the walls are not nearly so formidable as we were led to believe. Their numbers are impressive, but they include a great many young boys and old men. They appear to be counting rather desperately on a force that's marching toward the city under the command of a hidden cult-member."

"Haldar," Barak said.

She nodded.

"And that brings us right back to the absolute necessity of getting inside those walls," Javelin told them. He looked at Durnik. "How long do you estimate that it's going to take for the ground under the north wall to soften enough to topple the structure?"

Durnik sat back, staring thoughtfully at the ceiling of the tent. "We want to take them by surprise," he said, "so I don't think we want the water to come gushing out -not at first, anyway. A gradual seepage would be far less noticeable. It's going to take a while to saturate the ground."

"And we're going to have to be very careful," Garion added. "If this Ulfgar really is a sorcerer, he'll hear us if we make too much noise."

"There'll be plenty of noise when the wall comes down," Barak said. "Why don't you just blow it apart the way you did the back wall of Jarviksholm?"

Garion shook his head. "There are a couple of moments after you unleash your will when you're absolutely vulnerable to attack by anybody who has the same kind of talent. I'd sort of like to be alive and sane when I find my son."

"How long will it take to soak the ground under the wall?" Javelin asked.

Durnik scratched at his cheek. "Tonight," he replied, "and all day tomorrow. By midnight tomorrow, the wall ought to be sufficiently undermined. Then, just before we Garion and I can speed up the flow of water and wash out most of the dirt. It's going to be very wet and soft already, and a good stream of water ought to cut it right out from under the wall. If we lob stones at it from the far side and get a few dozen grappling hooks into it, we should be able to pull it down in short order."

"You might want to pick up the pace with your engines," Yarblek said to Mandorallen. "Give them time to get used to the idea of rocks coming out of the sky. That way they won't pay any attention when you start pounding on their walls tomorrow night."

"Midnight tomorrow, then?" Barak said.

"Right," Garion said firmly.

Javelin looked at his niece. "Do you have the layout of the north quarter of the city fairly well in mind?" he asked.

She nodded.

"Make a sketch for us. We'll need to know where to set up our defenses once we get inside."

"Right after I bathe, uncle."

"We need that sketch, Liselle."

"Not nearly as badly as I need a bath."

"You too, Kheldar," Queen Porenn said firmly.

Silk gave Liselle a speculative look.

"Never mind, Kheldar," she said. "I can wash my own back, thank you."

"Let's go find some water, Durnik," Garion said, getting to his feet. "Underground, I mean."

"Right," the smith replied.

There was no moon, of course. The clouds that had hovered over the area for the past week and more obscured the sky. The night air was chill as Garion and Durnik moved carefully across the shallow valley toward the besieged city.

"Cold night," Durnik murmured as they walked through the rank gorse.

"Mmm," Garion agreed. "How deep do you think the water might be lying?"

"Not too deep," Durnik replied. "I asked Liselle how deep the wells are in Rheon. She said that they were all fairly shallow. I think we'll hit water at about twenty-five feet."

"What gave you this idea, anyway?"

Durnik chuckled softly in the darkness. "When I was much younger, I worked for a farmer who gave himself great airs. He thought it might impress his neighbors if he had a well right inside his house. We worked at it all one winter and finally tapped into an artesian flow. Three days later, his house collapsed. He was very upset about it."

"I can imagine."

Durnik looked up at the looming walls. "I don't know that we need to get any closer," he said. "It might be hard to concentrate if they see us and start shooting arrows at us. Let's work around to the north side." "Right."

They moved even more carefully now, trying to avoid making any sound in the rustling gorse.

"This should do it," Durnik whispered. "Let's see what's down there." Garion let his thoughts sink quietly down through the hard-packed earth under the north wall of the city. The first few feet were difficult, since he kept encountering moles and earthworms. An angry chittering told him that he had briefly disturbed a badger. Then he hit a layer of rock and probed his thought along its flat surface, looking for fissures.

"Just to your left," Durnik murmured. "Isn't that a crack?"

Garion found it and wormed his way downward. The fissure seemed to grow damper and damper the deeper he went.

"It's wet-down there," he whispered, "but the crack's so narrow that the water's barely seeping up."

"Let's widen the crack -but not too much. Just enough to let a trickle come up."

Garion bent his will and felt Durnik's will join with his. Together they shouldered the crack in the rock a bit wider. The water lying beneath the rock layer gushed upward. Together they pulled back and felt the water begin to erode the hard-packed dirt under the wall, seeping and spreading in the darkness beneath the surface.

"Let's move on," Durnik whispered. "We ought to open up six or eight places under the wall in order to soak the ground thoroughly. Then tomorrow night we can push the cracks wide open."

"Won't that wash out this whole hillside?" Garion asked, also whispering.

"Probably ."

"That's going to make it a little hard for our troops when they rush this place."

"There's not much question about the fact that they're going to get their feet wet," Durnik said, "but that's better than trying to scale a wall with somebody pouring boiling oil on your head, wouldn't you say?"

"Much, much better," Garion agreed.

They moved on through the chill night. Then something brushed Garion's cheek. At first he ignored it, but it came again -soft and cold and damp. His heart sank. "Durnik," he whispered, "it's starting to snow."

"I thought that's what it was. I think this is going to turn very unpleasant on us."

The snow continued to fall through the remainder of the night and on into the next morning. Though there were occasional flurries that swirled around the bleak fortress, the snowfall for the most part was intermittent. It was a wet, sodden kind of snow that turned to slush almost as soon as it touched the ground. Shortly before noon, Garion and Leildorin donned heavy wool cloaks and stout boots and went out of the snow-clogged encampment toward the north wall of Rheon. When they were perhaps two hundred paces from the base of the hill upon which the city rested, they sauntered along with a great show of casualness, trying to look like nothing more dangerous than a pair of soldiers on patrol. As Garion looked at the fortress city, he saw the red and black bear-flag once more, and once again that banner raised an irrational rage in him. "Are you sure that you'll be able to recognize your arrows in the dark?" he asked his friend. "There are a lot of arrows sticking in the ground out there, you know."

Leildorin drew his bow and shot an arrow in a long arc toward the city. The feathered shaft rose high in the air and then dropped to sink into the snow-covered turf about fifty paces from the beginning of the slope. "I made the arrows myself, Garion," he said, taking another shaft from the quiver at his back. "Believe me, I can recognize one of them as soon as my fingers touch it." He leaned back and bent his bow again. "Is the ground getting soft under the wall?"

Garion sent out his thought toward the slope of the hill and felt the chill, musty dampness of the soil lying under the snow. "Slowly," he replied, "it's still pretty firm, though."

"It's almost noon, Garion," Leildorin said seriously, reaching for another arrow. "I know how thoroughly Goodman Durnik thinks things through, but is this really working?"

"It takes a while," Garion told him. "You have to soak the lower layers of earth first. Then the water starts to rise and saturate the dirt directly under the wall itself. It takes time; but if the water started gushing out of rabbit holes, the people on top of the wall would know that something's wrong."

"Think of how the rabbits would feel." Leildorin grinned and shot another arrow.

They moved on as Leildorin continued to mark the jumping-off line of the coming night's assault with deceptive casualness.

"All right," Garion said. "I know that you can recognize your own arrows, but how about the rest of us? One arrow feels just like another to me."

"It's simple," the young bowman replied. "I just creep up, find my arrows and string them all together with twine. When you hit that string, you stop and wait for the wall to topple. Then you charge. We've been making night assaults on Mimbrate houses in Asturia for centuries this way." Throughout the remainder of that snowy day, Garion and Durnik periodically checked the level of moisture in the soil of the north slope of the steep knoll upon which the city of Rheon stood.

"It's getting very close to the saturation point, Garion," Durnik reported as dusk began to fall. "There are a few places on the lower slope where the water's starting to seep through the snow."

"It's a good thing it's getting dark," Garion said, shifting the weight of his mail shirt nervously. Armor of any kind always made him uncomfortable, and the prospect of the upcoming assault on the city filled him with a peculiar emotion, part anxiety, and part anticipation.

Durnik, his oldest friend, looked at him with an understanding that pierced any possible concealment. He grinned a bit wryly. "What are a pair of sensible Sendarian farm boys doing fighting a war in the snow in eastern Drasnica?" he asked.

"Winning -I hope."

"We'll win, Garion," Durnik assured him, laying an affectionate hand on the younger man's shoulder.

"Sendars always win -eventually."

About an hour before midnight, Mandorallen began to move his siege engines, leaving only enough of them on the eastern and western sides to continue the intermittent barrage that was to mask their real purpose. As the hour wore on, Garion, Lelldorin, Durnik, and Silk crept forward at a half crouch toward the invisible line of arrows sticking up out of the snow.

"Here's one," Durnik whispered as his outstretched hands encountered the shaft of an arrow.

"Here," Lelldorin murmured, "let me feel it." He joined the smith, the both of them on their knees in the slush.

"Yes, it's one of mine, Garion," he said very quietly. "They should be about ten paces apart."

Silk moved quickly to where the two of them crouched over the arrow. "Show me how you recognize them," he breathed.

"It's in the fletching," Lelldorin replied. "I always use twisted gut to attach the feathers."

Silk felt the feathered end of the arrow. "All right," he said. "I can pick them out now."

"Are you sure?" Lelldorin asked.

"If my fingertips can find the spots on a pair of dice, they can certainly tell the difference between gut and linen twine," Silk replied.

"All right. We'll start here." Lelldorin attached one end of a ball of twine to the arrow. "I'll go this way, and you go that."

"Right." Silk tied the end of his ball of string to the same shaft. He turned to Garion and Durnik. "Don't overdo it with the water, you two," he said. "I don't particularly want to get buried in a mudslide out here." Then he moved off, crouched low and groping for the next arrow. Lelldorin touched Garion's shoulder briefly, then disappeared in the opposite direction.

"The ground's completely soaked now," Durnik murmured. "If we open those fissures about a foot wide, it's going to flush most of the support out from under the wall."

"Good."

Again, they sent their probing thoughts out through the sodden earth of the hillside, located the layer of rock, and then swept back and forth along its irregular upper side until they located the first fissure. Garion felt a peculiar sensation as he began to worm his thought down that narrow crack where the water came welling up from far below, almost as if he were extending some incredibly long though invisible arm with slender, supple fingers at its end to reach down into the fissure. "Have you got it?" he whispered to Durnik.

"I think so."

"Let's pull it apart then," Garion said, bracing his will.

Slowly, with an effort that made the beads of sweat stand out on their foreheads, the two of them forced the fissure open. A sharp, muffled crack reverberated up from beneath the sodden slope of the hillside as the rock broke under the force of their combined wills.

"Who's there?" a voice demanded from atop the city wall.

"Is it open wide enough?" Garion whispered, ignoring that alarmed challenge.

"The water's coming up much faster," Durnik replied after a moment's probing. "There's a lot of pressure under that layer of rock. Let's move on to the next place."

A heavy twang came from somewhere behind them, and a peculiar slithering whistle passed overhead as the line from one of Yarblek's catapult-launched grappling hooks arched up and over the north wall. The

hook made a steely clink as it slapped against the inside of the wall, and then there was a grating sound as the points dug in.

Crouched low, Garion and Durnik moved carefully on to their left, trying to minimize the soggy squelching sound their feet made in the slush and probing beneath the earth for the next fissure. When Lelldorin came back to rejoin them, they had already opened two more of those hidden cracks lying beneath the saturated slope; behind and above them, there was a gurgling sound as the soupy mud oozed out of the hillside to cascade in a brown flood down the snowy slope.

"I got all the way to the end of the line of arrows," Lelldorin reported. "The string's in place on this side."

"Good," Garion said, panting slightly from his exertions. "Go back and tell Barak to start moving the troops into place."

"Right." Lelldorin turned and went off into the swirl of a sudden snow flurry.

"We'll have to be careful with this one," Durnik murmured, searching along under the soil. "There are a lot of fractures in the rock here. If we pull it too far apart, we'll break up the whole layer and turn loose a river."

Garion grunted his agreement as he sent the probing fingers of his will out toward the fissure.

When they reached the last of their subterranean well springs, Silk came out of the dark behind them, his nimble feet making no sound as he moved through the slush.

"What kept you?" Durnik whispered to the little man. "You only had about a hundred yards to go."

"I was checking the slope," Silk replied. "The whole is starting to ooze through the snow like cold gravy."

Then I went up and pushed my foot against one of the stones of the wall. It wobbled like a loose tooth."

"Well," Durnik said in a tone of self-satisfaction, "it worked after all." There was a pause in the snowy darkness. "You mean you weren't actually sure?" Silk asked in a strangled voice.

"The theory was sound," the smith answered in an offhand sort of way. "But you can never be actually positive about a theory until you try it."

"Durnik, I'm getting too old for this."

Another grappling hook sailed overhead.

"We've got one more to open," Garion murmured. "Barak's moving the troops into place. Do you want to go back and tell Yablek to send up the signal to Mandorallen?"

"My pleasure," Silk replied. "I want to get out of here before we're all hip-deep in mud anyway." He turned and went off into the dark.

Perhaps ten minutes later, when the last fissure had been opened and the entire north slope of the hill had turned into a slithering mass of oozing mud and freely running water, an orange ball of blazing pitch arched high in the air over the city. In response to that prearranged signal, Mandorallen's engines emplaced to the south began a continuous barrage, lofting their heavy stones high over the rooftops of Rheon to slam against the inside of the north wall. At the same time, the lines on Yablek's grappling hooks tautened as the Nadrak mercenaries began to move their teams of horses away from the wall. There was an ominous creaking and grinding along the top of the hill as the weakened wall began to sway.

"How much longer do you think it's going to stand?" Barak asked as he came out of the darkness with Lelldorin at his side to join them.

"Not very." Durnik replied. "The ground's starting to give way under it." The groaning creak above them grew louder, punctuated by the continual sharp crashes along the inside as Mandorallen's catapults stepped up the pace of their deadly rain.

Then, with a sound like an avalanche, a section of the wall collapsed with a peculiarly sinuous motion as the upper portion toppled outward and the lower sank into the sodden earth. There was a great, splashing rumble as the heavy cascaded into the slush and mud of the hillside.

"A man should never try to put up stonework resting only on dirt," Durnik observed critically.

"Under the circumstances, I'm glad they did," Barak told him.

"Well, yes," Durnik admitted, "but there are right ways to do things." The big Cherek chuckled. "Durnik, you're an absolute treasure, do you know that?"

Another section of the wall toppled outward to splash onto the slope. Shouts of alarm and the clanging of bells began to echo through the streets of the fortified town.

"You want me to move the men out?" Barak asked Garion, his voice tense with excitement.

"Let's wait until the whole wall comes down," Garion replied. "I don't want them charging up the hill with all those building stones falling on top of them."

"There it goes." Lelldorin laughed gleefully, pointing toward the last, toppling section of the wall.

"Start the men," Garion said tersely, reaching over his shoulder for the great sword strapped to his back.

Barak drew in a deep breath. "Charge!" he roared in a vast voice.

With a concerted shout, the Rivans and their Nadrak allies plunged up through the slush and mud and began clambering over the fallen ruins of the north wall and on into the city, "Let's go!" Barak shouted. "We'll miss all the fighting if we don't hurry!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The fight was short and in many cases very ugly. Each element of Garion's army had been thoroughly briefed by Javelin and his niece, and they had all been given specific assignments. Unerringly, they moved through the snowy, firelit streets to occupy designated houses. Other elements, angling in from the edges of the breach in the north wall, circled the defensive perimeter Javelin had drawn on Liselle's map to pull down the houses and fill the streets with obstructing rubble.

The first counterattack came just before dawn. Howling Bear-cultists clad in shaggy furs swarmed out of the narrow streets beyond the perimeter to swarm up over the rubble of the collapsed houses, only to run directly into a withering rain of arrows from the rooftops and upper windows. After dreadful losses, they fell back.

As dawn broke pale and gray along the snowy eastern horizon, the last few pockets of resistance inside the perimeter crumbled, and the north quarter of Rheon was secure.

Garion stood somberly at a broken upper window of a house overlooking the cleared area that marked the outer limits of that part of the town that was under his control. The bodies of the cultists who had mounted the counterattack lay sprawled in twisted, grotesque heaps, already lightly dusted with snow.

"Not a bad little fight," Barak declared, coming into the room with his blood-stained sword still in his hand. He dropped his dented shield in a corner and came over to the window.

"I didn't care much for it," Garion replied, pointing at the windrows of the dead lying below. "Killing people is a very poor way of changing their minds."

"They started this war, Garion. You didn't."

"No," Garion corrected. "Ulfgar started it. He's the one I actually want."

"Then we'll have to go get him for you," Barak said, carefully wiping his sword with a bit of tattered cloth.

During the course of the day, there were several more furious counterattacks from inside the city, but the results were much the same as had been the case with the first. Garion's positions were too secure and too well covered by archers to fall to these sporadic sorties.

"They don't actually fight well in groups, do they?" Durnik said from the vantage point of the upper story of that half-ruined house.

"They don't have that kind of discipline," Silk replied. The little man was sprawled on a broken couch in one corner of the room, carefully peeling an apple with a small, sharp knife. "Individually, they're as brave as lions, but the concept of unified action hasn't quite seeped into their heads yet."

"That was an awfully good shot," Barak congratulated Lelldorin, who had just loosed an arrow through the shattered window.

Lelldorin shrugged. "Child's play. Now, that fellow creeping along the roof-line of the house several streets back -that's a bit more challenging." He nocked another arrow, drew, and released all in one smooth motion.

"You got him," Barak said.

"Naturally"

As evening approached, Polgara and Beldin returned to the camp outside the city. "Well," the gnarled sorcerer said with a certain satisfaction, "you won't have to worry about the pikemen for a while." He held out his twisted hands to one of Yarblek's glowing braziers.

"You didn't hurt them, did you?" Porenn asked quickly.

"No." He grinned. "We just bogged them down. They were going through a marshy valley, and we diverted a river into it. The whole place is a quagmire now. They're perched on hummocks and in the branches of trees waiting for the water to subside."

"Won't that stall Brendig as well?" Garion asked.

"Brendig's marching around that valley." Polgara assured him, sitting near one of the braziers with a cup of tea. "He should be here in a few days." She looked at Vella. "This tea is really excellent," she said.

"Thank you, Lady Polgara," the dark-haired dancer replied. Her eyes were fixed on Ce'Nedra's copper curls, radiant in the golden candlelight. She sighed enviously. "If I had hair like that, Yarblek could sell me for double the price."

"I'd settle for half," Yarblek muttered, "just to avoid all those incidental knifings."

"Don't be such a baby, Yarblek," she told him. "I didn't really hurt you all that much."

"You weren't the one who was doing the bleeding."

"Have you been practicing your curses, Vella?" Beldin asked.

She demonstrated -at some length.

"You're getting better," he congratulated her.

For the next two days, Garion's forces worked to heap obstructions along the rubble-choked perimeter of the north quarter of Rheon to prevent a counterattack in force from crossing that intervening space. Garion and his friends observed the process from a large window high up in the house which they had converted into a headquarters.

"Whoever's in charge over there doesn't seem to have a very good grasp of basic strategy," Yarblek noted.

"He's not making any effort to block off his side of that open space to keep us out of the rest of his city."

Barak frowned. "You know, Yarblek, you're right. That should have been his first move after we secured this part of town."

"Maybe he's too arrogant to believe that we can take more of his houses," Lelldorin suggested.

"Either that or he's laying traps for us back out of sight," Durnik added.

"That's possible, too," Barak agreed. "More than possible. Maybe we ought to do a little planning before we start any more attacks."

Before we can plan anything, we have to know exactly what kind of traps Ulfgar has waiting for us," Javelin said.

Silk sighed and made a wry face. "All right. After dark I'll go have a look."

"I wasn't really suggesting that, Kheldar."

"Of course you weren't."

It's a very good idea, though. I'm glad you thought of it."

It was some time after midnight when Silk returned to the large, firelit room in Garion's headquarters. "It's a very unpleasant night out there," the little man said, shivering and rubbing his hands together. He went over to stand in front of the fire.

"Well, are they planning any surprises for us?" Barak asked him, lifting a copper tankard.

"Oh, yes," Silk replied. "They're building walls across the streets several houses back from our perimeter and they're putting them just around corners so you won't see them until you're right on top of them."

"With archers and tubs of boiling pitch in all the houses nearby?" Barak asked glumly.

"Probably." Silk shrugged. "Do you have any more of that ale? I'm chilled to the bone."

"We'll have to work on this a bit," Javelin mused.

"Good luck," Barak said sourly, going to the ale keg. "I hate fighting in towns. Give me a nice open field any time."

"But the towns are where all the loot is," Yarblek said to him.

"Is that all you ever think about?"

"We're in this life to make a profit, my friend," the rawboned Nadrak replied with a shrug.

"You sound just like Silk."

"I know. That's why we went into partnership."

It continued to snow lightly throughout the following day. The citizens of Rheon made a few more probing attacks on Garion's defensive perimeter, but for the most part they contented themselves with merely shooting arrows at anything that moved.

About midmorning the next day, Errand picked his way over the rubble of the fallen north wall and went directly to the house from which Garion was directing operations.

When he entered, his young face was tight with exhilaration, and he was panting noticeably. "That's exciting," he said.

"What is?" Garion asked him.

"Dodging arrows."

"Does Aunt Pol know you're here?"

"I don't think so. I wanted to see the city, so I just came."

"You're going to get us both in trouble, do you know that?"

Errand shrugged. "A scolding doesn't hurt all that much. Oh, I thought you ought to know that Hettar's here - or he will be in an hour or so. He's just a few miles to the south."

"Finally!" Garion said with an explosive release of his breath. "How did you find out?"

"Horse and I went out for a ride. He gets restless when he's penned up. Anyway, we were up on that big hill to the south, and I saw the Algars coming."

"Well, let's go meet them."

"Why don't we?"

When Garion and his young friend reached the top of the hill south of Rheon, they saw wave upon wave of Algar clansmen flowing over the snowy moors at a brisk canter. A single horseman detached himself from the front rank of that sea of horses and men and pounded up the hill, his long black scalplock flowing behind him. "Good morning, Garion," Hettar said casually as he reined in. "You've been well, I trust?"

"Moderately," Garion grinned at him.

"You've got snow up here."

Garion looked around in feigned astonishment. "Why, I do believe you're right. I hadn't even noticed that." Another rider came up the hill, a man in a shabby, hooded cloak. "Where's your Aunt, Garion?" the man called when he was halfway up the hill.

"Grandfather?" Garion exclaimed with surprise. "I thought you were going to Mar Terrin."

Belgarath made an indelicate sound. "I did," he replied as he reined in his horse, "and it was an absolutely wasted trip. I'll tell you about it later. What's been going on here?"

Briefly Garion filled them in on the events of the past several weeks.

"You've been busy," Hettar noted.

"The time goes faster when you keep occupied."

"Is Pol inside the city, then?" Belgarath asked him.

"No. She and Ce'Nedra and the other ladies are staying in the camp we built when we first got here. The cultists have been counterattacking against our positions inside, so I didn't think it was entirely safe for them to be there."

"That makes sense. Why don't you round up everybody and bring them to the camp. I think we need to talk about a few things."

"All right, Grandfather."

It was shortly after noon when they gathered in the main tent in the Rivan encampment outside the city.

"Were you able to find anything useful, father?" Polgara asked Belgarath as the old man entered the tent.

Belgarath sprawled in a chair. "Some tantalizing hints was about all," he replied. "I get the feeling that Anheg's copy of the Ashabine Oracles has been rather carefully pruned somewhere along the way -or more likely at the very beginning. The modifications seem to be a part of the original text."

"Prophets don't usually tamper with their own prophecies," Polgara noted.

"This one would have -particularly if parts of the prophecy said things he didn't want to believe."

"Who was it?"

"Torak. I recognized his tone and his peculiar turn of phrase almost immediately."

"Torak?" Garion exclaimed, feeling a sudden chill.

Belgarath nodded. "There's an old Mallorealan legend that says that after he destroyed Cthol Mishrak, Torak had a castle built at Ashaba in the Karandese Mountains. Once he moved in, an ecstasy came over him, and he composed the Ashabine Oracles. Anyway, the legend goes on to say that after the ecstasy had passed, Torak fell into a great rage. Apparently there were things in the prophecy that he didn't like. That could very well account for the tampering I detected. We've always been told that the word gives meaning to the event."

"Can you do that?"

"No. But Torak was so arrogant that he may have believed he could."

"But that puts us at a dead end, doesn't it?" Garion asked with a sinking feeling. "I mean -the Mrin Codex said that you had to look at all the mysteries, and if the Ashabine Oracles aren't correct-" He lifted his hands helplessly.

"There's a true copy somewhere," Belgarath replied confidently. "There has to be- otherwise the Codex would have given me different instructions."

"You're operating on pure faith, Belgarath," Ce'Nedra accused him.

"I know," he admitted. "I do that when I don't have anything else to fall back on."

"What did you find at Mar Terrin?" Polgara asked.

Belgarath made a vulgar sound. "The monks there may be very good at comforting the spirits of all those slaughtered Marags, but they're very bad at protecting manuscripts. The roof leaks in their library, and the copy of the Mallorealan Gospels, naturally, was on a shelf right under the leak. It was so soggy that I could barely get the leaves apart, and the ink had run and smeared all over the pages. It was almost totally illegible. I spoke with the monks at some length about that." He scratched at one bearded cheek. "It looks as if I'm going to have to go a bit further afield to get what we need."

"You found nothing at all, then?" Beldin asked.

Belgarath grunted. "There was one passage in the Oracles that said that the Dark God will come again."

Garion felt a sudden chill grip his stomach. "Torak?" he said. "Is that possible?"

"I suppose you could take it to mean that, but if that's what it really means, then why would Torak have gone to the trouble of destroying so many of the other passages? If the entire purpose of the Oracles was to predict his own return, I expect that he'd have been overjoyed to keep them intact."

"You're assuming that old burnt-face was rational," Beldin growled. "I never noticed that quality in him very often."

"Oh, no," Belgarath disagreed. "Everything Torak did was perfectly rational -as long as you accepted his basic notion that he was the sole reason for creation. No, I think the passage means something else."

"Could you read any part of the Mallorean Gospels at father?" Aunt Pol asked him.

"Just one little fragment. It said something about a choice between the Light and the Dark."

Beldin snorted. "Now that would be something very unusual," he said. "The Seers at Kell haven't made a about anything since the world was made. They've been sitting on the fence for millennia."

Late the following afternoon, the Sendarian army came into view on the snowy hilltops to the west. Garion felt a peculiar twinge of pride as the solid, steady men he had always thought of as his countrymen marched purposefully through the snow toward the now-doomed city of Rheon.

"I might have gotten here sooner," General Brendig apologized as he rode up, "but we had to march around that quagmire where the Drasnian pikemen are bogged down."

"Are they all right?" Queen Porenn asked him quickly.

"Perfectly, your Majesty," the one-armed man replied. "They just can't go anywhere, that's all."

"How much rest will your troops need before they'll be ready to join the assault, Brendig?" Belgarath asked him.

Brendig shrugged. "A day ought to do it, Ancient One."

"That will give us time enough to make our plans," the old man said. "Let's get your men bivouacked and fed, and then Garion can brief you on the way things stand here."

In the strategy meeting in the garishly carpeted main tent that evening, they smoothed out the rough edges of their relatively simple plan of attack. Mandorallen's siege engines would continue to pound the city throughout the next day and on into the following night. On the next morning, a feigned assault would be mounted against the south gate to draw as many cultists as possible away from the hastily erected fortification inside the city. Another force would march out of the secure enclave in the north quarter of Rheon to begin the house-by-house occupation of the buildings facing the perimeter. Yet another force, acting on an inspired notion of General Brendig's, would use scaling ladders as bridges to go across the housetops and drop in behind the newly erected walls inside the city.

"The most important thing is to take Ulfgar alive," Garion cautioned. "We have to get some answers from him. I need to know just what part he played in the abduction of my son and where Geran is, if he knows."

"And I want to know just how many of the officers in my army he's subverted," Queen Porenn added.

"It looks as if he's going to be doing a lot of talking," Yarblek said with an evil grin. "In Gar og Nadrak we have a number of very entertaining ways of loosening people's tongues."

"Pol will handle that," Belgarath told him firmly. "She can get the answers we need without resorting to that sort of thing."

"Are you getting soft, Belgarath?" Barak asked.

"Not likely," the old man replied, "but if Yarblek here gets carried away, it might go a little too far, and you can't get answers out of a dead man."

"But afterward?" Yarblek asked eagerly.

"I don't really care what you do with him afterward."

The next day, Garion was in a small, curtained-off area in the main tent going over his maps and his carefully organized lists, trying to determine if there was anything he had overlooked. He had begun of late to feel as if the entire army were resting directly on his shoulders.

"Garion," Ce'Nedra said, entering his cubicle, "some friends have arrived."

He looked up.

"Brand's three sons," she told him, "and that glass blower Joran."

Garion frowned. "What are they

doing here?" he asked. "I told them all to stay at Riva."

They say that they've got something important to tell you."

He sighed. "You'd better have them come in, then."

Brand's three gray-cloaked sons and the serious-faced Joran entered and bowed. Their clothes were mud-spattered, and their faces weary. "We are not deliberately disobeying your orders, Belgarion," Kail assured him quickly, "but we discovered something very important that you have to know."

"Oh? What's that?"

"After you left Riva with the army, your Majesty," Kail's older brother Verdan explained, "we decided to go over the west coast of the island inch by inch. We thought there might be some clues that we overlooked in our first search."

"Besides," Brin added, "we didn't have anything else to do."

"Anyway," Verdan continued, "we finally found the ship those Chereks had used to come to the island."

Their ship?" Garion asked, suddenly sitting up. "I thought that whoever it was who abducted my son used it to get off the island."

Verdan shook his head. "The ship had been deliberately sunk, your Majesty. They filled it with rocks and then chopped holes in the bottom. We sailed right over it five times until a calm day when there wasn't any surf. It was lying on the bottom in about thirty feet of water."

"How did the abductor get off the island, then?"

"We had that same thought, Belgarion," Joran said. "It occurred to us that, in spite of everything, the abductor might still be on the Isle of the Winds. We started searching. That's when we found the shepherd." "Shepherd?"

"He'd been alone with his flock up in the meadows on the western side of the Isle," Kail explained. "He was completely unaware of what had happened in the city. Anyway, we asked him if he had seen anything unusual at about the time Prince Geran was taken from the Citadel, and he said that he had seen a ship sail into a cove on the West coast at about that time and that somebody carrying something wrapped in a blanket got on board. Then the ship put out to sea, leaving the others behind. Belgarion, it was the same cove where the trail the Orb was following ended."

"Which way did the ship go?"

"South,"

"There's one other thing, Belgarion," Joran added. "The shepherd was positive that the ship was Nyissan."

"Nyissan?"

"He was absolutely certain. He even described the snake banner she was flying."

Garion got quickly to his feet. "Wait here," he told them. Then he went to the flap in the partition.

"Grandfather, Aunt Pol, could you step in here for a moment?"

"What is it, dear?" Polgara asked as she and the old sorcerer came into Garion's makeshift office, with Silk trailing curiously behind.

"Tell them," Garion said to Kail.

Quickly, Brand's second son repeated what they had just told Garion.

"Salmissra?" Polgara suggested to her father.

"Not necessarily, Pol. Nyissa is full of intrigue, and the Queen isn't behind it all -particularly after what you did to her." He frowned. "Why would a Cherek abandon one of his own boats to ride aboard a Nyissan scow? That doesn't make sense."

"That's another question we'll have to ask Ulfgar, once we get our hands on him," Silk said.

At dawn the next morning, a large body of troops comprised of elements from all the forces gathered for the siege began to march across the valley to the south of the city toward the steep hill and Rheon. They carried scaling ladders and battering rams in plain sight to make the defenders believe that this was a major assault. In the quarter of the city occupied by Garion's troops, however, Silk led a sizeable detachment of men through the dawn murk across the rooftops to clear away the cult archers and the smeared men with their boiling pitch pots occupying those houses on either side of the hastily built walls erected to bar entrance into the rest of the city.

Garion, flanked by Barak and Mandorallen, waited in a snowy street near the perimeter of the occupied quarter.

"This is the part I hate," he said tensely. "The waiting."

"I must confess to thee that I myself find this lull just before a battle unpleasant," Mandorallen replied.

"I thought Arends loved a battle." Barak grinned at his friend.

"It is our favorite pastime," the great knight admitted, checking one of the buckles under his armor. "This interim just 'ere we join with the enemy, however, is irksome. Sober, even melancholy, thoughts distract the mind from the main purpose at hand."

"Mandorallen," Barak laughed. "I've missed you."

The shadowy form of Yarblek came up the street to join them. He had put aside his felt overcoat and now wore a heavy steel breastplate and carried a wicked-looking axe.

"Everything's ready," he told them quietly. "We can start just as soon as the little thief gives us the signal."

"Are you sure your men can pull down those walls?" Barak asked him.

Yarblek nodded. "Those people didn't have time enough to set the stones in mortar," he said. "Our grappling hooks can jerk down the walls in a few minutes."

"You seem very fond of that particular tool," Barak observed.

Yarblek shrugged. "I've always found that the best way to get through a wall is to yank it down."

"In Arendia, our preference is the battering ram," Mandorallen said.

"Those are good, too," Yarblek agreed, "but the trouble with a ram is that you're right under the wall when it falls. I've never particularly enjoyed having building stones bouncing off the top of my head."

They waited.

"Has anybody seen Lelldorin?" Garion asked.

"He went with Silk," Barak replied. "He seemed to think that he could find more targets from up on a roof."

"He was ever an enthusiast," Mandorallen smiled. "I confess, however, that I have never seen his equal with the longbow."

"There it is," Barak said, pointing at a flaming arrow arching high above the rooftops. "That's the signal."

Garion drew in a deep breath and squared his shoulders. "All right. Sound your horn, Mandorallen, and let's get started."

The brazen note of Mandorallen's horn shattered the stillness. From every street and alleyway, Garion's army poured out to begin the final assault on Rheon. Rivans, Algars, Nadraks, and the solid men of Sendaria crunched through the snow toward the perimeter with their weapons in their hands. Three score of Yarblek's leather-clad mercenaries ran on ahead, their grappling hooks swinging from their hands.

With Barak at his side, Garion clambered over the treacherous, sliding rubble of the houses that had been pulled down to form the perimeter and over the half-frozen bodies of arrow-stitched cultists who had fallen earlier. A few -though not many- cultists had escaped the hasty floor-by-floor search of Silk's men in the houses facing the perimeter and they desperately showered the advancing troops with arrows. At Brendig's sharp command, detachments of Sendars veered and broke into each house to neutralize those remaining defenders efficiently.

The scene beyond the perimeter was one of enormous confusion. Advancing behind a wall of shields, Garion's army swept the streets clear of the now-desperate cultists. The air was thick with arrows and curses, and several houses were already shooting flames out through their roofs.

True to Yarblek's prediction, the loosely stacked walls blocking the streets some way into the city fell easily to the dozens of grappling hooks that sailed up over their troops to bite into the other sides.

The grim advance continued, and the air rang with the steely clang of sword against sword. Somehow, in all the confusion, Garion became separated from Barak and found himself fighting shoulder to shoulder beside Durnik in a narrow alleyway. The smith carried no sword or axe, but fought instead with a large, heavy club.

"I just don't like chopping into people," he apologized, felling a burly opponent with one solid blow. "If you hit somebody with a club, there's a fair chance that he won't die, and there isn't all that blood."

They pushed deeper into the city, driving the demoralized inhabitants before them. The sounds of heavy fighting at the southern end of town gave notice that Silk and his men had reached the south wall and opened the gates to admit the massed troops whose feigned attack had fatally divided the cult forces.

And then Garion and Durnik burst out of the narrow alleyway into the broad, snowy central square of Rheon. Fighting raged all over the square; but on the east side, a thick knot of cultists was tightly packed about a high-wheeled cart.

Atop the cart stood a black-bearded man in a rust-colored brocade doublet.

A lean Nadrak with a slender spear in his hand arched back, took aim, and hurled his weapon directly at the man on the cart. The black-bearded man raised one hand in a peculiar gesture, and the Nadrak spear suddenly sheered off to the right to clatter harmlessly on the snow-slick cobblestones. Garion clearly heard and felt the rushing surge that could only mean one thing. "Durnik!" he shouted. "The man on the cart. That's Ulfgar!"

Durnik's eyes narrowed. "Let's take him, Garion," he said.

Garion's anger at this stranger who was the cause of all this warfare and carnage and destruction suddenly swelled intolerably, and his rage communicated itself to the Orb on the pommel of his sword. The Orb flared, and Iron-grip's burning sword suddenly flamed out in searing blue fire.

"There! It's the Rivan King!" the black-bearded man on the cart screamed. "Kill him!"

Momentarily Garion's eyes locked on the eyes of the man on the cart. There was hate there and, at the same time, an awe and a desperate fear. But, blindly obedient to their leader's command, a dozen cultists ran through the slush toward Garion with their swords aloft. Suddenly they began to tumble into twitching heaps in the sodden snow in the square as arrow after arrow laced into their ranks.

"Ho, Garion!" Lelldorin shouted gleefully from a nearby housetop, his hands blurring as he loosed his arrows at the charging cultists.

"Ho, Lelldorin!" Garion called his reply, even as he ran in amongst the fur-clad men, flailing about him with his burning sword. The attention of the group around the cart was riveted entirely on the horrifying spectacle of the enraged King of Riva and his fabled sword. They did not, therefore, see Durnik the smith moving in a catlike crouch along the wall of a nearby house.

The man on the cart raised one hand aloft, seized a ball of pure fire, and hurled it desperately at Garion. Garion flicked the fireball aside with his flaming blade and continued his grim advance, swinging dreadful strokes at the desperate men garbed in bearskins in front of him without ever taking his eyes off of the pasty-faced man in the black beard. His expression growing panicky, Ulfgar raised his hand again, but suddenly seemed almost to lunge forward off the cart into the brown slush as Durnik's cudgel cracked sharply across the back of his head.

There was a great cry of chagrin as the cult-leader fell. Several of his men tried desperately to lift his inert body, but Durnik's club, whistling and thudding solidly, felled them in their tracks. Others tried to form a wall with their bodies in an effort to keep Garion from reaching the body lying facedown in the snow, but Lelldorin's steady rain of arrows melted the center of that fur-clad wall. Garion, feeling strangely remote and unaffected by the slaughter, marched into the very midst of the disorganized survivors, swinging his huge sword in great, sweeping arcs. He barely felt the sickening shear as his sword cut through bone and flesh. After he had cut down a half a dozen or so, the rest broke and ran.

"Is he still alive?" Garion panted at the smith.

Durnik rolled the inert Ulfgar over and professionally peeled back one of his eyelids to have a look. "He's still with us," he said. "I hit him rather carefully."

"Good," Garion said. "Let's tie him up -and blindfold him."

"Why blindfold?"

"We both saw him use sorcery, so we've answered that particular question, but I think it might be a little hard to do that sort of thing if you can't see what you're aiming at."

Durnik thought about it for a moment as he tied the unconscious man's hands. "You know, I believe you're right. It would be difficult, wouldn't it?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

With the fall of Ulfgar, the cult's will to resist broke. Though a few of the more rabid continued to fight, most threw down their weapons in surrender. Grimly, Garion's army rounded them up and herded them through the snowy, blood-stained streets into the town's central square.

Silk and Javelin briefly questioned a sullen captive with a bloody bandage wrapped around his head, then joined Garion and Durnik, who stood watch over their still-unconscious prisoner. "Is that him?" Silk asked curiously, absently polishing one of his rings on the front of his gray doublet.

Garion nodded.

"He doesn't look all that impressive, does he?"

"The large stone house over there is his," Javelin said, pointing at a square building with red tiles on its roof.

"Not any more," Garion replied. "It's mine now."

Javelin smiled briefly. "We'll want to search it rather thoroughly," he said. "People sometimes forget to destroy important things."

"We might as well take Ulfgar in there, too," Garion said. "We need to question him, and that house is as good as any."

"I'll go get the others," Durnik offered, pulling off his pot-shaped helmet. "Do you think it's safe enough to bring Pol and the other ladies into the city yet?"

"It should be," Javelin replied. "What little resistance there is left is in the southeast quarter of the city."

Durnik nodded and went on across the square, his mail shirt jingling.

Garion, Silk, and Javelin picked up the limp form of the black-bearded man and carried him toward the stately house with the banner of a bear flying from a staff in front of it.

As they started up the stairs, Garion glanced at a Rivan soldier standing guard over some demoralized prisoners huddled miserably in the slush. "Would you do me a favor?" he asked the gray-cloaked man.

"Of course, your Majesty," the soldier said, saluting.

"Chop that thing down." Garion indicated the flagstaff with a thrust of his jaw.

"At once, your Majesty." The soldier grinned. "I should have thought of it myself."

They carried Ulfgar into the house and through a polished door. The room beyond the door was luxuriously furnished, but the chairs were mostly overturned, and there were sheets of parchment everywhere. A crumpled heap of them had been stuffed into a large stone fireplace built into the back wall, but the fireplace was cold.

"Good," Javelin muttered. "He was interrupted before he could burn anything."

Silk looked around at the room. Rich, dark-colored tapestries hung on the walls, and the green carpeting was thick and soft. The chairs were all upholstered in scarlet velvet, and unlighted candles stood in silver sconces along the wall.

"He managed to live fairly well, didn't he?" the little man murmured as they unceremoniously dumped the prisoner in the rust-colored doublet in one corner.

"Let's gather up these documents," Javelin said. "I want to go over them."

Garion unstrapped his sword, dropped his helmet on the floor and shrugged himself out of his heavy mailshirt. Then he sank wearily onto a soft couch. "I'm absolutely exhausted," he said. "I feel as if I haven't slept for a week."

Silk shrugged. "One of the privileges of command."

The door opened, and Belgarath came into the room. "Durnik said I could find you here," he said, pushing back the hood of his shabby old cloak. He crossed the room and nudged the limp form in the corner. "He isn't dead, is he?"

"No," Garion replied. "Durnik put him to sleep with a club is all."

"Why the blindfold?" the old man asked, indicating the strip of blue cloth tied across the captive's face.

"He was using sorcery before we captured him. I thought it might not be a bad idea to cover his eyes."

"That depends on how good he is. Durnik sent soldiers out to round up the others and then he went over to the encampment to get Pol and the other ladies."

"Can you wake him up?" Silk asked.

"Let's have Pol do it. Her touch is a little lighter than mine, and I don't want to break anything accidentally."

It was perhaps three-quarters of an hour later when they all finally gathered in the green-carpeted room.

Belgarath looked around, then straddled a straight-backed chair in front of the captive. "All right, Pol," he said bleakly. "Wake him up."

Polgara unfastened her blue cloak, knelt beside the prisoner and put one hand on each side of his head.

Garion heard a whispered rushing sound and felt a gentle surge. Ulfgar groaned.

"Give him a few minutes," she said, rising to her feet. "Then you can start questioning him."

"He's probably going to be stubborn about it," Brin predicted with a broad grin.

"I'll be terribly disappointed in him if he isn't," Silk said as he rifled through a drawer in a large, polished cabinet.

"Have you barbarians blinded me?" Ulfgar said in a weak voice as he struggled into a sitting position.

"No," Polgara told him. "Your eyes are covered to keep you out of mischief."

"Are my captors women, then?" There was contempt in the black-bearded man's voice.

"This one of them is," Ce'Nedra said, pushing her dark green cloak slightly to one side. It was the note in her voice that warned Garion and saved the prisoner's life. With blazing eyes, she snatched one of the daggers from Vella's belt and flew at the blindfolded man with the gleaming blade held aloft. At the last instant, Garion caught her upraised arm and wrested the knife from her grasp.

"Give me that!" she cried.

"No, Ce'Nedra."

"He stole my baby!" she screamed. "I'll kill him!"

"No, you won't. We can't get any answers out of him if you cut his throat."

With one arm still about her, he handed the dagger back to Vella.

"We have a few questions for you, Ulfgar," Belgarath said to the captive.

"You're going to have to wait a long time for the answers."

"I'm so glad he said that," Hettar murmured. "Who wants to start cutting on him?"

"Do whatever you wish," Ulfgar sneered. "My body is of no concern to me."

"We'll do everything we can to change your mind about that," Vella said in a chillingly sweet voice as she tested the edge of her dagger with her thumb.

"Just what was it you wanted to know, Belgarath?" Errand asked, turning from his curious examination of a bronze statue standing in the corner. "I can give you the answers, if you want."

Belgarath looked at the blond boy sharply. "Do you know what's in his mind?" he asked, startled.

"More or less, yes."

"Where's my son?" Garion asked quickly.

"That's one thing he doesn't know," Errand replied. "He had nothing to do with the abduction."

"Who did it then?"

"He's not sure, but he thinks it was Zandramas."

"Zandramas?"

"That name keeps cropping up, doesn't it?" Silk said.

"Does he know who Zandramas is?"

"Not really. It's just a name he's heard from his Master."

"Who is his Master?"

"He's afraid to even think the name," Errand said. "It's a man with a splotchy face, though."

The prisoner was struggling desperately, trying to free himself from the ropes which bound him. "Lies!" he screamed. "All lies!"

"This man was sent here by his Master to make sure that you and Ce'Nedra didn't have any children,"

Errand continued ignoring the screaming captive, "or to see to it that, if you did, the children didn't live. He couldn't have been behind the abduction, Belgarion. If he had been the one who crept into the nursery at Riva, he would have killed your son, not taken him away."

"Where does he come from?" Liselle asked curiously as she removed her scarlet cloak. "I can't quite place his accent."

"That's probably because he's not really a man," Errand told her. "At least not entirely. He remembers being an animal of some sort."

They all stared at the boy and then at Ulfgar.

At that point the door opened again, and the hunchbacked Beldin came into the room. He was about to say something, but stopped, staring at the bound and blindfolded prisoner. He stumped across the floor, bent, and ripped the blue cloth away from the man's eyes to stare into his face. "Well, dog", he said. "What brings you out of your kennel?"

"You!" Ulfgar gasped, his face growing suddenly pale.

"Urvon will have your heart for breakfast when he finds out how badly you've botched things," Beldin said pleasantly.

"Do you know this man?" Garion asked sharply.

"He and I have known each other for a long, long time, haven't we, Harakan?"

The prisoner spat at him.

"I see you will need a little bit of housebreaking," Beldin grinned.

"Who is he?" Garion demanded.

"His name is Harakan. He's a Mallorean Grolim -one of Urvon's dogs. The last time I saw him, he was whining and fawning all over Urvon's feet."

Then, quite suddenly, the captive vanished.

Beldin unleashed a string of foul curses. Then he, too flickered out of sight.

"What happened?" Ce'Nedra gasped. "Where did they go?"

"Maybe Beldin isn't as smart as I thought," Belgarath said. "He should have left that blindfold alone. Our prisoner translocated himself outside the building."

"Can you do that?" Garion asked incredulously. "Without being able to see what you're doing, I mean?"

"It's very, very dangerous, but Harakan seems to have been desperate. Beldin's following him."

"He'll catch him, won't he?"

"It's hard to say."

"I still have questions that have to be answered."

I can answer them for you, Belgarion," Errand told him quite calmly.

"You mean that you still know what's in his mind -even though he's not here any more?"

Errand nodded.

"Why don't you start at the beginning, Errand?" Polgara suggested.

"All right. This Harakan, I guess his real name is, came here because his Master, the one Beldin called Urvon, sent him here to make sure that Belgarion and Ce'Nedra never had any children. Harakan came here and gained control of the Bear-cult. At first he stirred up all kinds of talk against Ce'Nedra, hoping that he

could force Belgarion to set her aside and marry someone else. Then, when he heard that she was going to have a baby, he sent someone to try to kill her. That didn't work, of course, and he started to get desperate. He was terribly afraid of what Urvon would do to him if he failed. He tried to gain control of Ce'Nedra when she was asleep once, to make her smother the baby, but someone -he doesn't know who- stepped in and stopped him."

"It was Poledra," Garion murmured. "I was there that night."

"Is that when he came up with the idea of murdering Brand and laying the blame at King Anheg's door?" General Brendig asked.

Errand frowned slightly. "Killing Brand was an accident," he replied. "As closely as Harakan could work it out, Brand just happened along and caught the cultists in that hallway when they were about to do what he really sent them to Riva to do."

"And what was that?" Ce'Nedra asked him.

"They were on their way to the royal apartments to kill you and your baby."

Her face paled.

"And then they were supposed to kill themselves. That was what was supposed to start the war between Belgarion and King Anheg. Anyway, something went wrong. Brand got killed instead of you and your baby, and we found out that the cult was responsible instead of Anheg. He didn't dare go back to Urvon and admit that he had failed. Then Zandramas took your baby and got away from the Isle of the Winds with him.

Harakan couldn't follow because Belgarion was already marching on Rheon by the time he found out about it. He was trapped here, and Zandramas was getting away with your baby."

"That Nyissan ship!" Kail exclaimed. "Zandramas stole your son, Belgarion, and then sailed off to the south and left us all floundering around here in Drasnia."

"What about the story we got from that Cherek cultist right after the abduction?" Brin asked.

"A Bear-cultist isn't usually very bright," Kail replied. "I don't think this Zandramas would have had too much difficulty in persuading those Chereks that the abduction was on Harakan's orders, and all that gibberish about the prince being raised in the cult so that one day he could claim the Rivan throne is just kind of brainsick nonsense men like that would believe."

"That's why they were left behind, then," Garion said. "We were supposed to capture at least one of them and get the carefully prepared story that sent us off here to Rheon, while Zandramas sailed away to the south with my son."

"It looks as if we've all been very carefully manipulated," Javelin said, sorting through some parchment sheets he had stacked on a polished table. "Harakan as well as the rest of us."

"We can be clever, too," Belgarath said. "I don't think Zandramas realizes that the Orb will follow Geran's trail. If we move fast enough, we can sneak up from behind and take this clever manipulator by surprise."

"It won't work across water," the dry voice in Garion's mind said laconically.

"What?"

"The Orb can't follow your son's trail over water. The ground stays in one place. Water keeps moving around -wind, tides, that sort of thing."

Are you sure?"

But the voice was gone.

"There's a problem, Grandfather," Garion said. "The Orb can't find a trail on water."

"How do you know that?"

Garion tapped his forehead. "He just told me."

"That complicates things a bit."

"Not too much," Silk disagreed. "There are very few places where a Nyissan ship can land without being searched from keel to topmast. Most monarchs don't care much for the idea of having drugs and poisons slipped into their kingdoms. Zandramas would definitely not want to sail into some port and get caught with the heir to the Rivan Throne aboard ship."

"There are many hidden coves along the coast of Arendia," Lelldorin suggested.

Silk shook his head. "I don't think so," he said. "I think the ship would have just stayed out to sea. I'm sure Zandramas wanted to get as far away from the Alorn kingdoms as possible -and as quickly as possible. If this ruse that sent us here to Rheon hadn't worked, Garion would have had every man and every ship in the West out looking for his son."

"How about southern Cthol Murgos?" General Brendig suggested.

Javelin frowned. "No," he said. "There's a war going on down there and the whole west coast is being patrolled by Murgo ships. The only safe place for a Nyissan ship to land is in Nyissa itself."

"And that brings us back to Salmissra, doesn't it?" Polgara said.

"I think that if there had been any kind of official involvement in this, my people would have found out about it, Lady Polgara," Javelin said. "I've got Salmissra's palace thoroughly covered. The actual orders would have had to come from Sadi, Salmissra's Chief-Eunuch, and we watch him all the time. I don't think this came out of the palace."

The door opened and Beldin, his face as dark as a thundercloud, entered. "By the Gods!" he swore. "I lost him!"

"Lost him?" Belgarath asked. "How?"

"When he got to the street, he turned himself into a hawk. I was right on his tail, but he went into the clouds and changed form on me again. When he came out, he was mixed up in the middle of a flock of geese flying south. Naturally, when the geese saw me, they flew off squawking in all directions. I couldn't tell which one of them he was."

"You must be getting old."

"Why don't you shut up, Belgarath?"

"He's not important anymore, anyway." Belgarath shrugged. "We got what we needed out of him."

"I think I'd prefer it if he were safely dead. If nothing else, the loss of one of his favorite dogs would irritate Urvon, and I'll go out of my way to do that any day in the week."

"Why do you keep calling him a dog?" Hettar asked curiously.

"Because he's one of the Chandim -and that's what they are- the Hounds of Torak."

"Would you like to explain that?" Queen Porenn asked him.

Beldin took a deep breath to get his irritation under control. "It's not too complicated," he said. "When they built Cthol Mishrak in Mallorea, Torak set certain Grolims the task of guarding the city. In order to do that, they became hounds."

Garion shuddered, the memory of the huge dog-shapes they had encountered in the City of Night coming back to him with painful clarity.

"Anyway," Beldin continued, "after the Battle of Vo Mimbire when Torak was put to sleep for all those centuries, Urvon went into the forbidden area around the ruins and managed to persuade a part of the pack of hounds that he was acting on behalf of old burnt-face. He took them back to Mal Yaska with him and gradually changed them back into Grolims, even though he had to kill about half of them in the process. Anyhow, they call themselves the Chandim -a sort of secret order within the Grolim church. They're absolutely loyal to Urvon. They're pretty fair sorcerers and they dabble a bit in magic as well. Underneath it all, though, they're still dogs -very obedient and much more dangerous in packs than they are as individuals."

"What a fascinating little sidelight," Silk observed, looking up from a parchment scroll he had found in one of the cabinets.

"You have a very clever mouth, Kheldar," Beldin said testily. "How would you like to have me brick it up for you?"

"No, that's quite all right, Beldin."

"Well, what now, Belgarath?" Queen Porenn asked.

"Now? Now we go after Zandramas, of course. This hoax with the cult has put us a long way behind, but we'll catch up."

"You can count on that," Garion said. "I dealt with the Child of Dark once before and I can do it again if I have to." He turned back to Errand. "Do you have any idea of why Urvon wants my son killed?"

"It's something he found in a book of some kind. The book says that if your son ever falls into the hands of Zandramas, then Zandramas will be able to use him to do something. Whatever it is, Urvon would be willing to destroy the world to prevent it."

"What is it that Zandramas would be able to do?" Belgarath asked, his eyes intent.

"Harakan doesn't know. All he knows is that he's failed in the task Urvon set him."

Belgarath smiled slowly, a cold, wintery kind of smile. "I don't think we need to waste any time chasing down Harakan," he said.

"Not chase him?" Ce'Nedra exclaimed, "After all he's done to us?"

"Urvon will take care of him for us and Urvon will do things to him that we couldn't even begin to think of."

"Who is this Urvon?" General Brendig asked.

"Torak's third disciple," Belgarath replied. "There used to be three of them -Ctuchik, Zedar, and Urvon. But he's the only one left."

"We still don't know anything about Zandramas," Silk said.

"We know a few things. We know that Zandramas is now the Child of Dark, for example."

"That doesn't fit together, Belgarath," Barak rumbled. "Why would Urvon want to interfere with the Child of Dark? They're on the same side, aren't they?"

"Apparently not. It begins to look as if there's a little dissension in the ranks on the other side."

"That's always helpful."

"I'd like to know a bit more before I start gloating, though."

It was midafternoon before the last fanatic resistance collapsed in the southeastern quarter of Rheon and the demoralized prisoners were herded through the streets of the burning town to join the others in the town square.

Garion and General Brendig stood on the second floor balcony of the house where they had taken Harakan, talking quietly with the small, black-gowned Queen of Drasnia. "What will you do with them now, your Majesty?" General Brendig asked her, looking down at the frightened prisoners in the square.

"I'm going to tell them the truth and let them go, Brendig."

"Let them go?"

"Of course."

"I'm afraid I don't quite follow you."

"They're going to be just a little upset when I tell them that they've been duped into betraying Aloria by a Mallolean Grolim."

"I don't think they'll believe you."

"Enough of them will," she replied placidly, adjusting the collar of her black dress. "I'll manage to convince at least some of them of the truth, and they'll spread the word. Once it becomes general knowledge that the cult fell under the domination of this Grolim Harakan, it's going to be more difficult for them to gain new converts, don't you think?"

Brendig considered that. "I suppose you're right," he admitted. "But will you punish the ones who won't listen?"

"That would be tyranny, General, and one should always try to avoid the appearance of tyranny -particularly when it's unnecessary. Once word of this gets around, I think that anyone who starts babbling about the divine mission of Aloria to subjugate the southern kingdoms is going to be greeted with a barrage of stones."

"All right, then, what are you going to do about General Haldar?" he asked seriously. "You're not just going to let him go, too, are you?"

"Haldar's quite another matter," she replied. "He's a traitor, and that sort of thing ought to be discouraged."

"When he finds out what happened here, he'll probably try to run."

"Appearances can be deceiving, General Brendig," she told him with a chill smile. "I may look like a helpless woman, but I have a very long arm. Haldar can't run far enough or fast enough to escape me. And when my people catch him, he'll be brought back to Boktor in chains to stand trial. I think the outcome of that trial will be fairly predictable."

"Would you excuse me?" Garion asked politely. "I need to go talk with my grandfather."

"Of course, Garion," Queen Porenn said with a warm little smile.

He went back downstairs and found Silk and Javelin still ransacking the chests and cabinets in the green-carpeted room. "Are you finding anything useful?" he asked.

"Well, quite a bit, actually," Javelin replied. "I expect that by the time we're finished, we'll have the name of every cult member in Aloria."

"It just proves something I've always said," Silk noted as he continued to read. "A man should never put anything down in writing."

"Have either of you any idea where I can find Belgarath?"

"You might try the kitchens at the back of the house," Silk replied. "He said something about being hungry. I think Beldin went with him."

The kitchen in Harakan's house had escaped the general ransacking by Yarblek's men, who appeared to be more interested in loot than food, and the two old sorcerers sat comfortably at a table near a low, arched window picking at the remains of a roasted chicken. "Ah, Garion, my boy," Belgarath said expansively.

"Come in and join us."

"Do you suppose there's anything to drink around here?" Beldin asked, wiping his fingers on the front of his tunic.

"There should be," Belgarath replied. "It's a kitchen, after all. Why don't you look in that pantry?"

Beldin rose and crossed the kitchen floor toward the pantry.

Garion bent slightly to look out the low window at the houses burning one street over. "It's starting to snow again," he observed.

Belgarath grunted. "I think we'll want to get out of here as quickly as we can," he said. "I don't really want to spend the winter here."

Ah, ha!" Beldin said from the pantry. He emerged with a triumphant grin carrying a small wooden cask.

"You'd better taste it first," Belgarath told him. "It might be vinegar." Beldin set the cask on the floor and bashed in its top with his fist. Then he licked his fingers and smacked his lips. "No," he said, "it's definitely not vinegar." He rummaged through a nearby cupboard and produced three earthenware cups.

"Well, brother," Belgarath said, "what are your plans?"

Beldin dipped into the cask with one of the cups. "I think I'll see if I can track down Harakan. I'd like to finish him off before I go back to Mallorea. He's not the kind you want lurking in alleys behind you as you go by."

"You're going to Mallorea, then?" Belgarath tore a wing off the chicken lying on the table.

"That's possibly the only place where we can get any solid information about this Zandramas." Beldin belched.

"Javelin says that he thinks it's a Darshivan name," Garion told him.

Beldin grunted. "That could help a little. This time I'll start there. I couldn't get anything at all at Mal Zeth, and those half-wits in Karanda fell over in a dead faint every time I mentioned the name."

"Did you try Mal Yaska?" Belgarath asked him.

"Hardly. Urvon's got my description posted on every wall in that place. For some reason, he's afraid that someday I might show up and yank out several yards of his guts."

"I wonder why."

"I told him so, that's why."

"You'll be in Darshiva, then?"

"For the time being -at least, I will after I've got Harakan safely under the ground. If I find out anything about Zandramas, I'll get word to you." "Keep your eyes open for clear copies of the Mallorea Gospels and the Ashabine Oracles, too," Belgarath told him. "According to the Codex, I'm supposed to find clues in them."

"And what are you going to do?"

"I think we'll go on down to Nyissa and see if the Orb can pick up the trail of my great-grandson."

"The fact that some Rivan shepherd saw a Nyissan ship is a pretty slender lead, Belgarath."

"I know, but at the moment it's the only one we've got."

Garion absently pulled a few fragments off the picked-over chicken and put them in his mouth. He suddenly realized that he was ravenously hungry.

"Are you going to take Polgara with you?" Beldin asked.

"I don't think so. Garion and I are likely to be out of touch, and we'll need somebody here in the north to keep an eye on things. The Alorns are feeling muscular at the moment and they're going to need a firm hand to keep them out of mischief."

"That's a normal condition for Alorns. You realize that Polgara's not going to be happy when you tell her she has to stay behind, don't you?"

"I know," Belgarath replied with a gloomy look. "Maybe I'll just leave her a note. That worked pretty well last time."

"Just try to make sure she's not in the vicinity of anything breakable when she gets the note." Beldin laughed. "Like large cities and mountain ranges. I heard what happened when she got the last note you left." The door opened, and Barak stuck his head into the kitchen. "Oh," he said. "There you are. There are a couple people out here who want to see you. Mandorallen found them on the outskirts of town -a very strange pair."

"How do you mean strange?" Garion asked.

"The man's as big as a house. He's got arms like tree trunks, but he can't talk. The girl's pretty enough, but she's blind."

Belgarath and Beldin exchanged a quick look. "How do you know she's blind?" Belgarath asked.

"She's got a cloth tied across her eyes." Barak shrugged. "I just assumed that was what it meant."

"I guess we'd better go talk to her." Beldin said, rising from his seat. "A seeress wouldn't be in this part of the world unless it was pretty important."

"A seeress?" Garion asked.

"One of those people from Kell," Belgarath explained. "They're always blindfolded, and their guides are always mutes. Let's go see what she has to say."

When they entered the large main room, they found the others curiously eyeing the two strangers. The blindfolded seeress was a slight girl in a white robe. She had dark blond hair, and a serene smile touched her lips. She stood quietly in the center of the room, patiently waiting. Beside her stood one of the largest men Garion had ever seen. He wore a kind of sleeveless kirtle of coarse, undyed cloth belted at the waist, and he carried no weapon except for a stout, polished staff. He towered above even Hettar, and his bare arms were awesomely muscled. In a curious way, he seemed almost to hover over his slender mistress, his eyes watchful and protective.

"Has she said who she is?" Belgarath quietly asked Polgara as they joined the others.

"No," she replied. "All that she says is that she has to speak with you and Garion."

"Her name is Cyradis," Errand said from nearby.

"Do you know her?" Garion asked him.

"We met once -in the Vale. She wanted to find out something about me, so she came there, and we talked."

"What did she want to find out?"

"She didn't say."

"Didn't you ask her?"

"I think that if she'd wanted me to know, she'd have told me."

"I would speak with thee, Ancient Belgarath," the seeress said then in a light, clear voice, "and with thee, also, Belgarion."

They drew closer.

"I am permitted a short time here to tell thee certain truths. First, know that your tasks are not yet completed. Necessity doth command yet one more meeting between the Child of Light and the Child of Dark; and mark me well -this meeting shall be the last, for it is during this meeting that the final choice between the Light and the Dark shall be made."

"And where will this meeting take place, Cyradis?" Belgarath asked her, his face intent.

"In the presence of the Sardion -in the place which is no more."

"And where is that?"

"The path to that dread place lies in the mysteries, Ancient One. Thou must seek it there." She turned her face toward Garion, half-reaching out to him with one slender hand.

"Thy heart is sore, Belgarion," she said with a great sympathy in her voice, "for Zandramas, the Child of Dark, hath reft away thy son and even now doth flee with him toward the Sardion. It lies upon thee to bar the path of Zandramas to that stone -for the stars and the voices of the earth proclaim that the power of the Dark doth reside in the Sardion, even as the power of the Light doth reside in the Orb of Aldur. Should Zandramas reach the Dark Stone with the babe, the Dark shall triumph, and its triumph shall be eternal."

"Is my baby all right?" Ce'Nedra demanded, her face pale and a dreadful fear in her eyes.

"Thy child is safe and well, Ce'Nedra," Cyradis told her. "Zandramas will protect him from all harm -not out of love, but out of Necessity." The seeress' face grew still. "Thou must steel thy heart, however," she continued, "for should there be no other way to prevent Zandramas from reaching the Sardion with thine infant son, it falls to thee -or to thy husband -to slay the child."

"Slay?" Ce'Nedra exclaimed, "Never!"

"Then the Dark shall prevail," Cyradis said simply. She turned back to Garion. "My time grows short," she said to him. "Heed what I say. Thy choice of companions to aid thee in this task of thine must be guided by Necessity and not thine own preference. Shouldst thou choose awry, then shalt thou fail thy task, and Zandramas will defeat thee. Thy son shall be lost to thee forever, and the world as thou knowest it shall be no more." Garion's face was bleak. "Go ahead," he told her shortly. "Say the rest of what you have to say." Her suggestion that either he or Ce'Nedra could ever under any circumstances kill their own child had filled him with a sudden anger.

"Thou wilt leave this place in the company of Ancient Belgarath and his most revered daughter. Thou must also take with thee the Bearer of the Orb and thy wife."

"Absurd!" he burst out. "I'm not going to expose Ce'Nedra -or Errand- to that kind of danger."

"Then thou wilt surely fail."

He looked at her helplessly.

"Thou must have with thee as well the Guide and the Man with Two Lives -and one other whom I will reveal to thee. Thou wilt be joined at some later times by others -the Huntress, the Man Who Is No Man, the Empty One, and by the Woman Who Watches."

"That's fairly typical seer gibberish," Beldin muttered sourly.

"The words are not mine, gentle Beldin," she told him.

"These are the names as they are written in the stars -and in the prophecies. The incidental and worldly names which were given them at the time of their births are of no moment in the timeless realm of the two Necessities which contend with each other at the center of all that is or ever will be. Each of these companions hath a certain task, and all tasks must be completed 'ere the meeting which is to come, else the Prophecy which hath guided thy steps since time began will fail."

"And what is my task, Cyradis?" Polgara asked her coolly."

"It is as it hath ever been, Holy Polgara. Thou must guide, and nurture, and protect, for thou art the mother - even as Ancient Belgarath is the father." The faintest of smiles touched the blindfolded girl's lips. "Others will aid thee in thy quest from time to time, Belgarion," she continued, "but those I have named must be with thee at that final meeting."

"What about us?" Barak demanded, "Hettar and Mandorallen and Lelldorin and me?"

"The tasks of each of you are complete, most Dreadful Bear, and the responsibility for them hath descended to your sons. Shouldst thou or the Bowman or the Horse Lord or the Knight Protector seek to join with Belgarion in this quest, thy presence will cause him to fail."

"Ridiculous!" the big man sputtered. "I'm certainly not staying behind."

"That choice is not thine to make." She turned back to Garion, laying her hand on the massive arm of her mute protector. "This is Toth," she said, slumping as if a great weariness were about to overcome her. "He hath guided my faltering steps since the day that other sight came upon me and I bound up mine eyes that I might better see. Though it doth rend my soul, he and I must now part for a little while. I have instructed him to aid thee in thy search. In the stars, he is called the Silent Man, and it is his destiny to be one of thy companions." She began to tremble as if in exhaustion. "One last word for thee, Belgarion," she said in a quavering voice. "Thy quest will be fraught with great peril, and one of thy companions shall lose his life in the course of it. Prepare thine heart therefore, for when this mischance occurs, thou must not falter, but must press on to the completion of the task which hath been laid upon thee."

"Who?" he said quickly. "Which one of them is going to die?"

"That hath not been revealed to me," she said. And then with an obvious effort, she straightened.

"Remember me," she said, "for we shall meet anon." With that she vanished.

"Where did she go?" General Brendig exclaimed.

"She was never really here," Errand replied.

"It was a projection, Brendig," Belgarath said. "But the man -Toth- is solid. Now how did they work that? Do you know, Errand?"

Errand shrugged. "I can't tell, Belgarath. But it took the combined power of all the Seers at Kell."

"What absolute nonsense!" Barak burst out angrily, pounding one huge fist on the table. "Nothing in this world could make me stay behind!" "Mandorallen, Hettar, and Lelldorin vehemently nodded their agreement. Garion looked at Polgara. "Could she possibly have been lying?" he asked.

"Cyradis? No. A seeress isn't capable of lying. She may have concealed a few things, but she could never have lied. What she told us was what she saw in the stars."

"How can she see the stars with that blindfold over her eyes?" Lelldorin objected.

Polgara spread her hands. "I don't know. The seers perceive things in ways we don't entirely understand."

"Maybe she read them wrong," Hettar suggested.

"The Seers at Kell are usually right," Beldin growled, "so I wouldn't necessarily want to bet my life on that."

"That brings us right to the point," Garion said. "I'm going to have to go alone."

"Alone?" Ce'Nedra gasped.

"You heard what she said. Somebody who goes with me is going to get killed."

"That hath ever been a possibility, Garion," Mandorallen said soberly.

"But never a certainty."

"I won't let you go by yourself," Barak declared.

Garion felt a peculiar wrench, almost as if he had been rudely pushed aside. He was powerless as a voice which was not his came from his lips. "Will you people stop all this babbling?" it demanded. "You've been given your instructions. Now follow them."

They all stared at Garion in amazement. He spread his hands helplessly, trying to let them know that he had no control over the words coming from his mouth.

Belgarath blinked. "This must be important, if it can make you take a hand directly," he said to the awareness that had suddenly usurped Garion's voice.

"You don't have time to sit around debating the issue, Belgarath. You have a very long way to go and only so much time."

"Then what Cyradis said was true?" Polgara asked.

"As far as it went. She's still not taking sides, though."

"Then why did she come at all?" Beldin asked.

"She has her own task, and this was part of that. She must also give instructions to Zandramas."

"I don't suppose you could give us a hint or two about this place we're supposed to find?" Belgarath asked hopefully.

"Belgarath, don't do that. You know better. You have to stop at Prolgu on your way south."

"Prolgu?"

"Something that has to occur is going to happen there. Time is running out on you, Belgarath, so stop wasting it."

You keep talking about time. Could you be a bit more specific?"

"He's gone, Grandfather," Garion said, regaining control of his voice.

"He always does that," Belgarath complained. "Just when the conversation gets interesting, he leaves."

"You know why he does it, Belgarath," Beldin said.

Belgarath sighed. "Yes, I suppose I do." He turned to the others. "That's it, then," he said. "I guess we do exactly what Cyradis told us to do."

"You're surely not going to take Ce'Nedra with you," Porenn objected.

"Of course I'm going, Porenn," Ce'Nedra declared with a little toss of her head. "I'd have gone anyway -no matter I what that blind girl said."

"But she said that one of Garion's companions would die."

I'm not his companion, Porenn. I'm his wife."

There were actual tears in Barak's eyes. "Isn't there anything I can say to persuade you to change your mind?" he pleaded.

Garion felt the tears also welling up in his own eyes. Barak had always been one of the solid rocks in his life, and the thought of beginning this search without the big red-bearded man at his side left a great emptiness inside him. "I'm afraid we don't have any choice, Barak," he said very sadly. "If it were up to me-" He left it hanging, unable to go on.

"This hath rent mine heart, dearest Ce'Nedra," Mandorallen said, kneeling before the queen. "I am thy true knight, thy champion and protector, and yet I am forbidden to accompany thee on thy perilous quest."

Great, glistening tears suddenly streamed down Ce'Nedra's cheeks. She put her arms about the great knight's neck. "Dear, dear Mandorallen," she said brokenly, kissing his cheek.

"I've got some people working on a few things in Malloreon," Silk said to Yablek. "I'll give you a letter to them so that they can keep you advised. Don't make any hasty decisions, but don't pass up any opportunities, either."

"I know how to run the business, Silk," Yablek retorted.

"At least as well as you do."

"Of course you do, but you get excited. All I'm saying is that you should try to keep your head." The little man looked down rather sadly at his velvet doublet and all the jewels he was wearing. He sighed. "Oh, well, I've lived without all this before, I suppose." He turned to Durnik. "I guess we should start packing," he said.

Garion looked at him in perplexity.

"Weren't you listening, Garion?" the little man asked him. "Cyradis told you whom you were supposed to take along. Durnik's the Man with Two Lives, Errand is the Bearer of the Orb, and in case you've forgotten, I'm the Guide."

Garion's eyes widened.

"Naturally I'm going with you," Silk said with an impudent grin. "You'd probably get lost if I weren't along to show you the way."

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Here ends Book I of The Malloreon.

Book II, King of the Murgos.

begins the quest for Garion's son across strange new lands to the place that is no more and a conflict of opposing destinies that will decide the fate of all mankind.

PROLOGUE

Being an account of how Belgarion's Son was stolen and how he learned the Abductor was that Zandramas against whom the puissant Orb of Aldur had warned. —from The Lives of Belgarion the Great (Introduction, Vol. IV)

Now, as has been told, in the earliest of days the Gods created the world and filled it with all manner of beasts and fowls and plants. Men also they created, and each God chose from among the races of men those whom they would guide and over whom they would rule. The God Aldur, however, took none, choosing to live apart in his tower and study the creation which they had made.

But a time came when a hungry child arrived at Aldur's tower, and Aldur took the child in and taught him the Will

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and the Word, by which all power may be used, in the manner that men call sorcery. And when the boy showed promise, Aldur named him Belgarath and made him a disciple. Then in time others came, and Aldur taught them and made them also his disciples. Among these was a malformed child whom Aldur named Beldin.

There came a day when Aldur took up a stone and shaped it and he called it his Orb, for the stone had fallen from beyond the stars and was a seat of great power, a center for one of the two Destinies which had been in conflict for control of all creation since the beginning of days.

But the God Torak coveted the stone and stole it, for the Dark Destiny had claimed his soul for its agent. Then the men of Aloria, known as Alorns, met with Belgarath, who led Cherek Bear-shoulders and his three sons into the far East where Torak had built Cthol Mishrak, the City of Eternal Night. By stealth, they stole back the Orb and returned with it.

With the counsel of the Gods, Belgarath divided Aloria into the kingdoms of Cherek, Drasnia, Algaria, and Riva, naming each for one who had accompanied him. And to Riva Iron-grip, who was to rule over the Isle of the Winds, he gave the keeping of the Orb, which Riva placed on the pommel of the great sword that he hung upon the wall of the Hall of the Rivan King, behind his throne.

Then Belgarath sought his home, but found tragedy awaiting him. His beloved wife Poledra had passed from the world of the living in giving birth to twin girls. In time, he sent Beldaran, the fairer of these, to be a wife to Riva Iron-grip to found the line of Rivan kings. His other daughter, Polgara, he kept with him, since her dark hair bore a single lock of white, the mark of a sorceress.

Guarded by the power of the Orb, all went well with the West for thousands of years. Then, on an evil day, King Gorek of Riva and his sons and sons' sons were slain by foul treachery. One child escaped, however, to be henceforth guarded in secret by Belgarath and Polgara.

On the Isle, the Rivan Warder, Brand, sorrowfully took over the authority of his slain lord, and his sons continued to guard Aldur's Orb and all were known as Brand.

But there came a time when Zedar the Apostate found a child of such innocence that he could touch the Orb without being destroyed by its fire. Thus Zedar stole the Orb and

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fled with it toward the place where his dread Master, Torak, lay hidden.

When Belgarath learned of this, he went up to the quiet farm in Sendaria where Polgara was rearing a boy named Garion, who was the last descendant of the Rivan line. Taking the boy with them, they set out after the Orb. After many perilous adventures, they found the child, whom they named Errand. And, with Errand bearing the Orb, they returned to set the Orb back upon the sword.

Then Garion, now named Belgarion for the powers of sorcery he had shown, learned of the Prophecy, which revealed that the time was at hand when he, as the Child of Light, must confront the evil God Torak, to kill or to be killed. Fearfully, he departed eastward for the City of Endless Night to meet his fate. But with the aid of the great sword that bore the Orb of Aldur, he prevailed and slew the God.

Thus Belgarion, descendant of Riva Iron-grip, was crowned King of Riva and Overlord of the West. He took to wife the Tolnedran Princess Ce'Nedra, while Polgara took the faithful smith Durnik as her husband, since the Gods had raised him from the dead and had given him the power of sorcery to be her equal. With Belgarath, she and Durnik left for the Vale of Aldur in Algaria, where they planned to rear the strange, gentle child Errand.

The years passed as Belgarion learned to be a husband to his young bride and began mastering his powers of sorcery and the power of his throne. There was peace in the West, but trouble stirred in the South, where Kal Zakath, Emperor of Mallorean, waged war upon the King of the Murgos. And Belgarath, returning from a trip to Mallorean, reported dark rumors of a stone known as the Sardion. But what it might be, other than an object of fear, he could not say.

Then on a night when young Errand was visiting in the Citadel at Riva, he and Belgarion were awakened by the voice of the Prophecy within their minds and directed to the throne room. And there the blue Orb on the pommel of the sword turned angry red of a sudden and it spoke, saying, "Beware Zandramasf" But none could learn who or what Zandramas was.

Now, after years of waiting, Ce'Nedra found herself with child. But the fanatic followers of the Bear-cult were active again, crying that no Tolnedran should be Queen and that she must be set aside for one of the true blood of the Alorns.

When the Queen was great with child, she was set upon by an assassin in her bath and almost drowned. The assassin fled to the tower of the Citadel and from there threw herself to her death. But Prince Kheldar, the Drasnian adventurer who was also known as Silk, saw from her garments that she might be a follower of the cult. Belgarion was wroth, but he did not yet move to war.

Time passed, and Queen Ce'Nedra was delivered of a healthy male heir to the Throne of Riva. And great was the rejoicing from all the lands of the Alorns and beyond, and notables assembled at Riva to rejoice and celebrate this happy birth.

When all had departed and peace again descended upon the Citadel, Belgarion resumed his studies of the ancient Prophecy which men called the Mrin Codex. A strange blot had long troubled him, but now he found that he could read it in the light cast by the Orb. Thus he learned that the Dark Prophecy and his obligations as the Child of Light had not ended with the slaying of Torak. The Child of Dark was now Zandramas, whom he must meet in time to come "in the place which is no more."

His soul was heavy within him as he journeyed hastily to confer with his grandfather Belgarath in the Vale of Aldur. But even as he was speaking with the old man, new words of ill were brought him by messenger. Assassins had penetrated the Citadel at night, and the faithful Rivan Warder, Brand, had been killed.

With Belgarath and his Aunt Polgara, Belgarion sped to Riva, where one assassin weakly clung to life. Prince Kheldar arrived and was able to identify the comatose assassin as a member of the Bear-cult. New evidence revealed that the cult was massing an army at Rheon in Drasnia and was building a fleet at Jarviksholm on the coast of Cherek.

Now King Belgarion declared war upon the Bear-cult. Upon the advice of the other Alorn monarchs, he moved first against the shipyards at Jarviksholm to prevent the threat of a hostile fleet in the Sea of the Winds. His attack was quick and savage. Jarviksholm was razed to the ground, and the half-built fleet was burned before a single keel touched water.

But victory turned to ashes when a message from Riva reached him. His infant son had been abducted.

Belgarion, Belgarath, and Polgara turned themselves into

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birds by sorcery and flew back to Riva in a single day. The city of Riva had already been searched house by house. But with the aid of the Orb, Belgarion was able to follow the trail of the abductors to the west coast of the Isle. There they came upon a band of Cherek cultists and fell upon them. One survived, and Polgara forced him to speak. He declared that the child had been stolen on the orders of Ulfgar, leader of the Bear-cult, whose headquarters were at Rheon in eastern Drasnia. Before Polgara could wrest further information from him, however, the cultist leaped from the top of the cliff upon which they stood and dashed himself to death on the rocks below.

Now the war turned to Rheon. Belgarion found his troops badly outnumbered and an ambush awaiting his advance toward the city. He was facing defeat when Prince Kheldar arrived with a force of Nadrak mercenaries to turn the tide of battle. Reinforced by the Nadraks, the Rivans besieged the city of Rheon.

Belgarion and Durnik combined their wills to weaken the walls of the city until the siege engines of Baron Mandorallen could bring them down. The Rivans and Nadraks poured into the city, led by Belgarion. The battle inside was savage, but the cultists were driven back and most of them were slaughtered. Then Belgarion and Durnik captured the cult leader, Ulfgar.

Though Belgarion had already learned that his son was not within the city, he hoped that close questioning might drag the child's whereabouts from Ulfgar. The cult leader stubbornly refused to answer; then, surprisingly, Errand drew the information directly from Ulfgar's mind.

While it became clear that Ulfgar had been responsible for the attempt on Ce'Nedra's life, he had played no part in the theft of the child. Indeed, his chief goal had been the death of Belgarion's son, preferably before its birth. He obviously knew nothing of the abduction, which did not at all suit his purpose.

Then the sorcerer Beldin joined them. He quickly recognized Ulfgar as Harakan, an underling of Torak's last living disciple Urvon. Harakan suddenly vanished, and Beldin sped in pursuit.

Messengers now arrived from Riva. Investigations following Belgarion's departure had discovered a shepherd in the hills who had seen a figure carrying what might have been

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a baby embark upon a ship of Nyissan design and sail southward.

Then Cyradis, a Seeress of Kell, sent a projection of herself to tell them more. The child, she claimed, had been taken by Zandramas, who had spun such a web of deceit to throw the blame upon Harakan that even the cult members who had been left behind to be discovered had believed what Polgara had extracted from the captive on the cliff of the Isle of the Winds.

Clearly, she said, the Child of Dark had stolen the baby for a purpose. That purpose was connected with the Sardion. Now they must pursue Zandramas. Beyond that she would not speak, except to identify those who must go with Belgarion. Then, leaving her huge, mute guide Toth behind to accompany them, she vanished.

Belgarion's heart sank within him as he realized that his son's abductor was now months ahead and that the trail had grown extremely dim. But he grimly gathered his companions to pursue Zandramas, even to the edge of the world or beyond, if need be.

Part One

THE SERPENT QUEEN

CHAPTER ONE

Somewhere in the darkness, Garion could hear the crystalline tap of water dripping with a slow, monotonous regularity. The air around him was cool, smelling of rock and dampness overlaid with the musty odor of pallid white things that grow in the dark and flinch from the light. He found himself straining to catch all the myriad sounds that whispered through the dark caves of Ulgo—the moist trickle of water, the dusty slither of dislodged pebbles slowly running down a shallow incline, and the mournful sighing of air coming down from the surface through minute fissures in the rock.

Belgarath stopped and lifted the smoky torch that filled the passageway with flickering orange light and leaping shadows. "Wait here a moment," he said, and then he moved off down the murky gallery with his scuffed, mismatched

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boots shuffling along the uneven floor. The rest of them waited with the darkness pressing in all around them.

"I hate this," Silk muttered, half to himself. "I absolutely hate it."

They waited.

The ruddy flicker of Belgarath's torch reappeared at the far end of the gallery. "Allright," he called. "It's this way."

Garion put his arm about Ce'Nedra's slender shoulders. A kind of deep silence had fallen over her during their ride south from Rheon as it had grown increasingly evident that their entire campaign against the Bear-cult in eastern Drasnia had done little more than give Zandramas a nearly insurmountable lead with the abducted Geran. The frustration that made Garion want to beat his fists against the rocks around him and howl in impotent fury had plunged Ce'Nedra into a profound depression instead, and now she stumbled through the dark caves of Ulgo, sunk in a kind of numb misery, neither knowing nor caring where the others led her. He turned his head to look back at Polgara, his face mirroring all his deep concern. The look she returned him was grave, but seemingly unperturbed. She parted the front of her blue cloak and moved her hands in the minute gestures of the Drasnian secret language. —Be sure she stays warm—she said. —She's very susceptible to chills just now,—

A half-dozen desperate questions sprang into Garion's mind; but with Ce'Nedra at his side with his arm about her shoulders, there was no way he could voice them.

—It's important for you to stay calm, Garion—Polgara's ringers told him. —Don't let her know how concerned you are. I'm watching her, and

I'll know what to do when the time comes.—

Belgarath stopped again and stood tugging at one earlobe, looking dubiously down a dark passageway and then down another which branched off to the left.

"You're lost again, aren't you?" Silk accused him. The rat-faced little Drasnian had put aside his pearl-gray doublet and his jewels and gold chains and now wore an old brown tunic, shiny with age, a moth-eaten fur cloak and a shapeless, battered hat, once again submerging himself in one of his innumerable disguises.

"Of course I'm not lost," Belgarath retorted. "I just haven't pinpointed exactly where we are at the moment."

"Belgarath, that's what the word lost means."

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"Nonsense. I think we go this way." He pointed down the left-hand passageway.

"You thinkT'

"Uh—Silk," Durnik the smith cautioned quietly, "you really ought to keep your voice down. That ceiling up there doesn't look all that stable to me, and sometimes a loud noise is all it takes to bring one of them down."

Silk froze, his eyes rolling apprehensively upward and sweat visibly standing out on his forehead. "Polgara," he whispered in a strangled tone, "make him stop that."

"Leave him alone, Durnik," she said calmly. "You know how he feels about caves."

"I just thought he ought to know, Pol," the smith explained. "Things do happen in caves."

"Polgara!" Silk's voice was agonized. "Please.1"

"I'll go back and see how Errand and Toth are doing with the horses," Durnik said. He looked at the sweating little Drasnian. "Just try not to shout," he advised.

As they rounded a corner in the twisting gallery, the passageway opened out into a large cavern with a broad vein of quartz running across its ceiling. At some point, perhaps even miles away, the vein reached the surface, and refracted sunlight, shattered into its component elements by the facets of the quartz, spilled down into the cavern in dancing rainbows that flared and faded as they shifted across the sparkling surface of the small, shallow lake in the center of the cave. At the far end of the lake, a tiny waterfall tinkled endlessly from rock to rock to fill the cavern with its music.

"Ce'Nedra, look!" Garion urged.

"What?" She raised her head. "Oh, yes," she said indifferently, "very pretty." And she went back to her abstracted silence.

Garion gave Aunt Pol a helpless look.

"Father," Polgara said then, "I think it's just about lunch time. This seems like a good place to rest a bit and have a bite to eat."

"Pol, we're never going to get there if we stop every mile or two."

"Why do you always argue with me, father? Is it out of some obscure principle?"

He glowered at her for a moment, then turned away, muttering to himself.

Errand and Toth led the horses down to the shore of the

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crystal lake to water them. They were a strangely mismatched pair. Errand was a slight young man with blond, curly hair and he wore a simple brown peasant smock. Toth towered above him like a giant tree looming over a sapling. Although winter was coming on in the Kingdoms of the West, the huge mute still wore only sandals, a short kirtle belted at the waist, and an unbleached wool blanket drawn over one shoulder. His bare arms and legs were like tree trunks, and his muscles knotted and rippled whenever he moved. His nondescript brown hair was drawn straight back and tied at the nape of his neck with a short length of leather thong. Blind Cyradis had told them that this silent giant was to aid them in the search for Zandramas and Garion's stolen son, but so far Toth seemed content merely to follow them impassively, giving no hint that he even cared where they were going.

"Would you like to help me, Ce'Nedra?" Polgara asked pleasantly, unbuckling the straps on one of the packs.

Ce'Nedra, numb-faced and inattentive, walked slowly across the smooth stone floor of the cavern to stand mutely beside the pack horse.

"We'll need bread," Polgara said, rummaging through the pack as if unaware of the young woman's obvious abstraction. She took out several long, dark brown loaves of peasant bread and piled them like sticks of firewood in the little queen's arms. "And cheese, of course," she added, lifting out a wax-covered ball of Sendarian cheddar. She pursed her lips. "And perhaps a bit of the ham as well, wouldn't you say?"

"I suppose so," Ce'Nedra replied in an expressionless tone.

"Garion," Polgara went on, "would you lay this cloth on that flat rock over there?" She looked back at Ce'Nedra. "I hate to eat off an uncovered table, don't you?"

"Umm," Ce'Nedra replied.

The two of them carried the loaves of bread, the wax-coated cheese, and the ham to the improvised table. Polgara snapped her fingers and shook her head. "I forgot the knife. Would you get it for me?"

Ce'Nedra nodded and started back toward the pack horse.

"What's wrong with her, Aunt Pol?" Garion asked in a tense whisper.

"It's a form of melancholia, dear."

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"Is it dangerous?"

"It is if it goes on for too long."

"Can you do anything? I mean, could you give her some kind of medicine or something?"

"I'd rather not do that unless I have to, Garion. Sometimes the medicines just mask the symptoms, and other problems start to crop up. Most of the time, it's best to let these things run their natural course."

"Aunt Pol, I can't stand to see her like this."

"You're going to have to endure it for a while, Garion. Just behave as if you weren't aware of the way she's acting. She's not quite ready to come out of it yet.'" She turned with a warm smile. "Ah, there it is," she said, taking the knife from Ce'Nedra. "Thank you, dear."

They all gathered around Polgara's makeshift table for their simple lunch. As he ate, Durnik the smith gazed thoughtfully at the small crystal lake. "I wonder if there could be any fish in there," he mused.

"No, dear," Polgara said.

"It is possible, Pol. If the lake's fed by streams from the surface, the fish could have been washed down here when they were minnows, and—"

"No, Durnik."

He sighed.

After lunch, they re-entered the endless, twisting galleries, once again following Belgarath's flickering torch. The hours limped by as they trudged mile after mile with the darkness pressing palpably in around them.

"How much farther do we have to go, Grandfather?" Gar-ion asked, falling in beside the old man.

"It's hard to say exactly. Distances can be deceptive here in the caves."

"Have you got any idea at all about why we had to come here? I mean, is there anything in the Mrin Codex—or maybe the Darine—that talks about something that's supposed to happen here in Ulgo?"

"Not that I remember, no."

"You don't suppose we might have misunderstood, do you?"

"Our friend was pretty specific, Garion. He said that we have to stop at Prolgu on our way south, because something that has to happen is going to happen here."

"Can't it happen without us?" Garion demanded. "We're

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just floundering around here in these caves, and all the while Zandramas is getting farther and farther ahead of us with my son."

"What's that?" Errand asked suddenly from somewhere behind them. "I thought I heard something."

They stopped to listen. The guttering sound of Belgarath's torch suddenly sounded very loud as Garion strained his ears, trying to reach out into the darkness to capture any wayward sound. The slow drip of water echoed its soft tapping from somewhere in the dark, and the faint sigh of air coming down through the cracks and crevices in the rock provided a mournful accompaniment. Then, very faintly, Garion heard the sound of singing, of choral voices raised in the peculiarly discordant but deeply reverent hymn to UL that had echoed and re-echoed through these dim caverns for over five millennia.

"Ah, the Ulgos," Belgarath said with satisfaction. "We're almost to Prolgu. Now maybe we'll find out what it is that's supposed to happen here."

They went perhaps another mile along the passageway which rather suddenly became steeper, taking them deeper and deeper into the earth.

"Yakkf" a voice from somewhere ahead barked sharply. "Tacha velk? "•

"Belgarath, lyun hak," the old sorcerer replied calmly in response to the challenge.

"Belgarath? " The voice sounded startled. "Zajek kattig, Belgarath?"

"Marekeg Gorim, lyun zajek."

"Veed mo. Mar ishum Ulgo."

Belgarath extinguished his torch as the Ulgo sentry approached with a phosphorescently glowing wooden bowl held aloft.

"Yad ho, Belgarath. Groja UL."

"Yad ho," the old man answered the ritual greeting. "Groja UL."

The short, broad-shouldered Ulgo bowed briefly, then turned and led them on down the gloomy passageway. The greenish, unwavering glow from the wooden bowl he carried spread its eerie light in the dim gallery, painting all their faces with a ghostly pallor. After another mile or so, the gallery opened out into one of those vast caverns where the pale glow of that strange, cold light the Ulgos contrived winked

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at them from a hundred openings high up in the stone wall. They carefully moved along a narrow ledge to the foot of a stone stairway that had been chipped from the rock wall of the cave. Their guide spoke briefly to Belgarath.

"We'll have to leave the horses here," the old man said.

"I can stay with them," Durnik offered.

"No. The Ulgos will tend to them. Let's go up." And he started up the steep flight of stairs.

They climbed in silence, the sound of their footsteps echoing back hollowly from the far side of the cavern.

"Please don't lean out over the edge like that, Errand," Polgara said when they were about halfway up.

"I just wanted to see how far down it goes," he replied. "Did you know that there's water down there?"

"That's one of the reasons I'd rather you stayed away from the edge."

He flashed her a sudden smile and went on up.

At the top of the stairs, they skirted the edge of the dim subterranean abyss for several hundred yards, then entered one of the galleries where the Ulgos lived and worked in small cubicles carved from the rock. Beyond that gallery lay the Gorim's half-lit cavern with its lake and its island and the peculiarly pyramid-shaped house surrounded by solemn white pillars. At the far end of the marble causeway which crossed the lake, the Gorim of Ulgo, dressed as always in his white robe, stood peering across the water. "Belgarath?" he called in a quavering voice, "is that you?"

"Yes, it's me, Holy One," the old man replied. "You might have guessed that I'd turn up again."

"Welcome, old friend."

Belgarath started toward the causeway, but Ce'Nedra darted past him

with her coppery curls flying and ran toward the Gorim with her arms outstretched.

"Ce'Nedra?" he said, blinking as she threw her arms about his neck.

"Oh, Holy Gorim," she sobbed, burying her face in his shoulder, "someone's taken my baby."

"They've done what?" he exclaimed.

Garion had started almost involuntarily to cross the causeway to Ce'Nedra's side, but Polgara put her hand on his arm to stop him. "Not just yet, dear," she murmured.

"But—"

"This may be what she needs, Garion."

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"But, Aunt Pol, she's crying."

"Yes, dear. That's what I've been waiting for. We have to let her grief run its course before she can begin to come out of it."

The Gorim held the sobbing little queen in his arms, murmuring to her in a soft, comforting tone. After the first storm of her weeping had subsided, he raised his lined old face. "When did all this happen?" he asked.

"Late last summer," Belgarath told him. "It's a fairly involved story."

"Come inside then, all of you," the Gorim said. "My servants will prepare food and drink for you, and we can talk while you eat."

They filed into the pyramid-shaped house standing on the Gorim's island and entered the large central room with its stone benches and table, its glowing crystal lamps hanging on chains from the ceiling, and its peculiar, inward-sloping walls. The Gorim spoke briefly with one of his silent servants, then turned with his arm still about Ce'Nedra's shoulders. "Sit, my friends," he said to them.

As they sat at the stone table, one of the Gorim's servants entered, carrying a tray of polished crystal goblets and a couple of flagons of the fiery Ulgo drink.

"Now," the saintly old man said, "what has happened?"

Belgarath filled himself one of the goblets and then quickly sketched in the events of the past several months, telling the Gorim of the murder of Brand, of the attempt to sow dis-sention in the Alorn ranks

and of the campaign against the cult stronghold at Jarviksholm.

"And then," he went on as the Gorim's servants brought in trays of raw fruits and vegetables and a smoking roast hot from the spit, "right about at the same time we captured Jarviksholm, someone crept into the nursery in the Citadel at Riva and took Prince Geran out of his cradle. When we got back to the Isle, we discovered that the Orb will follow the baby's trail—as long as it stays on dry land, anyway. It led us to the west side of the island, and we encountered some Cherek Bear-cultists the abductor had left behind. When we questioned them, they told us that the new cult leader, Ulfgar, had ordered the abduction."

"But what they told you was not true?" the Gorim asked shrewdly.

"Not by half," Silk replied.

"Of course the problem there was that they didn't know they were lying," Belgarath continued. "They'd been very carefully prepared, and the story we got from them sounded quite plausible—particularly in view of the fact that we were already at war with the cult. Anyway, we mounted a campaign against the last cult stronghold at Rheon in northeastern Drasnica. After we took the town and captured Ulfgar, the truth started to come out. Ulfgar turned out to be a Mallorean Grolim named Harakan and he had absolutely nothing to do with the abduction. The real culprit was this mysterious Zandramas I told you about several years ago. I'm not sure exactly what part the Sardion plays in all this; but for some reason, Zandramas wants to take the baby to the place mentioned in the Mrin Codex—the place which is no more. Urvon desperately wants to prevent that, so he sent his henchman here to the west to kill the baby to keep it from happening."

"Have you any idea at all about where to begin the search?" the Gorim asked.

Belgarath shrugged. "A couple of clues is all. We're fairly sure that Zandramas left the Isle of the Winds aboard a Nyis-san ship, so that's where we're going to start. The Codex says that I'm supposed to find the path to the Sardion in the mysteries, and I'm fairly certain that when we find the Sardion, Zandramas and the baby won't be far away. Maybe I can get some hints in those prophecies—if I can ever find any uncorrupted copies."

"It also appears that the Seers of Kell are directly involving themselves," Polgara added.

"The seers?" The Gorim's voice was startled. "They've never done that before."

"I know," she replied. "One of them—agiri named Cy-radis—appeared at Rheon and gave us some additional information, and certain instructions."

"That is very unlike them."

"I think that things are moving toward the ultimate climax, Holy One," Belgarath said. "We were all concentrating so much on the

meeting between Garion and Torak that we lost sight of the fact that the real meetings are the ones between the Child of Light and the Child of Dark. Cyradis told us that this is going to be the last meeting, and that this time, everything's going to be decided once and for all. I

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rather suspect that's the reason that the seers are finally coming out into the open."

The Gorim frowned. "I would not have ever thought to see them concern themselves with the affairs of other men," he said gravely.

"Just who are these seers, Holy Gorim?" Ce'Nedra asked in a subdued voice.

"They are our cousins, child," he replied simply.

Her look betrayed her bafflement.

"After the Gods made the races of man, there came the time of the choosing," he explained. "There were seven races of man—even as there are seven Gods. Aldur chose to go his way alone, however, and that meant that one of the races of man remained unchosen and Godless."

"Yes," she nodded, "I've heard that part of the story."

"We were all of the same people," the Gorim continued. "Us, the Morindim, the Karands in the north of Mallorea, the Melcenes far to the east and the Dais. We were closest to the Dais, but when we went forth in search of the God UL, they had already turned their eyes to the skies in their attempt to read the stars. We urged them to come with us, but they would not."

"And you've lost all contact with them, then?" she asked.

"On occasion, some few of their seers have come to us, usually on some quest of which they would not speak. The seers are very wise, for the Vision which comes to them gives them knowledge of the past, the present, and the future—and more importantly, the meaning of it."

"Are they all women, then?"

"No. There are men as well. When the sight comes to them, they always bind their eyes to exclude all common light so that this other light can be seen more clearly. Inevitably, when a seer appears, there also appears a mute to be guide and protector. They are always paired—forever."

"Why are the Grplims so afraid of them?" Silk asked suddenly. "I've

been in Mallorea a few times and I've seen Mallorean Grolims go all to pieces at just the mention of Kell."

"I suspect that the Dais have taken steps to keep the Grolims away from Kell. It's the very center of their learning, and Grolims are intolerant of non-Angarak things."

"What is the purpose of these seers, Holy One?" Garion asked.

"It's not only the seers, Belgarion," the Gorim replied. "The Dais are involved in all branches of arcane knowledge—necromancy, wizardry, magic, witchcraft—all of these and more. No one—except the Dais themselves—seems to know exactly what their purpose might be. What-ever it is, though, they are entirely committed to it—both "the ones in Mallorea and those here in the west."

"In the west?" Silk blinked. "I didn't know that there were any Dais here."

The Gorim nodded. "They were divided by the Sea of the East when Torak used the Orb to crack the world. The western Dais were enslaved by the Murgos during the third millennium. But wherever they live—east or west—they have labored for eons at some task. Whatever that task may be, they are convinced that the fate of all creation depends on it."

"Does it?" Garion asked.

"We don't know, Belgarion. We don't know what the task is, so we can't even guess at its significance. We do know that they follow neither of the Prophecies which dominate the universe. They believe that their task was laid upon them by some higher destiny."

"And that's the thing that concerns me," Belgarath said. "Cyradis is manipulating us with these cryptic little announcements of hers; and for all I know, she's manipulating Zandramas as well. I don't like being led around by the nose—particularly by someone whose motives I don't understand. She complicates this whole business, and I don't like complications. I like nice, simple situations and nice, easy solutions."

"Good and Evil?" Durnik suggested.

"That's a difficult one, Durnik. I prefer 'them and us.' That clears away all the excess baggage and allows you to get right down to cases."

Garion slept restlessly that night and he rose early with his head feeling as if it were stuffed with sand. He sat for a time on one of the stone benches in the central room of the Gorim's house; then, caught in a kind of moody restlessness, he went outside to look across the quiet lake surrounding the island. The faint light from the globes hanging on their chains from the ceiling of the cavern cast a dim glow on the surface of the lake, and that glow filled the cave with a pale luminosity that seemed more like a light seen in a dream than

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any kind of illumination to be found in the real world. As he stood lost in thought at the water's edge, a movement on the far shore caught his eye.

They came singly and in groups of two and three, pale young women with the large, dark eyes and colorless hair of the Ulgos. They all wore modest white gowns, and they gathered shyly on the shore on the far side of the marble causeway, waiting in the dim light. Garion looked across the lake at them, then raised his voice to call, "Was there something you wanted?"

They whispered together for a moment, then pushed one of their number forward to speak for them. "We—we wanted to see the Princess Ce'Nedra," she blurted bashfully, her face dyed with a rosy blush. "If she's not too busy, that is." Her speech was halting, as if she were talking in a language not wholly familiar to her.

"I'll go see if she's awake," Garion offered.

"Thank you, sir," she replied, shrinking back into the protection of her group of friends.

Garion went back inside and found Ce'Nedra sitting up in bed. Her face had none of that numb indifference that had marked it for the past several weeks, and her eyes seemed alert. "You're up early," she noted.

"I had a little trouble sleeping. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, Garion. Why do you ask?"

"I was just—" He broke off with a shrug. "There are some young Ulgo women outside. They want to see you."

She frowned. "Who could they possibly be?"

"They seemed to know you. They said that they wanted to see the Princess Ce'Nedra."

"Of course!" she exclaimed, springing from her bed. "I'd almost forgotten them." She quickly pulled on a teal-green dressing gown and dashed from the room.

Curiously, Garion started to follow her, but stopped in the central hall of the house when he saw Polgara, Durnik, and the Gorim sitting quietly at the stone table.

"What was that all about?" Polgara asked, looking after the scurrying little queen.

"There are some Ulgo women outside," Garion replied. "They seem to be

friends of hers."

"She was very popular during her visit here," the Gorim said. "Ulgo girls are very shy, but Ce'Nedra befriended them all. They adored her."

"Excuse me, your Worship," Durnik said, "but is Relg anywhere about? I thought I might look in on him, as long as we're here."

"Relg and Taiba have taken their children and moved to Maragor," the Gorim replied.

"Maragor?" Garion blinked. "What about the ghosts there?"

"They are under the protection of the God Mara," the Gorim told him. "There seems to be some kind of understanding between Mara and UL. I'm not sure I entirely understand it, but Mara insists that Taiba's children are Marags and he has vowed to watch over them in Maragor."

Garion frowned. "But isn't their first-born son going to be Gorim someday?"

The old man nodded. "Yes. His eyes are still as blue as sapphires. I was concerned myself at first, Belgarion, but I'm certain that UL will return Relg's son to the caves of Ulgo at the proper time."

"How is Ce'Nedra this morning, Garion?" Polgara asked seriously.

"She seems to be almost back to normal. Does that mean that she's all right?"

"It's a good sign, dear, but it might be a little early to be sure. Why don't you go keep an eye on her?"

"All right."

"Just try not to be obvious. This is a rather critical time, and we don't want her getting the idea that we're spying on her."

"I'll be careful, Aunt Pol." He went outside and began walking around the small island as if he were only stretching his legs. He cast frequent glances at the group on the far shore. The pale, white-gowned Ulgo women were clustered about Ce'Nedra. Her green robe and her flaming red hair stood out in sharp contrast in the midst of the group. A sudden image came into Garion's mind. With her vibrant coloring, Ce'Nedra looked very much like a single crimson rose growing in the midst of a bed of white lilies.

After about a half an hour, Polgara came out of the house. "Garion," she said, "have you seen Errand this morning?"

"No, Aunt Pol."

"He's not in his room." She frowned slightly. "What is that boy thinking of? Go see if you can find him."

"Yes, ma'am," he replied automatically. As he started

across the causeway, he smiled to himself. In spite of all that had happened, he and Aunt Pol always returned to the same relationship they had shared when he was a boy. He was fairly certain that most of the time she did not even remember that he was a king, and so she often sent him on menial errands with no real awareness that they might be beneath his dignity. Moreover, he found that he did not really mind. To fall back into the pattern of immediately obeying her peremptory commands relieved him of the necessity of making difficult decisions and took him back to those days when he was just a simple farm boy with none of the cares and responsibilities that had come to him with the crown of Riva.

Ce'Nedra and her friends were seated on rocks not far from the dim lake shore. Their conversation was subdued, and Ce'Nedra's face was somber again.

"Are you all right?" he asked her as he approached them.

"Yes," she replied. "We were just talking, that's all."

He looked at her, but decided not to say anything more. "Have you seen Errand?" he asked instead.

"No. Isn't he in the house?"

He shook his head. "I think he's gone exploring. Aunt Pol asked me to find him."

One of the young Ulgo women whispered something to Ce'Nedra.

"Saba says that she saw him in the main gallery when she was coming here," Ce'Nedra told him. "It was about an hour ago."

"Which way is that?" he asked.

"Over there." She pointed toward an opening leading back into the rock.

He nodded. "Are you warm enough?" he asked her.

"I'm fine, Garion."

"I'll be back in a bit," he said and walked toward the gallery she had pointed out. It made him uncomfortable to be forced to step around her this way, but the possibility that a chance remark might push her back into that bleak depression made him wary and half-afraid to speak at all. A purely physical ailment was one thing, but an illness of the mind was something horrifying.

The gallery he entered, like all the caves and passageways in which

the Ulgos lived out their lives, was faintly illuminated by the dim glow of phosphorescent rocks. The cubicles on either side of the gallery were scrupulously neat, and he

saw entire families gathered about stone tables for their morning meal, apparently oblivious to the fact that the fronts of their quarters were open to scrutiny by anyone who chanced to pass this way.

Since few of the Ulgos could speak his language, it was impossible for Garion to ask anyone if Errand had passed, and he soon found that he was wandering more or less aimlessly, hoping that he might chance across his friend. At the far end of the gallery, he emerged into the vast cavern where that flight of chiseled stairs led downward toward the dim reaches below.

He considered the possibility that Errand might have gone down to visit his horse, but something seemed to tell him that he should turn instead to follow the broad ledge circling the edge of the chasm. He had gone no more than a few hundred yards when he heard the sound of voices issuing from the mouth of a dark passageway angling back into the rock face. The shifting echoes made it impossible to distinguish individual words, but it seemed to Garion that one of the voices was Errand's. He entered the passageway, following the sound alone.

At first there was no light in the unused gallery, and he put his hand to the rough rock wall to grope his way along; but as he rounded a corner, he saw a light coming from somewhere ahead—a peculiar kind of steady white radiance quite unlike the faint greenish glow of phosphorescence that normally illuminated this dark world of the caves. And then the corridor he was following bent sharply to the left, and he rounded that corner to see Errand talking with a tall, white-robed figure. Garion's eyes widened. The light he had seen was emanating from that figure, and he felt the awesome presence of a transcendent being.

The glowing figure did not turn, but spoke in a calm, quiet voice. "Join us, Belgarion, and welcome."

Garion found that he was actually trembling as he wordlessly obeyed. Then the figure in white turned, and he found himself looking directly into the timeless face of UL himself.

"I have been instructing young Eriond here in the task which lies before him," the Father of the Gods said.

"Eriond?"

"It is his true name, Belgarion. It is time for him to put aside the childish name of his boyhood and to assume his true one. Even as thou wert concealed beneath thy simple

'Garion,1 so hath he lain hidden under that 'Errand.' There is wisdom in this, for the true name of a man with a great task lying before

him can oft times bring danger when its owner hath not yet come into his inheritance."

"It's a good name, don't you think, Belgarion?" Eriond said proudly.

"It's an excellent name, Eriond," Garion agreed. The Orb, standing on the pommel of the great sword sheathed across Garion's back, glowed its blue response to the incandescently white radiance of UL, and the God nodded his acknowledgement of the stone.

"Tasks have been set for each of you," UL continued, "and for the companions who accompany you. All these tasks must be completed ere the meeting between the Child of Light and the Child of Dark may come again."

"Please, Holy UL," Garion said, "can you tell me—is my son all right?"

"He is well, Belgarion. The one who holds him will see to his needs. For the moment he is in no danger."

"Thank you," Garion said gratefully. Then he squared his shoulders. "And what is my task?" he asked.

"Thy task hath already been revealed to thee by the Seer-ess of Kell, Belgarion. Thou must bar the path of Zandramas to the Sardion; for should the Child of Dark reach that dread stone with thy son, the Dark shall prevail in this final meeting."

Garion steeled himself and then blurted his next question, afraid of what the answer might be. "In the Oracles of Ash-aba it says that the Dark God will come again," he said. "Does that mean that Torak will be reborn and that I'm going to have to fight him again?"

"Nay, Belgarion. My son himself will not return. Thy flaming sword reft him of his life, and he is no more. The enemy in this meeting will be more perilous. The spirit which infused Torak hath found another vessel. Torak was maimed and imperfect by reason of his pride. The one who shall rise in his stead—shouldst thou fail in thy task—will be invincible; and not thy sword nor all the swords in all this world will be enough to withstand him."

"Then it's Zandramas that I have to fight," Garion said grimly. "I've got reason enough, that's certain." "The meeting between the Child of Light and the Child

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of Dark shall not be a meeting between thee and Zandramas," UL told him.

"But the Codex says that Zandramas is the Child of Dark," Garion protested.

"At this present time, yes—even as at this present time thou art the Child of Light. That burden, however, shall pass from each of you ere

the final meeting can take place. Know this, moreover. The event which began with the birth of thy son must be completed in a certain time. The tasks which lie before thee and thy companions are many, and all must be completed ere the time appointed for this meeting. Shouldst thou or any of thy companions fail in the completion of any task, then shall all our striving for uncounted ages come to naught. This final meeting between the Child of Light and the Child of Dark must be complete, and all of the necessary conditions must be met, for it is in this meeting that all that was divided shall be made one again. The fate of this world--and of all other worlds--lies in thy hands, Belgarion, and the outcome will not depend upon thy sword but upon a choice which thou must make."

The Father of the Gods looked at the two of them fondly. "Be not afraid, my sons," he told them, "for though you are different in many ways, you share the same spirit. Aid and sustain each other and be comforted in the knowledge that I am with you." Then the glowing figure shimmered and was gone, and the caves of Ulgo resounded with an echo like the aftersound of some unimaginably huge bell.

CHAPTER TWO

A kind of unthinking serenity had come over Garion, a calm resolve much akin to that which he had felt when he had faced Torak in the decaying ruins of the City of Endless Night half a world away. As he thought back on that dreadful night, he began to grope his way toward a startling truth. The maimed God had not been striving for a purely physical victory. He had been trying with all the dreadful force of his will to force them to submit to him, and it had been their steadfast refusal to yield, more than Garion's flaming sword, which had defeated him in the end. Slowly, almost like the onset of dawn, the truth came to Garion. Although evil might seem invincible as it stalked the world in darkness, it nonetheless yearned toward the light, and only in the surrender of the light could the darkness prevail. So long as the Child of Light remained firm and unyielding, he was still invin-

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cible. As he stood in the dark cave listening to the shimmering aftersound of UL's departure, Garion seemed to see directly into the mind of his enemy. Beneath it all, Torak had been afraid, and even now that same fear gnawed at the heart of Zandramas.

And then Garion perceived yet another truth, a truth at once enormously simple and at the same time so profound that the scope of it shook every fiber of his being. There was no such thing as darkness! What seemed so vast and overwhelming was nothing more than the absence of light. So long as the Child of Light kept that firmly in mind, the Child of Dark could never win. Torak had known this; Zandramas knew it; and now at last Garion himself understood it, and the knowledge brought with it a surging exultation.

"It gets easier once you understand, doesn't it?" the young man they

had always called Errand asked quietly.

"You knew what I was thinking, didn't you?"

"Yes. Does that bother you?"

"No. I suppose not." Garion looked around. The gallery in which they stood suddenly seemed very dark now that UL was gone. Garion knew the way back, but the idea which he had just grasped seemed to require some kind of affirmation. He turned his head and spoke directly to the Orb riding on the pommel of his great sword. "Could you give us a bit of light?" he asked it.

The Orb responded by igniting into blue fire and at the same time filling Garion's mind with its crystal song. Garion looked at Eriond. "Shall we go back now? Aunt Pol was sort of worried when she couldn't find you."

As they turned and followed the deserted gallery back along the way they had come, Garion laid his arm affectionately across his young friend's shoulders. For some reason they seemed very close just now.

They emerged from the gallery at the brink of the dim abyss where pale lights dotted the sheer walls and the murmur of a waterfall far below came whispering up to them.

Garion suddenly remembered something that had happened the day before. "What is it about you and water that concerns Aunt Pol so much?" he asked curiously.

Eriond laughed. "Oh, that. When I was little—just after we moved into Poledra's cottage in the Vale—I used to fall into the river fairly often."

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Garion grinned. "That seems like a perfectly natural thing to me."

"It hasn't happened for a long time now, but I think that Polgara feels that maybe I'm saving it up for a special occasion of some sort."

Garion laughed, and they entered the cubicle-lined corridor that led toward the Gorim's cavern. The Ulgos who lived and worked there threw startled glances in their direction as they passed.

"Uh—Belgarion," Eriond said, "the Orb is still glowing."

"Oh," Garion replied, "I'd forgotten about that." He looked back over his shoulder at the cheerfully burning stone. "It's all right now,"

he told it. "You can stop." The Orb's final flicker seemed faintly disappointed. The others were gathered at breakfast in the central room of the Gorim's house. Polgara looked up as the two of them entered. "Where have you—" she began, then stopped as she looked into Eriond's eyes more closely. "Something's happened, hasn't it?" she asked instead.

Eriond nodded. "Yes," he replied. "UL wanted to talk with us. There were some things we needed to know."

Belgarath pushed aside his plate, his face becoming intent. "I think you'd better tell us about this," he said to them. "Take your time and don't skip over anything."

Garion crossed to the table and sat down beside Ce'Nedra. He described the meeting with the Father of the Gods carefully, trying as best he could to repeat UL's exact words. "And then he said that Eriond and I shared the same spirit and that we were supposed to aid and sustain each other," he concluded.

"Was that all he said?" Belgarath asked. "Pretty much, yes."

"Except that he told us he was with us," Eriond added. "He didn't say anything more specific about this certain time when everything has to be completed?" the old man demanded with a slightly worried expression.

Garion shook his head. "No. I'm sorry, Grandfather. I'm afraid not."

Belgarath's expression suddenly became exasperated. "I hate working to a schedule I haven't seen," he muttered. "I can't tell if I'm ahead or behind." Ce'Nedra had been clinging to Garion, her face filled with

both concern and relief. "Are you really sure he said that our baby is all right?" she demanded.

"He said that he is well," Eriond assured her. "He told us that the one who holds him will see to his needs and that for the moment he's in no danger."

"For the moment?" Ce'Nedra exclaimed. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"He didn't get any more specific, Ce'Nedra," Garion said.

"Why didn't you ask UL where he is?"

"Because I'm sure he wouldn't have told me. Finding Geran and Zandramas is my job, and I don't think they're going to let me evade it by getting somebody else to do it for me."

"They? Who are they?"

"The Prophecies—both of them. They're playing a game, and we all have to follow the rules—even if we don't know what they are."

"That's nonsense."

"Go tell them. It wasn't my idea."

Aunt Pol was looking oddly at Eriond. "Have you known?" she asked him. "About your name, I mean?"

"I knew I had another name. When you called me Errand, it didn't seem quite right, for some reason. Do you mind very much, Polgara?"

She rose with a smile, came around the table, and embraced him warmly. "No, Eriond," she told him, "I don't mind at all."

"Just exactly what is the task UL set for you?" Belgarath asked.

"He said that I'd recognize it when I came to it."

"Is that all he said about it?"

"He said that it was very important and that it was going to change me."

Belgarath shook his head. "Why does everything always have to be in riddles?" he complained.

"It's another one of those rules Garion mentioned," Silk told him, refilling his goblet from one of the flagons. "Well, what next, old man?"

Belgarath thought about it, tugging at an earlobe and looking up at one of the faintly glowing lamps. "I think it's fairly safe to say that this meeting was the thing that was supposed to happen here at Prolgu," he said, "so I expect that it's

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time for us to move along. It might not hurt for us to get where we're going a little early, but I'm positive that it's going to be a disaster if we get there late." He rose from his seat and put his hand on the Gorim's frail shoulder. "I'll try to get word to you from time to time," he promised. "Could you ask some of your people to lead us through the caves to Arendia? I want to get out into the open as soon as possible."

"Of course, my old friend," the Gorim replied, "and may UL guide your steps."

"I hope somebody does," Silk murmured.

Belgarath gave him a hard look.

"It's all right, Belgarath," Silk said expansively. "The fact that you get lost at the time doesn't diminish our respect for you in the slightest. I'm sure it's just a bad habit you picked up somewhere—probably because your mind was on weightier matters."

Belgarath looked at Garion. "Did we really have to bring

him along.?"

"Yes, Grandfather, we really did."

It was shortly after sunrise two days later when they reached the irregularly shaped cave mouth that opened out into a birch forest. The white trees lifted their bare limbs toward an intensely blue sky, and fallen leaves covered the ground with a carpet of gold. The Ulgos who had guided them through the caves winced visibly and drew back from the sunlight. They murmured a few words to Belgarath, he thanked them, and then they retreated back into the protective darkness.

"You have absolutely no idea how much better I feel now," Silk said with relief as he emerged from the cave and looked around at the frosty morning sunlight. Here and there back among the trees were patches of frozen snow, crusty and sparkling in the slanting rays of the morning sun; somewhere off to the left, they could hear the rush and babble of a mountain brook tumbling over stones.

"Have you any notion of exactly where we are?" Durnik asked Belgarath as they rode out into the birch trees.

The old man squinted back over his shoulder, gauging the angle of the new-risen sun. "My guess is that we're in the foothills above central Arendia," he replied.

"South of the lower end of the Arendish forest?" Silk asked.

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"That's hard to say for sure."

The little Drasnian looked around. "I'd better take a look," he said. He pointed at a hill rising out of the forest. "I might be able to see something from up there."

"And I think some breakfast might be in order," Polgara said. "Let's find a clear spot and build a fire."

"I won't be too long," Silk said, turning his horse and riding off through the white trunks of the birches.

The rest of them rode on down the slope, the hooves of their horses rustling the deep-piled carpet of golden leaves. Several hundred yards into the forest, they reached a clearing on the banks of the brook they had heard when they had emerged from the cave. Polgara drew in her horse. "This should do," she decided. "Garion, why don't you and Er-iond gather some firewood? I think some bacon and toasted bread might be nice."

"Yes, Aunt Pol," he said automatically, swinging down from his saddle. Eriond joined him, and the two of them went back in among the white trees in search of fallen limbs.

"It's pleasant being back out in the sunlight again," Eriond said as he pulled a large branch out from under a fallen tree. "The caves are

nice enough, I suppose, but I like to be able to look at the sky."

Garion felt very close to this open-faced young man. The experience they had shared in the cave had brought them even closer together and had focused an idea that had hovered on the edge of Garion's awareness for several years now. The fact that both he and Eriond had been raised by Aunt Pol and Durnik had made them in many respects very much like brothers. He considered that as he bundled several large limbs together with a length of rope. He realized at the same time that he knew very little about Eriond and what might have happened to him before they had found him at Rak Cthol. "Eriond," he said curiously, "can you remember anything at all about where you lived before Zedar found you?"

The young man looked up toward the sky, his eyes lost in thought. "It was in a city of some kind, I think," he replied. "I seem to remember streets—and shops."

"Do you remember your mother at all?"

"I don't think so. I don't remember living in any place for very long—or staying with the same people. It seems

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that I just used to go to a door, and people would take me inside and give me something to eat and a place to sleep." Garion felt a sudden sharp pang of sympathy. Eriond was as much—or even more—an orphan as he was himself, "Do you remember the day when Zedar found you?" he asked. Eriond nodded. "Yes," he replied, "quite clearly. It was cloudy, and there weren't any shadows, so I couldn't tell exactly what time of day it was. I met him in a very narrow street—an alley of some kind, I think. I remember that his eyes had a sort of injured look in them—as if something terrible had happened to him." He sighed. "Poor Zedar."

"Did he ever talk to you?"

"Not very often. About all he ever said was that he had an errand for me. He used to talk in his sleep once in a while, though. I remember that he used to say 'Master.' Sometimes when he said it, his voice would be full of love. Other times it was full of fear. It was almost as if he had two entirely different Masters."

"He did. At first he was one of the disciples of Aldur. Then later, his Master was Torak."

"Why do you suppose he did that, Belgarion? Changed Masters, I mean?"

"I don't know, Eriond. I really don't know."

Durnik had built a small fire in the center of the clearing, and

Polgara, humming softly to herself, was setting out her pots and pans beside it. As Garion and Eriond began breaking the branches they had gathered into manageable lengths, Silk rode back down the hill to rejoin them. "You can see quite a way from up there," he reported as he swung down from his saddle. "We're about ten leagues above the high road from Muros."

"Could you see the River Malerin?" Belgarath asked him.

Silk shook his head. "Not the river itself," he replied, "but there's a fairly good-sized valley off to the south. I'd imagine that it runs through there."

"I was fairly close then. How's the terrain look between here and the high road?"

"We've got some rough going ahead of us," Silk told him. "It's steep, and the woods look pretty dense."

"We'll have to make the best time we can. Once we get to the high road, we'll be all right."

Silk made a sour face. "There's another problem, though," he said. "There's a storm coming in from the west."

Durnik lifted his face to sniff at the frosty air and nodded. "Snow," he confirmed. "You can smell it coming."

Silk gave him a disgusted look. "You had to say it, didn't you, Durnik?" he said almost accusingly.

Durnik's look was slightly puzzled.

"Didn't you know that talking about unpleasant things makes them happen?"

"Silk, that's pure nonsense."

The little man sniffed. "I know—but it's true all the same."

The breakfast of bread, dried fruit, and bacon Aunt Pol prepared for them was simple, but there was more than enough to satisfy them all. When they had finished, they repacked, quenched their fire with water from the icy brook, and rode on down the steep slope, following the course of the tumbling stream through the white-trunked birch forest.

Dumik fell in beside the mute Toth as they rode. "Tell me, Toth," he said tentatively, eyeing the frothy white water pitching down over mossy green boulders, "have you ever done any fishing?"

The huge man smiled shyly.

"Well, I've got lines and hooks in one of the packs. Maybe if we get the chance ..." Durnik left it hanging.

Toth's smile broadened into a grin.

Silk stood up in his stirrups and peered on ahead. "That storm isn't much more than a half-hour away," he told them.

Belgarath grunted. "I doubt that we'll make very good time once it hits," he replied.

"I hate snow." Silk shivered glumly.

"That's a peculiar trait in a Drasnian."

"Why do you think I left Drasnia in the first place?"

The heavy bank of cloud loomed in front of them as they continued on down the hill. The morning sunlight paled and then disappeared as the leading edge of the storm raced high overhead to blot out the crisp blue of the autumn sky. "Here it comes," Eriond said cheerfully as the first few flakes began to dance and swirl in the stiff breeze moving up the ridge toward them.

Silk gave the young man a sour look, crammed his battered hat down lower over his ears and pulled his shabby cloak tighter about him. He looked at Belgarath. "I don't suppose

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you'd consider doing something about this?" he asked pointedly.

"It wouldn't be a good idea."

"Sometimes you're a terrible disappointment to me, Bel-garath," Silk said, drawing himself even more deeply into his cloak.

It began to snow harder, and the trees about them became hazy and indistinct in the shifting curtain of white that came seething up through the forest.

A mile or so farther down the hill they left the birch trees and entered a dark green forest of towering firs. The thick evergreens broke the force of the wind, and the snow sifted lazily down through the boughs, lightly dusting the needle-strewn floor of the forest. Belgarath shook the snow out of the folds of his cloak and looked around, choosing a route.

"Lost again?" Silk asked.

"No, not really." The old man looked back at Durnik. "How far down this hill do you think we're going to have to go to get below this?" he asked.

Durnik scratched at his chin. "It's sort of hard to say," he replied. He turned to the mute at his side. "What do you think, Toth?" he asked.

The giant lifted his head and sniffed at the air, then made a series of obscure gestures with one hand.

"You're probably right," Durnik agreed. He turned back to Belgarath. "If the slope stays this steep, we ought to be able to get below the snowline sometime this afternoon—if we keep moving."

"Well, I guess we'd better move along then," Belgarath said and led the way on down the hill at a jolting trot.

It continued to snow. The light dusting on the ground beneath the firs became a covering, and the dimness that had hovered among the dark tree trunks faded as the white snow brought its peculiar, sourceless light.

They stopped about noon and took a quick lunch of bread and cheese, then continued to descend through the forest toward Arendia. By midafternoon, as Durnik and Toth had predicted, the snow was mixed with a chill rain. Soon the few large, wet flakes were gone, and they rode through a steady drizzle that wreathed down among the trees.

Late in the afternoon the wind picked up, and the rain driven before it was cold and unpleasant. Durnik looked around. "I think that it's about time for us to find a place

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to stop for the night," he said. "We'll need shelter from this wind, and finding dry firewood might be a bit of a problem." The huge Toth, whose feet very nearly dragged on the ground on either side of his horse, looked around and then pointed toward a dense thicket of sapling evergreens standing at the far edge of the broad clearing they had just entered. Once again he began to move his hands in those peculiar gestures. Durnik watched him intently for a few moments, then nodded, and the two of them rode on across to the thicket, dismounted, and went to work.

The campsite they constructed was well back among the slender tree trunks of the thicket where the force of the wind was broken and the dense branches shed the rain like a thatched roof. The two of them bent a half circle of the tall saplings over and tied their tips to the trunks of other trees to form a domelike framework of considerable size. Then they covered the frame with tent canvas and tied it in place securely. The resulting structure was a round-topped, open-fronted pavilion perhaps as big as a fair-sized room. At the front, they dug in a firepit and lined it with rocks.

The rain had soaked down the forest, and collecting dry firewood was difficult, but Garion drew upon the experience he had gained during the quest for the Orb to seek out those sheltered hollows under fallen trees, the spots on the leeward sides of large tree trunks and the brush-choked areas under overhanging rocks where dry twigs and branches could be found. By evening he and Eriond had piled up a considerable supply of wood not far from the fire pit where Polgara and Ce'Nedra were preparing supper.

, There was a small spring several hundred yards on down the slope, and Garion slipped and slid downhill with two leather waterbags slung over his shoulders. The light was fading rapidly

under the dark, windswept evergreens, and the ruddy glow of their campfire beckoned cheerfully as he started back up through the trees with the full waterbags hanging pendulously down against his thighs.

Polgara had hung her damp cloak on a tree limb and was humming softly to herself as she and Ce'Nedra worked over the fire.

"Why, thank you, your Majesty," Ce'Nedra said as Gar-ion handed her the waterbags. Her little smile was somehow wistful, as if she were making a conscious effort to be light hearted.

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"It's my pleasure, your Majesty," he replied with a florid bow. "A good scullion can always find water when the cook's helper needs it."

She smiled briefly, kissed his cheek, and then sighed and went back to dicing vegetables for the stew Polgara was stirring.

After they had eaten, they all sat drowsily before the fire, listening to the sound of the wind in the treetops and the seething hiss of the rain in the forest about them.

"How far did we come today?" Ce'Nedra asked in a voice near sleep as she leaned wearily against Garion's shoulder.

"Seven or eight leagues, I'd guess," Durnik replied. "It's slow going when you don't have a road to follow."

"We'll make better time, once we hit the high road from Muros to the Great Fair," Silk added. His eyes brightened at that thought, and his long, pointed nose started to twitch.

"Never mind," Belgarath told him.

"We will need supplies, Belgarath," Silk said, his eyes still bright.

"I think we'll let Durnik take care of that. People who do business with you always seem to develop this sense of outrage once they've had time to think things through."

"But, Belgarath, I thought you said that you were in a hurry."

"I don't quite get the connection."

"People always travel faster when somebody's chasing them—or hadn't you noticed that?"

Belgarath gave him a long, hard look. "Just let it drop, Silk," he said, "Why don't we all get some sleep?" he suggested to the rest of them. "We've got a long day tomorrow."

It was well after midnight when Garion suddenly started into wakefulness. He lay rolled up in his blankets beside Ce'Nedra,

listening to her regular breathing and the soft patter of the rain on the tree limbs. The wind had died, and the fire at the front of their snug shelter had burned down to a few ruddy coals. He shook the last remnants of sleep from his mind, trying to remember what it was that had awakened him.

"Don't make any noise," Belgarath said softly from the far side of the shelter.

"Did something wake you, too, Grandfather?"

"I want you to get out of your blankets very slowly," the

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old man said in a voice so quiet that it scarcely reached Garion's ears, "and get your hands on your sword."

"What is it, Grandfather?"

"Listen!" Belgarath said.

From high overhead in the rainy darkness there came the ponderous flap of vast wings and a sudden flare of sooty red light. The wings flapped again, and then the sound was gone.

"Move, Garion," Belgarath said urgently. "Get your sword—and put something over the Orb so that she can't see the glow from it."

Garion untangled his legs from his blankets and groped in the darkness for Iron-grip's sword.

Again there was the vast flapping sound overhead, and then a strange, hissing cry, accompanied by another flare of that sooty red light.

"What's that?" Ce'Nedra cried out.

"Be still, girl!" Belgarath snapped.

They lay tensely in the darkness as the flapping sound faded off into the rainswept night.

"What's out there, Belgarath?" Silk asked tensely.

"She's a very large beast," the old man replied quietly. "Her eyes aren't very good, and she's as stupid as a stump, but she's very dangerous. She's hunting. Possibly she smells the horses—or us."

"How do you know it's a she?" Durnik asked.

"Because there's only one of them left in the world. She doesn't come out of her cave very often, but over the centuries enough people have caught glimpses of her to give rise to all those legends."

"I'm starting to get a very uneasy feeling about this," Silk murmured.

"She doesn't really look that much like the dragons in all those drawings," Belgarath continued, "but she is big, and she does fly."

"Oh, come now, Belgarath," Durnik scoffed. "There's no such thing as a dragon."

"I'm glad to hear it. Now, why don't you go out and explain that to her?"

"Is she the same creature we heard that night in the mountains above Maragor?" Garion asked.

"Yes. Have you got your sword?"

"Right here, Grandfather."

"Good. Now, very slowly, creep out and smother the last

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of those coals with dirt. Fire attracts her, so let's not take any chances on a sudden flare-up."

Garion inched his way out through the open front of the shelter and hurriedly scooped dirt over the fire pit with his hands.

"Is it really a flying lizard?" Silk whispered hoarsely. "No," Belgarath replied, "actually she's a species of bird. She has a long, snakelike tail, and what she's covered with looks more like scales than feathers. She also has teeth—lots of very long, sharp teeth." "Just exactly how big is she?" Durnik asked. "You remember Faldor's barn?" "Yes."

"About that big,"

From quite some distance off there came another screeching bellow and the murky red flare.

"Her fire isn't really all that serious," Belgarath continued in the same low voice, "particularly since these woods are so wet. It's when she catches you in dry grass that it starts to be a problem. She's big, but she's not very brave—and on the ground she's as clumsy as a pig on a frozen pond. If it gets down to a fight, we probably won't be able to hurt her very much. About the best we can hope for is to frighten her off."

"Fight?" Silk choked. "You're not serious." "We may not have any choice. If she's hungry and picks up our scent or the scent of the horses, she'll tear these woods apart looking for us. She has a few sensitive spots. Her tail is probably the best. Her wings get in the way, so she can't see behind her too well, and when she's on the

ground, she can't turn very fast."

"Let's see if I've got this straight," Silk said. "You want us to sneak up behind this dragon and hit it on the tail, is that it?"

"Approximately, yes."

"Belgarath, have you lost your mind? Why not just use sorcery to drive it away?"

"Because she's immune to sorcery," Polgara explained calmly. "It was one of the little refinements Torak added when he and the other Gods created her species. He was so impressed with the concept of a dragon that he chose it as his totem creature. He tried in every way he could to make it invincible."

"It was one of his character defects," Belgarath added sourly. "All right, the dragon is clumsy and stupid and she's not used to pain. If we're careful, we can probably frighten her away without anyone getting hurt."

"She's coming back," Eriond said.

They listened as the flapping of those huge wings reverberated again through the sodden forest.

"Let's get out into the open," Belgarath said tensely.

"That's a good idea," Silk agreed. "If I have to do this, I want lots of level running room around me."

"Ce'Nedra," Polgara said, "I want you to get as far back into this thicket as you can. Find a place to hide."

"Yes, Lady Polgara," Ce'Nedra replied in a frightened little voice.

They crept out of the shelter into the darkness. The rain had slackened to a kind of misty drizzle wreathing down among the trees. Their horses, picketed not far away, snorted nervously, and Garion could smell the sharp odor of their fear over the resinous scent of wet evergreens.

"All right," Belgarath whispered. "Spread out—and be careful. Don't try to attack her unless you're sure that her attention is someplace else."

They crept out of the thicket into the broad clearing and started across. Garion, sword in hand, moved carefully, feeling for obstructions with his feet. When he reached the far side, he located a large tree trunk and went around behind it.

They waited tensely, straining their eyes toward the rainswept night sky.

The heavy flapping of great wings reverberated down among the trees, and once again they heard that vast bellow. Even as the sound crashed down on them, Garion saw the huge billow of smoky flame in the sky overhead and, outlined by that flame, the shape of the dragon

herself. She was even bigger than he had imagined. Her wings might easily have shaded an acre. Her cruel beak was agape, and he could clearly see her pointed teeth with the flames writhing about them. She had a very long, snakelike neck, huge talons, and a long, reptilian tail that lashed at the air behind her as she plunged down toward the clearing.

Then Eriond stepped out from behind a tree trunk and walked out into the center of the clearing as calmly as if he were merely taking a midmorning stroll.

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"Eriond!" Polgara cried as, with a triumphant shriek, the dragon swooped down into the clearing. Talons extended, she struck at the unprotected young man. Her beak gaped, and vast billows of sooty orange flame poured forth to engulf him. With fear for the boy clutching at his heart, Garion ran forward with his sword aloft; but even as he ran at the huge beast, he felt the sudden familiar surge of Aunt Pol's will, and Eriond vanished as she translocated him to safety.

The earth shook as the dragon struck the ground, and her vast roar of frustration filled the clearing with the ruddy light of her fire. She was enormous. Her half-folded, scaly-looking wings reared above her higher than any house. Her lashing tail was thicker than the body of a horse, and her curved, tooth-studded beak was dreadful. A sickening stench filled the clearing each time she belched forth her billows of flame. By the light of her fire, Garion could clearly see her slitted yellow eyes. From what Belgarath had said, he expected a look of dull stupidity, but the burning eyes that searched the clearing were alert and filled with an intense, frightening eagerness.

Then Durnik and Toth were upon her. They dashed from the shelter of the trees, Durnik with his axe and Toth with the smith's sharp-bladed spade, and methodically they began to chop at the dragon's writhing tail. She shrieked, belching flame into the air, and began to claw at the sodden forest loam with her talons.

"Look out!" Silk shouted. "She's turning!"

The dragon whirled awkwardly, her wings beating at the air and her talons throwing up huge clots of earth, but Durnik and Toth had already run back into the shelter of the trees. As she swept the clearing with her burning eyes, Silk nimbly darted out behind her with his short, broad-bladed Drasnian sword in his hand. Again and again he drove it into the base of her huge tail. Then, as she floundered around to meet his attack, he danced clear to regain the safety of the surrounding forest.

And then Eriond stepped into the clearing again. Without any sign of fear but with a grave expression on his face, he walked out of the trees and moved directly toward the raging beast. "Why are you doing this?" he asked her calmly. "You know that this isn't the time or place."

The dragon almost seemed to flinch back at the sound of his voice, and her burning eyes grew wary.

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"You can't avoid what's going to happen," he continued seriously. "None of us can—and you can't change it with this kind of foolishness. You'd better go. We really don't want to have to hurt you."

The dragon faltered, and Garion suddenly sensed that she was not only baffled, but that she was also afraid. Then she seemed to clench herself. With an enraged bellow, she sent out a vast sheet of flame from her gaping beak to engulf Eriond, who made no effort to escape.

Every nerve in Garion's body shrieked at him to run to his young friend's aid, but he found that he could not move so much as a muscle. He stood, sword in hand, locked in a kind of helpless stasis.

As the billow of flame subsided, Eriond emerged from it unscathed and with an expression of regretful firmness on his face. "I'd hoped that we wouldn't have to do this," he said to the dragon, "but you aren't giving us too much choice, you know." He sighed. "All right, Belgarion," he said, "make her go away—but please try not to hurt her too much."

With a kind of surging exultation, as if those words had somehow released him from all restraint, Garion ran directly up behind the dragon with his suddenly blazing sword and began to rain blows on her unprotected back and tail. The awful reek of burning flesh filled the clearing, and the dragon shrieked in pain. She flailed her huge tail in agony, and it was more to protect himself from that ponderous lashing than out of any conscious effort to injure the beast that Garion swung a massive blow with Iron-grip's sword. The sharp edge sheared effortlessly through scale and flesh and bone, smoothly lopping off about four feet of the writhing tip of the tail.

The shriek which thundered from the dragon's beak was shattering, and her fire boiled skyward in a huge cloud. A great jet of streaming blood spurted from the wound the sword had left, splashing into Garion's face and momentarily blinding him.

"Garion!" Polgara shouted. "Look out!"

He clawed at his eyes to clear away the hot blood. With terrifying agility, the dragon whirled, her talons tearing at the earth and her wings thundering. The Orb exploded into intense fire, and its blue flame ran anew up the sword, hissing and smoking as it burned away the thick blood which be-

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smeared the blade. In the very act of striking at him with her beak, the dragon flinched back from the incandescence of the burning sword. Garion raised his blade, and once again the dragon flinched, retreating step by step across the wet clearing.

She was afraid! For some reason, the blue fire of the sword frightened her! Shrieking and trying desperately to defend herself with furnacelike gusts of fire, she backed away, her wounded tail still spraying the clearing with blood. There was clearly something about the fire of the Orb which she found unbearable. Once again filled with that wild surge of excitement, Garion raised his sword, and a searing pillar of fire erupted from its tip. He began to lash at the dragon with that whip of flame and heard the crackling sizzle as it seared her wings and shoulders. Fiercely he flogged her with the flame of his sword until, with a howl of agony, she turned and fled, tearing the earth with her talons and desperately flapping the huge sails of her wings.

Ponderously, she hurled herself into the air and clawed at the night with her wings, struggling to lift her vast bulk. She crashed through the upper branches of the firs at the edge of the clearing, fighting in panic to rise above the forest until she was clear. Shrieking, she flew off toward the southwest, filling the murky air with seething clouds of fire and streaming blood behind her as she went.

A stunned silence fell over them all as they looked up at the great beast fleeing through the rainy sky.

Polgara, her face dreadfully pale, came out from under the trees to confront Eriond. "Just exactly what were you thinking of?" she asked him in a terribly quiet voice.

"I don't quite follow you, Polgara," he replied, looking puzzled.

She controlled herself with an obvious effort. "Doesn't the word 'danger' have any meaning to you at all?"

"You mean the dragon? Oh, she wasn't really all that dangerous."

"She did sort of bury you up to the eyebrows in fire, Eriond," Silk pointed out.

"Oh, that," Eriond smiled. "But the fire wasn't real." He looked around at the rest of them. "Didn't you all know that?" he asked, looking slightly surprised. "It was only an illusion. That's all that evil ever really is—an illusion. I'm

sorry if any of you were worried, but I didn't have time to explain."

Aunt Pol stared at the unperturbed young man for a moment, then turned her eyes on Garion, who stood still holding his burning sword. "And you—you—" Words somehow failed her. Slowly she sank her face into her trembling hands. "Two of them,1' she said in a terrible voice. "Two of them! I don't think I can stand this—not two of them."

Durnik looked at her gravely, then handed his axe to the giant Toth.

He stepped over and put his arm about her shoulders. "There, there," he said. For a moment she seemed to resist, but then she suddenly buried her face in his shoulder. "Come along now, Pol," he said soothingly and gently turned her around to walk her back to their shelter. "Things won't seem nearly so bad in the morning."

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CHAPTER THREE

Garion slept very little during the remainder of that rainy night. His pulse still raced with excitement, and he lay under his blankets beside Ce'Nedra, living and reliving his encounter with the dragon. It was only toward the tag end of the night that he became calm enough to consider an idea that had come to him in the midst of the fight. He had enjoyed it. He had actually enjoyed a struggle that should have terrified him; the more he thought about it, the more he realized that this was not the first time that this had happened. As far back as his early childhood, this same wild excitement had filled him each time he had been in danger.

The solid good sense of his Sendarian upbringing told him that this enthusiasm for conflict and peril was probably an unhealthy outgrowth of his Alorn heritage and that he should strive to keep it rigidly controlled, but deep inside he knew

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that he would not. He had finally found the answer to the plaintive "Why me?" which he had voiced so often in the past. He was inevitably chosen for these dreadful, frightening tasks because he was perfectly suited for them.

"It's what I do," he muttered to himself. "Any time there's something so ridiculously dangerous that no rational human being would even consider trying it, they send for me."

"What was that, Garion?" Ce'Nedra murmured drowsily.

"Nothing, dear," he replied. "I was just thinking out loud. Go back to sleep."

"Ummm," she murmured and snuggled closer to him, filling his nostrils with the warm fragrance of her hair.

Dawn crept slowly under the overspreading limbs of the sodden forest with a kind of growing paleness. The persistent drizzle joined with a morning mist rising from the forest floor to form a kind of damp, gray cloud enveloping the dark trunks of fir and spruce.

Garion awoke from a half doze and saw the shadowy forms of Durnik and Toth standing quietly beside the cold fire pit at the front of the shelter. He slipped out from under the blankets, moving carefully to avoid waking his sleeping wife, and pulled on his clammy boots. Then he stood up, pulled on his cloak, and moved out from under the tent canvas to join them.

He looked up toward the gloomy morning sky. "Still raining, I see," he noted in that quiet tone people use when they rise before the sun.

Durnik nodded. "At this time of year it probably won't blow over for a week or so." He opened the leather pouch at his hip and took out his wad of tinder. "I suppose we'd better get a fire going," he said.

Toth, huge and silent, went over to the side of their shelter, picked up two leather water bags and started down the steep slope toward the spring. Despite his enormous size, he made almost no sound as he moved through the fog-shrouded bushes.

Durnik knelt by the fire pit and carefully heaped dry twigs in the center. Then he laid his ball of tinder beside the twigs and took out his flint and steel.

"Is Aunt Pol still asleep?" Garion asked him.

"Dozing. She says that it's very pleasant to lie in a warm

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bed while somebody else builds up the fire." Durnik smiled gently.

Garion also smiled. "That's probably because for all those years she was usually the first one up." He paused. "Is she still unhappy about last night?" he asked.

"Oh," Durnik said, bending over the pit and striking at his flint with his steel, "I think she's regained her composure a bit." His flint and steel made a subdued clicking sound; with each click a shower of bright, lingering sparks spilled down into the pit. One of them fell glowing onto the tinder, and the smith gently blew on it until a tiny tongue of orange flame rose from the center. Then he carefully moved the tinder under the twigs, and the flame grew and spread with a dry crackling. "There we are," he said, brushing the fire from the tinder and returning it to his pouch along with his flint and steel.

Garion knelt beside him and began snapping a dry branch into short lengths.

"You were very brave last night, Garion," Durnik said as the two of them fed the small fire.

"I think the word is insane," Garion replied wryly. "Would anybody in his right mind try to do something like that? I think the trouble is that I'm usually right in the middle of those things before I give any thought to how dangerous they are. Sometimes I wonder if Grandfather wasn't right. Maybe Aunt Pol did drop me on my head when I was a baby."

Durnik chuckled softly. "I sort of doubt it," he said. "She's very careful with children and other breakable things."

They added more branches to the fire until they had a cheerful blaze going, and then Garion stood up. The firelight reflected back from the fog with a soft, ruddy glow that had about it a kind of hazy unreality, as if, all unaware, they had inadvertently crossed the boundaries of the real world sometime during the night and entered the realms of magic and enchantment.

As Toth came back up from the spring with the two dripping waterbags, Polgara emerged from their shelter, brushing her long, dark hair. For some reason the single white lock above her left brow seemed almost incandescent this morning. "It's a very nice fire, dear," she said, kissing her hus-

band. Then she looked at Garion. "Are you all right?" she asked him.

"What? Oh, yes. I'm fine."

"No cuts or bruises or singses you might have overlooked last night?"

"No. I seem to have gotten through it without a scratch." He hesitated. "Were you really upset last night, Aunt Pol- with Eriond and me, I mean?"

"Yes, Garion, I really was-but that was last night. What would you like for breakfast this morning?"

Some time later, as the pale dawn crept steadily under the trees, Silk stood shivering on one side of the fire pit with his hands stretched out to the flames and his eyes suspiciously . fixed on the bubbling pot Aunt Pol had set on a flat rock at the very edge of the fire. "Gruel?" he asked. "Again?"

"Hot porridge," Aunt Pol corrected, stirring the contents of the pot with a long-handled wooden spoon.

"They're the same thing, Polgara."

"Not really. Gruel is thinner."

"Thick or thin, it's all the same."

She looked at him with one raised eyebrow. "Tell me, Prince Kheldar, why are you always so disagreeable in the morning?"

"Because I detest mornings. The only reason there's such a thing as morning in the first place is to keep night and afternoon from bumping into each other."

"Perhaps one of my tonics might sweeten your blood."

His eyes grew wary. "Ah--no. Thanks all the same, Pol--. gara. Now that I'm all the way awake, I feel much better."

"I'm so glad for you. Now, do you suppose you could ;. move away a bit? I'm going to need that side of the fire for the bacon."

"Anything you say." And he turned and went quickly back into the shelter.

Belgarath, who was lounging on top of his blankets, looked at the little man with an amused expression. "For a supposedly intelligent man, you do have a tendency to blunder from time to time, don't you?" he asked. "You should have learned by now not to bother Pol when she's cooking."

*: Silk grunted and picked up his moth-eaten fur cape. "I think I'll go check the horses," he said. "Do you want to ; come along?"

Belgarath cast an appraising eye at Polgaral's dwindling

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supply of firewood. "That might not be a bad idea," he agreed, rising to his feet.

'Til go with you," Garion said. "I've got a few kinks I'd like to work out. I think I slept on a stump last night." He slung the loop of his sword belt across one shoulder and followed the other two out of the shelter.

"It's sort of hard to believe that it really happened, isn't it?" Silk murmured when they reached the clearing. "The dragon, I mean. Now that it's daylight, everything looks so prosaic."

"Not quite," Garion said, pointing at the scaly chunk of the dragon's tail lying on the far edge of the clearing. The tip end of it was still twitching slightly.

Silk nodded. "That is the sort of thing you wouldn't ordinarily run across on a casual morning stroll." He looked at Belgarath. "Is she likely to bother us again?" he asked. "This is going to be a very nervous journey if we have to keep looking back over our shoulders every step of the way. Is she at all vindictive?"

"How do you mean?" the old man asked him.

"Well, Garion did kind of cut her tail off, after all. Do you think she might take it personally?"

"Not usually," Belgarath replied. "She doesn't really have that much in the way of a brain." He frowned thoughtfully. "What bothers me is that there was something about the whole encounter that was all wrong."

"Even the idea of it was wrong," Silk shuddered.

Belgarath shook his head. "That's not what I mean. I can't be sure if I imagined it or not, but she seemed to be looking specifically for one of us."

"Eriond?" Garion suggested.

"It sort of seemed that way, didn't it? But when she found him, she looked almost as if he frightened her. And what did he mean by those peculiar things he said to her?"

"Who knows?" Silk shrugged. "He's always been a strange boy. I don't think he lives in the same world with the rest of us."

"But why was the dragon so afraid of Garion's sword?"

"That sword frightens whole armies, Belgarath. The fire alone is pretty terrifying."

"She likes fire, Silk. I've seen her try to be coy and seductive for the benefit of a burning barn, and one time she flew around for a week making calves' eyes at a forest fire."

"There's something about last night that keeps nagging at me."

Eriond came out of the thicket where the horses were picketed, walking carefully around the dripping bushes.

"Are they all right?" Garion asked.

"The horses? They're fine, Belgarion. Is breakfast almost ready?"

"If that's what you want to call it," Silk replied sourly.

"Polgara's really a very good cook, Kheldar," Eriond assured him earnestly.

"Not even the best cook in the world can do very much with porridge."

Eriond's eyes brightened. "She's making porridge? I love porridge."

Silk gave him a long look, then turned sadly to Garion. "You see how easily the young are corrupted?" he observed. "Just give them the faintest hint of a wholesome upbringing, and they're lost forever." He squared his shoulders. "All right," he said grimly, "let's go get it over with."

After breakfast, they broke down their night's encampment and set out

through the soft drizzle falling from the weeping sky. It was about noon when they reached a wide swath of cleared land, a stretch of bushy, stump-dotted ground perhaps a quarter of a mile wide, and in the center of that swath lay a wide, muddy road.

"The high road from Muros," Silk said with some satisfaction.

"Why did they cut down all the trees?" Eriond asked him.

"They used to have trouble with robbers lying in ambush right beside the road. The cleared space on each side gives travelers a sporting chance to get away."

They rode out from under the dripping trees and across the weed-grown clearing to the muddy road. "Now we should be able to make better time," Belgarath said, nudging his horse into a trot.

They followed the road south for several hours, moving at a steady canter. As they rode down out of the forested foothills, the trees gave way to roiling grasslands. They crested a hilltop and reined in to give their steaming mounts a brief rest. Somewhat to the northwest they saw the dark border of the great Arendish forest, hazy in the misty drizzle, and not far ahead the grim, gray-walled pile of Mimbrate castle brooding down on the grasslands lying below.

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Ce'Nedra sighed as she stared out over the sodden plain and at the fortress that seemed to hold in its very stones all the stiff-necked, wary suspicion that was at the core of Arendish society.

"Are you all right?" Garion asked her, fearful that her sigh might signify a return to that bleak melancholy which she had so recently shaken off.

"There's something so mournful about Arendia," she replied. "All those thousands of years of hatred and grief, and what did they prove? Even that castle seems to be weeping."

"That's just the rain, Ce'Nedra," he said carefully.

"No," she sighed again. "It's more than that."

The road from Muros was a muddy yellow scar, stretching between fields of browned, drooping grasses as it wound down to the Arendish plain, and for the next several days they rode past great, rearing Mimbrate castles and through dirty thatch and wattle villages where acrid wood smoke hung in the chill air like a miasma and the hopeless expressions on the faces of the ragged serfs bespoke lives lived out in misery and despair. They stopped each night in mean, shabby wayside inns reeking of spoiled food and unwashed bodies.

On the fourth day, they crested a hill and looked down at the garish sprawl of the Great Arendish Fair, standing at the junction of the high road from Muros and the Great West Road. The tents and pavilions spread for a league or more in every direction in a gaudy profusion of blue and red and yellow beneath a weeping gray sky, and pack-trains going to and from that great commercial center crawled across the plain like streams of ants.

Silk pushed his shabby hat back from his face. "Maybe I'd better go down and take a quick look around before we all ride in," he said. "We've been out of touch for a while, and it might not hurt to get the feel of things."

"All right," Belgarath agreed, "but no chicanery."

"Chicanery?"

"You know what I mean, Silk. Keep your instincts under control."

"Trust me, Belgarath."

"Not if I can help it."

Silk laughed and thumped his heels to his horse's flanks.

The rest of them rode at a walk down the long slope as Silk galloped on ahead toward that perpetually temporary

tent-city standing in its sea of mud. As they approached the fair, Garion could hear a cacophonous tumult filling the air— a sort of bawling clamor of thousands of voices shouting all at once. There was also a myriad of scents—of spices and cooking food, of rare perfumes, and of horse corrals.

Belgarath drew in his mount. "Let's wait here for Silk," he said. "I don't want to blunder into anything."

They sat their horses to one side of the road in the chill rain, watching the slow crawl of pack trains slipping and sliding up the muddy road toward them.

About three-quarters of an hour later, Silk came pounding back up the hill. "I think we might want to approach carefully," he said, his pointed face serious.

"What's the matter?" Belgarath asked.

"I ran into Delvor," Silk replied, "and he told me that there's an Angarak merchant who's been asking questions about us."

"Maybe we should just bypass the fair, then," Durnik suggested.

Silk shook his head. "I think we ought to find out a little bit more about this curious Angarak. Delvor's offered to put us up in his tents for a day or so, but it might not be a bad idea if we circle the fair and come in from the south. We can join one of the caravans coming up from Tol Honeth. That way we won't be quite so obvious."

Belgarath considered it, squinting up at the rainy sky. "All right," he decided. "I don't want to waste too much time, but I don't like the idea of someone following us, either. Let's go see what Delvor can tell us."

They rode in a wide half circle through the rain-drenched grass and reached the muddy track of the Great West Road a mile or so south of the fair. A half-dozen Tolnedran merchants wrapped in rich fur cloaks rode at the head of a string of creaking wagons, and Garion and his friends unobtrusively fell in at the tail end of their column as the gradual darkening of the sky announced the approach of a dreary, rain-swept evening.

The narrow lanes lying between the tents and pavilions seethed with merchants from all parts of the world. The soupy mud was ankle-deep, churned by the hooves of hundreds of horses and the feet of brightly dressed men of trade, who bawled and shouted and haggled with each other, ignoring the mud and rain. Torches and lanterns hung at the

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sides of open-fronted booths made of canvas, where treasures of incalculable worth stood in curious proximity to brass pots and cheap tin plates.

"It's this way," Silk said, turning into a side lane. "Del-vor's tents are a few hundred yards on up ahead."

"Who's Deivor?" Ce'Nedra asked Garion as they rode past a noisy tavern pavilion.

"A friend of Silk's. We met him the last time we were here. I think he's a member of Drasnian Intelligence."

She sniffed. "Aren't ail Drasnians members of the intelligence service?"

He grinned. "Probably," he agreed.

Deivor was waiting for them in front of his blue and white striped pavilion. Silk's friend had changed very little in the years since Garion had last seen him. He was as bald as an egg, and his expression was still as shrewd and cynical as it had been before. He wore a fur-trimmed cloak pulled tightly about his shoulders, and his bald head gleamed wetly in the rain. "My servants will care for your horses," he told them as they dismounted. "Let's get in out of sight before too many people see you."

They followed him into his warm, well-lighted pavilion, and he carefully tied down the tent flap behind them. The pavilion was very nearly as comfortable-looking as a well-appointed house. There were chairs and divans and a large, polished table set with a splendid supper. The floors and walls were carpeted in blue, oil lamps hung on chains from the ceiling, and in each corner there was an iron brazier filled with glowing coals. Delvor's servants all wore sober livery and they wordlessly took the dripping cloaks from Garion and his friends and carried them through a canvas partition to an adjoining tent.

"Please," Deivor said politely, "seat yourselves. I took the liberty of having a bit of supper prepared."

Silk looked around as they all sat down at the table. "Opulent," he noted.

Deivor shrugged. "A little planning—and quite a bit of money. A tent doesn't have to be uncomfortable."

"And it's portable," Silk added. "If one has to leave someplace in a hurry, a tent can be folded up and taken along. That's hard to do with a house."

"There's that, too," Deivor admitted blandly. "Please

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eat, my friends. I know the kind of accommodations—and meals—that are offered in the inns here in Arendia."

The supper that had been set for them was as fine as one that might have come to the table of a nobleman. A heap of smoking chops lay on a silver platter, and there were boiled onions and peas and carrots swimming in a delicate cheese sauce. The bread was of the finest white, still steaming hot from the oven, and there was a wide selection of excellent wines.

"Your cook appears to be a man of some talent, Deivor," Polgara noted.

"Thank you, my Lady," he replied. "He costs me a few dozen extra crowns a year and he's got a foul temper, but I think he's worth the expense and aggravation."

"What's this about a curious Angarak merchant?" Bel-garath asked, helping himself to a couple of the chops.

"He rode into the fair a few days ago with a half-dozen servants, but no pack horses or wagons. Their horses looked hard-ridden, as if he and his men had come here in a hurry. Since he arrived, he hasn't done any business at all. He and his people have spent all their time asking questions."

"Are they specifically asking for us?"

"Not by name, Ancient One, but the way they've been describing you didn't leave much doubt. He's been offering money for information—quite a bit of money."

"What kind of Angarak is he?"

"He claims to be a Nadrak, but if he's a Nadrak, I'm a Thull. I think he's a Mailorean. He's about medium height and build, clean-shaven and soberly dressed. About the only tiling unusual about him is his eyes. They seem to be com-pletety white—except for the pupils.

There's no color to them at all."

Aunt Pol raised her head quickly. "Blind?" she asked.

"Blind? No, I don't think so. He seems to be able to see where he's going. Why do you ask, my Lady?"

"What you just described is the result of a very rare condition," she replied. "Most of the people who suffer from it are Wind."

"If we're going to ride out of here without having him about ten minutes behind us, we're going to need some kind of distraction to delay him," Silk said, toying with a crystal goblet. He looked at his friend. "I don't suppose you still

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have any of those lead coins you hid in that Murgo tent the last time we were here, do you?"

"I'm afraid not, Silk. I had to go through customs at the Tolnedran border a few months ago. I didn't think it would be wise to have the customs people find that kind of thing in my packs, so I buried them under a tree."

"Lead coins?" Ce'Nedra said with a puzzled look. "What could you possibly buy with coins made of lead?"

"They're gilded, your Majesty," Delvor told her. "They look exactly like Tolnedran gold crowns."

Ce'Nedra's face suddenly went pale. "That's horrible!" she gasped.

Delvor's face mirrored his puzzlement at the vehemence of her reaction.

"Her Majesty is a Tolnedran, Delvor," Silk reminded him, "and counterfeit money strikes at the very core of a Tolnedran's being. I think it has something to do with their religion."

"I don't find that particularly amusing, Prince Kheldar," Ce'Nedra said tartly.

After supper they talked for a while longer, the comfortable talk of people who are warm and well-fed, and then Delvor led them into an adjoining tent that had been partitioned off into sleeping chambers. Garion fell asleep almost as soon as his head touched the pillow and he awoke the following morning feeling more refreshed than he had in weeks. He dressed quietly to avoid waking Ce'Nedra and went out into the main pavilion.

Silk and Delvor sat at the table talking quietly. "There's a great deal of ferment going on here in Arendia," Delvor was saying. "The news of the campaign against the Bear-cult in the Alorn kingdoms has stirred the blood of all the young hotheads—both Mimbrate and Asturian. The thought of a fight someplace that they weren't invited

to attend fills young Arends with anguish."

"There's nothing new about that," Silk said. "Good morning, Garion."

"Gentlemen," Garion said politely, pulling up a chair.

"Your Majesty," Delvor greeted him. Then he turned back to Silk. "The thing that concerns everybody more than the casual belligerence of the young nobles, though, is the unrest that's arisen among the serfs."

Garion remembered the miserable hovels in the villages

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they had passed in the last few days and the hopeless looks on the faces of their inhabitants. "They have reason enough for discontent, don't you think?" he said.

"I'd be the first to agree, your Majesty," Delvor said, "and it's not the first time it's happened. This time, though, it's a little more serious. The authorities have been finding caches of weapons—fairly sophisticated ones. A serf with a pitchfork isn't much of a match for an armored Mimbrate knight. A serf with a crossbow, however, is an altogether different matter. There have been several incidents—and some reprisals."

"How could serfs get those kinds of weapons?" Garion asked him. "Most of the time they don't even have enough to eat. How could they possibly afford to buy crossbows?"

"They're coming in from outside the country," Delvor told him. "We haven't been able to pinpoint the source yet, but it's fairly obvious that somebody wants to make sure that the Arendish nobility is too busy at home to get involved in anything anyplace else."

"Kal Zakath, perhaps?" Silk suggested.

"It's entirely possible," Delvor agreed. "There's no question that the emperor of Malloreia has global ambitions, and turmoil in the Kingdoms of the West would be his best ally if he decides to turn his armies northward after he finally kills King Urgit."

Garion groaned. "That's all I need," he said, "one more thing to worry about."

When the others joined them in the main pavilion, Delvor's servants brought in a huge breakfast. There were whole platters of eggs, heaps of bacon and sausage, and plate after plate of fruit and rich pastries.

"Now this is what I call a breakfast," Silk said enthusiastically.

Polgara gave him a cool look. "Go ahead and say it, Prince Kheldar," she said. "I'm sure that you have all sorts of interesting observations to make."

"Would / say anything about that excellent gruel you offer us every morning, dear lady?" he asked with exaggerated innocence.

"Not if you're at all concerned about your health, you wouldn't," Ce'Nedra said sweetly.

One of the servants entered the tent with an offended expression on his face. "There's an obnoxious, filthy hunch-

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back outside, Delvor," he reported. "He has the foulest mouth I've ever run across and he's demanding to be let in. Do you want us to chase him off?"

"Oh, that would be Uncle Beldin," Polgara said.

"You know him?" Delvor seemed surprised.

"I've known him since I was a baby," she replied. "He's not really as bad as he seems—once you get used to him." She frowned slightly. "You probably ought to let him come in," she advised. "He can be terribly unpleasant when people irritate him."

"Belgarath," Beldin growled, roughly pushing his way past the protesting servant, "is this all the farther you've come? I thought you'd be in Tol Honeth by now."

"We had to stop at Prolgu to see the Gorim," Belgarath replied mildly.

"This isn't a grand tour, you blockhead," Beldin snapped irritably. The little hunchback was as filthy as ever. The wet rags he wore for clothes were tied to his body here and there with lengths of rotten twine. His hair was matted and had twigs and bits of straw clinging to it. His hideous face was as black as a thundercloud as he stumped to the table on his short, gnarled legs and helped himself to a bit of sausage.

"Please try to be civil, uncle," Aunt Pol said.

"Why?" He pointed at a small pot standing on the table. "What's in that?"

"Jam," Delvor replied, looking slightly intimidated.

"Interesting," Beldin said. He dipped one dirty hand into the pot and began feeding gobs of jam into his mouth. "Not bad," he said, licking his fingers.

"There's bread right there, uncle," Aunt Pol said pointedly.

"I don't like bread," he grunted, wiping his hand on his clothes.

"Did you manage to catch up with Harakan?" Belgarath asked him.

Beldin retorted with a number of expletives that made Ce'Nedra's face blanch. "He gave me the slip again. I don't have the time to waste chasing him, so I'll have to forgo the pleasure of splitting him up the middle." He dipped his hand into the jam pot again.

"If we run across him, we'll take care of it for you," Silk offered.

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"He's a sorcerer, Kheldar. If you get in his way, he'll hang your guts on a fence."

"I was going to let Garion do it."

Beldin set down the empty jam pot and belched.

"Can I offer you anything else?" Delvor asked him.

"No, thanks all the same, but I'm full now." He turned back to Belgarath. "Were you planning to get as far as Tol Honeth before summer?"

"We're not really that far behind, Beldin," Belgarath protested.

Beldin made an indelicate sound. "Keep your eyes open on the way south," he advised. "There's a Mallorean who's been asking questions about you and the others. He's been hiring people all up and down the Great West Road."

Belgarath looked at him sharply. "Could you get any kind of name?"

"He uses several. The one that crops up most often is Naradas."

"Have you got any idea of what he looks like?" Silk asked.

"About all I've been able to pick up is the fact that he's got funny eyes. From what I've been told, they're all white."

"Well," Delvor said, "well, well, well."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Beldin asked him.

"The man with white eyes is right here in the fair. He's been asking questions here, too."

"That makes it fairly easy, then. Have somebody go run a knife into his back."

Belgarath shook his head. "The legionnaires who police the fair get excited when unexplained bodies start showing up," he said.

Beldin shrugged. "Rap him on the head with something, then drag him a few miles out onto the plain. Cut his throat and dump him in a hole. He probably won't sprout until spring." He looked over at Polgara with a sly grin creasing his ugly face. "If you keep nibbling on that

pastry, girl, you're going to spread. You're chubby enough already."

"Chubby?"

"That's all right, Pol. Some men like girls with fat bottoms."

"Why don't you wipe the jam out of your beard, uncle?"

"I'm saving it for lunch." He scratched one armpit.

"Lice again?" she asked coolly.

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"It's always possible. I don't mind a few lice, though. They're better company than most people I know."

"Where are you going now?" Belgarath asked him.

"Back to Mallorea. I want to root around in Darshiva for a while and see what I can dig up about Zandramas."

Delvor had been looking at the grimy little man with a speculative squint. "Were you planning to leave immediately, Master Beldin?" he asked.

"Why?"

"I'd like a word with you in private, if you've got a few moments."

"Secrets, Delvor?" Silk asked.

"Not really, old boy. I've got a sort of an idea, but I'd like to get it a bit more developed before I tell you about it." He turned back to the hunchback. "Why don't we take a little stroll, Master Beldin? I have a notion that might appeal to you, and it really won't take very long."

Beldin's look was curious. "All right," he agreed, and the two of them went outside into the drizzling morning.

"What was that all about?" Garion asked Silk.

"It's an irritating habit Delvor picked up at the Academy. He likes to pull off clever ploys without any advance warning. That way he can sit around afterward and bask in everyone's stunned admiration." The little man looked at the table. "I believe I'll have just a bit more of that sausage," he said, "and maybe a few more eggs. It's a long way to Tol Honeth, and I'd like to put in a buffer against all that gruel."

Polgara looked at Ce'Nedra. "Have you ever noticed that when some

people find a notion they think is funny, they tend to keep playing with it long past the point where it bores everyone else to tears?"

Ce'Nedra looked at Silk with a sly little twinkle in her eyes. "I've noticed that, Lady Polgara. Do you suppose it might be the result of a limited imagination?"

"I'm sure that has something to do with it, dear." Aunt Polgara looked at Silk with a serene smile. "Now, did you want to play some more, Kheldar?"

"Ah-no, Polgara. I don't really think so."

It was shortly before noon when Delvor and Beldin returned, each with a self-satisfied smirk on his face. "It was a truly masterful performance, Master Beldin," Delvor congratulated the little hunchback as they entered.

"Child's play." Beldin shrugged deprecatingly. "People

inevitably believe that a deformed body houses a defective brain. I've used that to my advantage many times."

"I'm sure they'll tell us what this is all about eventually," Silk said.

"It wasn't too complicated, Silk," Delvor told him. "You'll be able to leave now without any worries about that curious Mallorean."

"Oh?"

"He was trying to buy information," Delvor shrugged, "so we sold him some, and he left—at a full gallop."

"What sort of information did you sell him?"

"It went sort of like this," Beldin said. He stooped a bit more, deliberately exaggerating his deformity, and his face took on an expression of vapid imbecility. "An' it please yer honor," he said in a squeaky voice dripping with servile stupidity, "I hears that you wants to find some people an' that you says you'll pay to know where they be. I seed the people yer lookin fer, an' I kin tell you where they was—if you gimme enough money. How much was you willin' to pay?"

Delvor laughed delightedly. "Naradas swallowed it whole. I took Master Beldin to him and told him that I'd found someone who knew about the people he was looking for. We agreed to a price, and then your friend here gulled him completely."

"Which way did you send him?" Belgarath asked.

"North." Beldin shrugged. "I told him that I'd seen you camped by the roadside up in the Arendish forest—that one of the members of your party had fallen sick and that you'd stopped to nurse him back to health."

"Wasn't he at all suspicious?" Silk asked.

Delvor shook his head. "The thing that makes people suspicious is help that comes for no particular reason. I gave Naradas every reason to believe that I was sincere. I cheated Master Beldin—outrageously. Naradas gave him a few silver coins for his information. My price, however, was much higher."

"Brilliant," Silk murmured admiringly.

"There's something you ought to know about White Eyes, though," Beldin told Belgarath. "He's a Mallorean Grolim. I didn't probe into him too hard, because I didn't want him to catch what I was doing, but I was able to get that much. He's got a great deal of power, so watch out for him."

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"Did you find out whom he's working for?"

Beldin shook his head. "I pulled back as soon as I found out what he was." The hunchback's face grew bleak. "Be careful about this one, Belgarath. He's very dangerous."

Belgarath's face grew grim. "So am I, Beldin," he said.

"I know, but there are some things you won't do. Naradas doesn't feel that kind of restraint."

CHAPTER FOUR

They rode south under clearing skies for the next six days. A cold wind bent the winter-browned grass at the sides of the road, and the rolling plain of southern Arendia lay dead and sere beneath a chill blue sky. They passed an occasional mud-and-wattle village where ragged serfs clenched themselves to endure yet another winter and more infrequently a rearing stone keep where a proud Mimbrate baron kept a watchful eye on his neighbors.

The Great West Road, like all roads that formed a part of the Tolnedran highway system, was patrolled by scarlet-cloaked Imperial Legionnaires. Garion and his friends also encountered an occasional merchant traveling northward with wary eyes and accompanied by burly hirelings whose hands never strayed far from their weapons.

They reached the River Arend on a frosty midmorning and 61

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looked across the sparkling ford at the Forest of Vordue in northern Tolnedra. "Did you want to stop at Vo Mimbre?" Silk asked Belgarath.

The old man shook his head. "Mandoratlen and Lelldorin have probably already advised Korodullin about what happened in Drasnia, and I'm not really in the mood for three or four days of speeches filled with thee's and thou's and forasmuches. Besides, I want to get to Tol Honeth as soon as possible."

As they splashed through the shallow waters of the ford, Garion remembered something. "Will we have to stop at that customs station?" he asked.

"Naturally," Silk replied. "Everybody has to go through customs—except for licensed smugglers, of course." He looked over at Belgarath. "Do you want me to handle things when we get there?"

"Just don't get too creative."

"Nothing could have been further from my mind, Belgarath. All I want is a chance to try these out." He indicated the seedy clothing he wore.

"I've been sort of wondering what you had in mind when you picked out your wardrobe," Durnik said.

Silk gave him a sly wink.

They rode up out of the ford and on into the Forest of Vordue with its neatly spaced trees and groomed undergrowth. They had gone no more than a league when they came to the whitewashed building that housed the customs station. One corner of the long, shedlike structure showed signs of a recent fire, and the red-tile roof was badly soot-darkened at that end. A half-dozen slovenly soldiers of the customs service were huddled in the muddy yard about a small open fire, drinking cheap wine to ward off the chill. One of them, a stubble-faced man in a patched cloak and rusty breastplate, indolently rose, stepped into the middle of the road, and held up one beefy hand. "That's as far as you go," he declared. "Take your horses over there beside the building and open your packs for inspection."

Silk pushed forward. "Of course, sergeant," he replied in an obsequious, fawning tone. "We have nothing to hide."

"We'll decide that," the unshaven soldier said, swaying slightly as he barred their path.

The customs agent emerged from the station with a blanket wrapped about his shoulders. It was the same stout man

whom they had encountered years before when they had passed this way during their pursuit of Zedar and the stolen Orb. On their previous meeting, however, there had been a certain smug self-satisfaction about him. Now his florid face bore the discontented expression of a man who lives with the conviction that life has somehow cheated him. "What do you have to declare?" he demanded brusquely.

"Nothing on this trip, I'm afraid, your Excellency," Silk answered in a whining voice. "We're just poor travelers on our way to Tol Honeth."

The paunchy agent peered at the little man. "I think we've met before, haven't we? Aren't you Radek of Boktor?"

"The same, your Excellency. You have an extremely good memory."

"In my business, you have to. How did you do with your Sendarian woolens that time?"

Silk's face grew melancholy. "Not nearly as well as I'd hoped. The weather broke before I got to Tol Honeth, so the price was less than half of what it should have been."

"I'm sorry to hear that," the agent said perfunctorily. "Would you mind opening your packs?"

"All we have is food and spare clothing." The little Dras-nian was actually sniveling.

"It's been my experience that people sometimes forget that they're carrying things of value. Open the packs, Radek."

"Anything you say, Excellency." Silk clambered down from his horse and began unbuckling the straps on the packs.

"I wish I did have things of value in here," he sighed trag-

ically, "but that unfortunate venture in the wool market

."; started a long decline for me, I'm afraid. I'm virtually out of business."

The agent grunted and rummaged through their packs for several minutes, shivering all the while. Finally he turned back to Silk with a sour look. "It seems that you're telling the truth, Radek. I'm sorry I doubted you." He blew on his hands trying to warm them. "Times have been hard of late. Nothing's come through here in the last six months that was even worth a decent bribe."

"I've heard that there's been some trouble down here in % Vordue," Silk whined as he buckled the packs shut again. I. "Something about a secession from the rest of Tolnedra."

"The most idiotic thing in the history of the Empire," the

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agent exploded. "All the brains went out of the Vordue family after the Grand Duke Kador died. They should have known that fellow was an agent for a foreign power." "Which fellow was that?"

"The one who claimed that he was an eastern merchant. He wormed his way into the confidence of the Vordues and puffed them up with flattery. By the time he was done, they actually believed that they were competent enough to run their own kingdom, independent of the rest of Tolnedra. But that Varana's a sly one, let me tell you. He struck a bargain with King Korodullin, and before long all of Vordue was crawling with Mimbrate knights stealing everything in sight." He pointed at the scorched corner of his station. "You see that? A platoon or so of them came by here and sacked the building. Then they set fire to the place."

"Tragic," Silk commiserated with him. "Did anyone ever find out just who that so-called merchant was working for?"

"Those idiots in Tol Vordue didn't, that's for certain, but I knew who he was the minute I laid eyes on him."

"Oh?"

"The man was a Rivan, and that puts the whole thing right in the lap of King Belgarion. He's always hated the Vordues anyway, so he came up with this scheme to break their power in northern Tolnedra." He smiled bleakly. "He's getting exactly what he's got coming to him, though. They forced him to marry the Princess Ce'Nedra, and she's making his life

miserable." "How were you able to tell that the agent was Rivan?"

Silk asked curiously.

"That's easy, Radek. The Rivans have been isolated on that island of theirs for thousands of years. They're so inbred that all kinds of defects and deformities crop up in them."

"He was deformed?"

The agent shook his head. "It was his eyes," he said. "They didn't have any color to them at all—absolutely white." He shuddered. "It was a chilling thing to see." He pulled his blanket tighter about his shoulders. "I'm sorry, Radek, but I'm freezing out here. I'm going back inside where it's warm. You and your friends are free to go." And with that he hurried back into the station and the warmth of his fireside.

"Isn't that interesting?" Silk said as they rode away.

Belgarath was frowning. "The next question is who this busy man with the white eyes is working for," he said.

"Urvon?" Durnik suggested. "Maybe he put Harakan to work in the north and Naradas here in the south—both of them trying to stir up as much turmoil as possible."

"Maybe," Belgarath grunted, "but then again maybe not."

"My dear Prince Kheldar," Ce'Nedra said, pushing back the hood of her cloak with one mittened hand, "what exactly was the purpose of all that cringing and sniveling?"

"Characterization, Ce'Nedra," he replied airily. "Radek of Boktor was a pompous, arrogant ass—as long as he was rich. Now that he's poor, he's gone the other way entirely. It's the nature of the man."

"But, there isn't any such person as Radek of Boktor."

"Of course there is. You just saw him. Radek of Boktor exists in the memories of people all over this part of the world. In many ways he's even more real than that bloated time-server back there."

"But he's now. You just made him up."

"Certainly I did, and I'm really rather proud of him. His existence, his background, and his entire life history are a matter of public record. He's as real as you are."

"That doesn't make sense at all, Silk," she protested.

"That's because you aren't Drasnian, Ce'Nedra."

They reached Tol Honeth several days later. The white marble Imperial City gleamed in the frosty winter sunshine, and the legionnaires standing guard at the carved bronze gates were as crisp and burnished as always. As Garion and his friends clattered across the marble-paved bridge to the gate, the officer in charge of the guard detachment took one look at Ce'Nedra and banged his clenched fist on his polished breastplate in salute. "Your Imperial Highness," he greeted her. "If we had known you were approaching, we would have sent out an escort."

1 "That's all right, Captain," she replied in a tired little voice. "Do you suppose you could send one of your men --:••-' on ahead of us to the palace to advise the Emperor that we're f here?"

|b "At once, your Imperial Highness," he said, saluting f again and standing aside to let them pass.

"I just wish that someday somebody in Tolnedra would

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remember that you're married," Garion muttered, feeling a bit surly about it.

"What was that, dear?" Ce'Nedra asked.

"Can't they get it through their heads that you're the Queen of Riva now? Every time one of them calls you 'Your Imperial Highness,' it makes me feel like some kind of hanger-on—or a servant of some sort."

"Aren't you being a little oversensitive, Garion?"

He grunted sourly, still feeling just a bit offended.

The avenues of Tol Honeth were broad and faced with the proud, lofty

houses of the Tolnedran elite. Columns and statuary abounded on the fronts of those residences in vast, ostentatious display, and the richly garbed merchant princes in the streets were bedecked with jewels beyond price. Silk looked at them as he rode past and then ruefully down at his own shabby, threadbare garments. He sighed bitterly.

"More characterization, Radek?" Aunt Polgara asked him.

"Only in part," he replied. "Of course Radek would be envious, but I have to admit that I do sort of miss my own finery."

"How on earth do you keep all these fictitious people straight?"

"Concentration, Polgara," he said, "concentration. You can't succeed at any game if you don't concentrate."

The Imperial Compound was a cluster of sculptured marble buildings enclosed within a high wall and situated atop a hill in the western quarter of the city. Warned in advance of their approach, the legionnaires at the gate admitted the party immediately with crisp military salutes. Beyond the gate lay a paved courtyard, and standing at the foot of the marble stairs leading up to a column-fronted building stood the Emperor Varana. "Welcome to Tol Honeth," he said to them as they dismounted. Ce'Nedra hurried toward him, but stopped at the last moment and curtsied formally. "Your Imperial Majesty," she said.

"Why so ceremonial, Ce'Nedra?" he asked, holding out his arms to her.

"Please, Uncle," she said, glancing at the palace functionaries lining the top of the stairs, "not here. If you kiss me here, I'll break down and cry, and a Borune never cries in public."

"Ah," he said with an understanding look. Then he turned

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to the rest of them. "Come inside, all of you. Let's get in out of the cold." He turned, offered Ce'Nedra his arm and limped up the stairs.

Just inside the doors, there was a large circular rotunda, lined along its walls with marble busts of the last thousand years or so of Tolnedran Emperors. "Look like a gang of pickpockets, don't they?" Varana said to Garion with a wry smile.

"I don't see yours anywhere," Garion replied.

"The royal sculptor is having trouble with my nose. The Anadiles descended from peasant stock, and my nose isn't suitably imperial for his taste." He led them down a broad hallway to a large, candle-lit room with a crimson carpet and drapes and deeply upholstered furniture of the same hue. In each corner stood a glowing iron brazier, and the room was pleasantly warm. "Please," the Emperor said, "make yourselves comfortable. I'll send for something hot to

drink and have the kitchen prepare a dinner for us." He spoke briefly with the legionnaire at the door as Garion and his friends removed their cloaks and seated themselves.

"Now," Varana said, closing the door, "what brings you to Tol Honeth?"

"You've heard about our campaign against the Bear-cult?" Belgarath asked him, "and the reason for it?"

The Emperor nodded.

"As it turned out, the campaign was misdirected. The cult was not involved in the abduction of Prince Geran, although there was an effort to implicate them. The person we're looking for is named Zandramas. Does that name mean anything to you?"

Varana frowned. "No," he replied, "I can't say that it does."

Belgarath rapidly sketched in the situation, telling Varana what they had learned about Zandramas, Harakan, and the Sardion. When he had finished, the Emperor's expression was slightly dubious.

"I can accept most of what you say, Belgarath," he said, "but some of it—" He shrugged, holding up both hands.

"What's the problem?"

"Varana's a sceptic, father," Polgara said. "There are certain things he prefers not to think about."

"Even after everything that happened at Thull Mardu?" Belgarath looked surprised.

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"It's a matter of principle, Belgarath." Varana laughed. "It has to do with being a Tolnedran—and a soldier."

Belgarath gave him an amused look. "All right, then, can you accept the fact that the abduction might have been politically motivated?"

"Of course. I understand politics."

"Good. There have always been two major centers of power in Mallorea—the throne and the church. Now it looks as if this Zandramas is raising a third. We can't tell if Kal Zakath is directly involved in any way, but there's some kind of power struggle going on between Urvon and Zandramas. For some reason Garion's son is central to that struggle."

"We've also picked up some hints along the way that for one reason or another the Maltoreans don't want us to become involved," Silk added. "There are agents stirring up trouble in Arendia, and it may have been a Mallorean who was behind the Vordue secession."

Varana looked at him sharply.

"A man named Naradas."

"Now that's a name I have heard," the Emperor said. "Supposedly he's an Angarak merchant here to negotiate some very sweeping trade agreements. He travels a great deal and spends a lot of money. My commercial advisors think that he's an agent for King Urgit. Now that Zakath controls the mining regions in eastern Cthol Murgos, Urgit desperately needs money to finance the war he's got going on down there."

Silk shook his head. "I don't think so," he said. "Naradas is a Mallorean Grolim. It's not likely that he'd be working for the King of the Murgos."

There was a respectful tap at the door.

"Yes?" Varana said.

The door opened and Lord Morin, the Imperial Chamberlain, entered. He was an old man now and very thin. His hair had gone completely white and it stood out in wisps. His skin had that waxy transparency one sees in the very old, and he moved slowly. "The Drasnian Ambassador, your Majesty," he announced in a quavering voice. "He says that he has some information of great urgency for you—and for your guests."

"You'd better show him in then, Morin."

"There's a young lady with him, your Majesty," Morin added. "A Drasnian noblewoman, I believe."

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"We'll see them both," Varana said.

"As you wish, your Majesty," Morin replied with a creaky bow.

When the aged Chamberlain escorted the ambassador and his companion into the room, Garion blinked in surprise. "His Excellency, Prince Khaldon, Ambassador of the Royal Court of Drasnia," Morin announced, "and her Ladyship, the Margravine Liselle, a-uh—" He faltered.

"Spy, your Excellency," Liselle supplied with aplomb.

"Is that an official designation, your Ladyship?"

"It saves a great deal of time, Excellency."

"My," Morin sighed, "how the world changes. Should I introduce your Ladyship to the Emperor as an official spy?"

"I think he's gathered that already, Lord Morin," she said, touching his thin hand affectionately.

Morin bowed and tottered slowly from the room.

"What a dear old man," she murmured.

"Well, hello, cousin," Silk said to the ambassador.

"Cousin," Prince Khaldon replied coolly.

"Are you two somehow related?" Varana asked.

"Distantly, your Majesty," Silk told him. "Our mothers were second cousins—or was it third?"

"Fourth, I think," Khaldon said. He eyed his rat-faced relative. "You're looking a bit seedy, old man," he noted. "The last time I saw you, you were dripping gold and jewels."

"I'm in disguise, cousin," Silk said blandly. "You're not supposed to be able to recognize me."

"Ah," Khaldon said. He turned to the Emperor. "Please excuse our banter, your Majesty. Kheldar here and I have loathed each other since childhood."

Silk grinned. "It was hate at first sight," he agreed. "We absolutely detest each other."

Khaldon smiled briefly. "When we were children, they used to hide all the knives every time our families visited each other."

Silk looked curiously at Liselle. "What are you doing in Tol Honeth?" he asked her.

"It's a secret."

"Velvet brought several dispatches from Boktor," Khaldon explained, "and certain instructions."

"Velvet?"

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"Silly, isn't it?" Liselle laughed. "But then, I suppose they could have chosen a worse nickname for me."

"It's better than some that spring to mind," Silk agreed.

"Be nice, Kheldar."

"There was something you thought we ought to know, Prince Khaldon?" Varana asked.

Khaldon sighed. "It saddens me to report that the courtesan Bethra has been murdered, your Majesty."

"What? "

"She was set upon by assassins in a deserted street last night when she was returning from a business engagement. She was left for dead, but she managed to drag herself to our gate, and she was able to pass on some information before she died."

Silk's face had gone quite white. "Who was responsible for it?" he demanded.

"We're still working on that, Kheldar," his cousin replied. "We have some suspicions, of course, but nothing concrete enough to take before a magistrate."

The Emperor's face was bleak, and he rose from the chair in which he had been sitting. "There are some people who will need to know about this," he said grimly. "Would you come with me, Prince Khaldon?"

"Of course, your Majesty."

"Please excuse us," Varana said to the rest of them. "This is a matter that needs my immediate attention." He led the Drasnian Ambassador from the room.

"Did she suffer greatly?" Silk asked the girl known as Velvet in a voice filled with pain.

"They used knives, Kheldar," she replied simply. "That's never pleasant."

"I see." His ferretlike face hardened. "Could she give you any kind of idea what might have been behind it?"

"I gather that it had to do with several things. She mentioned the fact that she once informed Emperor Varana of a plot against the life of his son."

"The Honeths!" Ce'Nedra grated.

"What makes you say that?" Silk asked quickly.

"Garion and I were here when she told Varana. It was at the time of my father's funeral. Bethra came secretly to the palace and said that two Honethite nobles—Count Elgon and Baron Kelbor—were hatching a scheme to murder Varana's son."

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Silk's face was stony. "Thank you, Ce'Nedra," he said grimly.

"There's something else you should know, Kheldar," Velvet said quietly. She looked at the rest of them. "We all will be discreet about this, won't we?"

"Of course," Belgarath assured her.

Velvet turned back to Silk. "Bethra was Hunter," she told him.

"Hunter? Bethra?"

"She has been for several years now. When the struggle over the succession started heating up here in Tolnedra, King Rhodar instructed Javelin to take steps to make sure that the man who followed Ran Borune to the throne would be someone the Alorns could live with. Javelin came to Tol Honeth and recruited Bethra to see to it."

"Excuse me," Belgarath interrupted, his eyes alight with curiosity, "but exactly what is this 'Hunter'?"

"Our most secret spy," Velvet replied. "Hunter's identity is known only to Javelin, and Hunter deals with only the most sensitive situations—things that the Drasnian crown simply cannot openly become involved in. Anyway, when it appeared that the Grand Duke Noragon of the House of Honeth was almost certain to be the next Emperor, King Rhodar made a certain suggestion to Javelin, and a few months later, Noragon accidentally ate some bad shellfish— some very bad shellfish."

"Bethra did that?" Silk's tone was amazed.

"She was extraordinarily resourceful."

"Margravine Liselle?" Ce'Nedra said, her eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

"Yes, your Majesty?"

"If the identity of Hunter is the deepest state secret in Drasnia, how is it that you were aware of it?"

"I was sent from Boktor with certain instructions for her. My uncle knows that I can be trusted."

"But you're revealing it now, aren't you?"

"It's after the fact, your Majesty. Bethra's dead. Someone else will be Hunter now. Anyway, before she died, Bethra told us that someone had found out about her involvement in the death of Grand Duke Noragon and had passed the information on. She believed that it was that information that triggered the attack on her."

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"It's definitely narrowing down to the Honeths then, isn't it?" Silk said.

"It's not definite proof, Kheldar," Velvet warned him.

"It's definite enough to satisfy me."

"You're not going to do anything precipitous, are you?" she asked him. "Javelin wouldn't like that, you know."

"That's Javelin's problem."

"We don't have time to get involved in Tolnedran politics, Silk," Belgarath added firmly. "We're not going to be here that long."

"It's not going to take me all that long."

"I'll have to report what you're planning to Javelin," Velvet warned.

"Of course. But I'll be finished with it by the time your report reaches Boktor."

"It's important that you don't embarrass us, Kheldar."

"Trust me," he said and quietly left the room.

"It always makes me nervous when he says that," Durnik murmured.

Early the following morning, Belgarath and Garion left the Imperial Palace to visit the library at the university. It was chilly in the broad streets of Tol Honeth, and a raw wind was blowing in off the Nedrane River. The few merchants abroad at that hour walked briskly along the marble thoroughfares with fur cloaks pulled tightly about them, and gangs of roughly dressed laborers thronged up out of the poorer sections of the city with their heads bent into the wind and their chapped hands burrowed deep into their clothing.

Garion and his grandfather passed through the deserted central marketplace and soon reached a large cluster of buildings enclosed by a marble wall and entered through a gate stamped with the Imperial Seal. The grounds inside the compound were as neatly trimmed as those surrounding the palace, and there were broad marble walks stretching from building to building across the lawns. As they moved along one of those walks, they encountered a portly, black-robed scholar pacing along with his hands clasped behind his back and his face lost in thought.

"Excuse me," Belgarath said to him, "but could you direct us to the library?"

"What?" The man looked up, blinking.

"The library, good sir," Belgarath repeated. "Which way is it?"

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"Oh," the scholar said. "It's over there someplace." He gestured vaguely. -,

"Do you suppose you could be a bit more precise?"

The scholar gave the shabbily dressed old man an offended look. "Ask one of the porters," he said brusquely. "I'm busy. I've been working on a problem for twenty years now and I've almost found the solution."

"Oh? Which problem is that?"

"I doubt that it would be of much interest to an uneducated mendicant," the scholar replied loftily, "but if you really must know, I've been trying to calculate the exact weight of the world."

"Is that all? And it's taken you twenty years?" Belgarath's face was astonished. "I solved that problem a long time ago—in about a week."

The scholar stared at him, his face going dead white. "That's impossible!" he exclaimed. "I'm the only man in the world who's looking into it. No one has ever asked the question before."

Belgarath laughed. "I'm sorry, learned scholar, but it's been asked several times already. The best solution I ever saw was by a man named Talgin—at the University of Mel-cena, I think. It was during the second millennium. There should be a copy of his calculations in your library."

The scholar began to tremble violently, and his eyes bulged. Without a word he spun on his heel and dashed across the lawn with the skirts of his robe flapping behind him.

"Keep an eye on him, Garion," Belgarath said calmly. "The building he runs to should be the library."

"Just how much does the world weigh?" Garion asked curiously.

"How should I know?" Belgarath replied. "No sane man would even be curious about it."

"But what about this Talgin you mentioned—the one who wrote the solution?"

"Talgin? Oh, there's no such person. I just made him up."

Garion stared at him. "That's a dreadful thing to do, Grandfather," he accused. "You've just destroyed a man's entire life work with a lie."

"But it did get him to lead us to the library," the old man said slyly. "Besides, maybe now he'll turn his attention to

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something a bit more meaningful. The library's in that building with the tower. He just ran up the steps. Shall we go?"

There was a marble rotunda just inside the main entrance to the library, and in the precise center of that rotunda stood a high, ornately carved desk. A bald, skinny man sat behind the desk laboriously copying from a huge book. For some reason the man looked familiar to Garion, and he frowned as they approached the desk, trying to remember where he had seen him before.

"May I help you?" the skinny man asked, looking up from his copying as Belgarath stopped in front of his desk.

"Possibly so. I'm looking for a copy of the Prophecies of the Western Grolims."

The skinny man frowned, scratching at one ear. "That would be in the comparative theology section," he mused. "Could you hazard a guess as to the date of composition?"

Belgarath also frowned, staring up into the vault of the rotunda as he considered it. "My guess would be early third millennium," he said finally.

"That would put it at the time of either the second Ho-nethite Dynasty or the second Vorduvian," the scholar said. "We shouldn't have too much trouble finding it." He rose to his feet. "It's this way," he said, pointing toward one of the hallways fanning out from the rotunda. "If you'll follow me, please."

Garion still felt the nagging certainty that he knew this polite, helpful scholar. The man certainly had better manners than the pompous, self-important world-weighter they had met outside, and—Then it came to him. "Master Jeebers?" he said incredulously, "is that you?"

"Have we met before, sir?" Jeebers asked politely, looking at Garion with a puzzled squint.

Garion grinned broadly. "We have indeed, Master Jeebers. You introduced me to my wife."

"I don't seem to recall—"

"Oh, I think you do. You crept out of the palace with her one night and rode south toward Tol Borune. Along the way, you joined a party of merchants. You left rather suddenly when my wife told you that leaving Tol Honeth was her idea instead of Ran Borune's."

Jeebers blinked and then his eyes widened. "Your Majesty," he said with a bow. "Forgive me for not recognizing you at once. My eyes aren't what they once were."

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Garion laughed, clapping him on the shoulder in delight. "That's quite all right, Jeebers," he said. "I'm not going about announcing who I am on this trip."

"And how is little Ce'Nedra—Uh, her Majesty, that is?"

Garion was about to tell his wife's former tutor about the abduction of their son, but Belgarath gave him a discreet nudge. "Uh—fine, just fine," he said instead.

"I'm so glad to hear it," Jeebers said with a fond smile. "She was an absolutely impossible student, but strangely I find that much of the fun went out of my life after she and I parted company. I was

delighted to hear of her fortuitous marriage and not nearly as surprised as my colleagues here when we heard that she had raised an army and marched on Thull Mardu. She always was a fiery little thing—and brilliant." He gave Garion a rather apologetic look. "To be honest, though, I have to tell you that she was an erratic and undisciplined student."

"I've noticed those qualities in her from time to time."

Jeebers laughed. "I'm sure you have, your Majesty," he said. "Please convey my regards to her—" He hesitated, "And if you don't think it's presumptuous—my affection as well."

"I will, Jeebers," Garion promised. "I will."

"This is the comparative theology section of our library," the bald scholar said, pushing open a heavy door. "All the items are catalogued and stored by Dynasty. The antiquity sections are back this way." He led them along a narrow aisle between tall book racks filled with leather-bound volumes and tightly rolled scrolls. The skinny man paused once and rubbed his finger along one of the shelves. "Dust," he sniffed disapprovingly. "I expect I'd better speak sharply to the custodians about that."

"It's the nature of books to collect dust," Belgarath said.

"And it's the nature of custodians to avoid doing anything about it," Jeebers added with a wry smile. "Ah, here we are." He stopped in the center of a somewhat broader aisle where the books showed marked signs of extreme age. "Please be gentle with them," he said, touching the backs of the volumes with an odd kind of affection. "They're old and brittle. The works written during the Second Honethite Dynasty are on this side, and those dating back to the Second Vordue Dynasty are over here. They're further broken down into kingdom of origin, so it shouldn't be hard for you to

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locate the one you want. Now, if you'll excuse me, I shouldn't stay away from my desk for too long. Some of my colleagues get impatient and start rooting through the shelves on their own. It takes weeks sometimes to get things put right again."

"I'm sure we can manage from here, Master Jeebers," Belgarath assured him, "and thank you for your assistance." "It's my pleasure," Jeebers replied with a slight bow. He looked back at Garion. "You will remember to give little Ce'Nedra my greetings, won't you?" "You have my word on it, Master Jeebers." "Thank you, your Majesty." And the skinny man turned and went on out of the book-lined room.

"An enormous change there," Belgarath noted. "Probably the little fright Ce'Nedra gave him at Tol Borune that time knocked all the pomposity out of him." The old man was peering intently at the shelves. "I'll have to admit that he's a very competent scholar."

"Isn't he just a librarian?" Garion asked, "somebody who looks after

books?"

"That's where all the rest of scholarship starts, Garion. All the books in the world won't help you if they're just piled up in a heap." He bent slightly and pulled a black-wrapped scroll from a lower shelf. "Here we are/' he said triumphantly. "Jeebers led us right to it." He moved to the end of the aisle where a table and bench sat before a tall, narrow window and where the pale winter sunlight fell golden on the stone floor. He sat and carefully undid the ties that held the scroll tightly rolled inside its black velvet cover. As he pulled the scroll out, he muttered a number of fairly sulfurous oaths.

"What's the matter?" Garion asked. "Grolim stupidity," Belgarath growled. "Look at this." He held out the scroll. "Look at the parchment." Garion peered at it. "It looks like other parchment to me." "It's human skin," the old man snorted disgustedly. Garion drew back in revulsion. "That's ghastly." "That's not the point. Whoever provided the skin was finished with it anyway. The problem is that human skin won't hold ink." He unrolled a foot or so of the scroll. "Look at that. It's so faded that you can't even make out the words."

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"Could you use something to bring them out again way you did with Anheg's letter that time?"

"Garion, this scroll's about three thousand years old. The solution of salts I used on Anheg's letter would probably dissolve it entirely."

"Sorcery then?"

Belgarath shook his head. "It's just too fragile." He started to swear again even as he carefully unrolled the scroll inch by inch, moving it this way and that to catch the sunlight. "Here's something,'" he grunted with some surprise.

"What does it say?"

"'. . . seek the path of the Child of Dark in the land of the serpents . . . '" The old man looked up. "That's something, anyway."

"What does it mean?"

"Just what it says. Zandramas went to Nyissa. We'll pick up the trail there."

"Grandfather, we already knew that."

"We suspected it, Garion. There's a difference. Zandramas has tricked us into following false trails before. Now we know for certain that we're on the right track."

"It isn't very much, Grandfather."

"I know, but it's better than nothing."

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CHAPTER FIVE

"Would you just look at that?" Ce'Nedra said indignantly the following morning. She had just arisen and stood at the window, wrapped in a warm robe.

"Hmmm?" Garion murmured drowsily. "Look at what, dear?" He was burrowed deeply under the warm quilts and was giving some serious thought to going back to sleep. "You can't see it from there, Garion. Come over here " He sighed, slipped out of bed, and padded barefoot over to the window.

"Isn't that disgusting?" she demanded.

The grounds of the Imperial Compound were blanketed in white, and large snowflakes were settling lazily through the dead-calm air.

"Isn't it sort of peculiar for it to snow in Tol Honeth?" he asked.

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"Garion, it never snows in Tol Honeth. The last time I saw snow here was when I was five years old."

"It's been an unusual winter."

"Well, I'm going back to bed, and I'm not going to get up until every bit of it melts."

"You don't really have to go out in it, you know."

"I don't even want to look at it." She flounced back to their canopied bed, let her robe drop to the floor, and climbed back under the quilts. Garion shrugged and started back toward the bed. Another hour or two of sleep seemed definitely in order.

"Please pull the curtains on the bed shut," she told him, "and don't make too much noise when you leave."

He stared at her for a moment, then sighed. He closed the heavy curtains around the bed and sleepily began to dress.

"Do be a dear, Garion," she said sweetly. "Stop by the kitchen and tell them that I'll want my breakfast in here."

Now that, he felt, was distinctly unfair. He pulled on the rest of his clothes, feeling surly.

"Oh, Garion?"

"Yes, dear?" He kept it neutral with some effort.

"Don't forget to comb your hair. You always look like a straw stack in the morning." Her voice already sounded drowsy and on the edge of sleep.

He found Belgarath sitting moodily before the window in an unlighted dining room. Although it was quite early, the old man had a tankard on the table beside him. "Can you believe this?" he said disgustedly, looking out at the softly falling snow.

"I don't imagine that it's going to last very long, Grandfather."

"It never snows in To! Honeth."

"That's what Ce'Nedra was just saying." Garion held out his hands to a glowing iron brazier.

"Where is she?"

"She went back to bed."

"That's probably not such a bad idea. Why didn't you join her?"

"She decided that it was time for me to get up,"

"That hardly seems fair."

"The same thought occurred to me."

Belgarath scratched absently at his ear, still looking out at the snow. "We're too far south for this to last for more

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than a day or so. Besides, the day after tomorrow is Erastide. A lot of people will be traveling after the holiday, so we won't be quite so conspicuous."

"You think we should wait?"

"It's sort of logical. We wouldn't make very good time slogging through all that, anyway."

"What do you plan to do today, then?"

Belgarath picked up his tankard. "I think I'll finish this and then go back to bed."

Garion pulled up one of the red velvet upholstered chairs and sat down. Something had been bothering him for several days now, and he decided that this might be a good time to bring it out into the open.

"Grandfather?"

"Yes?"

"Why is it that all of this seems to have happened before?"

"All of what?"

"Everything. There are Angaraks in Arendia trying to stir up trouble—just as they were when we were following Zedar. There are intrigues and assassinations in Tolnedra— the same as last time. We ran into a monster—a dragon this time instead of the Algoths—but it's still pretty close to the same sort of thing. It seems almost as if we were repeating everything that happened when we were trying to find the Orb. We've even been running into the same people—Del-vor, that customs man, even Jeebers."

"You know, that's a very interesting question, Garion." Belgarath pondered for a moment, absently taking a drink from his tankard. "If you think about it in a certain way, though, it does sort of make sense."

"I don't quite follow you."

"We're on our way to another meeting between the Child of Light and the Child of Dark," Belgarath explained. "That meeting is going to be a repetition of an event that's been happening over and over again since the beginning of time. Since it's the same event, it stands to reason that the circumstances leading up to it should also be similar." He thought about it a moment longer. "Actually," he continued, "they'd almost have to be, wouldn't they?"

"That's a little deep for me, I'm afraid."

"There are two Prophecies—two sides of the same thing. Something happened an unimaginably long time ago to separate them."

"Yes. I understand that."

"When they got separated, things sort of stopped."

"What things?"

"It's kind of hard to put into words. Let's call it the course of things that were supposed to happen—the future, I suppose. As long as those two forces are separate—and equal— the future can't happen. We all just keep going through the same series of events over and over again."

"When will it end?"

"When one of the Prophecies finally overcomes the other. When the Child of Light finally defeats the Child of Darker the other way around."

"I thought I already did that."

"I don't think it was conclusive enough, Garion."

"I killed Torak, Grandfather. You can't get much more conclusive than that, can you?"

"You killed Torak, Garion. You didn't kill the park Prophecy. I think it's going to take something more significant than a sword fight in the City of Night to settle this."

"Such as what?"

Belgarath spread his hands. "I don't know. I really don't. This idea of yours could be very useful, though."

"Oh?"

"If we're going to go through a series of events that are similar to what happened last time, it could give us a notion of what to expect, couldn't it? You might want to think about that—maybe spend a little time this morning remembering exactly what happened last time." .

"What are you going to do?"

; Belgarath drained his tankard and stood up. "As I said— <*Tm going back to bed."

That afternoon, a polite official in a brown mantle tapped on the door of the room where Garion sat reading and advised him that the Emperor Varana wanted to see him. Gar-ion set aside his book and followed the official through the echoing marble halls to Varana's study.

"Ah, Belgarion," Varana said as he entered. "A bit of news has just reached me that you might find interesting. Please, have a seat."

"Information?" Garion asked, sitting in the leather-up-;;holstered chair beside the Emperor's desk.

"That man you mentioned the other day—Naradas—has been seen here in Tol Honeth."

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"Naradas? How did he manage to get down here that fast? The last I heard, he was riding north from the Great Fair in Arendia."

"Has he been following you?"

"He's been asking a lot of questions and spreading money around."

"I can have him picked up, if you want. I have a few questions I'd like to ask him myself, and I could hold him for several months if need be."

Garion thought about it. Finally he shook his head rather regretfully. "He's a Mallorean Grolim, and he could be out of any kind of prison cell you could put him in within a matter of minutes."

"The Imperial Dungeon is quite secure, Belgarion," Var-ana said a bit stiffly.

"Not that secure, Varana." Then Garion smiled briefly, remembering the Emperor's stubborn convictions about such things. "Let's just say that Naradas has some out-of-the-ordinary resources available to him. It's one of those things that makes you uncomfortable to talk about." "Oh," Varana said distastefully, "that." Garion nodded. "It might be better in the long run just to have your people keep an eye on him. If he doesn't know that we're aware that he's here, he might lead us to others— or at least to certain information. Harakan's been seen here in Tolnedra, too, I understand, and I'd like to find out if there's some kind of connection between the two of them." Varana smiled. "Your life is a great deal more complicated than mine, Belgarion," he said. "I only have one reality to deal with."

Garion gave a wry shrug. "It helps to fill up my spare time," he replied.

There was a light tap on the door, and Lord Morin slowly shuffled into the room. "I'm sorry to disturb your Majesties, but there's some unsettling news from the city."

"Oh?" Varana said. "What's been happening, Morin?"

"Someone's been killing members of the Honeth family— very quietly, but very efficiently. Quite a few have died in the last two nights."

"Poison?"

"No, your Majesty. This assassin is more direct. He smothered a few with their own pillows night before last, and there was one nasty fall. At first the deaths appeared to

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be of natural causes. Last night, though, he started using a knife." Morin shook his head disapprovingly. "Messy," he sniffed. "Very messy."

Varana frowned. "I thought that all the old feuds had set-tied down. Do you think it might be the Horbites? They hold grudges forever sometimes."

"No one seems to know, your Majesty. The Honeths are terrified. They're either fleeing the city or turning their houses into forts."

Varana smiled. "I think I can live with the discomfort of the Honeth family. Did this fellow leave any kind of trademark? Can we identify him as a known assassin?"

"We haven't a clue, your Majesty. Should I put guards around the houses of the Honeths—the ones who are left?"

"They have their own soldiers." Varana shrugged. "But put out some inquiries and let this fellow know that I'd like to have a little

talk with him."

"Are you going to arrest him?" Garion asked.

"Oh, I don't know that I want to go that far. I just want to find out who he is and suggest to him that he ought to follow the rules a little more closely, that's all. I wonder who he could possibly be."

Garion, however, had a few private suspicions about the matter.

The Erastide festivities were in full swing in Tol Honeth, and the revelers, many far gone in drink, lurched and staggered from party to party as the great families vied with one another in a vulgar display of ostentatious wealth. The huge mansions of the rich and powerful were festooned with gaily hued buntings and hung with colored lanterns. Fortunes were spent on lavish banquets, and the entertainments provided often exceeded the bounds of good taste. Although the celebrations at the palace were more restrained, Emperor Varana nonetheless felt obliged to extend his hospitality to many people he privately loathed.

The event which had been long in the planning for that particular evening was a state banquet to be followed by a grand ball. "And you two will be my guests of honor," Varana firmly told Garion and Ce'Nedra. "If / have to endure this, then so do you."

"I'd really rather not, uncle," Ce'Nedra told him with a sad little smile. "I'm not much in the mood for festivities just now."

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"You can't just turn off your life, Ce'Nedra," he said gently. "A party—even one of the stuffy ones here in the palace—might help to divert your mind from your tragic circumstances." He gave her a shrewd look. "Besides," he added, "if you don't attend, the Honeths, Horbites, and Vor-dues will all be smirking up their sleeves about your absence."

Ce'Nedra's head came up quickly, and her eyes took on a flinty look. "That's true, isn't it?" she replied. "Of course, I really don't have a thing to wear."

"There are whole closets filled with your gowns in the imperial apartments, Ce'Nedra," he reminded her.

"Oh, yes. I'd forgotten those. All right, uncle, I'll be happy to attend."

And so it was that Ce'Nedra, dressed in a creamy white velvet gown and with a jeweled coronet nestling among her flaming curls, entered the ballroom that evening on the arm of her husband, the King of Riva. Garion, dressed in a borrowed blue doublet that was noticeably tight across the shoulders, approached the entire affair with a great lack of enthusiasm. As a visiting head of state, he was obliged to stand for an hour or so in the reception line in the grand ballroom, murmuring empty responses to the pleasantries offered by assorted Horbites, Vordues, Ranites, and Bo-runes—and their often giddy wives. The Honeths, however, were conspicuous by their absence.

Toward the end of that interminable ceremony, Javelin's honey-blond niece, the Margravine Liselle, dressed in a spectacular gown of lavender brocade, came past on the arm of Prince Khaldon. "Courage, your Majesty," she murmured as she curtsied to Garion. "Not even this can last forever—though it might seem like it."

"Thanks, Liseile," he replied drily.

After the reception line had wound to its tedious conclusion, Garion circulated politely among the other guests, enduring the endlessly repeated comment: "It never snows in Tol Honeth."

At the far end of the candlelit ballroom, a group of Ar-endish musicians sawed and plucked and tootled their way through a repertoire of holiday songs that were common to all the Kingdoms of the West. Their lutes, violas, harps, flutes, and oboes provided a largely unheard background to the chattering of the Emperor's guests.

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"I had engaged Madame Aldima to entertain us this evening," Varana was saying to a small cluster of Horbites. "Her singing was to have been the high point of the festivities. Unfortunately, the change in the weather has made her fearful of coming out of her house. She's most protective of her voice, I understand."

"And well she should be," a Ranite lady standing just behind Garion murmured to her companion. "It wasn't much of a voice to begin with, and time hasn't been kind to it— all those years Aldima spent singing in taverns, no doubt." "It hardly seems like Erastide without singing," Varana continued. "Perhaps we might persuade one of these lovely ladies to grace us with a song or two."

A stout Borune lady of middle years quickly responded to the Emperor's suggestion, joining with the orchestra in a rendition of an old favorite delivered in a warbling soprano voice that struggled painfully to reach the higher registers. When she had finished and stood red-faced and gasping, the Emperor's guests responded to her screeching with polite applause which lasted for almost five seconds. Then they returned to their inane chatter.

And then the musicians struck up an Arendish air so old that its origins were lost in the mists of antiquity. Like most Arendish songs, it was of a melancholy turn, beginning in a minor key with an intricate waterfall of notes from the lute. As the deep-toned viola entered with the main theme, a rich contralto voice joined in. Gradually, the conversations died out as that voice poignantly touched the guests into silence. Garion was startled. Standing not far from the orchestra, the Margravine Liselle had lifted her head in song. Her voice was marvelous. It had a dark, thrilling timbre and was as smooth as honey. The other guests drew back from her in profound respect for that glorious voice, leaving her standing quite alone in a golden circle of candlelight. And then, to Garion's astonishment, Ce'Nedra stepped into that candlelight to join the lavender-gowned Drasnian girl. As the flute .. picked up the

counterharmony, the tiny Rivan Queen raised her sad little face and joined her voice with that of the Mar-; - gravine. Effortlessly, her clear voice rose with that of the flute, so perfectly matching its tone and color that one could not separate exactly the voice of the instrument from hers. And yet, there was a sadness bordering on heartbreak in her singing, a sorrow that brought a lump to Garion's throat and

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tears to his eyes. Despite the festivities around her, it was clearly evident that Ce'Nedra still nursed her abiding anguish deep in her heart, and no gaiety nor entertainment could lessen her suffering.

As the song drew to its conclusion, the applause was thunderous. "More!" they shouted. "More!"

Encouraged by the ovation, the musicians returned to the beginning of that same ancient air. Once again the lute spilled out its heart in that rippling cascade, but this time as the viola led Liselle into the main theme, yet a third voice joined in—a voice Garion knew so well that he did not even have to look to see who was singing.

Polgara, dressed in a deep blue velvet gown trimmed in silver, joined Liselle and Ce'Nedra in the candlelit circle. Her voice was as rich and smooth as the Margravine's, and yet there was in it a sorrow that went even beyond Ce'Nedra's—a sorrow for a place that had been lost and could never return again. Then, as the flute accompanied Ce'Nedra into the rising counterpoint, Polgara's rose to join hers as well. The harmony thus created was not the traditional one which was so familiar in all the Kingdoms of the West. The Arendish musicians, their eyes filled with tears, took up those strange antique chords to recreate a melody that had not been heard in thousands of years.

As the last notes of that glorious song faded, there was an awed silence. And then, many of them weeping openly, the guests burst into applause as Polgara silently led the two young women out of that golden circle of light.

Belgarath, looking somewhat unusually regal in a snowy Tolnedran mantle, but holding nonetheless a full silver goblet, stood in her path, his eyes a mystery.

"Well, father?" she asked.

Wordlessly he kissed her forehead and handed her the goblet. "Lovely, Pol, but why revive something that's been dead and gone for all these centuries?"

Her chin lifted proudly. "The memory of Vo Wacune will never die so long as I live, father. I carry it forever in my heart, and every so often I like to remind people that there was once a shining city

filled with grace and courage and beauty and that this mundane world in which we now live allowed it to slip away."

"It's very painful for you, isn't it, Polgara?" he asked gravely.

"Yes, father, it is—more painful than I can say—but I've endured pain before, so. . . ." She left it hanging with a slight shrug and moved with regal step from the hall.

After the banquet, Garion and Ce'Nedra took a few turns about the ballroom floor, more for the sake of appearances than out of any real desire for it.

"Why does Lady Polgara feel so strongly about the Wacite Arends?" Ce'Nedra asked as they danced.

"She lived in Vo Wacune for quite some time when she was young," Garion replied. "I think she loved the city— and the people—very much."

"I thought my heart would break when she sang that song."

"Mine nearly did," Garion said quietly. "She's suffered so very much, but I think that the destruction of Vo Wacune hurt her more than anything else that's ever happened. She's never forgiven Grandfather for not coming to the aid of the city when the Asturians destroyed it."

Ce'Nedra sighed. "There's so much sorrow in the world."

"There's hope, too," he reminded her.

"But only such a little." She sighed again. Then a sudden impish smile crossed her lips. "That song absolutely de-.stroyed all the ladies who are here," she smirked. "Absolutely destroyed them."

"Try not to gloat in public, love," he gently chided her. "It's really not very becoming."

"Didn't Uncle Varana say that I was one of the guests of honor?" :
"Well—yes."

"It's my party then," she said with a toss of her head, "so I'll gloat if I want to."

When they all returned to the set of rooms Varana had provided for their use, Silk was waiting for them, standing by the fire and wanning his hands. The little man had a furtive, slightly worried look on his face, and he was covered from top to toe with reeking debris. "Where's Varana?" he asked tensely as they entered the candlelit sitting room. : "He's down in the ballroom entertaining his guests," Gar-ton said.

"What have you been doing, Prince Kheldar?" Ce'Nedra asked, wrinkling her nose at the offensive odors emanating from his clothes.

"Hiding," he replied, "under a garbage heap. I think we might want to leave Tol Honeth—fairly soon."

Belgarath's eyes narrowed. "Exactly what have you been up to, Silk?" he demanded, "and where have you been for the past couple of days?"

"Here and there," Silk said evasively. "I really should go get cleaned up."

"I don't suppose you know anything about what's been happening to the Honeth family, do you?" Garion asked.

"What's this?" Beigarath said.

"I was with Varana this afternoon when Lord Morin brought the report. The Honeths have been dying at a surprising rate. Eight or ten at last count."

"Twelve, actually," Silk corrected meticulously.

Beigarath turned on the rat-faced man. "I think I'd like an explanation."

"People die," Silk shrugged. "It happens all the time."

"Did they have help?"

"A little, maybe."

"And were you the one who provided this assistance?"

"Would I do that?"

Belgarath's face grew bleak. "I want the truth, Prince Kheldar."

Silk spread his hands extravagantly. "What is truth, old friend? Can any man ever really know what the truth is?"

"This isn't a philosophical discussion, Silk. Have you been out butchering Honeths?"

"I don't know that I'd say 'butchering' exactly. That word smacks of a certain crudity. I pride myself on my refinement."

"Have you been killing people?"

"Well," Silk's face took on a slightly offended expression, "if you're going to put it that way—"

"Twelve people?" Durnik's tone was incredulous.

"And another that isn't very likely to survive," Silk noted. "I was

interrupted before I had time to make sure of him, but I probably did enough to get the job done."

"I'm still waiting, Silk," Beigarath said darkly.

Silk sniffed at one rancid sleeve and made a face. "Bethra and I were very good friends." He shrugged as if that explained everything.

"But—" Durnik objected. "Didn't she try to have you killed once?"

"Oh, that. That wasn't anything important. It was business—nothing personal."

"Isn't trying to kill somebody about as personal as you can get?"

"Of course not. I was interfering with something she was working on. You see, she had this arrangement with the Thullish ambassador, and—"

"Quit trying to change the subject, Silk," Beigarath said.

Silk's eyes grew hard. "Bethra was a special woman," he replied. "Beautiful, gifted, and totally honest. I admired her very much. You could almost say that I loved her—in a rather special kind of way. The idea that someone saw fit to have her cut down in the street greatly offended me. I did what I thought was appropriate."

"Despite the importance of what we're doing?" Beigarath's face was like a thundercloud. "You just dropped everything and ran out to do a little private killing?"

"There are some things you just don't let slide, Beigarath. There's also a principle involved. We do not allow the killing of a member of Drasnian intelligence to go unpunished. It's bad for business if people get the idea that they can get away with that sort of thing. Anyway, the first night I went to some pains to make things look sort of natural."

"Natural?" Durnik asked. "How can you make a murder look natural?"

"Please, Durnik. Murder is such an ugly word."

"He smothered them in their beds with their own pillows," Garion explained.

"And one fellow sort of accidentally fell out of a window," Silk added. "Rather a high one as I recall. He came down on an iron fence."

Durnik shuddered.

"I managed to visit five of them night before last, but the methods were taking entirely too long, so last night I was a bit more direct. I did sort of linger for a time with the Baron Kelbor, though. He was the one who actually gave the order to have Bethra killed. We had a very nice chat before he left us."

"Kelbor's house is the most closely guarded in Tol Honeth," Ce'Nedra said. "How did you manage to get in?"

"People seldom look up at night—particularly when it's snowing. I went in over the rooftops. Anyway, Kelbor gave

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me some very useful information. It seems that the man who told the Honeths about Bethra's activities was a Mailorean."

"Naradas?" Garion asked quickly.

"No. This one had a black beard."

"Harakan, then?"

"Lots of people have beards, Garion. I'd like a little bit more confirmation—not that I'd object to cutting Harakan up into little pieces, but I'd hate to let the real culprit get away because I was concentrating too much on our old friend," His face went bleak again. "That's particularly true in view of the fact that, from what Kelbor said, this helpful Mailorean arranged and participated in Bethra's murder—sort of as a favor to the Honeth family."

"I do wish that you'd go take a bath, Prince Kheldar," Ce'Nedra said. "What on earth possessed you to take up residence in a garbage heap?"

He shrugged. "I was interrupted during my last visit, and a number of people were chasing me. This snow complicated things a bit. My tracks were fairly easy for them to follow. I needed a place to hide, and the garbage heap was handy." His look became disgusted, "It never snows in Tol Honeth."

"You'd be amazed at how many people have told me the same thing today," Garion murmured.

"I really think we should leave almost immediately," Silk said.

"What for?" Durnik asked. "You got away, didn't you?"

"You forget the tracks, Durnik." Silk held up one foot. "Rivan boots—an affectation, perhaps. They're very comfortable, but they do leave distinctive tracks. I expect that it's only going to be a matter of time before somebody puts a few things together and I'm not really in the mood for dodging Honethite assassins. They're fairly inept, but they can be an inconvenience."

The door opened rather quietly, and Silk instantly went into a crouch, his hands diving inside his smeared doublet for his daggers.

"My goodness," the lavender-gowned Velvet said mildly, entering and closing the door behind her, "aren't we jumpy this evening?"

"What are you doing in here?" Silk demanded.

"I was attending the Imperial Ball. You have no idea how much gossip one can pick up at such affairs. The whole ballroom is buzzing with

the accidents that have been befalling

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the Honeths in the past couple nights. Under the circumstances, I thought it might have occurred to you that it was time for us to leave." . "Us?"

"Oh, didn't I tell you? How forgetful of me. Til be joining you."

"You most certainly will nor!" Belgarath said.

"I hate to contradict you, Ancient One," she said regretfully, "but I'm acting on orders." She turned to Silk. "My uncle has been a little nervous about some of your activities during the past few years. He trusts you, my dear Kheldar—you must never think that he doesn't trust you— but he does sort of want somebody to keep an eye on you." She frowned. "I think that he's going to be quite cross when he hears about your midnight visits to the Honeth family."

"You know the rules, Liselle," Silk replied. "Bethra was one of our people. We don't let those things go."

"Naturally not. But Javelin prefers to order that sort of retaliation personally. Your somewhat hasty vengeance has robbed him of that opportunity. You're just too independent, Silk. He's right, you know. You do need to be watched." She pursed her lips slightly. "I must admit, though, that it was a very nice job."

"Now you listen to me, young lady," Belgarath said hotly. "I am not conducting a guided tour for the benefit of the Drasnian spy network."

She gave him a disarming little smile and fondly patted his bearded cheek. "Oh, come now, Belgarath," she said, her soft brown eyes appealing, "do be reasonable. Wouldn't it be more civilized—and convenient—to have me in your party rather than trailing along behind you? I am going to follow my orders, Revered One, whether you like it or not."

"Why is it that I have to be surrounded by women who won't do as they're told?"

Her eyes went very wide. "Because we love you, Immortal One," she explained outrageously. "You're the answer to every maiden's dreams, and we follow you out of blind devotion."

"That's about enough of that, Miss," he said ominously. "You're not going with us, and that's final."

"You know," the dry voice in Garion's mind mused, "/ think I've finally isolated the difficulty I've always had with Belgarath. It's his pure, pigheaded contrariness. He doesn't

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really have any reason for these arbitrary decisions of his. He just does it to irritate me."

"Do you mean that she's supposed to go along?" Garion blurted, so startled that he said it aloud.

"Of course she is. Why do you think I went to all the trouble to get her to Tol Honeth before you all left. Go ahead and tell him."

Belgarath's expression, however, clearly showed that Garion's inadvertent exclamation had already told him that he had just been overruled. "Another visitation, I take it?" he said in a slightly sick tone of voice.

"Yes, Grandfather," Garion said. "I'm afraid so."

"She goes along then?"

Garion nodded.

"I love to watch his expression when he loses one of these arguments," the dry voice said smugly.

Polgara began to laugh.

"What's so funny, Pol?" Belgarath demanded.

"Nothing, father," she replied innocently.

He suddenly threw his hands into the air. "Go ahead," he said in exasperation. "Invite all of Tol Honeth to come along. I don't care."

"Oh, father," Polgara said to him, "stop trying to be such a curmudgeon."

"Curmudgeon? Pol, you watch your tongue."

"That's really very difficult, father, and it makes one look ridiculous. Now, I think we should make a few plans. While the rest of us are changing clothes and packing, why don't you and Garion go explain to Varana that we're going to have to leave. Think up some suitable excuse. I don't know that we necessarily want him to know about Silk's nocturnal activities." She looked at the ceiling thoughtfully. "Dumik and Eriond and Toth will see to the horses, of course," she mused, "and I have a rather special little job for you, Prince Kheldar."

"Oh?"

"Go wash—thoroughly."

"I suppose I should have my clothes laundered as well," he noted,

looking down at his garbage-saturated doublet and hose.

"No, Silk. Not laundered-burned."

"We can't leave tonight, Lady Polgara," Ce'Nedra said. "All the gates of the city are locked, and the legionnaires

won't open them for anybody-except on the Emperor's direct orders."

"I can get us out of the city," Velvet said confidently.

"How are you going to manage that?" Belgarath asked her.

"Trust me."

"I wish people wouldn't keep saying that to me."

"Oh, by the way," she continued, "I saw an old friend of ours today. A large group of Honeths were riding toward the south gate." She looked over at Silk. "You really must have frightened them, Kheldar. They had whole battalions of their soldiers drawn up around them to keep you at a distance. Anyway, riding right in the middle of them and looking every inch a Tolnedran gentleman was the Mallo-rean, Harakan."

"Well, well," Silk said. "Isn't that interesting?"

"Prince Kheldar," Velvet said pleasantly, "please do go visit the baths-or at the very least, don't stand quite so close."

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CHAPTER SIX

A chill gray fog had risen from the river to shroud the broad avenues of Tol Honeth. The snow had turned to rain-a cold drizzle that sifted down through the fog, and, although the roofs and courtyards were still mantled in white, the thoroughfares and avenues were clogged with seeping brown slush, crossed and crisscrossed with the tracks of wagons and carriages. It was nearly midnight when Garion and the others quietly left the grounds of the Imperial Compound, and the few bands of holiday revelers they encountered in the streets were much the worse for drink.

Velvet, riding a chestnut mare and wrapped and cowled in a heavy gray cloak, led them down past the marble-fronted houses of the merchant barons of Tol Honeth, through the empty central marketplace and into the poorer quarters of the city lying to the south. As they turned the corner of a

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side street, an authoritative voice came out of the fog. "Halt!"

Velvet reined in her horse and sat waiting as a squad of helmeted and red-cloaked legionnaires armed with lances marched out of the rainy

mist. "State your business, please," the sergeant in charge of the patrol said brusquely.

"It's not really business, dear fellow," Velvet replied brightly. "We're on our way to an amusement. Count Norain is giving a party at his house. You do know the count, don't you?"

Some of the suspicion faded from the sergeant's face. "No, your Ladyship," he answered. "I'm afraid not."

"You don't know Norry?" Velvet exclaimed. "What an extraordinary thing! I thought everyone in Tol Honeth knew him—at least he always says so. Poor Norry's going to be absolutely crushed. I'll tell you what. Why don't you and your men come along with us so that you can meet him? You'll adore it. His parties are always so amusing." She gave the sergeant a wide-eyed, vapid smile.

"I'm sorry, your Ladyship, but we're on duty. Are you certain that you're following the right street, though? You're entering one of the meaner sections of the city, and I don't recall any noblemen's houses hereabouts."

"It's a short cut," Velvet told him. "You see, we go down through here, and then we turn left." She hesitated, "Or was it right? I forget exactly, but I'm sure one of my friends knows the way."

"You must be careful in this part of town, your Ladyship. There are footpads and cutpurses about."

"My goodness!"

"You really ought to be carrying torches."

"Torches? Great Nedra, no! The smell of the smoke from a torch lingers in my hair for weeks. Are you sure you can't join us? Norry's parties are so delightful."

"Give the count our regrets, your Ladyship,"

"Come along, then," Velvet said to the others. "We really must hurry. We're terribly late as it is. Good-bye, Captain."

"Sergeant, your Ladyship."

"Oh? Is there a difference?"

"Never mind, your Ladyship. Hurry along now. You wouldn't want to miss any of the fun."

Velvet laughed gaily and moved her horse out at a steady trot.

"Who is Count Norain?" Durnik asked her curiously when they were out of earshot of the patrol.

"A figment of my imagination, Goodman Durnik," Velvet laughed.

"She's a Drasnian, all right," Belgarath murmured.

"Did you have any doubts, Eternal One?"

"Exactly where are you taking us, Liselle?" Polgara asked as they rode on down the foggy street.

"There's a house I know, Lady Polgara. It's not a very nice house, but it's built up against the south wall of the city, and it has a very useful back door."

"How can it have a back door if it's up against the city wall?" Ce'Nedra asked, pulling the hood of her green cloak forward to shield her face from the rainy mist.

Velvet winked at her. "You'll see," she said.

The street down which they rode grew shabbier and shabbier. The buildings looming out of the fog were built of plain stone instead of marble, and many of them were windowless warehouses, presenting blank faces to the street.

They passed a rank-smelling tavern from which came shouts and laughter and snatches of bawdy songs. Several drunken men burst from the door of the tavern and began pummeling each other with fists and clubs. One burly, unshaven ruffian lurched into the street and stood swaying in their path.

"Stand aside," Velvet said coolly to him.

"Who says so?"

The impassive Toth moved his horse up beside Velvet's mount, reached out with one huge arm, set the tip of the staff he carried against the man's chest, and gave him a light push.

"Just watch out who you're shoving!" The drunken man said, knocking the staff aside.

Without changing expression, Toth flicked his wrist, and the tip of the staff cracked sharply against the side of the fellow's head, sending him reeling, vacant-eyed and twitching, into the gutter.

"Why, thank you," Velvet said pleasantly to the mute giant, and Toth inclined his head politely as they rode on down the shabby street.

"What in the world were they fighting about?" Ce'Nedra asked curiously.

"It's a way to keep warm," Silk replied. "Firewood's

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expensive in Tol Honeth, and a nice friendly fight stirs up the blood. I thought that everybody knew that."

"Are you making fun of me?"

"Would I do that?"

"He's always had a certain streak of flippancy in his nature, your Majesty," Velvet said.

"Liselle," Ce'Nedra told her quite firmly, "since we're going to be traveling together, let's drop the formalities. My name is Ce'Nedra."

"If your Majesty prefers it that way."

"My Majesty does."

"All right then, Ce'Nedra," the blond girl said with a warm smile.

They rode on through the unlighted streets of the Imperial City until they reached the looming mass of the south wall. "We go this way," Velvet told them, turning down a rainy street lying between the wall and a long string of warehouses. The house to which she led them was a stout, two-storey building, its stones black and shiny from the rain and fog, and it was set about a central courtyard and had a heavy front gate. Its narrow windows were all tightly shuttered, and a single small lantern gleamed over its gate.

Velvet dismounted carefully, holding her skirt up to keep its hem out of the slush. She stepped to the gate and tugged at a rope. Inside the courtyard a small bell tinkled. A voice from inside answered, and she spoke quietly for a moment to the gatekeeper. Then there was the sound of a clanking chain, and the gate swung open. Velvet led her horse into the courtyard, and the rest followed her. Inside, Garion looked around curiously. The courtyard had been cleared of snow, and the cobblestones gleamed wetly in the still-falling drizzle. Several saddled horses stood under an overhanging roof, and a couple of well-appointed carriages were drawn up to a solid-looking door.

"Are we going inside?" Ce'Nedra asked, looking about curiously.

Velvet gave her a speculative look, then turned to look at Eriond. "Perhaps that might not be such a good idea," she said.

The muffled sound of laughter came from somewhere inside, followed by a woman's shrill squeal.

One of Polgara's eyebrows went up. "I think Liselle is right," she said firmly. "We'll wait out here."

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"I'm agrown woman, Lady Polgara," Ce'Nedra objected.

"Not that grown, dear."

"Will you accompany me, Prince Kheldar?" Velvet asked the little man. "The presence of an unescorted woman in this house is sometimes misunderstood."

"Of course," he replied.

"We won't be long," Velvet assured the rest of them. With Silk at her side, she went to the door, rapped on its panels, and was immediately admitted.

"I still don't see why we can't wait inside where it's warm and dry," Ce'Nedra complained, shivering and pulling her cloak more tightly about her.

"I'm sure you would if you went in there," Polgara told her. "A little rain won't hurt you."

"What could possibly be that bad about this house?"

There was another squeal from inside followed by more raucous laughter.

"That, for one thing," Polgara replied.

Ce'Nedra's eyes grew wide. "You mean that it's one of those places?" Her face suddenly went bright red.

"It's got all the earmarks of it."

After about a quarter of an hour, a slanting cellar door at the rear of the rain-drenched courtyard creaked open, and Silk came up from below carrying a gleaming lantern. "We're going to have to lead the horses down," he told them.

"Where are we going?" Garion asked.

"Down to the cellars. This place is full of surprises."

In single file, leading their skittish horses, they followed down a slanting stone ramp. From somewhere below, Garion could hear the gurgle and wash of running water; when they reached the foot of the ramp, he saw that the narrow passageway opened out into a large, cavelike chamber, roofed over with massive stone arches and dimly lighted by smoky torches. The center of the chamber was filled with dark, oily-looking water, and a narrow walkway ran around three sides of the pool. Moored to the walkway was a fair-sized barge, painted black and with a dozen dark-cloaked oarsmen on each side.

Velvet stood on the walkway beside the barge. "We can only cross two at a time," she said to them, her voice echoing hollowly in the vaulted chamber, "because of the horses."

"Cross?" Ce'Nedra said. "Cross where?"

"To the south bank of the Nedrane," Velvet replied.

"But we're still inside the city walls."

"Actually, we're under the city wall, Ce'Nedra. The only thing between us and the river are two of the marble slabs that form the exterior facing."

There came then the clanking of a heavy windlass somewhere in the dimness, and the front wall of the subterranean harbor creaked slowly open, dividing in the middle and swinging ponderously on great, well-greased iron hinges. Through the opening between the two slowly moving stone slabs, Garion could see the rain-dimpled surface of the river moving slowly by with its far shore lost in the dripping fog.

"Very clever," Belgarath said. "How long has this house been here?"

"Centuries," Velvet replied. "It was built to provide just about anything anyone could desire. Occasionally, one of the customers wants to leave—or enter—the city unobserved. That's what this place is for."

"How did you find out about it?" Garion asked her.

She shrugged. "Bethra owned the house. She told Javelin about its secrets."

Silk sighed. "She even reaches out from the grave to help us."

They were ferried in pairs across the foggy, rain-swept expanse of the Nedrane to land on a narrow, mist-shrouded sand beach backed by a thicket of willows. When Velvet finally joined them, it was perhaps three hours past midnight. "The oarsmen will brush our tracks out of the sand," she told them. "It's part of the service."

"Did this cost very much?" Silk asked her.

"A great deal, actually, but it comes out of the budget of the Drasnian Embassy. Your cousin didn't like that too much, but I persuaded him to pay—finally."

Silk grinned viciously.

"We have a few hours left until daylight," Velvet continued. "There's a wagon road on the other side of these willows, and it joins the Imperial Highway about a mile or so downriver. We should probably travel at a walk until we're out of earshot of the city. The legionnaires at the south gate might become curious if they hear galloping."

They mounted their horses in the soggy darkness and rode through the willows, down onto the muddy wagon track.

Garion pulled his horse in beside Silk's. "What was going on in that place?" he asked curiously.

"Almost anything you could imagine." Silk laughed. "And probably a number of things you couldn't. It's a very interesting house with all sorts of diversions for people with enough money to be able to afford them."

"Did you recognize anybody there?"

"Several, actually—some highly respected members of the noble houses of the Empire."

Ce'Nedra, who rode directly behind them, sniffed disdainfully. "I cannot understand why any man would choose to frequent that sort of place."

"The customers are not exclusively male, Ce'Nedra," Silk told her.

"You can't be serious."

"A fair number of the highborn ladies of Tol Honeth have found all kinds of interesting ways to relieve their boredom. They wear masks, of course—although very little else. I recognized one countess, however—one of the pillars of the Horbite family."

"If she was wearing a mask, how could you recognize her?"

"She has a distinctive birthmark—in a place where it's seldom seen. Some years back, she and I were quite friendly, and she showed it to me."

There was a long silence. "I don't know that I really want to discuss this any more," Ce'Nedra said primly and nudged her horse past them to join Polgara and Velvet.

"She did ask," Silk protested innocently to Garion. "You heard her, didn't you?"

They rode south for several days in clearing weather. Erastide had passed virtually unnoticed while they were on the road, and Garion felt a strange kind of regret about that. Since his earliest childhood, the midwinter holiday had been one of the high points of the year. To allow it to pass unobserved seemed somehow to violate something very sacred. He wished that there might have been time to buy something special for Ce'Nedra, but about the best he could manage in the way of a gift was a tender kiss.

Some leagues above Tol Borune, they met a richly dressed couple riding north toward the Imperial Capital, accompanied by a dozen or so liveried servants. "You there, fellow," the velvet-clad nobleman called condescendingly to Silk,

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who happened to be riding in the lead, "what news from Tol Honeth?"

"The usual, your Lordship," Silk replied obsequiously. "Assassinations, plots, and intrigues—the normal amusements of the highborn."

"I don't care much for your tone, fellow," the nobleman said.

"And I don't care much for being called 'fellow,' either."

"We've heard such amazing stories," the giddy-looking lady in a fur-lined red velvet cape said breathlessly. "Is it true that someone is actually trying to kill all the Honeths? We heard that whole families have been murdered in their beds."

"Balera," her husband said in disgust, "you're just repeating wild rumors. What could a seedy-looking commoner like this know about what's really happening in the capital? I'm sure that if there were any substance to those wild stories, Naradas would have told us."

"Naradas?" Silk's eyes suddenly filled with interest. "An Angarak merchant with colorless eyes?"

"You know him?" the nobleman asked with some surprise.

"I know 0/him, your Lordship," Silk replied carefully. "It's not wise to go around announcing that you're acquainted with that one. You did know that the Emperor has put a price on his head, didn't you?"

"Naradas? Impossible!"

"I'm sorry, your Honor, but it's common knowledge all over Tol Honeth. If you know where to put your hands on him, you can earn yourself a thousand gold crowns without much effort."

"A thousand crowns!"

Silk looked around conspiratorially. "I wouldn't really want this to go any further," he said in a half whisper, "but it's widely rumored in Tol Honeth that those gold coins he's so free with are false."

"False?" the noble exclaimed, his eyes suddenly bulging.

"Very clever imitations," Silk continued. "Just enough gold is mixed with baser metals to make the coins look authentic, but they aren't worth a tenth of their face value."

The noble's face turned pasty white, and he clutched involuntarily at the purse attached to his belt.

"It's all part of a plot to destroy the Tolnedran economy

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by debasing the coinage," Silk added. "The Honeths were involved in it in some way, and that's why they're all being murdered. Of course, anyone caught with any of those coins in his possession is immediately hanged."

"What?"

"Naturally." Silk shrugged. "The Emperor intends to root out this monstrous business immediately. Stern measures are absolutely essential."

"I'm ruined!" the nobleman groaned. "Quickly, Balera!" he said, wheeling his horse, "we must return to Tol Borune at once!" And he led his frightened wife back southward at a dead run.

"Don't you want to hear about which kingdom was behind it all?" Silk called after them. Then he doubled over in his saddle, convulsed with laughter.

"Brilliant, Prince Kheldar," Velvet murmured admiringly.

"This Naradas moves around quite a bit, doesn't he?" Durnik said.

"I think I just put a bit of an anchor on him," Silk smirked. "Once that rumor spreads, I expect that he's going to have a little trouble spending his money—not to mention the interest that reward I mentioned is going to generate in certain quarters."

"That was a dreadful thing you did to that poor nobleman, though," Velvet said disapprovingly. "He's on his way back to Tol Borune to empty out all his strongboxes and bury the money."

Silk shrugged. "That's what he gets for consorting with Angaraks. Shall we press on?"

They passed Tol Borune without stopping and rode on south toward the Wood of the Dryads. When the ancient forest came into view on the southern horizon, Polgara pulled her horse in beside the mount of the dozing Belgar-ath. "I think we should stop by and pay our respects to Xantha, father," she said.

The old man roused himself and squinted in the direction of the Wood. "Maybe," he grunted doubtfully.

"We owe her the courtesy, father, and it's not really out of our way."

"All right, Pol," he said, "but just a brief stop. We're months behind Zandramas already."

They crossed the last band of open fields and rode in under

the ancient, mossy oaks. The leaves had fallen to the chill winds of winter, and the bare limbs of the huge trees were starkly etched against the sky.

A peculiar change came over Ce'Nedra as they entered the Wood.

Although it was still not really warm, she pushed back the hood of her cloak and shook out her coppery curls, causing her tiny, acorn-shaped gold earrings to tinkle musically. Her face became strangely calm, no longer mirroring the sorrow that had marked it since the abduction of her son. Her eyes became soft, almost unfocused. "I have returned," she murmured into the quiet air beneath the spreading trees.

Garion felt, rather than heard, the soft, murmuring response. From all around him he seemed to hear a sibilant sighing, although there was no trace of a breeze. The sighing was almost like a chorus, joining just below the level of hearing into a quiet, mournful song, a song filled with a gentle regret and at the same time an abiding hope.

"Why are they sad?" Eriond quietly asked Ce'Nedra.

"Because it's winter," she replied. "They mourn the falling of their leaves and regret the fact that the birds have all flown south."

"But spring will come again," he said.

"They know, but winter always saddens them."

Velvet was looking curiously at the little queen.

"Ce'Nedra's background makes her peculiarly sensitive to trees," Polgara explained.

"I didn't know that Tolnedrans were that interested in the out-of-doors."

"She's only half Tolnedran, Liselle. Her love of trees comes from the other side of her heritage."

"I'm a Dryad," Ce'Nedra said simply, her eyes still dreamy. -

"I didn't know that."

"We didn't exactly make an issue of it," Belgarath told her. "We were having trouble enough getting the Alorns to accept a Tolnedran as the Rivan Queen without complicating matters by telling them that she was a nonhuman as well."

They made a simple camp not far from the place where they had been set upon by the hideous mud-men Queen Sal-missra had dispatched to attack them so many years before. Because they could not hew limbs from live trees in this sacred wood, they were obliged to make shelters as best they could with what they found lying on the leaf-strewn forest

floor, and their fire was of necessity very small. As twilight settled slowly over the silent Wood, Silk looked dubiously at the tiny, flickering flame and then out at the vast darkness moving

almost visibly out from among the trees. "I think we're in for a cold night," he predicted.

Garion slept badly. Although he had piled fallen leaves deeply in the makeshift bed he shared with Ce'Nedra, their damp cold seemed to seep through to chill his very bones. He awoke from a fitful doze just as the first pale, misty light seeped in among the trees. He sat up stiffly and was about to throw off his blanket, but stopped, Eriond was sitting on a fallen log on the other side of their long-dead campfire, and sitting beside him was a tawny-haired Dryad.

"The trees say that you are a friend," the Dryad was saying as she absently toyed with a sharp-tipped arrow.

"I'm fond of trees," Eriond replied.

"That's not exactly the way they meant it."

"I know."

Garion carefully pushed his blankets aside and stood up.

The Dryad's hand moved swiftly toward the bow lying at her side, then she stopped. "Oh," she said, "it's you." She looked at him critically. Her eyes were as grey as glass. "You've gotten older, haven't you?"

"It's been quite a few years," he said, trying to remember just exactly where he had seen her before.

A faint hint of a smile touched her lips. "You don't remember me, do you?"

"Well, sort of."

She laughed, then picked up her bow. She set the arrow she was holding to the string and pointed it at him. "Does this help your memory at all?"

He blinked. "Weren't you the one who wanted to kill me?"

"It was only fair, after all. I was the one who caught you, so I should have been the one who got to kill you."

"Do you kill every human you catch?" Eriond asked her.

She lowered her bow. "Well, not every one of them. Sometimes I find other uses for them."

Garion looked at her a bit more closely. "You haven't changed a bit. You still look the same as before."

"I know." Her eyes grew challenging. "And pretty?" she prompted.

"Very pretty."

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"What a nice thing for you to say. Maybe I'm glad that I didn't kill you after all. Why don't you and I go someplace, and you can say some more nice things to me?"

"That's enough, Xbel," Ce'Nedra said tartly from her bed of leaves. "He's mine, so don't get any ideas."

"Hello, Ce'Nedra," the tawny-haired Dryad said as calmly as if they had talked together within the past week. "Wouldn't you be willing to share him with one of your own sisters?"

"You wouldn't lend me your comb, would you?"

"Certainly not—but that's entirely different."

"There's no way that I could ever make you understand," Ce'Nedra said, pushing back her blankets and rising to her feet.

"Humans." Xbel sighed. "You all have such funny ideas." She looked speculatively at Eriond, her slim little hand softly touching his cheek. "How about this one? Does it belong to you, too?"

Pofgara came out of another one of their makeshift shelters. Her face was calm, although one of her eyebrows was raised. "Good morning, Xbel," she said. "You're up early."

"I was hunting," the Dryad replied. "Does this blond one belong to you, Polgara? Ce'Nedra won't share that one of hers with me, but maybe—" Her hand lingeringly touched Eriond's soft curls.

"No, Xbel," Polgara said firmly.

Xbel sighed again. "None of you are any fun at all," she pouted. Then she stood up. She was as tiny as Ce'Nedra and as slender as a willow. "Oh," she said, "I almost forgot. Xantha says that I'm supposed to take you to her."

"But you got sidetracked, didn't you?" Ce'Nedra added drily.

"The day hasn't even got started yet." The Dryad shrugged.

Then Belgarath and Silk came out into the open area around the cold fire pit; a moment later, Durnik and Toth joined them.

"You have such a lot of them," Xbel murmured warmly. "Surely you can spare me one for just a little while."

"What's this?" Silk asked curiously.

"Never mind, Silk," Polgara told him. "Xantha wants to see us. Right after breakfast, Xbel here will show us the way—won't you, Xbel?"

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"I suppose so." Xbel sighed a bit petulantly. After their simple breakfast, the tawny-haired Dryad led them through the ancient Wood.

Belgarath, leading his horse, walked beside her, and the two of them seemed deep in a conversation of some kind. Garion noticed that his grandfather furtively reached into his pocket from time to time and offered something to the siim Dryad—something she greedily snatched and popped into her mouth. "What's he giving her?" Velvet asked. "Sweets," Polgara said, sounding disgusted. "They're not good for her, but he always brings sweets with him when he comes into this Wood."

"Oh," Velvet said, "I see." She pursed her lips. "Isn't she a bit young to be so—well—"

Ce'Nedra laughed. "Appearances can be deceiving, Lis-elle. Xbel is quite a bit older than she looks." "How old would you say?"

"Two or three hundred years at least. She's the same age as her tree, and oak trees live for a very long time."

Back in the forest, Garion heard giggles, whispers, and the faint tinkle of little golden bells; once in a while he caught a glimpse of a flitting patch of color as a Dryad scampered through the trees, her earrings jingling.

Queen Xantha's tree was even more vast than Garion remembered it, its branches as broad as highways and the hollows in its bole opening like the mouths of caves. The Dryads in their brightly colored tunics bedecked the huge limbs like flowers, giggling and whispering and pointing at the visitors. Xbel led them into the broad, moss-covered clearing beneath the tree, put her fingers to her lips, and made a curiously birdlike whistle.

Queen Xantha, with her red-haired daughter Xera at her side, emerged from one of the hollows in the vast trunk and greeted them as they dismounted. Ce'Nedra and Xera flew into each others' arms even as the queen and Polgara warmly embraced. Xantha's golden hair was touched with gray at the temples, and her gray-green eyes were tired. "Are you unwell, Xantha?" Polgara asked her. The queen sighed. "The time is growing close, that's all." She looked up affectionately at her enormous oak. "He's growing very tired, and his weight presses down upon his roots. He finds it harder and harder each spring to revive himself and put forth leaves."

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"Can I do anything?"

"No, dearest Polgara. There's no pain—just a great weariness. I won't mind sleeping. Now, what brings you into our Wood?"

"Someone has taken my baby," Ce'Nedra cried, flying into her aunt's arms.

"What are you saying, child?"

"It happened last summer, Xantha," Belgarath told her. "We're trying to find the trail of the one who stole him—a Malloreal named

Zandramas. We think that the abductor sailed south aboard a Nyissan ship."

Xbel was standing not far from the giant Toth, eyeing his awesomely muscled arms speculatively. "I saw one of the boats of the snake-people late last summer," she mentioned, not taking her eyes off the huge mute, "down where our river empties out into the big lake."

"You never mentioned it Xbel," Xantha said.

"I forgot. Is anybody really interested in what the snake-people do?"

"Big lake?" Durnik said with a puzzled frown. "I don't remember any big lakes here in this Wood."

"It's the one that tastes funny," Xbel told him. "And you can't see the other side."

"You must mean the Great Western Sea, then."

"Whatever you want to call it," she replied indifferently. She continued to look Toth up and down.

"Did this Nyissan ship just sail on by?" Belgarath asked her.

"No," she said. "It got burned up. But that was after somebody got off."

"Xbel," Polgara said, stepping between the tawny-haired little Dryad and the object of her scrutiny, "do you think you can remember exactly what you saw?"

"I suppose so. It wasn't really very much, though. I was hunting, and I saw a boat go up to the beach on the south side of the river. This human in a black cloak with the hood pulled up got off with something in its arms. Then the black boat went back out into the water, and the human on the beach waved one hand at it. That's when the ship caught on fire—all over. All at once."

"What happened to the crew?" Durnik asked her.

"You know those big fish with all the teeth?"

"Sharks?"

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"I guess so. Anyway, the water around the boat was full of them. When the humans jumped off the boat to get away from the fire, the fish ate them all up." She sighed. "It was a terrible waste. I was hoping that maybe one or two might have gotten away—or maybe even three." She sighed again.

"What did the human on the beach do then?" Polgara asked.

Xbel shrugged. "It waited until the ship burned all up and then it went into the woods on the south side of the river." She stepped around Polgara, her eyes still fixed on the huge mute. "If you're not using this one, Polgara, do you suppose I could borrow it for a little while? I've never seen one quite as big."

Garion spun and ran toward his horse, but Eriond was already there. He held out the reins of his own chestnut stallion. "He's faster, Belgarion," he said. "Take him."

Garion nodded shortly and swung into the saddle.

"Garion!" Ce'Nedra cried, "where are you going?"

But he was already plunging into the forest at a gallop. He was not really thinking as the stallion thundered through the leafless Wood. The only semblance of a thought in his mind was the image the indifferent Xbel had implanted there—a dark figure on the beach with something in its arms. Slowly, however, something else intruded itself on his awareness. There was something strange about the stallion's gait. About every fourth or fifth stride, the horse gave a peculiar lurch, and the wood seemed to blur for an instant. Then the gallop would continue until the next lurch and blurring.

The distance from Xantha's tree to the beach where the River of the Woods emptied into the Great Western Sea was considerable, he knew. At even the fastest gallop, it would take the better part of a day and a half to cover it. But wasn't that the glint of winter sunlight on a huge body of water coming through the trees just ahead?

There was another lurch and that odd blurring; quite suddenly the stallion set his forelegs stiffly, sliding through the sand at the very edge of the rolling surf.

"How did you do that?"

The horse looked back over one shoulder inquiringly.

Then Garion looked around in dismay. "We're on the wrong side of the river," he cried. "We're supposed to be over there." He drew on his will, preparing to translocate

himself to the south beach, but the horse wheeled, took two steps, and lurched again.

They were suddenly on the sandy south beach, and Garion was clinging to the saddle to keep from falling off. For an irrational moment, he wanted to scold the animal for not warning him, but there was something much more important to attend to. He slid down from his saddle and ran along the damp sand at the edge of the water, drawing Iron-grip's sword as he went. The Orb glowed eagerly as he held up the blade. "Geran!" he shouted to it. "Find my son."

Between two strides, the Orb tugged at him, almost jerking him off-balance. He slid to a stop on the hard-packed sand, feeling the

powerful pull of the sword in his hands. The tip lowered, touched the sand once, and then the Orb flared triumphantly as the blade pointed unerringly up the driftwood-uttered beach toward the scrubby forest at its upper end.

It was true! Although he had secretly feared that the hints they had received might have been just another clever ruse, the trail of Zandramas and of his infant son was here after all. A sudden wave of exultation surged through him.

"Run, Zandramas!" he called out. "Run as fast as you can! I have your trail now, and the world isn't big enough for you to find any place to hide from me!"

CHAPTER SEVEN

A chill dampness hung in the air beneath the tangled limbs overhead, and the smell of stagnant water and decay filled their nostrils. The trees twisted upward from the dark floor of the jungle, seeking the light. Gray-green moss hung in streamers from the trees, and ropy vines crawled up their trunks like thick-bodied serpents. A pale, wispy fog hovered back among the trees, rising foul-smelling and dank from black ponds and sluggishly moving streams.

The road they followed was ancient, and it was overgrown with tangled brush. Garion rode now at the head of the party with his sword resting on the pommel of his saddle and the Orb eagerly tugging him on. It was late afternoon, and the day that had been gray and overcast to begin with settled slowly, almost sadly toward evening.

"I didn't know that the Nyissans had ever built roads," 110

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Ce'Nedra said, looking at the weed-choked track lying ahead of them.

"They were all abandoned after the Marag invasion at the end of the second millennium," Belgarath told her. "The Nyissans discovered that their highway system provided too easy a route for a hostile army, so Salmissra ordered that all the roads be allowed to go back to the jungle."

The sword in Garion's hands swung slightly, pointing toward the thick undergrowth at the side of the road. He frowned slightly, reining in. "Grandfather," he said, "the trail goes off into the woods."

The rest of them pulled up, peering into the obscuring bushes. "I'll go take a look," Silk said, sliding down from his horse and walking toward the side of the road.

"Watch out for snakes," Durnik called after him.

Silk stopped abruptly. "Thanks," he said in a voice dripping with sarcasm. Then he pushed into the brush, moving carefully and with his eyes fixed on the ground.

They waited, listening to the rustling crackle as Silk moved around back in the undergrowth. "There's a campsite back here," he called to them, "an old fire pit and several lean-tos."

"Let's have a look," Belgarath said, swinging down out of his saddle.

They left Toth with the horses and pushed back into the stiffly rustling brush. Some yards back from the road they came to a clearing and found Silk standing over a cold fire pit with a number of charred sticks lying at the bottom. "Was Zandramas here?" he asked Garion.

Garion moved forward, holding out his sword. It moved erratically in his hands, pointing first this way and then that. Then it tugged him toward one of the partially collapsed shelters. When he reached it, the sword dipped, touched the ground inside the rude lean-to, and the Orb flared.

"I guess that answers that question," Silk said with a certain satisfaction.

Durnik had knelt by the fire pit and was carefully turning over the charred sticks and peering into the ashes beneath. "It's been several months," he said.

Silk looked around. "From the number of shelters I'd say that at least four people made camp here."

Belgarath grunted. "Zandramas isn't alone any more, then."

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Eriond had been curiously poking into the crude shelters and he reached down, picked something up from the ground inside one of them, and came back to join the rest. Wordlessly, he held out the object in his hand to Ce'Nedra.

"Oh," she cried, taking it quickly and clutching it tightly against her.

"What is it, Ce'Nedra?" Velvet asked.

The little queen, her eyes brimming, mutely held out the object Eriond had just given her. It was a small, woof-knit cap, lying damp and sad-looking in her hand. "It's my baby's," she said in a choked voice. "He was wearing it the night he was stolen."

Durnik cleared his throat uncomfortably. "It's getting late," he said quietly. "Did we want to set up for the night here?"

Garion looked at Ce'Nedra's agonized face. "I don't think so," he replied. "Let's go on just a little farther."

Durnik also looked at the grieving queen. "Right," he agreed.

About a half mile farther down the road, they reached the ruins of a long-abandoned city, half buried in the rank jungle growth. Trees

buckled up the once-broad streets, and climbing vines wreathed their way upward about the empty towers.

"It seems like a good location," Durnik said, looking around the ruins. "Why did the people just go away and leave it empty?"

"There could be a half-dozen reasons, Durnik," Polgara said. "A pestilence, politics, war—even a whim."

"A whim?" He looked startled.

"This is Nyissa," she reminded him. "Salmissra rules here, and her authority over her people is the most absolute in all the world. If she came here at some time in the past and told the people to leave, they'd have left."

He shook his head disapprovingly. "That's wrong," he said.

"Yes, dear," she agreed. "I know."

They made camp in the abandoned ruins, and the next morning they continued to ride in a generally southeasterly direction. As they pushed deeper and deeper into the Nyis-san jungle, there was a gradual change in the vegetation. The trees loomed higher, and their trunks grew thicker. The underbrush became more dense, and the all-pervading reek of

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stagnant water grew stronger. Then, shortly before noon, a slight, vagrant breeze suddenly brought another scent to Garion's nostrils. It was an odor of such overpowering sweetness that it almost made him giddy.

"What is that lovely fragrance?" Velvet asked, her brown eyes softening.

Just then they rounded a bend, and there, standing in glory at the side of the road, rose the most beautiful tree Garion had ever seen. Its leaves were a shimmering gold, and long crimson vines hung in profusion from its limbs. It was covered with enormous blossoms of red, blue, and vivid lavender, and among those blossoms hung rich-looking clusters of shiny purple fruit that seemed almost ready to burst. An overwhelming sense of longing seemed to come over him as the sight and smell of that glorious tree touched his very heart.

Velvet, however, had already pushed past him, her face fixed in a dreamy smile as she rode toward the tree.

"Liselle!" Polgara's voice cracked like a whip. "Stop!"

"But—" Velvet's voice was vibrant with longing.

"Don't move," Polgara commanded. "You're in dreadful danger."

"Danger?" Garion said. "It's only a tree, Aunt Pol."

"Come with me, all of you," she commanded. "Keep a tight rein on your horses, and don't go anywhere near that tree." She rode slowly forward at a walk, holding her horse's reins firmly in both hands.

"What's the matter, Pol?" Durnik asked.

"I thought that all of those had been destroyed," she muttered, looking at the gorgeous tree with an expression of flinty hatred.

"But—" Velvet objected, "why would anyone want to destroy something so lovely?"

"Of course it's lovely. That's how it hunts."

"Hunts?" Silk said in a startled voice. "Polgara, it's only a tree. Trees don't hunt."

"This one does. One taste of its fruit is instant death, and the touch of its blossoms paralyzes every muscle in the body. Look there." She pointed at something in the high grass beneath the tree. Garion peered into the grass and saw the skeleton of a large-sized animal. A half-dozen of the crimson tendrils hanging from one of the flower-decked branches had

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poked their way down into the animal's rib cage and interwoven themselves into the mossy bones.

"Do not look at the tree," Polgara told them all in a deadly tone. "Do not think about the fruit, and try not to inhale the fragrance of its flowers too deeply. The tree is trying to lure you to within range of its tendrils. Ride on and don't look back." She reined in her horse.

"Aren't you coming, too?" Durnik asked with a worried look.

"I'll catch up," she replied. "I have to attend to this monstrosity first."

"Do as she says," Belgarath told them. "Let's go."

As they rode on past that beautiful, deadly tree, Garion felt a wrench of bitter disappointment; as they moved farther down the road away from it, he seemed to hear a silent snarl of frustration. Startled, he glanced back once and was amazed to see the crimson tendrils hanging from the branches writhing and lashing at the air in a kind of vegetative fury. Then he turned back quickly as Ce'Nedra made a violent retching sound.

"What's the matter?" he cried.

"The tree!" she gasped. "It's horrible! It feeds on the agony of its victims as much as upon their flesh!"

As they rounded another bend in the road, Garion felt a violent surge, and there was a huge concussion behind them, followed by the sizzling crackle of a fire surging up through living wood. In his mind he heard an awful scream filled with pain, anger, and a malevolent hatred. A pall of greasy black smoke drifted low to the ground, bringing with it a dreadful stench.

It was perhaps a quarter of an hour later when Polgara rejoined them. "It will not feed again," she said with a note of satisfaction in her voice. She smiled almost wryly. "That's one of the few things Salmissra and I have ever agreed upon," she added. "There's no place in the world for that particular tree."

They rode on down into Nyissa, following the weed-choked track of the long-abandoned highway. About noon of the following day, Eriond's chestnut stallion grew restive, and the blond young man pulled up beside Garion, who still rode in the lead with his sword on the pommel of his saddle. "He wants to run." Eriond laughed gently. "He always wants to run."

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Garion looked over at him. "Eriond," he said, "there's something I've been meaning to ask you."

"Yes, Belgarion?"

"When I was riding your horse to the beach back up there in the Wood of the Dryads, he did something that was sort of odd."

"Odd? How do you mean?"

"It should have taken nearly two days to reach the sea, but he did it in about a half an hour."

"Oh," Eriond said, "that."

"Can you explain how he does it?"

"It's something he does sometimes when he knows that I'm in a hurry to get someplace. He kind of goes to another place, and when he comes back, you're much farther along than you were when he started."

"Where is this other place?"

"Right here—ah! around us—but at the same time, it's not. Does that make any sense?"

"No. Not really."

Eriond frowned in concentration. "You told me one time that you could change yourself into a wolf—the same way Belgarath does."

"Yes."

"And you said that when you do that, your sword is still with you,

but at the same time it's not."

"That's what Grandfather told me."

"I think that's where this other place is—the same place where your sword goes. Distance doesn't seem to mean the same thing there as it does here. Does that explain it at all?"

Garion laughed. "It doesn't even come close, Eriond, but I'll take your word for it."

About midafternoon the next day, they reached the marshy banks of the River of the Serpent where the highway turned toward the east, following the winding course of that sluggish stream. The sky had cleared, though the pale sunlight had little warmth to it.

"Maybe I'd better scout on ahead," Silk said. "The road looks a bit more well traveled along this stretch, and we didn't exactly make a lot of friends the last time we were here." He spurred his horse into a brisk canter; in a few minutes he was out of sight around a bend in the weed-choked road.

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"We won't have to go through Sthiss Tor, will we?" Ce'Nedra asked.

"No," Belgarath replied. "It's on the other side of the river." He looked at the screen of trees and brush lying between the ancient highway and the mossy riverbank. "We should be able to slip past it without too much trouble."

An hour or so later, they rounded a bend in the road and caught a glimpse of the strange, alien-looking towers of the capital of the snake-people rising into the air on the far side of the river. There seemed to be no coherent pattern to Nyis-san architecture. Some of the towers rose in slender spires, and others were bulky, with bulblike tops. Some even twisted in spirals toward the sky. They were, moreover, painted every possible hue—green, red, yellow, and even some in a garish purple. Silk was waiting for them a few hundred yards farther along the road. "There won't be any trouble getting past here without being seen from the other side," he reported, "but there's someone on up ahead who wants to talk to us."

"Who?" Belgarath asked sharply.

"He didn't say, but he seemed to know we were coming."

"I don't like that very much. Did he say what he wants?"

"Only that he's got a message of some kind for us."

"Let's go find out about this." The old man looked at Garion. "You'd better cover the Orb," he suggested. "Let's keep it out of sight—just to be on the safe side."

Garion nodded, took out a soft, tight-fitting leather sleeve and

pulled it down over the hilt of Iron-grip's sword.

The shaven-headed Nyissan who awaited them was dressed in shabby, stained clothing and he had a long scar running from forehead to chin across an empty eye socket. "We thought you'd get here earlier," he said laconically as they all reined in. "What kept you?"

Garion looked at the one-eyed man closely. "Don't I know you?" he asked. "Isn't your name Issus?"

Issus grunted. "I'm surprised you remember. Your head wasn't too clear the last time we met."

"It wasn't the sort of thing I'd be likely to forget."

"Somebody in the city wants to see you," Issus said.

"I'm sorry, friend," Belgarath told him, "but we're pressed for time. I don't think there's anybody in Sthiss Tor that we need to talk with."

Issus shrugged. "That's up to you. I was paid to meet you

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and give you the message." He turned and started back through the slanting, late-afternoon sunlight toward the rank growth along the river bank. Then he stopped. "Oh. I almost forgot. The man who sent me said to tell you that he has some information about somebody named Zandramas, if that means anything to you."

"Zandramas?" Ce'Nedra said sharply.

"Whoever that is," Issus replied. "If you're interested, I've got a boat. I can take some of you across to the city if you want."

"Give us a minute or two to talk it over," Belgarath said to him.

"Take as long as you want. We can't cross until after dark anyway. I'll wait in the boat while you decide." He went on down through the bushes toward the river bank.

"Who is he?" Silk asked Garion.

"His name is Issus. He's for hire. Last time I saw him, he was working for Sadi—the Chief Eunuch in Salmissra's palace—but I get the feeling that he'll work for anybody as long as he gets paid." He turned to Belgarath. "What do you think, Grandfather?"

The old man tugged at one ear lobe. "It could be some kind of ruse," he said, "but somebody over there knows enough about what we're doing to realize that we're interested in Zandramas. I think I'd like to find out who this well-informed citizen is."

"You won't get anything out of Issus," Silk told him. "I've already tried."

Belgarath pondered a moment. "Go see how big this boat of his is."

Silk went over to the edge of the road and peered down through the bushes. "We can't all go," he reported. "Maybe four of us."

Belgarath scratched his chin. "You, me, Pol, and Gar-ion," he decided. He turned to Durnik. "Take the others— and the horses—and go back into the jungle a ways. This might take us a while. Don't build up any fires that can be seen from the city."

"I'll take care of things, Belgarath."

The boat Issus had rowed across from the city was painted a dull black, and it was moored to a half-sunken log, and screened by overhanging tree limbs. The one-eyed man

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looked critically at Garion. "Do you have to take that big sword?" he asked.

"Yes," Garion replied.

Issus shrugged. "Suit yourself."

As twilight settled on the river, a mist of tiny gnats rose from the surrounding bushes and swarmed about them as they sat in the boat waiting for darkness. Silk absently stapped at his neck.

"Don't jiggle the boat," Issus warned. "The leeches are hungry this time of year, so it's not a good time for swimming."

They sat huddled in the small boat enduring the biting of the gnats as the light gradually faded. After about a half-hour of discomfort, Issus peered out through the concealing branches. "It's dark enough," he said shortly. He untied the boat and pushed it out from the bank with one oar. Then he settled himself and started to row toward the lights of Sthiss Tor on the far side. After about twenty minutes, he swung his boat into the deep shadows beneath the wharf jutting out into the water from the Drasnian enclave, that commercial zone on the river front where northern merchants were permitted to conduct business. A tar-smeared rope was slung under the wharf, and Issus pulled them hand over hand beneath the protecting structure until they reached a ladder. "We go up here," he said, tying his boat to a piling beside the ladder. "Try not to make too much noise."

"Exactly where are you taking us?" Potgara asked him.

"It's not far," he replied and quietly went up the ladder.

"Keep your eyes open," Belgarath muttered. "I don't altogether trust

that fellow."

The streets of Sthiss Tor were dark, since all the ground-level windows were thickly shuttered. Issus moved on catlike feet, keeping to the shadows, although Garion could not be sure if his stealth was out of necessity or merely from habit. As they passed a narrow alleyway, Garion heard a skittering noise coming from somewhere in the darkness, and his hand flew to his sword hilt. "What's that?" he asked.

"Rats." Issus shrugged. "They come up from the river at night to feed on garbage—and then the snakes crawl in out of the jungle to eat the rats." He held up one hand. "Wait here a moment." He moved on ahead to peer cautiously up and down a broad street lying just ahead of them. "It's

clear," he said. "Come ahead. The house we want is just across the street."

"That's Droblek's house, isn't it?" Polgara asked as they joined the furtive Nyissan, "the Drasnian Port Authority?"

"You've been here before, I see. Let's go. They're expecting us."

Droblek himself opened the door of his house in response to Issus' light tap. The Drasnian port official wore a loose-fitting brown robe and was, if anything, more grossly fat than he had been when Garion had last seen him. As he opened the door, he looked nervously out into the street, peering this way and then that in the gloom. "Quickly," he whispered, "Inside—all of you." Once he had closed the door behind them and secured it with a stout lock, he seemed to relax a bit. "My Lady," he wheezed to Polgara with a portly bow, "my house is honored."

"Thank you, Droblek. Are you the one who sent for us?"

"No, my Lady. I helped to make the arrangements, though."

"You seem a bit nervous, Droblek," Silk said to him.

"I'm concealing something in my house that I'd rather not have here, Prince Kheldar. I could get into a lot of trouble if anyone found out about it. The Tolnedran Ambassador always has people watching my house, and he'd delight in embarrassing me."

"Where's the man we're supposed to meet?" Belgarath asked brusquely.

Droblek's face was awed as he replied. "I have a hidden chamber at the back of the house, Ancient One. He's waiting there."

"Let's go see him, then."

"At once, Eternal Belgarath." Waddling and puffing noticeably, the Drasnian official led them down a dimly lighted hallway. At its far end, he ran his hand down the wall and touched one of its stones. With a loud click, an irregularly shaped section of the wall came unlatched to protrude slightly from the rest.

"Exotic," Silk murmured.

"Who's there?" a shrill voice came from the other side of that hidden door.

"It's me—Droblek," the fat man answered. "The people you wanted to see have arrived." He pulled the stone-slab covered door open. "I'll go keep watch," he said to them.

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Beyond the door was a small, dank, hidden chamber lighted by a single candle. Sadi the eunuch stood fearfully beside a battered wooden table. His shaven head was stub-bled and his scarlet silk robe tattered. There was a hunted look about his eyes. "At last," he said with relief.

"What on earth are you doing here, Sadi?" Polgara asked him.

"Hiding," he said. "Come in, please, all of you, and close the door. I don't want anybody to find out accidentally where I am."

They stepped into the small room, and Drobiek pushed the door shut behind them.

"Why is the Chief Eunuch of Salmissra's palace hiding in the house of the Drasnian Port Authority?" Silk asked curiously.

"There's been a slight misunderstanding at the palace, Prince Kheldar," Sadi replied, sinking into a chair by the wooden table. "I'm not Chief Eunuch any more. As a matter of fact, there's a price on my head—a fairly large one, I'm told. Drobiek owed me a favor, so he let me hide here—not very willingly, but—" He shrugged.

"Since we're talking about prices, I'll take my money now," Issus said.

"I have one more little job for you, Issus," the eunuch said in his oddly contralto voice. "Do you think that you could get into the palace?"

"If I need to."

"There's a red leather case in my quarters—under the bed. It has brass hinges. I need it."

"Did you want to discuss the price?"

"I'll pay you whatever you think is fair."

"All right. Let's say double what you already owe me."

"Double?"

"The palace is very dangerous right now."

"You're taking advantage of the situation, Issus."

"Go fetch it yourself then."

Sadi looked at him helplessly. "All right," he surrendered, "double."

"It's always a pleasure doing business with you, Sadi," Issus said flatly. Then he went to the door and slipped out.

"What happened here?" Silk asked the nervous eunuch.

Sadi sighed. "Certain accusations were made against me," he said in a pained voice. "I wasn't entirely prepared

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to defend myself against them, so I thought it might be wiser to take an extended leave from my duties. I've been working too hard lately anyway."

"Were the accusations unfounded?"

Sadi ran one long-fingered hand over his stubbled scalp. "Well—not entirely," he admitted, "but the matter was blown all out of proportion."

"Who took your place at the palace?"

"Sariss." Sadi almost spat the name. "He's a third-rate schemer with no real sense of style at all. Someday I'm going to take a great deal of pleasure in cutting out several things he needs rather badly—with a dull knife."

"Issus told us that you had some information about someone called Zandramas," Belgarath said.

"I do indeed," Sadi replied. He rose from his chair and went to the narrow, unmade bed standing against one wall. He rummaged around under the dirty brown blanket, took out a small silver flask, and opened it. "Excuse me," he said, taking a small sip. He grimaced. "I wish it didn't taste so bad."

Polgara gave him a cool look. "Do you suppose you could tell us what you know about Zandramas—before you start seeing the butterflies?"

Sadi looked at her innocently. "Oh, no. This isn't one of those, Lady Polgara," he assured her, shaking the flask. "It just has a certain calming effect. My nerves have been absolutely destroyed by what's happening in the past few months."

"Why don't we get down to business?" Belgarath suggested.

"Very well. I have something you want, and you have something I want. I think a trade is in order."

"Why don't we discuss that?" Silk said, his eyes suddenly brightening

and his long nose twitching.

"I'm very much aware of your reputation, Prince Kheldar." Sadi smiled. "I'm not foolish enough to try to bargain with you."

"All right, just what is this thing you want from us, Sadi?" Belgarath asked the dead-eyed eunuch.

"You're on your way out of Nyissa. I want you to take me with you. In exchange, I'll tell you everything I've learned about Zandramas."

"Totally out of the question."

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"I think you're speaking in haste, Ancient One. Hear me out first."

"I don't trust you, Sadi," Belgarath said bluntly.

"That's quite understandable. I'm not the sort of man who should be trusted."

"Then why should I saddle myself with you?"

"Because I know why you're following Zandramas—and more importantly, I know where Zandramas is going. It's a very dangerous place for you, but I can arrange a way for us to move around freely once we get there. Now, why don't we put aside all this childishness about trusting each other and get down to business?"

"We're just wasting time here," Belgarath said to the rest of them.

"I can be very useful to you, Ancient One," Sadi told him.

"Or to anyone who might want to know where we are," Silk added.

"That wouldn't be in my own best interests, Kheldar."

"Which brings up an interesting point," Silk said. "I have a splendid opportunity here to turn a quick profit. You mentioned the fact that there's a large price on your head. If you don't want to be co-operative, I might just decide to collect that price. How much did you say it was?"

"You won't do that, Kheldar," Sadi replied placidly. "You're in a hurry to catch up with Zandramas, and there are always a hundred administrative details involved in collecting a reward. It would probably be a month before you saw any of the money, and Zandramas would be that much farther ahead of you by then."

"That's probably true," Silk admitted. He reached for one of his daggers with a regretful expression. "There's this other alternative, however—messy, but usually fairly effective."

Sadi backed away from him. "Belgarath," he said in a faintly alarmed voice.

"That won't be necessary, Silk," the old man said. He turned to Polgara. "See what you can do, Pol," he suggested.

"All right, father." She turned to the eunuch. "Sit down, Sadi," she told him. "I want you to look at something."

"Of course, Lady Polgara," he agreed amiably, seating himself in a chair by the table.

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"Look closely," she said, making a curious gesture in front of his eyes.

The eunuch continued to smile. "How charming," he murmured, looking at something which seemed to have appeared before his eyes. "Can you make it do any other tricks, too?"

She bent forward and looked closely into his eyes. "I see. You're more clever than I thought, Sadi." She turned back to the rest of them. "He's drugged," she said. "Probably what he drank out of that flask. Right now there's absolutely nothing I can do with him."

"That takes us back to the other alternative, doesn't it?" Silk said, reaching for his dagger again.

Polgara shook her head. "Right now, he wouldn't even feel it."

"Oh," Sadi said in a disappointed voice, "you made it go away—and I rather liked it."

"The drug won't last forever." Silk shrugged. "And by the time it wears off, we should be far enough from the city to be able to carve some answers out of him without the screams attracting any attention." His hand strayed again to the hilt of his dagger.

"Alorns," the dry voice in Garion's mind said disgustedly. "Why is it that your solution to every problem comes out of a scabbard?"

"What? "

"Tell the little thief to put away his knife."

"But—"

"Don't argue with me, Garion. You have to have Sadi's information about Zandramas, and I can't give it to you."

"You're not suggesting that we take him along? " Garion was profoundly shocked at the idea.

"I'm not suggesting anything, Garion. I'm telling you. Sadi goes along. You can't do what you have to do without him. Now tell your grandfather."

"He's not going to like it."

"I can face that prospect with enormous fortitude." Then the voice was gone.

"Grandfather," Garion said in a sick tone.

"What?" The old man's tone was testy.

"This isn't my idea, Grandfather, but—" Garion looked at the dreamy-faced eunuch with distaste and then lifted his hands helplessly.

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"You're not serious!" Belgarath exclaimed after a moment.

"I'm afraid so."

"Am I missing something?" Sadi asked curiously.

"Shut up!" Belgarath snapped. Then he turned back to Garion. "Are you absolutely sure?"

Garion nodded dejectedly.

"This is sheer idiocy!" The old man turned and glared at Sadi. Then he reached across the table and took the front of the eunuch's iridescent robe in his fist. "Listen to me very carefully, Sadi," he said from between clenched teeth. "You're going with us, but keep your nose out of that flask. Do you understand me?"

"Of course, Ancient One," the eunuch replied in that same dreamy voice.

"I don't think you fully grasp what I'm talking about," Belgarath continued in a dreadfully quiet voice. "If I catch you with your brains full of dandelion fluff just once, I'll make you wish that Kheldar had gotten to you with his knife first. Do you follow me?"

Sadi's eyes grew wide, and his face blanched. "Y-yes, Belgarath," he stammered fearfully.

"Good. Now start talking. Just exactly what do you know about Zandramas?"

CHAPTER EIGHT

"It all started last year," Sadi began, still eyeing Belgarath apprehensively. "A Mallorean posing as a jewel merchant came to Sthiss Tor and sought out my chief rival at the palace—a petty schemer named Sariss. It was rather general knowledge that Sariss had long coveted my position, but I hadn't gotten around to having him killed yet." He made a face. "A grave oversight, as it turned out. Anyway, Sariss and the Mallorean negotiated for a bit, and the bargain they struck had nothing to do with gem stones. This so-called jeweler needed something that only someone in a position of authority

could provide, so he gave Sariss certain information that Sariss was able to use to discredit me and usurp my position."

"I just love politics, don't you?" Silk said to no one in particular.

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Sadi grimaced again. "The details of my fall from the queen's favor are tedious," he continued, "and I really don't want to bore you with them. At any rate, Sariss supplanted me as Chief Eunuch, and I barely escaped from the palace with my life. Once Sariss had consolidated his position, he was able to keep his part of the bargain he had reached with his Malloreal friend."

"And what exactly did the Malloreal want?" Silk asked.

"This, Prince Kheldar," Sadi said, rising and going to his rumpled cot. He drew a carefully folded parchment from beneath the mattress and handed it to the little man.

Silk read it quickly and then whistled.

"Well?" Belgarath said.

"It's an official document," Silk replied. "At least, it's over the queen's seal. Early last spring, Salmissra dispatched a diplomatic mission to Sendaria."

"That's fairly routine, Silk."

"I know, but there are also some secret instructions to the diplomats. She tells them that they will be met at the mouth of the River of the Serpent by a foreigner, and that they are to render this stranger every possible aid. The gist of the whole thing is that these diplomats were to make arrangements to get the foreigner to the port of Halberg on the west coast of Cherek and to have a Nyissan ship standing off the Rivan coast on a certain date about the middle of last summer."

"Coincidence, perhaps?" Belgarath suggested.

Silk shook his head and held up the parchment. "It identifies the foreigner by name. The diplomats were supposed to identify their passenger by the name 'Zandramas.'"

"That explains a few things, doesn't it?" Garion said.

"May I see that?" Polgara asked.

Silk handed her the parchment.

She looked at it briefly and then held it out to Sadi. "Are you positive that this is Salmissra's seal?" she asked him.

"There's no question about it, Polgara," he replied, "and no one dares to touch that seal without her consent."

"I see."

"How did you come by the document, Sadi?" Silk asked curiously.

"Four copies of all official documents are routinely made, Prince Kheldar. It's one of the resources of those with access

to the queen's favor. The purchase price of the extra copies has been established for centuries."

"All right," Garion said, "so Zandramas came to Nyissa posing as a merchant, arranged to have Sariss replace you as Chief Eunuch, and somehow managed to get Salmissra to issue that order. Is that it?"

"It's not quite that simple, Belgarion," Sadi told him. "The Mallorean merchant was not Zandramas. No one here in Sthiss Tor ever saw Zandramas. The 'stranger' the document talks about joined the diplomats on their way to Sen-daria. So far as I've been able to determine, Zandramas never passed through Sthiss Tor. Not only that, but after the arrangements for the ship to Halberg had been made, all the diplomats conveniently died. They were stopping over at an inn in Camaar on their way to the capital, and there was a fire in the middle of the night. No one escaped the fire."

"That's got a familiar ring to it," Silk said-

"All right then," Garion said, "who was the Mallorean jeweler?"

Sadi spread his hands helplessly. "I was never able to find out," he confessed.

"Did you ever see him?"

"Once. He was a strange-looking fellow. His eyes were absolutely colorless."

There was a long pause, and then Silk said, "That clears up a few other things, doesn't it?"

"Maybe so," Garion said, "but it still doesn't answer my main question. We know who Naradas is working for now. We know how Zandramas got to Cherek and escaped from the Isle of the Winds with my son, but what I need to know is where the trail we're following is going to lead."

Sadi shrugged. "Rak Verkat."

"How did you arrive at that conclusion?" Silk asked him.

"Sariss hasn't been in power long enough to weed out the more untrustworthy of his underlings. I found one who was open to the

notion of private enterprise. Zandramas has to be in Mallorean with Prince Geran by this coming spring, and the route must be by way of Rak Verkat."

"Wouldn't it be shorter to sail from Rak Cthan?" Silk asked.

Sadi looked at him with a faintly surprised expression. "I thought you knew," he said. "Kal Zakath has put a very

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handsome price on the head of Zandramas, and the Mallo-rean reserves are concentrated at Rak Hagga. If Zandramas tried to go through Hagga to reach Cthan, all those troops would drop whatever they were doing to go head-hunting. The only safe port for Zandramas to sail from is Rak Verkat."

"Was this underling you bribed reliable?" Silk demanded. "Of course not. As soon as he had finished telling me all this, he had planned to turn me in for the reward—dead, naturally, so he didn't really have any reason to lie to me, and he was too stupid to make up a coherent lie anyway." The eunuch smiled bleakly. "I know of a certain plant, though. It's a very reliable plant. The man was telling me the absolute truth. As a matter of fact, he kept telling me the truth long after it had begun to bore me. Sariss provided Zandramas with an escort across Nyissa and detailed maps of the shortest route to the Isle of Verkat." "Was that all the fellow said?" Garion asked. "Oh, no," Sadi replied. "He was busy confessing to me that he had cheated on an examination in school when I finally had Issus cut his throat. I can only deal with so much truth in one day."

"All right," Garion said, ignoring that, "Zandramas is going to the Isle of Verkat. How does that help us?"

"The route Zandramas will have to follow will be roundabout—because of that reward I mentioned. We, on the other hand, can go straight across southern Cthol Murgos to the Isle. It will save us months."

"That route goes right through the war zone," Silk protested.

"That's no particular problem. I can take you directly through to Verkat without any hindrance from either the Murgos or the Malloreans." "How do you propose to manage that?" "When I was younger, I was engaged in the slave trade in Cthol Murgos. I know all the routes and I know whom to bribe and whom to avoid. Slavers are useful to both sides in the war between the Murgos and Malloreans, so they're allowed to move around freely. All we have to do is dress as slave traders, and no one will interfere with us."

"What's to keep you from selling us to the Grolims as soon as we cross the border?" Silk asked bluntly. "Self-interest." Sadi shrugged. "Grolims are an ungrate-

fill lot. If I sell you to them, it's quite likely that they'll turn around and sell me to Salmissra. I don't think I'd like that at all."

"Is she really that angry with you?" Garion asked.

"Irritated," Sadi said. "A snake doesn't really get angry. I've heard, however, that she wants to bite me personally. That's a great honor, of course, but one I'd prefer to forgo."

The door to the hidden room clicked open, and Droblek looked in. "Issus is back," he said.

"Good," Belgarath replied. "I want to get back across the river before morning."

The one-eyed man came in carrying the case Sadi had described. It was a flat, square box a couple of feet across and several inches thick. "What's in this, Sadi?" he asked. "It gurgles." He took the case.

"Be careful man!" Sadi exclaimed. "Some of those bottles are fragile."

"What's this?" Belgarath demanded.

"A bit of this, a bit of that," Sadi replied evasively.

"Drugs?"

"And poisons and antidotes—a few aphrodisiacs, an anesthetic or two, a fairly effective truth drug—and Zith."

"What is Zith?"

"Zith is a who, Ancient One, not a what. I never go anywhere without her." He opened the case and lovingly took out a small earthenware bottle, securely corked and with a series of small holes encircling its neck. "Would you hold this, please?" he said, handing the bottle to Silk. "I want to make sure Issus didn't break anything." He began to carefully examine the row after row of little vials nested in velvet-lined pockets inside the case.

Silk looked curiously at the bottle, then took hold of the cork.

"I really wouldn't do that, Prince Kheldar," Sadi advised. "You might get a nasty surprise."

"What's in here?" Silk asked, shaking the bottle.

"Please, Kheldar. Zith becomes vexed when people shake her." Sadi closed the case, set it aside, and took the bottle from Silk. "There, there," he said to it in a crooning voice. "It's nothing to be alarmed about, dear. I'm right here and I won't let him disturb you any more."

From inside the bottle came a peculiar purring sound.

"How did you get a cat in there?" Garion asked.

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"Oh, Zith isn't a cat, Belgarion," Sadi assured him. "Here, I'll show you." Carefully he worked the cork out and laid the bottle on its side on the table. "You can come out now, dear," he crooned to it.

Nothing happened,

"Come along now, Zith. Don't be shy."

Then a small, bright-green snake slithered obediently from the mouth of the bottle. She had gleaming yellow eyes and a vibrant red stripe running down her back from nose to tail. Her forked tongue flickered out, touching Sadi's outstretched hand.

Silk recoiled with a sharp intake of breath.

"Isn't she beautiful?" Sadi said, gently stroking the little snake's head with one finger. The snake began to purr contentedly, then raised her head, fixed Silk with a cold, reptilian eye, and hissed spitefully at him.

"I do believe that you offended her, Prince Kheldar," Sadi said. "Maybe you should stay away from her for a while."

"Don't worry," Silk said fervently, backing away. "Is she venomous?"

"She's the deadliest little snake in the world, aren't you, dear?" Sadi stroked the snake's head again. "Also the rarest. Her species is highly prized in Nyissa because they're the most intelligent of all reptiles. They're friendly—even affectionate—and, of course, the purr is absolutely delightful."

"But she does bite," Silk added.

"Only people who irritate her—and never a friend. All you have to do is feed her and keep her warm and show her a little affection now and then, and she'll follow you around like a puppy."

"Not me, she won't."

"Sadi," Belgarath said, pointing at the case, "what's the idea of all this? I don't need a walking apothecary shop trailing along behind me."

Sadi held up one hand. "Murgos aren't really very interested in money, Ancient One, but there are people I'll have to bribe when we go across Cthol Murgos. Some of them have picked up certain habits. That case is going to be worth more to us than a pack horse loaded down with gold."

Belgarath grunted. "Just keep your face out of it. I don't

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want your head full of smoke at a crucial moment—and keep your snake under control."

"Of course, Belgarath."

The old sorcerer turned to Issus. "Can you get a bigger boat? We need to get back across the river, and that one of yours won't hold all of us."

Issus nodded.

"Not just yet, father," Polgara said. "I'm going to need him for a while."

"Pol, we need to get back on the other side of the river before dawn."

"I won't be too long, father, but I have to go to the palace."

"The palace?"

"Zandramas went to Cherek—where no Angarak has been allowed since the days of Bear-shoulders. Salmisra arranged that and she also engineered the escape from the Isle of the Winds after the abduction of Ce'Nedra's baby. I want to know why."

"We're a bit pressed for time, Polgara. Can't this wait?"

"I don't think so, father. I think we need to know if there were any other arrangements. I'd rather not be surprised by a battalion or so of Nyissan troops lurking in the jungle along the trail we're following."

He frowned. "You might be right."

"You're going to the palace?" Garion asked her.

"I must, dear."

"All right," he said, squaring his shoulders. "Then I'm going with you."

She gave him a long, steady look. "You're going to insist, I take it?"

He nodded. "Yes, Aunt Pol, I think I am." He said it quite decisively.

She sighed. "How quickly they grow up," she said. Then she turned to Issus. "Do you know a back way to the palace?" she asked him.

The one-eyed man nodded.

"Will you show us?"

"Of course," he replied. He paused. "We can discuss the price later."

"Price?"

"Nothing for nothing, Lady," he shrugged. "Shall we go?"

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It was nearly midnight when Issus led Polgara and Garion out the rear door of Droblek's house into a narrow alleyway that smelled strongly of rotting garbage. They made their way furtively through a twisting series of similar alleys, sometimes passing through the lower corridors of houses to move from one alley to another.

"How do you know which houses have unlocked doors?" Garion whispered as they emerged from a tall, narrow house in a run-down quarter of the city.

"It's my business to know," Issus replied. He straightened and looked around. "We're getting close to the palace," he told them. "The streets and alleys in this part of the city are patrolled. Wait here a minute." He stealthily crossed the alley, opened a recessed door, and slipped inside. A couple of moments later he emerged, carrying two silk robes, a pair of lances, and a couple of brass helmets. "We'll wear these," he said to Garion, "and if you don't mind, Lady, pull your hood farther over your face. If anybody stops us, let me do the talking."

Garion pulled on the robe and helmet and took one of the lances from the assassin.

"Tuck your hair up under the helmet," Issus instructed. Then he stepped out boldly, trusting to their disguises rather than to stealth.

They had no sooner entered the next street than they were stopped by a half-dozen armed men.

"What's your business?" the man in charge of the patrol demanded.

"We're escorting a visitor to the palace," Issus replied.

"What kind of visitor?"

Issus gave him a disgusted look. "You don't really want to interfere, corporal," he said. "The one she's visiting wouldn't like it."

"And who is that?"

"Now, that's a very stupid question, man. If this woman's friend finds out that I told you, we'll probably both wind up in the river."

"How do I know that you're telling me the truth?"

"You don't—but do you really want to take a chance on it?"

The corporal's expression grew faintly nervous as he thought about

it. "You'd better move along," he said finally.

"I was sure you'd see it my way," Issus observed. He

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roughly took hold of Polgara's arm. "Move, you," he commanded.

When they reached the end of the street, Garion glanced back. The soldiers were still watching them, but made no move to follow.

"I hope you aren't offended, Lady," Issus apologized.

"No," Polgara replied. "You're a very resourceful fellow, Issus."

"That's what I get paid for. We go this way."

The wall of Salmissra's palace was very high, constructed of great roughhewn stone blocks that had stood for eons in this dank city by the river. Issus led them into the dense shadows under the wall and to a small, iron-barred gate. He fumbled with the lock for a moment, then carefully swung the gate open. "Let's go," he muttered.

The palace was a maze of dimly lighted corridors, but Issus led them confidently, moving along as if he were on an important mission. As they approached the broader, somewhat more brightly lighted hallways near the center of the palace, a grotesquely made-up eunuch lurched by, his legs stiff and his eyes unfocused. His mouth was fixed in a stupefied grin, and his body twitched spasmodically as he stumbled past them. They passed an open doorway and heard someone inside giggling uncontrollably. Garion could not be sure if that unseen person was a man or a woman.

The one-eyed man stopped and opened a door. "We have to go through here," he said, taking a smoky lamp from the niche beside the door. "Be careful. It's dark, and there are snakes on the floor."

The room was cool and had a musty smell. Garion could clearly hear the dry, dusty hiss of scales rubbing against each other in the corners. "It's fairly safe," Issus said. "They were fed today, and that always makes them sluggish." He stopped at the door, opened it a crack and peered out. "Wait," he whispered.

Garion heard a couple of men talking and the sound of their footsteps in the corridor outside. Then a door opened and closed.

"It's clear," Issus said quietly. "Let's go." He led them •«it into the corridor and along its dimly lighted length to a ipottshed door. He looked at Polgara. "Are you sure you want to see the queen?" he asked her.

She nodded.

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"AH right," he said. "Sariss is in here. He'll take us to the throneroom."

"Are you sure?" Garion whispered.

Issus reached under the robe he had donned in the alley and drew out a long, saw-edged dagger. "I can practically guarantee it," he said. "Give me a moment. Then come in and close the door." He shoved the door open and jumped into the room like a great, soft-footed cat.

"What—" someone inside the room cried out in a high-pitched voice. Then there was a terrified silence.

Garion and Polgara entered quickly, closing the door behind them. A man sat at the table, his eyes bulging with fright and with the needlepoint of Issus' dagger pushed against his throat. He wore a crimson silk robe, and his shaven head was pasty white. Rolls of greasy, unhealthy-looking fat drooped from his jowls, and his frightened eyes were small and piglike,

Issus was talking to him in a dreadfully quiet voice, emphasizing what he was saying by pressing the point of his knife into the skin of the fat man's throat. "This is an Ulgo knife, Sariss. It causes almost no damage when it goes in, but when you pull it out, it jerks out all kinds of things along with it. Now, we aren't going to make any kind of outcry, are we?"

"N-no," Sariss stammered in a squeaky voice.

"I was sure you'd see it my way. This is what we're going to do. This lady and her young friend want to have a word with the queen, so you're going to take us to the throne room."

"The queen?" Sariss gasped. "No one goes into her presence without permission. I-I can't do it."

"This conversation has suddenly taken a definite turn for the worse." Issus looked over at Polgara. "Would you like to turn your head, Lady?" he asked politely. "The sight of a man with his brains oozing out of his ears makes some people queasy."

"Please," Sariss begged him. "I can't. The queen will kill me if I take you into the throne room without being summoned."

"And I'll kill you if you don't. Somehow, I've got the feeling that this isn't going to be one of your good days, Sariss. Now get on your feet." The assassin jerked the trembling fat man from his chair.

They stepped out into the corridor with the eunuch leading the way. Sweat was streaming down his face, and there was a wild look in his eyes.

"No blunders, Sariss," Issus warned. "Remember that I'm right behind

you."

The two burly guards at the entrance to the throne room bowed respectfully to the Chief Eunuch and swung the heavy doors open for him.

Salmissra's throne room was unchanged. The enormous stone statue of Issa, the Serpent God, still loomed behind the dais at the far end of the room. The crystal lamps still glowed dimly on their silver chains, and the two dozen bald and crimson-robed eunuchs still knelt on the polished floor, ready to murmur in unison their phrases of adoration. Even the gold-framed mirror still stood on its pedestal at the side of the divanlike throne.

Salmissra herself, however, was dreadfully changed. She was no longer the beautiful, sensuous woman Garion had seen when, drugged and bemused, he had first been led into her presence. She lay on her throne with her mottled coils undulating restlessly. Her polished scales gleamed in the lamplight, and her flat reptile's head rose on its long, thin neck, with the golden crown of the serpent queen resting lightly above her dead, incurious eyes.

She glanced briefly at them as they entered, then turned back to regard her reflection in the mirror. "I do not recall having summoned you, Sariss," she said in a dry, dusty whisper.

"The queen questions the Chief Eunuch," the two dozen shaven-headed men kneeling near the dais intoned in unison.

"Forgive me, Eternal Salmissra," the eunuch pleaded, prostrating himself on the floor before the throne. "I was forced to bring these strangers into your presence. They threatened to kill me if I refused."

"Then you should have died, Sariss," the serpent whispered. "You know that I do not like to be disturbed."

"The queen is displeased," half of the kneeling eunuchs murmured.

"Ah," the other half responded with a certain spiteful satisfaction.

Salmissra swung her swaying head slightly to fix her eyes on Issus. "I seem to know you," she said.

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The one-eyed man bowed. "Issus, your Majesty," he replied. "The assassin."

"I do not wish to be disturbed just now," the Serpent Queen told him in her emotionless whisper. "If that means that you're going to kill Sariss, please take him out into the corridor to do it."

"We will not disturb you for long, Salmissra," Polgara said, pushing back the hood of her cloak.

The snake's head turned slowly, her forked tongue tasting the air. "Ah, Polgara," she hissed without any evident surprise. "It has been some time since your last visit."

"Several years," Polgara agreed.

"I no longer take note of the years." Salmissra's dead gaze turned to Garion. "And Belgarion," she said. "I see that you're not a boy any more."

"No," he replied, fighting down an involuntary shudder.

"Come closer," she whispered. "Once you thought that I was beautiful and yearned for my kiss. Would you like to kiss me now?"

Garion felt a strange compulsion to obey and found that he could not take his eyes from those of the Serpent Queen. Not even aware that he did it, he took a hesitant step toward the dais.

"The fortunate one approaches the throne," the eunuchs murmured.

"Garion!" Polgara said sharply.

"I will not hurt him, Polgara. I never intended to hurt him."

"I have a few questions for you, Salmissra," Polgara said coldly. "Once you answer them, we'll leave you to your entertainments."

"What manner of questions, Polgara? What could I possibly know that your sorcery could not ferret out?"

"You recently met a Maillolean named Naradas," Polgara said. "A man with colorless eyes."

"Is that his name? Sariss never told me."

"You made an arrangement with him."

"Did I?"

"At his request, you sent diplomats to Sendaria. Among them was a foreigner named Zandramas. Your diplomats were instructed to give the foreigner every possible assistance in getting to Halberg on the west coast of Cherek. You

also ordered a ship to the Isle of the Winds to bring Zandramas back to Nyissa."

"I gave no such orders, Polgara. I have no interest in the affairs of Zandramas."

"The name is familiar to you?"

"Of course. I told you once that the priests of Angarak and the

sorcerers of Aloria are not the only ones who can find a truth that lies hidden. I know of your desperate pursuit of the one who took Belgarion's son from the Citadel at Riva."

"But you say that you were in no way involved in the arrangements?"

"The one you call Naradas came to me with gifts," Salmissra whispered, "but said nothing more than that he wished my permission to trade here in Nyissa."

"Then how do you explain this?" Aunt Pol took the parchment sheet Sadi had given her from under her cloak.

Salmissra flicked her tongue at one of the kneeling eunuchs. "Bring it to me," she ordered.

The eunuch leaped to his feet, took the parchment from Aunt Pol, and then knelt on the edge of the dais, holding the sheet open and extended toward his queen.

"This is not the order I gave," Salmissra said flatly after the briefest of glances. "I ordered the diplomats to Sendaria—nothing more. Your copy is not accurate, Polgara."

"Would the original be about anywhere?" Garion asked her.

"Sariss should have it."

^ Garion looked at the fat eunuch groveling on the floor. "Where is it?" he demanded.

Sariss stared at him, then his gaze went in terror to the enthroned serpent.

Garion considered several alternatives but discarded most of them in favor of simplicity. "Make him talk, Issus," he said shortly.

The one-eyed man stepped over, straddled the trembling eunuch, and grasped his chin firmly from behind. Then he pulled up sharply until Sariss was arched backward. The saw-edged dagger made a steely grating sound as it came out of its sheath.

"Wait!" Sariss begged in a choked voice. "It—it's in the drawer at the bottom of my wardrobe in my room."

"Your methods are direct, assassin," the queen observed.

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"I'm a simple man, your Majesty," Issus replied. "I do not have the temperament for subtlety nor intricacy. I've found that directness saves time in the long run." He released the terrified Sariss and

pushed his UIgo dagger back into his sheath. He looked at Garion. "Do you want me to go get the parchment?" he asked.

"I think we're going to need it."

"All right." Issus turned and left the room.

"An interesting man," Salmissra noted. She bent and caressingly touched her mottled coils with her blunt nose. "My life is much changed since you were last here, Polgara," she whispered in her dusty voice. "I am no longer driven by those hungers I had before, but pass my days instead in restless doze. I lull myself into slumber with the sweet sound of my own scales caressing each other. As I sleep, I dream. I dream of mossy caves in deep, cool forests, and I dream of the days when I was still a woman. But sometimes in my dreams, I am a bodiless spirit, seeking out the truths that others would hide. I know of the fear which lies in your heart, Polgara, and the desperate need that drives Zandramas. I even know of the terrible task which lies upon Cyradis."

"But you still say that you are not involved in this matter?"

"I have no interest in it. You and Zandramas can pursue each other across all the kingdoms of the world, but I am incurious as to the outcome."

Aunt Pol's eyes narrowed as she looked at her.

"I have no reason to He to you, Polgara," Salmissra said, sensing the suspicion in that look. "What could Zandramas possibly offer me that would buy my aid? All of my needs are satisfied, and I no longer have desires." Her blunt head came up and her tongue flickered. "I rejoice, however, that your quest has brought you again into my presence so that I may gaze once more upon the perfection of your face."

Polgara's chin lifted. "Look quickly then, Salmissra. I have little patience for the involuted amusements of a snake."

"The centuries have made you waspish, Polgara. Let us be civil to one another. Would you like to have me tell you what I know of Zandramas? She is no longer what she once was."

"She!" Garion exclaimed.

"You did not even know that?" the serpent hissed maliciously.

"Your sorcery is a sham, then, Polgara. Could you not sense your enemy is a woman? And did you perhaps not even realize that you have already met her?"

"What are you talking about, Salmissra?"

"Poor, dear Polgara. The long, long centuries have filled your wits with cobwebs. Did you really think that you and Belgarath are the only ones in the world who can change their shapes? The dragon who visited you in the mountains above Arendia appears quite different when she resumes her natural form."

The door to the throne room opened and Issus came back in, holding a parchment sheet with a red wax seal on the bottom of it.

"Bring it to me," Salmissra commanded.

Issus looked at her, his single eye narrowing as he gauged the distance between the serpent's throne and his own unprotected skin. Then he went over to the prostrate eunuch who had presented Polgara's document to the queen. Without changing expression, he kicked the man solidly in the ribs. "Here," he said, thrusting out the parchment. "Take this to her Majesty."

"Are you afraid of me, Issus?" Salmissra asked, sounding faintly amused.

"I am unworthy to approach you too closely, my Queen."

Salmissra bent her head to examine the parchment the trembling eunuch held out for her to read. "There appears to be some discrepancy," she hissed. "This document is the same as the one you showed me, Polgara, but it is not the document to which I ordered my seal affixed. How is this possible?"

"May I speak, my Queen?" the eunuch who held the parchment asked in a quavering voice.

"Of course, Adiss," she replied almost pleasantly, "so long as you realize that if your words displease me, the kiss I wUl give you in payment will bring you death." Her forked tongue flickered out toward him.

The eunuch's face went a ghastly gray color, and his trembling became so violent that he very nearly collapsed.

"Speak, Adiss," she whispered. "It is my command that you disclose your mind to me. We will determine then whether you live or die. Speak. Now."

"My Queen," he quavered, "the Chief Eunuch is the only % person in the palace permitted to touch your Majesty's royal

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seal. If the document in question is false, must we not look to him for an explanation?"

The serpent considered that, her head swaying rhythmically back and forth and her forked tongue flickering. At last she stopped her reptilian dance and leaned slowly forward until her tongue brushed the cringing eunuch's cheek. "Live, Adiss," she murmured. "Your words have not displeased me, and so my kiss grants the gift of life." Then

she reared her mottled form again and regarded Sariss with her dead eyes. "Do you have an explanation, Sariss? As our most excellent servant Adiss has pointed out, you are my Chief Eunuch. You affixed my seal. How did this discrepancy come to pass?"

"My Queen—" His mouth gaped open, and his dead-white face froze in an expression of stark terror.

The still-shaken Adiss half rose, his eyes filled with a sudden wild hope. He held up the parchment in his hand and turned to his crimson-robed companions kneeling to one side of the dais. "Behold," he cried in a triumphant voice. "Behold the proof of the Chief Eunuch's misconduct!"

The other eunuchs looked first at Adiss and then at the groveling and terrified Chief Eunuch. Their eyes also furtively tried to read the enigmatic expression on Salmissra's face. "Ah," they said in unison at last.

"I'm still waiting, Sariss," the Serpent Queen whispered.

Sariss, however, quite suddenly scrambled to his feet and bolted toward the throne room door, squealing in mindless, animal panic. As fast as his sudden flight was, though, Issus was even faster. The shabby, one-eyed assassin bounded after the fleeing fat man, his horrid dagger leaping into his hand. With the other he caught the back of the Chief Eunuch's crimson robe and jerked him up short. He raised his knife and looked inquiringly at Salmissra.

"Not yet, Issus," she decided. "Bring him to me."

Issus grunted and dragged his struggling captive toward the throne. Sariss, squealing and gibbering in terror, scrambled his feet ineffectually on the polished floor.

"I will have an answer from you, Sariss," Salmissra whispered.

"Talk," Issus said in a flat voice, setting his dagger point against the eunuch's lower eyelid. He pushed slightly, and a sudden trickle of bright-red blood ran down the fat man's cheek.

Sariss squealed and began to blubber. "Forgive me, your Majesty," he begged. "The Mallorean Nadaras compelled it of me."

"How did you do it, Sariss?" the serpent demanded implacably.

"I put your seal at the very bottom of the page, Divine Salmissra," he blurted. "Then when I was alone, I added the other orders."

"And were there other orders as well?" Aunt Pol asked him. "Will we encounter hindrances and traps on the trail of Zandramas?"

"No. Nothing. I gave no orders other than that Zandramas be escorted to the Murgo border and provided the maps she required. I pray you, your Majesty. Forgive me."

"That is quite impossible, Sariss," she hissed. "It had been my intention to hold myself aloof in the dispute between Polgara and

Zandramas, but now I am involved because you have abused my trust in you."

"Shall I kill him?" Issus asked calmly.

"No, Issus," she replied. "Sariss and I will share a kiss, as is the custom in this place." She looked oddly at him. "You are an interesting man, assassin," she said. "Would you like to enter my service? I am certain that a position can be found for one of your talents."

Adiss the eunuch gasped, his face suddenly going pale. "But your Majesty," he protested, leaping to his feet, "your servants have always been eunuchs, and this man is—" He faltered, suddenly realizing the temerity of his rash outburst.

Salmissra's dead eyes locked on his, and he sank white-faced to the floor again. "You disappoint me, Adiss," she said in that dusty whisper. She turned back to the one-eyed assassin. "Well, Issus?" she said. "A man of your talents could rise to great eminence, and the procedure, I'm told, is a minor one. You would soon recover and enter the service of your queen."

"Ah—I'm honored, your Majesty," he replied carefully, "but I'd really prefer to remain more or less intact. There's a certain edge my profession requires, and I'd rather not endanger that by tampering with things." , "I see." She swung her head briefly to look at the cow-Bering Adiss and then back to the assassin. "You have made jj|.an enemy today, however, I think—and one that may some ",day grow quite powerful."

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Issus shrugged. "I've had many enemies," he replied. "A few of them are even still alive." He gave the cowering eunuch a flinty look. "If Adiss wants to pursue the matter, he and I can discuss it privately some day—or perhaps late some night when our discussions won't disturb anyone."

"We must leave now," Polgara said. "You have been most helpful, Salmissra. Thank you."

"I am indifferent to your gratitude," Salmissra replied. "I do not think that I will see you again, Polgara. I think that Zandramas is more powerful than you and that she will destroy you."

"Only time can reveal that."

"Indeed. Farewell, Polgara."

"Good-bye, Salmissra." Polgara deliberately turned her back on the dais. "Come along, Canon-Issus," she said.

"Sariss," Salmissra said in a peculiar, almost singing tone, "come to me." Garion glanced back over his shoulder and saw that she had reared her mottled body until it rose high above the dais and her

velvet-covered throne. She swayed rhythmically back and forth. Her dead eyes had come alight with a kind of dreadful hunger and they burned irresistably beneath her scaly brows.

Sariss, his mouth agape and with his piglike eyes frozen and devoid of all thought, lurched toward the dais with jerky, stiff-legged steps.

"Come, Sariss," Salmissra crooned. "I long to embrace you and give you my kiss."

Aunt Pol, Garion, and Issus reached the ornately carved door and went quietly into the corridor outside. They had gone no more than a few yards when there came from the throne room a sudden shrill scream of horror, dying hideously into a gurgling, strangled squeal.

"I think that the position of Chief Eunuch just became vacant," Issus observed drily. Then, as they continued on down the dimly lighted hallway he turned to Polgara. "Now, my Lady," he said, ticking the items off on his fingers, "first of all there was the fee for getting you and the young man into the palace. Then there was the business of persuading Sariss to take us to the throne room, and then ..."

Part Two

RAK URG

OAK CLQA

CHAPTER NINE

It was almost dawn when they crept quietly out of Droblek's house. A thick gray fog shrouded the narrow, twisting streets of Sthiss Tor as they followed Issus through the shabby quarter near the docks. The smell of the river and the reek of the surrounding swamps lay heavy in the foggy darkness, filling Garion's nostrils with the odors of decay and stagnant water.

They emerged from a narrow alleyway, and Issus motioned them to a halt as he peered into the mist. Then he nodded. "Let's go," he whispered. "Try not to make any noise." They hurried across a glistening cobblestone street, ill-lit by torches, each surrounded by a nimbus of hazy red light, and entered the deeper shadows of another garbage-strewn alley. At the far end of that alley, Garion could see

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the slow-moving surface of the river sliding ponderously by, pale in the fog.

The one-eyed assassin led them along another cobblestone street to the foot of a rickety wharf jutting out into the fog. He stopped in the shadows beside a dilapidated shack that stood partially out over the water and rumbled briefly at the door. He opened it slowly, muffling the protesting creak of a rusty hinge with a tattered piece of rag. "In here," he muttered, and they followed him into the dank-smelling shack. "There's a boat tied at the end of this wharf," he told them in a half whisper. "Wait here while I go get it." He went to the front of the shack, and Garion heard the creak of hinges as a trapdoor opened.

They waited, listening nervously to the skittering and squeaking of the rats that infested this part of town. The moments seemed to creep by as Garion stood watch beside the door, peering out through a crack between two rotting boards at the foggy street running along the edge of the river.

"All right," he heard Issus say from below after what seemed like hours. "Be careful on the ladder. The rungs are slippery."

One by one, they climbed down the ladder into the boat the one-eyed man had pulled into place under the wharf. "We have to be quiet," he cautioned them after they had seated themselves. "There's another boat out there on the river somewhere."

"A boat?" Sadi asked in alarm. "What are they doing?"

Issus shrugged. "Probably something illegal." Then he pushed his craft out into the shadows at the side of the wharf, settled himself on the center seat, and began to row, dipping his oars carefully into the oily surface of the river so that they made almost no sound.

The fog rose from the dark water in little tendrils, and the few lighted windows high in the towers of Sthiss Tor had a hazy unreality, like tiny golden candles seen in a dream. Issus rowed steadily, his oars making only the faintest of sounds.

Then from somewhere not far upstream, there was a sudden muffled outcry, followed by a splash and the gurgling sound of bubbles rising to the surface.

"What was that?" Sadi hissed nervously as Issus stopped rowing to listen.

"Be still," the one-eyed man whispered.

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From somewhere in the fog, there came the thumping sound of someone moving around in a boat, followed by the splash of an awkwardly pulled oar. A man swore, his voice harsh and loud.

"Keep quiet," another voice said.

"What for?"

"Let's not tell everybody in Sthiss Tor that we're out here."

"You worry too much. That rock I tied to his ankles will keep him down for a long time." The creaking oarlocks faded off into the fog.

"Amateurs," Issus muttered derisively.

"An assassination, perhaps?" Silk asked with a certain professional curiosity. "Or a private killing?"

"What difference does it make?" Issus started to row again, his oars dipping slowly into the water. Behind them Sthiss Tor had disappeared in the fog. Without the reference point of its dim lights, it seemed to Garion that they were not moving at all, but sat motionless on the surface of the dark river. Then, at last, a shadowy shore appeared ahead in the clinging fog; after a few more minutes, he was able to make out the hazy shape of individual tree tops outlined by the pale mist.

A low whistle came to them from the bank, and Issus angled their boat slightly, making for that signal. "Garion, is that you?" Durnik's whispered voice came out of the shadows.

"Yes."

Issus pulled their boat under the overhanging branches, and Durnik caught the bow. "The others are waiting on the far side of the road," he said quietly as he helped Polgara from the boat.

"You've been most helpful, Issus," Sadi said to his hireling.

The one-eyed man shrugged. "Isn't that what you paid me for?"

Silk looked at him. "If you decide to consider my offer, talk to Droblek."

"I'll think about it," Issus replied. He paused, then looked at Polgara. "Good luck on your journey, Lady," he said quietly. "I get the feeling that you're going to need it."

"Thank you, Issus."

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Then he pushed his boat back out into the fog and disappeared.

"What was that all about?" Sadi asked Silk.

"Oh, nothing much. Drasnian Intelligence is always looking for a few good men, is all."

Durnik was looking curiously at the shaven-headed eunuch.

"We'll explain when we get back to the others, dear," Polgara assured him.

"Yes, Pol," he agreed. "We go this way." He led them up the brushy bank to the broken stones of the road and then pushed his way into the tangled undergrowth on the far side, with the rest of them close behind him.

Ce'Nedra, Eriond, Toth, and Velvet sat in a little hollow behind the moss-covered trunk of a fallen tree. A single, well-shielded lantern gave forth a dim glow, illuminating the hollow with faint light. "Garion," Ce'Nedra exclaimed with relief, coming quickly to her feet. "What took you so long?"

"We had to make a side trip," he replied, taking her into his arms. As he nestled his face into her hair, he found that it still had that warm, sweet fragrance that had always touched his heart.

"All right," Belgarath said, looking out into the tag end of the foggy night, "I want to get moving, so I'll keep this short." He sat down on the spongy moss beside the lantern. "This is Sadi." He pointed at the shaven-headed eunuch. "Most of you know him already. He'll be going with us."

"Is that altogether wise, Belgarath?" Durnik asked dubiously.

"Probably not," the old man replied, "but it wasn't my idea. He seems to feel that Zandramas has gone down into southern Cthol Murgos and plans to cross the continent to the Isle of Verkat off the southeast coast."

"That's a very dangerous part of the world just now, Ancient One," Velvet murmured.

"We'll have no trouble, dear lady," Sadi assured her in his contralto voice. "If we pose as slavers, no one will interfere with us."

"So you say," Belgarath said somewhat sceptically. "That might have been true before the war started down there, but we still don't know for sure how the Malloreans view the slave trade."

"There's one other thing you should all know," Polgara

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added quietly. "Garion and I went to the palace to find out if Salmissra was involved in this in any way. She told us that Zandramas is a woman."

"A woman?" Ce'Nedra exclaimed.

"That's what she said, and she had no reason to lie to us."

Durnik scratched at his head. "That's a bit of a surprise, isn't it? Are you sure Salmissra knew what she was talking about?"

She nodded. "She was very certain—and quite smug about the fact that she knew something that I didn't."

"It does sort of fit," Velvet said thoughtfully. "Most of the things Zandramas has done were done the way a woman would do them."

"I can't quite follow that," Durnik admitted.

"A man does things one way, Goodman. A woman does them differently. The fact that Zandramas is a woman explains a great deal."

*• "She's also going to great lengths to conceal the fact," Silk added. "She's made sure that just about everybody who's seen her isn't alive to tell anybody about it."

"We can talk about all this some more later," Belgarath said, standing up and looking around at the gradually lightening fog. "I want to get away from this place before the people on the other side of the river start moving around. Let's saddle the horses."

It took a bit of readjustment of their equipment to free one of the pack horses for Sadi's use, but a short time later they rode out from their sheltered place of concealment and on along the weedy track that followed the winding course of the River of the Serpent. They moved at first at a cautious walk, but once they had passed the outskirts of Sthiss Tor, lying hidden in the fog across the river, they picked up their pace to a canter, clattering along the abandoned road that stretched through the rank jungle and reeking swamps of the tend of the snake-people.

As the sun rose, it gave the fog surrounding them a kind of mystical glow, and the droplets hanging along the edges of individual leaves drooping from the undergrowth at the side of the road took on ajewellike sparkle. Garion, sandy-eyed and tired from a night without sleep, looked bemused at the jeweled green leaves, marveling that such beauty could exist in this stinking swamp.

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"The whole world is beautiful, Belgarion," Eriond assured him in response to that unspoken thought. "You just have to know how to look at it."

Once the fog had burned off, they were able to move at a much more rapid pace. They encountered no other travelers that day. By the time the sun began to sink into the heavy banks of purple cloud that seemed to hover perpetually over the western horizon, they were well upriver.

"How far is it to the Murgo border?" Garion asked Sadi as the two of them gathered firewood while Durnik and Toth set up the tents for their night's encampment.

"Several more days," the eunuch replied. "The highway fords the river up near the headwaters and then angles down toward Araga. There's a village on the other side of the ford. I'll need to stop there for a few things—suitable garments and the like."

Velvet and Ce'Nedra were unpacking Polgara's cooking utensils not far

away, and the blond Drasnian girl looked over at Sadi. "Excuse me," she said, "but I think I've discovered a flaw in your plan."

"Oh?"

"How can we pose as slavers when some of us are obviously women?"

"But there are always women in any party of slave traders, my dear lady," he answered, dropping an armload of firewood beside the stone-lined cooking pit. "I'm sure that if you think about it, you'll understand why."

"I certainly don't," Ce'Nedra declared.

Sadi coughed rather delicately. "We trade in female slaves as well as males, your Majesty," he explained, "and a female who's been guarded by women brings a higher price."

A slow flush crept up her face. "That's revolting."

Sadi shrugged. "I didn't make the world, your Majesty," he replied. "I only try to live in it."

After they had eaten, Sadi took an earthenware bowl, filled it with hot water, and began to lather his stubbled scalp.

"There's something I've been meaning to ask you, Sadi," Silk said from the other side of the fire. "Exactly what was it that you did to make Salmissra so discontented with you?"

Sadi gave him a wry look. "Those of us in the queen's service are an extraordinarily corrupt lot, Kheldar," he replied. "We're all knaves and scoundrels and worse. A number of years ago Salmissra laid down certain guidelines to

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keep our plotting and deceit within reasonable limits—just to keep the government from falling apart. I overstepped a few of those limits—most of them, actually. Sariss found out about it and ran to the Queen to tattle." He sighed. "I do so wish that I'd been able to see his reaction when she kissed him." He picked up his razor.

"Why do all Nyissan men shave their heads?" Ce'Nedra asked him curiously.

"There are all manner of nasty little insects in Nyissa, your Majesty, and hair provides them with a perfect nesting place."

She gave him a startled look, her hand going unconsciously to her coppery curls.

"I shouldn't worry too much," he smiled. "Most of the time, they're dormant in winter."

About noon several days later, the road they were following began to

climb up out of the jungles into the foothills. The damp chill that had lain over the normally steaming swamps of Nyissa moderated as they climbed, and it was pleasantly warm as they moved up into the hardwood forest lying along the eastern frontier. The river began to tumble over stones beside the road, and its murky waters grew clear as they rode deeper into the hills.

"The ford is just up ahead," Sadi told them as he led them around a broad curve in the road. A stone bridge had once crossed the river there, but time and the turbulent water had eaten away its foundations and tumbled it into the riverbed. The green water rushed over the fallen stones, swift and foaming. Upstream from the fallen bridge, there was a wide stretch of gravel-bottomed shallows that rippled, sparkling in the sun. A well-traveled trail led down to the ford.

"What about the leeches?" Silk asked, eyeing the water with suspicion.

"The water's a little too fast for them, Prince Kheldar," Sadi replied. "Their bodies are too soft to take much bouncing around on rocks." He rode confidently down into the rippling stream and led them on across.

"That village I mentioned is just up ahead," he told them as they emerged from the stream. "It should only take me an hour or so to pick up what we'll need."

"The rest of us can wait here, then," Belgarath said, ; ; Swinging down from his saddle. "You go with him, Silk."

"I can manage," Sadi protested.

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"I'm sure you can. Let's just call it a precaution." "How am I going to explain to the shopkeeper what a Drasnian is doing with me?" "Lie to him. I'm sure you'll be very convincing." Garion dismounted and walked up the slope of the river bank. These were the people he loved most in the world, but sometimes their idle banter set his teeth on edge. Even though he knew that they really meant nothing by it, it seemed somehow to reflect an indifferent frivolity, a callous lack of concern for his personal tragedy—and more importantly, for Ce'Nedra's. He stood atop the river bank, looking with unseeing eyes down the descending gorge of the River of the Serpent and out over the dense green canopy of the jungles of the snake-people. He would be glad to get out of Nyissa. It was not so much the clinging mud, the stink of the swamps, nor even the clouds of insects that hovered perpetually in the air. The real problem with Nyissa was the fact that one could seldom see for more than a few feet in any direction. For some reason, Garion felt an overpowering need to see for long distances, and the obscuring trees and undergrowth that had blocked

his vision since they had been in Nyissa had increasingly irritated him. A number of times he had caught himself just on the verge of clenching his will and blasting out long, clear avenues through the jungle. When Silk and Sadi returned, the little Drasnian's face was angry.

"They're only for show, Prince Kheldar," Sadi protested mildly. "We're not actually going to have any slaves with us anyway, so there won't really be anyone to wear them, will there?"

"It's the idea of them that offends me."

"What's this?" Belgarath asked.

Sadi shrugged. "I purchased a few shackles and slave bells. Kheldar doesn't approve."

"I didn't like the whips either," Silk added.

"I explained that to you, Kheldar."

"I know. It's still disgusting."

"Of course it is. Nyissans are a disgusting people. I thought you knew that."

"We can sort out comparative moralities later on," Belgarath said. "Let's move along."

The road they followed rose steeply up from the river, taking them deeper and deeper into the foothills. The hard-

woods gave way to gnarled evergreens and low-lying heather. Great, rounded white boulders lay in scattered profusion among the dark green trees, and the sky overhead was an intense blue. They camped that night in a grove of low, twisted junipers, building their fire against a boulder so that its white surface could reflect back both light and heat. Above them rose a steep ridge that stood jaggedly outlined against the starry eastern sky.

"Once we cross that ridge, we'll be in Cthol Murgos," Sadi told them as they sat around the fire after supper. "The Murgos watch their borders very carefully, so it's probably time to start wearing our disguises." He opened the large bundle he had brought from the village near the ford and took out a number of dark green silk robes. He looked spec-ulatively at Ce'Nedra and the gigantic Toth. "There may be a slight problem here," he murmured. "The shopkeeper didn't have a wide variety of sizes."

"I'll fix it, Sadi," Polgara said, taking the rolled-up robes tfrom him and opening one of the packs in search of her sew-ing kit.

Belgarath had been staring thoughtfully at a large map. "There's something that's been bothering me," he said. He turned to Sadi. "Is there any way Zandramas might have taken a ship from one of these ports on the west coast and sailed around the southern end of the continent to Verkat?"

Sadi shook his head, his shaven scalp gleaming in the orange firelight. "Impossible, Ancient One. A Malloorean fleet slipped up behind the Murgos a few years back, and : King Urgit still has nightmares about it. He's closed all the / west coast ports and has ships patrolling the sea lanes all the way around the tip of the Urga peninsula. No one sails along that coast without his specific permission." ? "How far is it to Verkat?" Durnik asked.

Sadi squinted up at the stars. "Three or four months at this time of the year, Goodman."

Polgara had been humming quietly to herself as her needle ^flashed in the firelight. "Come here, Ce'Nedra," she said.

The little queen rose and went over to where she sat. Pol-held up the green silk robe, measuring it against her tiny , then nodded in satisfaction.

Ce'Nedra wrinkled her nose. "Do they have to smell so
1?" she asked Sadi.

'I don't suppose they have to, but they always do, for

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some reason. Slaves have a certain odor about them, and it seems to rub off."

Aunt Po! was looking at Toth as she held another of the slaver's robes in her hands. "This could be a bit more challenging," she murmured.

The giant gave her a brief, almost shy smile and rose to put more wood on the fire. As he poked the coals with a stick, a column of winking red sparks rose to greet the stars hanging low in the night sky. From somewhere down the ridge, as if in response to those sparks, there came a deep, coughing roar.

"What's that?" Ce'Nedra cried.

"Lion." Sadi shrugged. "Sometimes they hunt along the slave route—the old and crippled ones at any rate."

"Why would they do that?"

"Sometimes slaves get too sick to walk any farther and they have to be left behind. An old lion can't chase anything that's very nimble, and . . ." He left it hanging in the air.

She stared at him in horror.

"You did ask, after all, your Majesty," he reminded her. "As a matter of fact, I don't like the idea very much myself. That's one of the reasons I left the slave trade to go into politics." He stood up and

brushed off the back of his robe. "Now, if you dear people will excuse me, I have to go feed Zith. Please be careful when you go to your beds tonight. Sometimes she sneaks away after she's been fed. I think it amuses her to hide from me, and one never knows where she might turn up." He walked out of the circle of golden firelight toward the place where he had spread his blankets.

Silk stared after him, then turned back to the fire. "I don't know about the rest of you," he declared, "but I'm sleeping right here tonight."

The next morning after breakfast, they donned the evil-smelling robes of Nyissan slavers. At Belgarath's instruction, Garion once again covered the hilt of Iron-grip's sword. "I think we'd better keep the Orb well wrapped as long as we're in Cthol Murgos," the old man said. "It tends to get excited when there are Angaraks about."

They mounted their horses and followed the ancient highway up a ravine toward the jagged ridge top. As they rounded a bend, Polgara suddenly reined in her horse with a sharp hiss.

"What's the matter, Pol?" Durnik asked her.

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She did not reply immediately, but her face grew pale. Her eyes flashed, and the white lock at her brow suddenly flamed. "Monstrous!" she said.

"What is it, Aunt Pol?" Garion asked.

"Look over there," she answered, pointing with a trembling hand. There were white bones scattered about on the rocky ground several yards from the road; lying among them was a vacant-eyed human skull.

"One of the slaves Sadi mentioned last night?" Silk suggested.

Polgara shook her head. "A part of the arrangement between Sariss and Naradas involved several men to escort Zandramas to the Murgo border," she reminded him. "When she got this far, she didn't need t^em any more."

Silk's face grew grim. "That seems to be in character. Every time she finishes with somebody, she kills him."

"She didn't just kill them," Polgara said with a look of revulsion. "She broke their legs and left them for the lions. They waited all day for nightfall, and then the lions came."

Ce'Nedra's face blanched. "How horrible!"

"Are you sure, Pol?" Durnik asked, his face slightly sick.

"Some things are so dreadful that they leave their traces in the very rocks."

Belgarath had been staring bleakly at the gnawed bones. "This isn't the first time she's done this. She's not satisfied with just killing people to cover her tracks. She has to commit atrocities."

"She's a monster," Ce'Nedra declared. "She feeds on horror."

"It's a bit more than that," Belgarath replied. "I think she's trying to leave messages for us." He jerked his head toward the scattered bones. "That wasn't really necessary. I think she's trying to scare us off."

"It won't work," Garion said very quietly. "All she's doing is adding to the final reckoning. When the time finally comes for her to pay it, I think she's going to find that all of this is more than she can afford."

At the top of the ridge, the ancient road they had been following ended abruptly, sharply marking the invisible line where Nyissa ended and Cthol Murgos began. From the ridge top they looked out over an endless, unbroken expanse of shattered black rock and miles-wide beds of dark brown gravel, shimmering under a broiling sun.

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"Which way did Zandramas go from here?" Durnik asked Garion.

"She turned south," Garion replied, feeling the Orb pulling in a new direction.

"We could gain time if we cut straight across that out there, couldn't we?"

"Absolutely out of the question, Goodman Durnik," Sadi declared. "That's the Great Desert of Araga. It's as big as Algaria. The only water there is in the wells of the Dagashi, and you wouldn't want to get caught dipping into a Dagashi well.1*

"The Dagashi live out there?" Durnik asked, shading his eyes with one hand to look out at the fiery wasteland.

"They're the only ones who can," Sadi replied. "Perhaps that explains why they're so fearsome. We're going to have to follow this ridge line south for a hundred leagues or so to get around that waste. Then we'll strike out due southeast across Morcth and on down into the Great Southern Forest in Gorut."

Belgarath nodded. "Let's get started then."

They rode south, skirting the western edge of the Desert of Araga and staying well up in the hills, which sloped steeply down to the desert floor. As they rode, Garion noticed that the trees on this side of the ridge were stunted and sparsely distributed. There was no grass growing in the rock-strewn ground, and the heather had given way to scrubby thorn bushes. The sharp ridge line appeared to be an abrupt demarcation between two entirely different climates. What had been only pleasantly warm on the west side became oppressively hot here on

the east. There were almost no streams, and the few springs they found were tiny and seeped their water grudgingly into tepid little puddles hidden among the rust-colored boulders.

On the morning of the third day after they had entered Cthol Murgos, Toth belted his blanket across one shoulder, took up his staff, and walked down to the mouth of the ravine where they had spent the night, to look out over the rocky desert lying below. The sun had not yet risen, and the light from the dawn sky was steely and shadowless, etching each rock and crag of the sun-blasted wasteland in sharp detail. After a moment, the giant returned and touched Durnik's shoulder.

"What is it, Toth?" the smith asked.

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The mute pointed to the mouth of the ravine.

"All right," Durnik said, rising from the spot where he had been kindling their morning fire. The two of them went on down the ravine in the pale light and stood looking out. After a few moments, Durnik called back over his shoulder. "Belgarath, I think you'd better come here and look at this."

The old sorcerer finished pulling on his scuffed and mismatched boots and went down to join them, with his green silk robe flapping about his ankles. He stared out for a while, then muttered a curse. "We've got a problem," he announced without turning.

The problem became apparent as soon as the rest of them reached the entrance to the ravine. Some distance out on the desert, a large cloud of dust was rising to hang motionless in the still morning air.

"How many men do you think it would take to raise that much dust?" Garion asked quietly.

"At least several hundred," Silk told him.

"Murgos?"

"Not unless the Murgos have changed their habits," Vel-vet murmured. "Those men are dressed in red."

Silk peered intently out at the dust cloud. "You've got good eyes," he said finally to the blond girl.

"One of the advantages of youth," she replied sweetly.

He gave her a quick, irritable look.

"I thought this was Murgo territory," Durnik objected.

"It is," Sadi said, "but the Malloreans send patrols out every so often. Zakath's been trying to find a way to come at Urgit from behind for a number of years now."

"How did they find water out there?"

"I'm sure they brought it with them."

Toth turned toward the south side of the ravine and scrambled up the steep, rocky bank, sending long streams of dusty brown gravel slithering down behind him.

"Do you think we can outrun them?" Silk asked Belgarath.

"That probably wouldn't be a very good idea. I think we'd better stay here until they're out of the area."

Toth gave a low whistle from the top of the bank he had just climbed.

"Go see what he wants, Durnik," Belgarath said.

The smith nodded and started up the steep slope.

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"Do you think they'll find us up here?" Ce'Nedra asked tensely.

"It's not too likely, your Majesty," Sadi replied. "I doubt that they're going to take the time to search every ravine and gully in these mountains."

Belgarath squinted out at the dust cloud. "They're moving toward the southwest," he noted. "If we sit tight for a day or so, they'll move on out of our vicinity."

"I hate to lose the time," Garion fretted.

"So do I, but I don't think we've got much choice."

Durnik came sliding back down the bank of the ravine. "There's another group of men up ahead," he reported tersely. "Murgos, I think."

Belgarath uttered a fairly rancid curse. "I really don't want to get caught in the middle of a skirmish," he said. "Go up there and keep an eye on things," he told Silk. "Let's not have any more surprises."

Silk started up the steep bank of the ravine. On an impulse, Garion followed him. When they reached the top, they took cover behind a scrubby thorn bush.

The fiery ball of the sun slid up out of the desert lying to the east, and the obscuring cloud of dust raised by the advancing Malloreal column turned it to an ominous red. The figures of the men below, both the mounted Mallorealans and the concealed Murgos, were tiny in the distance, like toy figures on a miniature landscape.

"As closely as I can tell, they're about evenly matched," Silk noted, looking down at the two parties of troops.

Garion considered it. "The Murgos are going to have the advantage, though. They're on higher ground and they'll have the element of surprise."

Silk grinned. "You're turning into quite a tactician."

Garion let that pass.

"Sadi was right," Silk said. "The Malloreans brought water with them." He pointed at two dozen or so cumbersome-looking wagons loaded with large casks, trailing along at the rear of the column advancing across the desert.

The Malloreans reached the first of the shallow ravines stretching up into the foothills, then halted, while their scouts fanned out to search the rocky terrain. It was only a short time before alarmed shouts announced that at least some of the Murgos had been seen.

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"That doesn't make any sense," Garion said. "They didn't even try to keep from being found."

"Murgos aren't notorious for intelligence," Silk replied. As the red-clad Malloreans massed up for a charge, the concealed Murgos rose from their hiding places and began to shower their foes with arrows, but after only a few volleys, they began to pull back.

"Why are they retreating?" Garion demanded in disgust. "What's the point of setting up an ambush and then turning around and running away from it?"

"Nobody's that stupid," Silk muttered his agreement. "They're up to something else."

The retreating Murgos kept up a steady rain of arrows, littering the ravines stretching up into the hills with windrows of red-garbed dead as the Malloreans doggedly charged up into the foothills. Once again, the toylike quality of all those men so far below became apparent. At closer range, the carnage at the edge of that vast desert would have sickened Garion, but from up here he could watch with little more than curiosity.

And then, when the great majority of the charging Malloreans were far up the ravines and gullies, a force of axe-wielding Murgo cavalry came pounding around the tip of a long, rocky ridge that protruded out into the wasteland.

"That's what they were up to," Garion said. "They lured the Malloreans into a charge so that they could attack from the rear."

"I don't think so," Silk disagreed. "I think they're after the supply wagons."

The galloping Murgo cavalry swept across the intervening space and

then thundered along the sides of the poorly guarded Malloorean supply column, their axes rising and fall-ing as they chopped open the water casks. With each stroke, sparkling water gushed out to soak into the arid floor of the desert. The sun, obscured by the dust of the charge, glowed red through the choking clouds to dye the gushing streams of water. From their vantage point high above the battle, it looked almost to Garion that the fluid spurting from the ruptured barrels was not water, but blood.

With a great outcry of chagrin, the Malloorean charge faltered. Then the red-clad figures far below turned and desperately ran back toward the desert to protect their precious water supply. But it was too late. With brutal efficiency, the

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Murgo cavalry had already axed open every barrel and cask and was riding back the way they had come with triumphant jeers.

The Murgos, whose feigned retreat had drawn the Mal-loorean troops into their fatal charge, ran back down the ridges to resume their former positions. From their vantage points above the now-demoralized Mallooreans, they sent great sheets of arrows arching up into the morning sky to rain down upon their enemies. In the midst of that deadly rain, the Mallooreans desperately tried to salvage what little water was left in the bottoms of their shattered barrels, but their losses from the arrow storm soon grew unacceptable. The men in red tunics broke and ran out into the waiting desert, leaving their wagons behind.

"That's a brutal way to make war," Silk said.

"The battle's pretty much over then, isn't it?" Garion said as the black-robed Murgos moved down into the ravines to butcher the wounded.

"Oh, yes," Silk replied, sounding almost sick. "The fighting's all done. The dying isn't, though."

"Maybe the ones who are left can make it back across the desert."

"Not a chance."

"All right, then," a lean man in a black robe said, stepping out from behind a nearby rocky outcrop with a half-drawn bow in his hands.

"Now that you've seen it all, why don't we go back down to your camp and join the others?"

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Silk rose to his feet slowly, keeping both hands in plain sight.

"You're very quiet on your feet, friend," he observed.

"I'm trained to be so," the man with the bow replied. "Move. Your friends are waiting."

Silk gave Garion a quick warning look.—Let's go along until we can size up the situation—His fingers cautioned.— I'm sure this one isn't alone.—

They turned and slid down the bank to the floor of the ravine, with the stranger following watchfully behind them, his bow at the ready. At the upper end of the gully where they had pitched their tents the previous night, a score of black-robed men armed with bows guarded the others. They all had the scarred cheeks and angular eyes of Murgos, but there were certain subtle differences. The Murgos Garion

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had seen before had always been heavy-shouldered, and their stance had been marked by a stiff arrogance. These men were leaner, and their bearing was at once wary and peculiarly relaxed.

"You see, noble Tajak," Sadi said obsequiously to the lean-faced man who seemed to be in charge, "it is exactly as I told you. I have only these two other servants."

"We know your numbers, slaver," the lean-faced man replied in a harshly accented voice. "We've been watching you since you entered Cthol Murgos."

"We made no effort to hide," Sadi protested mildly. "The only reason we remained concealed here was to avoid becoming involved in that unpleasantness down at the edge of the desert." He paused. "One is curious, however, to know why the noble Dagashi would choose to concern themselves with the activities of a party of Nyissan slavers. Surely we are not the first to come this way."

Tajak ignored that, looking carefully at Garion and his friends with his slate-hard black eyes. "What's your name, slaver?" he asked Sadi finally.

"I am Ussa of Sthiss Tor, good master, a duly registered slave trader. I have all the proper documents, if you'd care to examine them."

"How is it that none of your servants are Nyissan?"

Sadi spread his hands innocently. "The war here in the south makes most of my countrymen a bit reluctant to venture into Cthol Murgos just now," he explained, "so I was forced to hire foreign adventurers instead."

"Perhaps," the Dagashi said in a flat, unemotional voice. He gave Sadi a penetrating look. "Are you interested in money, Ussa of Sthiss Tor?" he asked suddenly.

Sadi's dead eyes brightened, and he rubbed his hands together eagerly. "Well, now," he said, "why don't we talk about that? Just exactly how may I serve you? And how much would you be willing to pay

me?"

"You will need to discuss that with my master," Tajak replied. "My orders were to find a party of slavers and tell them that I could put them in touch with someone who could see that they were well-paid for a fairly minor service. Are you interested in such a proposition?"

Sadi hesitated, glancing surreptitiously at Belgarath for some kind of instruction.

"Well?" Tajak said impatiently. "Are you interested?"

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"Of course," Sadi answered carefully. "Who is your master, Tajak? Just who is this benefactor who wants to make me rich?"

"He will tell you his name and what you must do for him when you meet him—at Kahsha."

"Kahsha?" Sadi exclaimed. "You didn't say that I'd have to go there."

"There are many things I didn't say. Well? Do you agree to go with us to Kahsha?"

"Do I have any choice?"

"No."

Sadi spread his arms helplessly.

—What's Kahsha—Garion's fingers asked Silk.

—The headquarters of the Dagashi. It's got an unsavory reputation.—

"All right," Tajak said decisively, "let's break down these tents and get ready to leave. It's many hours to Kahsha, and midafternoon is not a good time to be out in the desert."

The sun was well up when they rode out of the mouth of the ravine with Tajak's Dagashi formed up watchfully around them. Out in the wasteland, the defeated Malloreans had begun their hopeless trek.

"Will they not attempt to use your wells, noble Tajak?" Sadi asked.

"Probably—but they won't be able to find them. We cover our wells with piles of rock, and all piles of rock in the desert look the same."

There were Murgo troops at the base of the foothills, watching the dispirited retreat of the Malloreans. As Tajak approached them, he made a quick, imperious gesture to them, and they grudgingly stood aside.

As they rode through a narrow defile that opened out into the desert, Garion took the opportunity to pull his horse in beside Belgarath's.

"Grandfather," he whispered urgently, "what should we do?"

"We wait and see what this is all about," the old man replied. "Let's not do anything to give away our disguise— not yet, anyway."

As they rode out into the furnace heat of the desert, Sadi looked back at the Murgos soldiers lining the tops of the last low line of hills. "Your countrymen are most accommodating," he said to Tajak. "I'm surprised, though, that they didn't stop us to ask one or two questions."

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"They know who we are," Tajak said shortly, "and they know better than to interfere with us." He looked at the already-sweating eunuch. "It would be wise of you to keep your mouth closed now, Ussa. The sun draws the moisture out of a man's body very quickly in this desert, and an open mouth is the first thing it attacks. It's quite possible to talk yourself to death out here."

Sadi gave him a startled look and then clamped his lips tightly together.

The heat was unbelievable. The desert floor was for the most part a vast, flat bed of reddish-brown gravel, broken only by occasional heaps of dark boulders and widely scattered stretches of gleaming white sand. The world seemed to shimmer and undulate as heat waves rose from the blistering gravel. The sun was like a club beating down on Gar-ion's head and neck; though he was sweating profusely, the moisture evaporated from his body so quickly that his clothing remained totally dry.

They rode into that furnace for an hour, and then Tajak signaled for a halt. With a quick gesture, he sent five of his men off across a low rock ridge lying to the northeast. A short while later they returned, carrying lukewarm water in bags made of whole goatskins.

"Water the horses first," Tajak said tersely. Then he strode to the base of the ridge, bent, and scooped up a handful of what appeared to be white sand. He came back. "Hold out your right hands," he said, then spilled perhaps a spoonful into each outstretched palm. "Eat it," he ordered.

Sadi cautiously licked at the white stuff in his palm and then immediately spat. "Issa!" he swore. "Salt!"

"Eat it all," Tajak told him. "If you don't, you'll die."

Sadi stared at him.

"The sun is baking the salt out of your body. Without salt in your blood, you die."

They all reluctantly ate the salt. When they had finished, the Dagashi allowed each of them to drink sparingly; then they remounted and rode on into the inferno.

Ce'Nedra began to droop in her saddle like a wilted flower. The heat seemed to crush her. Garion pulled his horse in beside hers. "Are you all right?" he asked through parched lips.

"No talking!" a Dagashi snapped.

(The little queen lifted her face and gave Garion a wan smile and then rode on.

Time lost all meaning in that dreadful place, and even thought became impossible. Garion rode dumbly, his head bent beneath the hammerlike blows of the sun. Hours—or years—later, he raised his head, squinting against the brilliant light around him. He stared stupidly ahead, and only slowly did the realization come to him that what he was ; seeing was utterly impossible. There, looming in the air be-V. fore them, floated a vast black island. It hovered above the . shimmering, sun-blasted gravel, defying all reason. What manner of sorcery could perform such a feat? How could anyone have that much power?

But it was not sorcery. As they rode nearer, the undulating

> heat waves began to thin, dispelling the mirage and revealing

V the fact that what they approached was not an island in the

air, but instead a single rock peak rising precipitously from

the desert floor. Encircling it was a narrow trail, hacked out

of the solid rock and spiraling upward around the mountain.

"Kahsha," Tajak said shortly. "Dismount and lead your

horses."

The trail was very steep. After the second spiral around the mountain the shimmering gravel floor of the desert lay far below. Up and up they went, round and round the blis-teringly hot peak. And then the trail went directly into the mountain through a large, square opening.

"More caves?" Silk whispered bitterly. "Why is it always ; caves?" ;— Garion, however, moved eagerly. He would gladly have

entered a tomb to get away from the intolerable sun. | "Take the horses," Tajak instructed some of his men, ? "and see to them at once. The rest of you, come with me." r, He led them into a long corridor chopped out of the rock itself. Garion groped along blindly until his eyes became adjusted to the dimness. Though by no means cold, the air in : the corridor was infinitely cooler than it had been outside. i He breathed deeply,.straightened, and

looked around. The brutal amount of physical labor it had taken to hack this long corridor out of solid rock was clearly evident.

Sadi, noticing that as well, looked at the grim-faced man striding beside him. "I didn't know that Dagashi were such expert stonecutters," he observed. "We aren't. The corridor was cut by slaves."

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"I didn't know that the Dagashi kept slaves."

"We don't. Once our fortress was finished, we turned them loose."

"Out there?" Sadi's voice was aghast.

"Most of them preferred to jump off the mountain instead.1'

The corridor ended abruptly in a cavern quite nearly as vast as some Garion had seen in the land of the Ulgos. Here, however, narrow windows high in the wall admitted light. As he looked up, he saw that this was not a natural cave, but rather was a large hollow that had been roofed over with stone slabs supported by vaults and buttresses. On the floor of the cave stood a city of low stone houses, and rising in the center of that city stood a bleak, square fortress.

"The house of Jaharb," their guide said shortly. "He waits. We must hurry."

Silk drew in his breath with a sharp hiss.

"What's the matter?" Garion whispered.

"We're going to have to be very careful here," Silk murmured. "Jaharb is the chief elder of the Dagashi and he has a very nasty reputation."

The houses in the city of the Dagashi all had flat roofs and narrow windows. Garion noticed that there was none of the bustle in the streets which one might see in a western city. The black-robed, unsmiling Dagashi went about their business in silence, and each man he saw moving through that strange, half-lit town seemed to carry a kind of vacant space about him, a circle into which none of his fellow townsmen would intrude.

The fortress of Jaharb was solidly built of huge basalt blocks, and the guards at the heavy front door were formidably armed. Tajak spoke briefly to them, and the door swung open.

The room to which Tajak took them was large and was illuminated by costly oil lamps, swinging on chains from the ceiling. The only furnishings were heaps of yellow cushions scattered on the floor and

a row of stout, iron-bound chests standing along the rear wall. Seated in the midst of one of the heaps of cushions was an ancient man with white hair and a dark face that was incredibly wrinkled. He wore a yellow robe and he was eating grapes as they entered, carefully selecting them one by one and then languidly raising them to his lips.

"The Nyissan slavers, Revered Elder," Tajak announced in tones of profoundest respect.

Jaharb set aside his bowl of grapes and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and looking at them intently with his smoky, penetrating eyes. There was something infinitely chilling about that steady gaze. "How are you called?" he asked Sadi finally. His voice was as cold as his eyes, very quiet and with a kind of dusty dryness to it.

"I am Ussa, Revered One," Sadi replied with a sinuous bow.

"So? And what is your business in the lands of the Mur-gos?" The ancient man spoke slowly, drawing out his words almost as if he were singing them.

"The slave trade, Great Elder," Sadi answered quickly.

"Buying or selling?"

"A bit of each. The present turmoil offers certain opportunities."

"I'm sure it does. You are here for gain, then?"

"A reasonable profit is all, Revered Jaharb."

The Elder's expression did not change, but his eyes bored into the face of the suddenly sweating eunuch. "You seem uncomfortable, Ussa," the dusty voice crooned softly. "Why is that?"

"The heat, Revered Jaharb," Sadi said nervously. "Your desert is very hot."

"Perhaps." The smoky eyes continued their unrelenting gaze. "Is it your purpose to enter the lands controlled by the Malloreans?"

"Why, yes," Sadi replied, "as a matter of fact it is. I am told that many slaves took advantage of the chaos that accompanied the Mallorean invasions to hide themselves in the Forest of Gorut. They are free for the taking, and the fields and vineyards of Hagga and Cthan lie untended for lack of slaves to work them. There is profit in such a situation."

"You will have little time for pursuing runaway slaves, Ussa. You must be in Rak Hagga before two months have passed."

"But—"

Jaharb held up one hand. "You will proceed from this place to Rak Urga, where you are expected. A new servant will join you there. His name is Kabach, and you will find him in the Temple of Torak under

the protection of Agachak, the Grolim Hierarch of that place. Agachak and King Urgit

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will place you and your servants on board a ship which will take you around the southern end of the Urga peninsula to Rak Cthaka. From there you will go directly overland to Rak Hagga. Do you understand all that I have said?"

"Most certainly, Revered Jaharb—and what is it that you want me to do in Rak Hagga?"

"When you reach Rak Hagga, Kabach will leave you, and your task will be complete. Your entire service to me consists of concealing him within your party as you journey to Rak Hagga—a small thing, but your reward will be great."

"The ship will certainly save me months of difficult travel on horseback, Revered Elder, but will I not have difficulty explaining my presence to the Malloreans if I have no slaves to sell in the mart at Rak Hagga?"

"You will buy slaves in Cthaka or Gorut. The Malloreans will have no reason to question you."

"Forgive me, Revered Elder," Sadi said with a slightly embarrassed cough, "but my purse is slender. That's why my plan was to capture runaway slaves. They cost no more than the effort of running them down."

Jaharb did not reply, and his probing eyes remained flat and emotionless. He turned his gaze to Tajak. "Open that chest at the end," he said.

Tajak moved quickly to obey. When he lifted the lid of the chest, Garion heard Ce'Nedra gasp involuntarily. The chest was filled to its very brim with bright red gold coins.

"Take what you need, Ussa," Jaharb said indifferently. Then a faintly amused look flickered in his smoldering eyes. "But no more than you can hold in both your hands."

Sadi gaped at the gold-filled chest, his eyes filled with greed and his face and shaven scalp sweating profusely. He looked at the red gold, then down at his own two rather delicately shaped hands. A sudden look of undisguised cunning came over his face. "Gold is heavy, most Revered Jaharb, and my hands are quite weak as a result of a recent illness. Might I have one of my servants gather up your most generous payment?"

"That's not an unreasonable request, Ussa," Jaharb replied, his eyes openly amused now. "But mind, no more than he can hold in his two hands."

"Naturally," Sadi said. "I certainly wouldn't want you to overpay

me." He turned. "You there," he said to Toth,

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"go to that chest and remove a double handful of coins--and be certain that you take no more."

Impassively Toth went to the chest and scooped out perhaps a half pailful of the gleaming red coins in his huge hands.

Jaharb regarded the nervously sweating eunuch for a long moment, his wrinkled face expressionless. Then quite suddenly he threw back his head and laughed a dusty laugh. "Excellent, Ussa," he crooned softly. "Your mind is agile. I like that quality in those who serve me. It may be that you will even live long enough to spend some of the gold you have just so cleverly obtained."

"It was merely a demonstration of my intelligence, Revered Jaharb," Sadi answered quickly, "to prove to you that you made no mistake in selecting me. I'll have him put the coins back if you wish--some of them, anyway."

"No, Ussa. Keep them all. You will earn every one of them by the time you reach Rak Hagga, I think."

"I am much honored to be of service to the Dagashi. Even if it were not for your open-handed generosity, I would be no poorer for having befriended you." He hesitated, glancing quickly at Belgarath. "I have been told, Revered Elder, that the Dagashi know many things."

"Few secrets are hidden from us in this part of the world."

"Might I be so bold as to ask a question? A small thing, but one of some interest to me?"

"You may ask, Ussa. I will decide whether or not to answer after I hear the question."

"I have an extremely wealthy customer in Tol Honeth, Revered Jaharb," Sadi said. "He has an absolute passion for rare books and he would pay me a fortune for a copy of the Grolim Prophecies of Rak Cthol. Do you possibly know where I might find such a book?"

Jaharb frowned slightly, rubbing at his wrinkled cheek. "The Dagashi have little interest in books," he said. "The volume you seek would certainly have been in the library of Ctuchik at Rak Cthol, but I'm sure it was lost when Belgarath the Sorcerer destroyed the city." He thought a moment longer. "You might ask Agachak when you get to Rak Urga, however. The Temple library there is most extensive; since the prophecies deal with religion, Agachak is certain to have a copy--if one still exists."

"I am profoundly grateful for the information, Revered Elder," Sadi said, bowing again.

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Jaharb straightened. "And now you and your servants will need to rest. You depart for Rak Urga at first light tomorrow morning. A room has been prepared for you." He turned back to his bowl of grapes.

The room to which they were taken was quite large. The stone walls had been whitewashed to enhance the dim light which lay over the city of the assassins, but the furnishings were rudimentary at best, consisting only of a low stone table and heaps of cushions.

As soon as the black-robed Tajak left them alone, Garion pulled off his green slaver's robe. "Grandfather," he said, "what are we going to do? We can't go to Rak Urga. If we're ever going to catch Zandramas, we're going to have to get to Verkat as soon as we can."

The old man sprawled in a pile of cushions. "Actually, Garion, things couldn't have worked out better for us. Once we have the ship that Agachak and Urgit have waiting for us, we can sail directly on to Verkat. That's going to save us months of difficult travel."

"But won't the Dagashi--this Kabach who's waiting at Rak Urga--object if we don't land where Jaharb said we were going to?"

Sadi unlatched his leather case. "Set your mind at ease, Belgarion." He took out a small vial containing a thick blue liquid and held it up. "Two drops of this in his food and he'll be so happy that he won't care where we're going."

"You're a very versatile fellow, Sadi," Belgarath said. "How did you know that I was looking for the Prophecies of the Western Grolims?"

Sadi shrugged. "It wasn't hard to deduce, Ancient One. A part of the arrangement between Sariss and Naradas involved the burning of the only copy of that book in the palace library at Sthiss Tor. If Zandramas wanted it destroyed, it was fairly obvious that she didn't want you to get your hands on it."

"I'm starting to revise my opinion of you, Sadi. I still don't entirely trust you, but you certainly can be useful when you set your mind to it."

"Why, thank you, Ancient Belgarath." The eunuch took out the small earthenware bottle.

"Are you going to feed that snake?" Silk asked.

"She does get hungry, Kheldar."

"I'll wait outside, then."

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"Tell me, Prince Kheldar," Velvet said curiously, "what is the source of this peculiar aversion of yours toward reptiles?"

"Most normal people don't like snakes."

"Oh, they aren't that bad."

"Are you trying to be funny?"

She opened her brown eyes very wide in an expression of exaggerated innocence. "Would I do that?"

He went out into the hallway muttering to himself.

Velvet laughed and then went over to join Ce'Nedra on the pile of cushions near the window. Garion had noticed that the two of them had grown quite close during the weeks since they had left Tol Honeth. Because Polgara had always seemed so totally self-sufficient, he had not fully realized the deep-seated need that most women had for the companionship of other women. As Sadi fed his little green snake, the two of them sat side by side on the cushions and brushed the dust of their journey out of their hair.

"Why do you tease him so much, Liselle?" Ce'Nedra asked, pulling her brush through her flaming locks.

"I'm getting even with him," Velvet replied with an impish smile. "When I was a little girl, he used to tease me outrageously. Now it's my turn."

"You always seem to know just exactly what to say to offend him the most."

"I know him very well, Ce'Nedra. I've been watching him for years now. I know every single one of his weaknesses and I know exactly where he's the most sensitive." The blond girl's eyes grew soft. "He's a legend in Drasnia, you know. At the Academy, whole seminars are devoted to his exploits. We all try to emulate him, but none of us has his outrageous flair."

Ce'Nedra stopped brushing and gave her friend a long, speculative look.

"Yes?" Velvet said, returning the look.

"Oh, nothing," Ce'Nedra said and went back to brushing her hair.

The desert night was surprisingly chill. The air was so totally devoid of moisture that each day's heat evaporated almost as soon as the sun went down. As they set out from Kahsha in the steely dawn light, Garion found that he was actually shivering. By midmorning, however, the burning sun had once again turned the barren waste of Araga into

an inferno. It was nearly noon by the time they reached the foothills along the western rim of the desert and began the climb that took

them up out of that hideous furnace.

"How long until we get to Rak Urga, good Master?" Sadi asked Tajak, who once again escorted them.

"A week or so."

"Distances are very great in this part of Cthol Murgos, aren't they?"

"It's a very large country."

"And very empty."

"Only if you don't look around you."

Sadi looked at him inquiringly.

"Along that ridge, for example." Taak pointed toward the ragged stretch of rock outlined against the western sky where a single black-robed Murgo sat astride his horse, watching them.

"How long has he been there?" Sadi asked.

"For the past hour. Don't you ever look up?"

"In Nyissa, we always watch the ground. Snakes, you know."

"That explains it, I suppose."

"What's he doing up there?"

"Watching us. King Urgit likes to keep track of strangers."

"Is he likely to cause trouble?"

"We are Dagashi, Nyissan. Other Murgos do not cause us trouble."

"It's a great comfort to have so formidable an escort, good Tajak."

The country through which they rode for the next week was rocky and only sparsely vegetated. Garion had some difficulty adjusting to the notion that it was late summer here in the southern latitudes. The turn of the seasons had always been so immutable that emotionally and perhaps in his very blood, he found that he could not actually accept the idea that they were reversed here at the bottom of the world.

At a certain point in their journey southward, he felt the well-covered Orb on the pommel of the sword that rode across his back tug strongly off toward the left. He nudged his horse up beside Belgarath's. "Zandramas turned east here," he reported quietly.

The old man nodded.

"I hate to lose the trail," Garion said. "If Sadi's wrong

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about where she's going, it could take months to find it again."

"We wasted a lot of time on the Bear-cult, Garion," the old man replied. "We have to make that up, and that means taking a few gambles."

"I suppose you're right, Grandfather, but I still don't like it."

"I don't much either, but I don't think we have any choice, do we?"

A series of squalls blew in off the Great Western Sea as they proceeded down the rocky spine of the Urga peninsula, an indication that autumn was rapidly approaching. Although the squalls were blustery, they carried only fitful spates of rain, and the journey continued without interruption. They more frequently saw mounted Murgo patrols now, ranging along the ridge tops and outlined against the dirty gray sky. The Murgos, however, prudently gave the Dagashi a wide berth.

And then, about noon on a windy day when heavy clouds rolled in off the vast ocean, they topped a hill and looked down at a large body of water embraced by steep rock cliffs.

"The Gulf of Urga," Tajak said tersely, pointing at that leaden sea.

A peninsula jutted out from the far shore, sheltering the entrance to the gulf with a rocky headland. Embraced by the curve of that headland was a harbor dotted with black-hulled ships, and rising from that harbor was a fair-sized town.

"Is that it?" Sadi asked.

Tajak nodded. "Rak Urga," he said.

A ferry awaited them on the narrow beach, bobbing in the sullen waves rolling in from the open sea. It was a large, wide-beamed barge manned by two score wretched-looking slaves under the watchful eye of a Murgo boatman armed with a long whip. Tajak and his men led the way down to the gravel strand, then turned without a word and rode back up the trail.

The channel running from the Great Western Sea into the Gulf of Urga was not wide, and Garion could clearly make out the low stone buildings of Rak Urga squatting under a murky sky on the far side. Sadi spoke briefly with the Murgo, a few coins changed hands, and then they led their horses aboard. The Murgo barked a short command to his slaves,

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cracking his whip over their heads by way of emphasis. Desperately, the slaves pushed the barge off the gravel beach with their oars, casting fearful glances at their cruel-faced master and his whip. Once they were clear of the beach, they quickly took their places and began to row, pulling hard for the city across the narrow channel.

The Murgo paced up and down the length of the barge, his face alert, and his eyes intently on his slaves, watching for any hint of flagging effort. Once, when they were about halfway across, he partially raised his whip, apparently for no other reason than out of a desire to use it.

"Excuse me, noble ferryman," Silk said, stepping in front of him, "but did you know that your boat is leaking?"

"Leaking?" the Murgo replied sharply, lowering his whip.

"Where?"

"I can't really be sure, but there's quite a bit of water down in the bottom."

The Murgo called to his steersman in the stern and then quickly raised a wooden grating so that the two of them could peer down into the shallow bottom of his boat. "That's bilgewater," he said in disgust, motioning his steersman back to his post. "Don't you know anything about boats?"

"Not much," Silk admitted. "I saw the water and thought you ought to know about it. Sorry to have bothered you." He walked forward to rejoin the others.

"What was that all about?" Belgarath asked.

"Durnik's face was getting a bit bleak." Silk shrugged. "I didn't want his passion for justice to get the better of him."

Belgarath looked at the smith.

"I'm not going to stand around idly, if he starts flogging those poor men," Durnik declared, his face stiff. "The minute he raises that whip, he's going to find himself swimming."

"You see what I mean?" Silk said.

Belgarath looked as if he were about to say something, but Polgara stepped in front of him. "Leave him alone, father," she said. "It's the way he is, and I wouldn't change him for the world."

The harbor of Rak Urga was even more congested with ships than it had appeared to be from the other side. The steersman of the barge picked his way carefully through all those anchored vessels toward the stone quays jutting out

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into the lead-gray chop of the channel. A dozen or more of the wide-beamed Murgo ships were moored to the quays, bumping against woven rope fenders as gangs of slaves unloaded them.

The barge drew in close to the sheltered side of one of the quays, and the horses were carefully led up a slanting stone ramp, made slippery by clinging seaweed. Ce'Nedra looked down at the garbage-strewn water sloshing below and sniffed disdainfully. "Why do seaports always look—and smell—the same?" she murmured.

"Probably because the people who live in them find all that water irresistible," Velvet replied.

Ce'Nedra looked puzzled.

"It's just too convenient," the Drasnian girl explained. "They always seem to forget that the garbage they throw into the harbor this morning will come back to haunt them with the afternoon tide."

When they reached the top of the ramp, a self-important Murgo stood waiting for them, his heavy black robe flapping in the stiff breeze. "You there," he said arrogantly. "State your business."

Sadi stepped forward and gave the Murgo an oily bow. "I am Ussa," he replied, "registered slave trader from Sthiss Tor. I have all the necessary documents."

"There's no slave market in Rak Urga," the Murgo declared suspiciously. "Hand over your documents."

"Of course." Sadi dipped his hand inside his green robe and brought out a packet of folded parchment.

"If you're not dealing in slaves, what are you doing here?" the Murgo demanded, taking the packet from him.

"I'm merely doing a favor for my good friend Jaharb, Chief Elder of the Dagashi," Sadi told him.

The Murgo paused in the very act of opening the packet. "Jaharb?" he said a bit apprehensively.

Sadi nodded. "Since I was passing this way anyhow, he asked me to stop by and deliver a message to Agachak, the Hierarch of Rak Urga."

The Murgo swallowed hard and thrust the documents back into Sadi's hands as if they had suddenly grown hot. "On your way, then," he said shortly.

"My thanks, noble sir," Sadi said with another bow. "Excuse me, but could you direct me to the Temple of Torak? This is my first visit to Rak Urga."

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"It lies at the head of the street running up from this quay," the Murgo answered.

"Again my thanks. If you'll give me your name, I'll tell Agachak how

helpful you were."

The Murgo's face took on a pasty hue. "That won't be necessary," he said quickly, then turned and walked away.

"The names Jaharb and Agachak appear to have a certain impact here,1' Silk suggested.

Sadi smiled. "I imagine that, if you were to mention them in the same breath, every door in town would open for you," he agreed.

Rak Urga was not an attractive city. The streets were narrow, and the buildings were built of roughly squared-off stones and topped by gray slate roofs that overhung the streets, putting the thoroughfares into a perpetually gloomy twilight. It was not merely that gray bleakness, however, that made the city so dreary. There was about it an air of cold unconcern for normal human feelings, coupled with a sense of lingering fear. Grim-faced Murgos in their black robes moved through the streets, neither speaking nor even acknowledging the presense of their fellow townsmen.

"Why are these people all so unfriendly toward each other?" Eriond asked Polgara.

"It's a cultural trait," she told him. "Murgos were the aristocracy at Cthol Mishrak before Torak ordered them to migrate to this continent. They are absolutely convinced that Murgos are the supreme creation of the universe—and every one of them is convinced that he's superior to all the rest. It doesn't leave them very much to talk about."

There was a pall of greasy black smoke hanging over the city, bringing with it a sickening stench.

"What is that dreadful smell?" Velvet asked, wrinkling her nose.

"I don't think you really want to know," Silk told her with a bleak look on his face.

"Surely they aren't still—" Garion left it hanging.

"It seems so," the little man replied.

"But Torak's dead. What's the sense of it?"

"Grolims have never really been all that much concerned about the fact that what they do doesn't make sense, Gar-ion," Belgarath said. "The source of their power has always been terror. If they want to keep the power, they have to continue the terror."

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They rounded a comer and saw a huge black building ahead of them. A column of dense smoke rose from a large chimney jutting up from the slate roof, blowing first this way and then that in the gusty wind coming up from the harbor

"Is that the Temple?" Durnik asked.

"Yes " Polgara replied. She pointed at the two massive, nail-studded doors forming the only break in the blank, featureless wall. Directly above those doors there hung the polished steel replica of the face of Torak. Garion felt the familiar chill in his blood as he looked at the brooding face of his enemy. Even now, after all that had happened in the City of Endless Night, the face of Torak filled him with dread, and he was not particularly surprised to find that he was actually trembling as he approached the entrance to the Temple of the maimed God of Angarak.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Sadi slid down from his saddle, went up to the nail-studded doors, and clanged the rusty iron knocker, sending hollow echoes reverberating back into the Temple.

"Who comes to the House of Torak?" a muffled voice demanded from inside.

"I bear a message from Jaharb, Chief Elder at Mount Kah-sha, for the ears of Agachak, Hierarch of Rak Urga."

There was a momentary pause inside, and then one of the doors creaked open and a pock-marked Grolim looked cautiously out at them. "You are not of the Dagashi," he said accusingly to Sadi.

"No, as a matter of fact, I'm not. There's an arrangement between Jaharb and Agachak, and I'm part of it."

"I have not heard of such an arrangement."

Sadi looked pointedly at the unadorned hood of the Gro-178

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lim's robe, an obvious indication that the priest was of low rank. "Forgive me, servant of Torak," he said coolly, "but is your Hierarch in the habit of confiding in his doorman?"

The Grolim's face darkened as he glared at the eunuch. "Cover your head, Nyissan," he said after a long moment. "This is a holy place."

"Of course." Sadi pulled the hood of his green robe up over his shaven scalp. "Will you have someone see to our horses?"

"They will be taken care of. Are these your servants?" The Grolim looked past Sadi's shoulder at the others, who still sat their horses in the cobbled street.

"They are, noble priest."

"Tell them to come with us. I will take you all to Chabat."

"Excuse me, priest of the Dragon God. My message is for Agachak."

"No one sees Agachak without first seeing Chabat. Bring your servants and follow me."

The rest of them dismounted and passed through the grim doors into the torchlit corridor beyond. The sickening odor of burning flesh which had pervaded the city was even stronger here in the Temple. A sense of dread came over Garion as he followed the Grolim and Sadi along the smoky hallway into the Temple. The place reeked of an ancient evil, and the hollow-faced priests they passed in the corridor all looked at them with heavy suspicion and undisguised malice.

And then there came from somewhere in the building an agonized shriek, followed by a great iron clang. Garion shuddered, fully aware of the meaning of those sounds.

"Is the ancient rite of sacrifice still performed?" Sadi asked the Grolim in some surprise. "I would have thought that the practice might have fallen into disuse—all things considered."

"Nothing has happened to make us discontinue the performance of our holiest duty, Nyissan," the Grolim replied coldly. "Each hour we offer up a human heart to the God Torak."

"But Torak is no more."

The Grolim stopped, his face angry. "Never speak those words again!" he snapped. "It is not the place of a foreigner to utter such blasphemy within the walls of the Temple. The spirit of Torak lives on, and one day he will be reborn to

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rule the world. He himself will wield the knife when his enemy, Belgarion of Riva, lies screaming on the altar."

"Now there's a cheery thought," Silk murmured to Bel-garath. "We get to do it all over again."

"Just shut up, Silk," Belgarath muttered.

The chamber to which the Groiim underpriest led them was large and dimly lighted by several oil lamps. The walls were lined with black drapes, and the air was thick with incense. A slim, hooded figure sat behind a large table with a guttering black candle at its elbow and a heavy, black-bound book before it. A kind of warning tingle prickled Garion's scalp as he sensed the power emanating from that figure. He glanced quickly at Polgara, and she nodded gravely.

"Forgive me, Holy Chabat," the pock-marked Groiim said in a slightly trembling voice as he genuflected before the table, "but I bring a messenger from Jaharb the assassin."

The figure at the table looked up, and Garion suppressed a start of

surprise. It was a woman. There was about her face a kind of luminous beauty, but it was not that which struck his eye. Cruelly inscribed into each of her pale cheeks were deep red scars that ran down from her temples to her chin in an ornate design, a design which appeared to represent flames. Her eyes were dark and smoldering, and her full-lipped mouth was drawn into a contemptuous sneer. A deep purple piping marked the edge of her black hood. "So?" she said in a harshly rasping voice. "And how is it that the Dagashi now entrust their messages to foreigners?"

"I—I thought not to ask, Holy Chabat," the Groiim faltered. "This one claims to be a friend of Jaharb."

"And you chose not to question him further?" Her harsh voice sank into a menacing whisper, and her eyes bored into the suddenly trembling underpriest. Then her gaze slowly shifted to Sadi. "Say your name," she commanded.

"I am Ussa of Sthiss Tor, Holy Priestess," he replied. "Jaharb instructed me to present myself to your Hierarch and to give him a message."

"And what is that message?"

"Ah—forgive me, Holy Priestess, but I was told that it was for Agachak's ears alone."

"I am Agachak's ears," she told him, her voice dreadfully quiet. "Nothing reaches his ears that I have not heard first." It was the tone of her voice that made Garion suddenly un-

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derstand. Although this cruelly scarred woman had somehow risen to a position of power here in the temple, she was still uncertain about that power. She bore her uncertainty like an open wound, and the slightest questioning of her authority roused in her an abiding hatred for whomever doubted her. Fervently he hoped that Sadi realized how extremely dangerous she was.

"Ah," Sadi said with polished aplomb. "I was not fully aware of the situation here. I was told that Jaharb, Agachak, and King Urgit have reason to want one Kabach transported safely to Rak Hagga. I am the one who is to provide that transportation."

Her eyes narrowed suspiciously. "That is certainly not the entire message," she accused.

"I'm afraid it is, Noble Priestess, I presume that Agachak will understand its meaning."

"Jaharb said nothing else to you?"

"Only that this Kabach is here in the Temple under Agachak's protection."

"Impossible," she snapped. "I would have known about it if he were. Agachak conceals nothing from me."

Sadi spread his hands in a mollifying gesture. "I can only repeat what Jaharb told me, Holy Priestess."

She gnawed at one knuckle, her eyes suddenly filled with doubt. "If you're lying to me, Ussa—or trying to conceal something—I will have your heart ripped out," she threatened.

"That is the entire message, Holy Priestess. May I now deliver it to your Hierarchy?"

"The Hierarchy is at the Drojim Palace, consulting with the High King. He is not likely to return until midnight."

"Is there someplace where my servants and I could await his return, then?"

"I have not yet finished with you, Ussa of Sthiss Tor. What is it that this Kabach is to do in Rak Hagga?"

"Jaharb did not think I needed to know that."

"I think you're lying to me, Ussa," she said, her fingernails rapping a nervous staccato on the table top.

"I have no reason to lie to you, Holy Chabat," he protested.

"Agachak would have told me of this matter. He conceals nothing from me—nothing."

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"Perhaps he overlooked it. It may not be anything of much importance."

She looked at each of the others in turn then, her eyes hooded beneath her dark brows. She turned a cold gaze on the still-trembling Grolim. "Tell me," she said in a voice scarcely more than a whisper, "how is it that the one over there was permitted to come into my presence bearing a sword?" She pointed at Garion.

The Priest's face grew stricken. "Forgive me, Chabat," he stammered, "I—I failed to notice the sword."

"Failed? How can one fail to see so large a weapon? Can you possibly explain that to me?" The Grolim began to tremble even more violently. "Is the sword perhaps invisible? Or is it, perhaps, that my safety is of no concern to you?" Her scarred face grew even more cruel. "Or might it be that you bear me some malice and hoped that this foreigner might decide to slay me?"

The Grolim's face grew ashen.

"I think perhaps that I should bring this matter to the attention of

Agachak upon his return. He will doubtless wish to speak with you about this invisible sword—at some length."

The door to the chamber opened and an emaciated Grolim, black-robed, but with his green-lined hood pushed back, entered the chamber. His black hair was greasy and hung in lank tangles about his shoulders. He had the bulging eyes of a fanatic and there was the acrid odor of a long-unwashed body about him. "It's nearly time, Chabat," he announced in a strident voice.

Chabat's smoldering eyes softened as she looked at him. "Thank you, Sorchak," she replied, lowering her eyelashes in an oddly coquettish fashion. She rose, opened a drawer in the table, and took out a black leather case. She opened the case and lovingly lifted out a long, gleaming knife. Then she looked coldly at the Grolim priest she had just chastised. "I go now to the Sanctum to perform the rite of sacrifice," she told him, absently testing the edge of her heavy-bladed knife. "If one single word of anything that has happened here escapes your lips, you yourself will die at the next sounding of the bell. Now take these slavers to suitable quarters where they can await the return of the Hierarch." She turned back to the greasy-haired Sorchak, her eyes alight

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with a sudden, dreadful eagerness. "Will you escort me to the Sanctum so that you can witness my performance of the rite?"

"I would be honored, Chabat," he replied with a jerky bow; but as the priestess turned from him, his lip curled into a sneer of contempt.

"I will leave you in the care of this bungler," she told Sadi as she passed him. "You and I have not yet finished our discussion, but I must go prepare myself for the sacrifice." With Sorchak at her side, she left the room.

When the door closed, the pock-marked underpriest spat on the floor where she had just stood.

"I had not known that a priestess could rise to the Purple in one of the Temples of Torak," Sadi said to him.

"She is the favorite of Agachak," the Grolim muttered darkly. "Her ability at sorcery is very limited, so her elevation came at his insistence. The Hierarch has a peculiar preference for ugly things. It is only his power that keeps her from getting her throat cut."

"Politics." Sadi sighed. "It's the same the world over. She seems most zealous about the performance of her religious duties, however."

"Her eagerness to perform the rite of sacrifice has little to do with religion. She delights in blood. I myself have seen her drink it as it gushes from the chest of the sacrifice and bathe her face and arms in it." The priest glanced around quickly as if afraid of being overheard. "One day, however, Agachak will discover that she practices witchcraft in the House of Torak and that she and Sorchak

celebrate their black sabbaths with obscene rites when all the others in the Temple have gone to their beds. When our Hierarch discovers their corruption, she herself will go screaming under the knife, and every Grolim in the Temple will volunteer to slit her open as she lies on the altar." He straightened. "Come with me," he ordered them.

The rooms to which he led them were little more than a series of narrow, dim cells. In each cell stood a low cot, and, hanging on a peg protruding from the wall in each, was a black Grolim robe. The priest nodded briefly, then silently left. Silk looked around the somewhat larger central room with its single lamp and the rough table and benches in its center. "Hardly what I'd call luxurious," he sniffed.

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"We can lodge a complaint, if you'd like," Velvet suggested.

"What happened to her face?" Ce'Nedra asked in a horrified voice. "She's hideous."

"It was a custom in certain Grolim temples in parts of Hagga," Polgara replied. "Priestesses with some ability at sorcery carved their faces in that fashion to seal themselves to Torak forever. The practice has largely been abandoned."

"But she could have been so beautiful. Why did she disfigure herself that way?"

"People sometimes do strange things in the grip of religious hysteria."

"How did that Grolim miss seeing Garion's sword?" Silk asked Belgarath.

"The Orb is taking steps to make itself inconspicuous."

"Did you tell it to do that?"

"No. Sometimes it gets certain ideas on its own."

"Well, things seem to be going rather well, don't you think?" Sadi said, rubbing his hands together in a self-congratulatory manner. "I told you I could be very useful down

here."

"Very useful, Sadi," Silk replied sardonically. "So far you've led us into the middle of a battle, directly into the headquarters of the Dagashi, and now to the very center of Grolim power in Cthol Murgos. What did you have planned for us next—assuming that the lady with the interesting face doesn't gut you before morning?"

"We are going to get the ship, Kheldar," Sadi assured him. "Not even Chabat would dare to counter the wishes of Agachak--no matter how injured her pride may be. And the ship will save us months."

"There's something else Garion and I need to attend to," Belgarath said. "Durnik, take a look out in that hallway and see if they posted any guards to watch us." "Where are you going?" Silk asked him. "I need to find the library. I want to see if Jaharb was right about that book being here."

"Wouldn't it be better to wait until tonight--after everybody's gone to bed?"

The old man shook his head. "It might take us a while to find what we need. Agachak's going to be at the palace until midnight, so this is probably the best time to paw through his library." He gave the little Drasnian a brief smile. "Be--

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sides," he added, "although it might upset your notion of order, sometimes you can move around in the daytime more easily than you can by sneaking around corners after midnight."

"That's a terribly unnatural thing to suggest, Belgarath."

"The hallway looks clear," Durnik reported from the doorway.

"Good." Belgarath stepped back into the cells and emerged with a couple of the Grolim robes. "Here," he said, extending one of them to Garion, "put this on." As the two of them pulled off their green robes and replaced them with the black ones, Durnik kept watch at the door. "It's still clear, Belgarath," he said, "but you'd better hurry. I can hear people moving around down at the far end."

The old man nodded, pulling up the hood of his robe. "Let's go," he said to Garion.

The corridors were dim, lighted only by smoky torches set in iron rings protruding from the stone walls. They encountered but few of the black-robed Grolim priests in the hallways. The Grolims walked with an odd, swaying gait, their arms folded in their sleeves, their heads down, and the cowls of their robes covering their faces. Garion guessed that there was some obscure significance to that stiff-legged walk and tried to emulate it as he followed his grandfather along the half-lit halls.

Belgarath moved with feigned confidence, as if he knew precisely where they were going. They reached a broader corridor, and the old man glanced once toward its far end where a pair of heavy doors stood open. Beyond those doors lay a room filled with the flickering light of seething flames. "Not that way," he whispered to Garion.

"What is it?"

"The Sanctum. That's where the altar is." He quickly led the way

across the corridor and entered an intersecting hallway.

"This could take hours, Grandfather," Garion said in a low voice.

Belgarath shook his head. "Grolim architecture is fairly predictable," he disagreed. "We're in the right part of the Temple. You check the doors on that side, and I'll take these over here."

They moved along the hall, cautiously opening each door as they came to it.

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"Garion," the old man whispered, "it's over here."

The room they entered was quite large and smelled of old parchment and moldy leather bindings. It was filled with row upon row of tall, cluttered bookshelves. Solitary tables, each with a pair of wooden benches and with a single dimly glowing oil lamp hanging over it on a long chain, stood in little alcoves along the walls.

"Take a book—any book," Belgarath said. "Sit at that table over there and try to look as if you're studying. Keep your hood up and your eye on the door. I'm going to have a look around. Cough if anybody comes in."

Garion nodded, took a heavy volume from one of the shelves, and seated himself at the table. The minutes dragged by as he looked unseeing at the pages of his book with his ears straining for the slightest sound. Then, shockingly, there came the now-familiar shriek, a long drawn-out cry of despairing agony, followed by the sullen iron clang of the huge gong in the Sanctum where the Grolims conducted then- unspeakable rites. Unbidden, an image rose in his mind—the image of the scar-faced Chabat gleefully butchering a victim. He clenched his teeth together, forcing himself not to leap to his feet to stop that abomination.

Then Belgarath whistled softly to him from a narrow aisle leading back between two of the high-standing bookshelves. "I've got it," he said, "Keep watch on the door. I'll be back

here."

Garion sat nervously at the table, his eyes and ears alert. He was not good at this sort of thing. His nerves seemed to wind tighter and tighter as he waited, listening and watching for someone to open that door. What would he do if some black-robed priest entered? Should he speak or just remain silent with his head down over his book? What was customary here? He formulated a half-dozen different strategies, but when the latch of the door clicked loudly, he followed one that he had not even considered—he bolted. He swung his legs over the bench upon which he sat and noiselessly dodged back among the high, dark shelves looking for

Belgarath.

"Is it safe to talk in here?" he heard someone say.

Another man grunted. "Nobody comes in here any more. What was it you wanted to talk about?"

"Have you endured enough of her yet? Are you ready to do something about her?"

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"Keep your voice down, you fool. If someone hears you and carries your words back to her, your heart will fry in the coals at the next sounding of the bell."

"I loathe that scar-faced wench," the first Grolim spat.

"We all do, but our lives depend on not letting her know that. As long as she's Agachak's favorite, her power is absolute."

"She won't be his favorite if he finds out that she's practicing magic here in the Temple."

"How will he find out? Will you denounce her? She would deny it, and then Agachak would let her have you to do with as she chose."

There was a long, fearful silence.

"Besides," the second Grolim continued, "I don't think Agachak would even care about her petty amusements. The only thing that concerns him at the moment is his search for Cthrag Sardius. He and the other Hierarchs are bending all their thought to locating it. If she wants to dally with Sorchak and try to raise demons in the middle of the night, that's her affair and no business of ours."

"It's an abomination!" The first priest's voice was choked with outrage. "She defiles our Temple."

"I won't listen to such talk. I want to keep my heart inside my chest."

"Very well." The first Grolim's tone grew sly. "It may be as you say. You and I are both of the Green, however, and our elevation to the Purple will be more genuine than hers was. If we came upon her when no one else was around, you could use your power to lock her muscles, and I could sink my knife into her heart. Then she could stand before Torak and listen to his judgment upon her for violating his commandment forbidding magic."

"I refuse to listen to this any more." There was the sound of rapid footsteps, and the door slammed.

"Coward," the first priest muttered; then he too went out and closed the door behind him.

"Grandfather," Garion whispered hoarsely, "where are you?"

"Back here. Did they leave?"

"They're gone."

"Interesting conversation, wasn't it?"

Garion joined the old man at the back of the library. "Do

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you think Chabat could really be trying to raise demons-- the way the Morindim do?"

"A fair number of Grolims here seem to think so. If she is, she's walking on very dangerous ground. Torak absolutely forbade the practice of magic. Favorite or no, Agachak would have to condemn her if he found out about it."

"Did you find anything?" Garion looked at the book the old man had on the table in front of him.

"I think this might help. Listen: 'The path that has been lost will be found again on the Southern Isle.'"

"Verkat?"

"It almost has to be. Verkat is the only island of any size in southern Cthol Murgos. It confirms what Sadi told us, and I always like to get confirmation whenever I can."

"But it still means that we're only trailing after Zandra-mas. Did you find anything that tells us how to get ahead of

her?"

"Not yet," Belgarath admitted. He turned a page. "What's this?" he said in a startled voice. "What is it?"

"Listen." The old man lifted the book so that the lamp light fell upon the page. " 'Behold:' " he read, " 'In the days which shall follow the ascension of the Dark God into the heavens shall the King of the East and the King of the South do war upon each other, and this shall be a sign unto ye that the day of the meeting is at hand. Hasten therefore unto the Place which is No More when battles do rage upon the plains of the south. Take with thee the chosen sacrifice and a King of Angarak to bear witness to what shall come to pass. For lo, whichever of ye cometh into the presence of Cthrag Sar-dius with the sacrifice and an Angarak King shall be exalted above all the rest and shall have dominion over them. And know further that in the moment of the sacrifice shall the Dark God be reborn, and he shall triumph over the Child of

Light in the instant of his rebirth.'" Garion stared at him, feeling the blood drain from his face.

"Sacrifice?" he exclaimed. "Is that what Zandramas plans

to do with my son?" "So it would seem," Belgarath grunted. He thought about

it for a moment. "This explains a few things, but I still don't

quite follow this business about needing an Angarak King

present at the meeting. Cyradis didn't say anything about

that, and neither did the Prophecy."

"That's a Grolim book you've got there, Grandfather," Garion pointed out. "Maybe it's wrong."

"That's possible, too, but it does help to explain why Zandramas is moving around so stealthily. If Urvon knows about this the way Agachak obviously does, they'll both be doing everything in their power to get your son away from her. Whichever one of them gets to the Sardion with Geran and one of the Kings of Angarak is going to gain absolute control of the Grolim Church.'"

"Why my son?" Garion demanded. "Why would he be the one chosen for sacrifice?"

"I'm not sure, Garion. We haven't found an explanation for that yet."

"I don't think we'd better tell Ce'Nedra about this," Gar-ion said. "She has problems enough as it is."

The door opened again, and Garion spun, his hand going over his shoulder to the hilt of his sword.

"Belgarath? Are you in here?" It was Silk's voice.

"Back here," Belgarath answered. "Keep your voice down."

"We've got trouble," the little man said, coming to the back of the library to join them. "Eriond is missing."

"What?" Garion exclaimed.

"He slipped out when none of us was watching."

Belgarath slammed his fist down on the table and swore. "What's the matter with that boy?" he burst out.

Silk pushed back the hood of the Grolim robe he wore. "Polgara was going to go looking for him, but Durnik and I talked her out of it. I said I'd come and find you instead." V "We'd better find him," the old man said, rising to his • feet. "Pol will only wait for so long before she starts acting on her own. We'd better split up. We can cover more ground that way." He led them to the door of the library, glanced out quickly, and then went out into the hall. "Don't do

anything unusual," he cautioned Garion in a whisper. "There are Grolims in this place with enough talent to hear you if you start making any noise." 4 Garion nodded.

"And check back with the others from time to time. We won't accomplish much if one of us finds Eriond and then has to go looking for the other two. Let's go." He moved quickly off down the dimly lighted hallway.

"How did he manage to slip past Aunt Pol?" Garion whis-

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pered to Silk as the two of them went side by side back the way they had come.

"Ce'Nedra had a bout of hysterics," Silk replied. "The sacrifices upset her. Polgara had her in one of the cells trying to calm her down. That's when Eriond slipped out."

"Is she all right?" Garion demanded, the sinking fear that had been with him since Prolgu returning with sudden force.

"I think so. Polgara gave her something, and she's sleeping." Silk carefully looked around a corner. "I'll go this way," he whispered. "Be careful." He moved off on silent

feet.

Garion stood waiting for his friend to get well out of sight, then cautiously stepped out into the next corridor, folding his hands on his chest and lowering his cowed head in an imitation of Grolim piety. What could Eriond possibly be thinking of? The sheer irresponsibility of the boy's act made Garion want to pound his fist against the wall. He moved down the corridor, trying his best not to do anything that might look suspicious and carefully cracking open each door he came to.

"What is it?" a harshly accented voice demanded from inside a dark room when he opened the door.

"Sorry, brother," Garion muttered, trying to imitate the thickly accented Angarak speech, "wrong door." He quickly closed it again and went on down the corridor, moving as fast as he dared.

~ The door behind him was suddenly yanked open, and a half-dressed Grolim stepped out, his face angry. "You there," he shouted after Garion, "stop!"

Garion threw a quick look over his shoulder and was around the corner into the broad central corridor of the Temple in two steps.

"Come back here!" the Grolim shouted, and Garion heard his bare feet slapping on the flagstone floor as he ran in pursuit. Garion swore and then took a gamble. He yanked open the first door that presented itself and darted inside. A quick glance told him that the room was

empty, and he closed the door and set his ear against its panel to listen.

"What's the trouble?" he heard someone demand from the corridor outside.

"Someone just tried to come into my cell." Garion recognized the outraged voice of the Grohm upon whom he had just intruded.

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There was a sly chuckle.' 'Perhaps you should have waited to see what she wanted."

"It was a man."

There was a pause. "Well," the first voice said. "Well, well, well."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all. You'd better go put on some clothes. If Chabat catches you in the hall in your undergarments, she might get some peculiar ideas."

"I'm going to look for this intruder. There's something very strange going on here. Will you help me?"

"Why not? I haven't got anything better to do."

From far up the corridor Garion heard a slow, groaning chant and the sound of many shuffling feet.

"Quick," one of the voices outside the door warned, "back down this side passage. If they see us, they'll insist that we join them."

Garion heard their scurrying feet as they dodged back out of sight. Carefully, he opened the door a crack and peered out. The slow shuffling march and the deep-toned chanting came nearer. A line of Grolims, the cowls of their hoods raised and with their hands clasped in front of them, came into view, moving at a ceremonial pace along the torchlit corridor toward the very heart of the Temple. He waited in the dark room for them to pass, and then, on a sudden impulse so strong that he moved without even thinking, he boldly opened the door, stepped out into the corridor, and fell in at the end of the column.

The slow, rhythmic march continued on down the broad hallway, and the reek of burning flesh grew stronger in Gar-ion's nostrils as the file which he had joined approached the Sanctum. Then, chanting even louder, they passed through the arched doorway into the vaulted Sanctum itself.

The ceiling was very high, lost in smoky shadows. On the wall facing the door hung that polished steel mask—the calm, beautiful replica of the unblemished face of the God Torak. Under that uncaring mask stood the black altar with bright rivulets of fresh blood streaking its

sides. There stood the glowing brazier, awaiting the next quivering heart to be offered up to the long-dead God; and there the fire pit yawned for the body of the next butchered victim.

Shaking himself, Garion dodged quickly out of sight behind a column standing to one side of the doorway and stood

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sweating and trembling for several moments, struggling to control his emotions. Better perhaps than any man alive, he knew the full meaning of this awful place. Torak was dead. He himself had felt the faltering beat of the stricken God's heart thrilling down the blazing length of Iron-grip's sword, sunk deep in his enemy's chest. The slaughter that had drenched this foul place with blood in the years since that awful night was senseless, empty-homage paid to a maimed and demented God who had died weeping fire and crying piteously to the indifferent stars. A slow burning rage began to build up in his chest, filling his mouth with a fiery taste as bitter as gall. Unbidden, his will began to clench itself as he envisioned the shattering of the mask and the altar and the sudden destruction of this filthy place.

"That's not why you're Here, Beigarion!" the voice in his mind cracked.

Slowly, as if, were he to release it all at once, it might destroy the entire city, Garion relaxed his will. Time enough to crush this horror later. Right now, he had to find Eriond. Cautiously, he poked his head around the column which concealed him. A priest with the purple-lined hood of his robe pushed back had just entered from the far side of the Sanctum. In his hands he carried a dark red cushion, and gleaming on that cushion lay a long, cruel knife. He faced the image of his dead God and reverently lifted the cushion and the knife in supplication. "Behold the instrument of thy will, Dragon God of Angarak," he intoned, "and behold him whose heart is to be offered unto thee."

Four Grplims dragged a naked, screaming slave into the Sanctum, ignoring his helpless struggles and panic-sticken pleas for mercy. Without thinking, Garion reached over his shoulder for his sword. "Stop that!" the voice commanded. "No! I'm not going to let it happen!" "It won't happen. Now get your hand off your sword!" "No chance!" Garion said aloud, drawing his blade and lunging around the pillar. And then as if he had suddenly been turned to stone, he found that he could not move so much as an eyelash. "Let go of me!" he grated.

"No." You're here to watch this time, not to act. Now stand there and keep your eyes open,"

Garion stared in sudden disbelief as Eriond, his pale blond curls gleaming in the cruel light of the Temple, entered by

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way of the same door through which the slave had just been dragged. The young man's face bore an expression of almost regretful determination as he entered and walked directly toward the astonished priest. "I'm sorry," he said quite firmly, "but you can't do this any more."

"Seize this desecrator," the priest at the altar shouted. "It shall be his heart which shall sizzle in the coals!"

A dozen Grolims leaped to their feet, but suddenly froze, caught in that same stasis which locked Garion's muscles.

"This can't continue," Eriond said in that same determined voice. "I know how much it means to all of you, but it just can't go on. Someday—very soon, I think—you'll all understand."

There was no sound, no rushing surge such as Garion had come to expect, but the yawning fire pit before the altar suddenly roared to a furnace note, sending leaping flames and glowing sparks shooting upward to lick at the very vaults of the ceiling. The suffocatingly hot Sanctum suddenly cooled as if a cleansing breeze had just swept through it. Then the seething fire guttered briefly like a dying candle— and went out. The glowing brazier at the side of the altar also flared into blinding incandescence, and its steel body grew suddenly soft, drooping and sagging as it began to collapse under its own weight. With a flicker, it also went out.

The priest dropped his knife in horror and leaped to the still-glowing brazier. Irrationally, he put forth his hands as if he would force the softened meiakback into its original shape, but he howled in pain as the red-hot steel seared deeply into his flesh.

Eriond regarded the dead fires with a look of satisfaction, then turned to the stunned Grolims still holding the naked slave. "Let that man go," he told them.

They stared at him.

"You might as well," Eriond said almost conversationally. "You can't sacrifice him without the fires, and the fires won't burn any more. No matter what you do, you won't ever be able to start them again."

"Done!" the voice in Garion's mind said in a tone of such exultation that it buckled his knees.

The burned priest, still moaning and cradling his charred hands at his chest, raised his ashen face. "Seize him!" he shrieked, pointing at Eriond with a blackened hand. "Seize him and take him to Chabat!"

CHAPTER TWELVE

There was no longer any need for stealth. Alarm bells rang in every quarter of the Temple, and frightened Grolims scurried this way and that, shouting contradictory orders to each other. Garion ran among them, desperately looking for Belgarath and Silk.

As he rounded a corner, a wild-faced Grolim caught him by the arm. "Were you there in the Sanctum when it happened?" he demanded.

"No," Garion lied, trying to free his arm.

"They say that he was ten feet tall, and that he blasted a dozen priests into nothingness before he extinguished the fires."

"Oh?" Garion said, still trying to free himself from the Grolim's grasp.

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"Some people say that it was Belgarath the Sorcerer himself."

"I find that hard to believe."

"Who else would have that much power?" The Grolim stopped suddenly, his eyes going very wide. "You know what this means, don't you?" he asked in a trembling voice.

"What?"

"The Sanctum will have to be rededicated, and that requires Grolim blood. Dozens of us will have to die before the Sanctum is purified."

"I really have to go," Garion told him, tugging at the arm the man held fast in both hands.

"Chabat will wade to the hips in our blood," the priest moaned hysterically, ignoring Garion's words.

There was really no choice. Things were much too urgent for diplomacy. Garion feigned a frightened expression as he looked past the babbling Grolim's shoulder. "Is that her coming?" he whispered hoarsely.

The Grolim turned his head to look in fright back over his shoulder. Garion carefully measured him and then smashed his fist into the unprotected side of the terrified man's face. The Grolim slammed back against the wall, his eyes glazed and vacant. Then he collapsed in a heap on the floor.

"Neat," Silk said from a dark doorway a few yards up the hall, "but the reason for it escapes me."

"I couldn't get loose from him," Garion explained, bending to take hold of the unconscious man. He dragged him into a shadowy alcove and propped him up in a sitting position. "Have you got any idea where Grandfather is?"

"He's in here," Silk replied, jerking his thumb over his shoulder at the door behind him. "What happened?"

"I'll tell you in a minute. Let's get in out of sight."

They went through the doorway to find Belgarath seated on the edge of a table. "What's going on out there?" he demanded.

"I found Eriond."

"Good."

"No, not really. He went into the Sanctum just as the Grolims were about to sacrifice a slave and put out the fires."

"He did whatT

"I think it was him. I was there and I know that it wasn't me. He just walked in and told them that they couldn't sacrifice people any more, and then the fires went out. Grand-

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father, he didn't make a sound when he did it--no surge, no noise, nothing."

"Are you sure it was him? I mean--it wasn't something natural?"

Garion shook his head. "No. The fires flared up and then went out like blown-out candles. There were other things going on, too. The voice talked to me and I couldn't even move a muscle. The Grolims who were dragging the slave to the altar just let him go when Eriond told them to. Then he told them all that they won't ever be able to relight the fires."

"Where's the boy now?"

"They're taking him to Chabat."

"Couldn't you stop them?"

"I was told not to." Garion tapped his forehead.

"I should have expected that," Belgarath said irritably. "We'd better go warn Pol and the others. We may have to free Eriond and then fight our way out of here." He opened the door, looked out into the hallway, and motioned Garion and Silk to follow him.

Polgara's face was deathly pale when the three of them re-entered the room where she and the others were waiting. "You didn't find him," she said. It was not exactly a question.

"Garion did," Belgarath replied.

She turned to Garion. "Why isn't he with you, then?" she demanded.

"I'm afraid the Grolims have him, Aunt Pol."

"We've got a problem here, Pol," Belgarath said gravely. "From what Garion says, Eriond went into the Sanctum and put out the fires."

"What?" she exclaimed.

Garion spread his hands helplessly. "He just walked in and made the fires go out. The Grolims seized him and they're taking him to Chabat."

"This is very serious, Belgarath," Sadi said. "Those fires are supposed to burn perpetually. If the Grolims believe that the boy was responsible, he's in very great danger."

"I know," the old man agreed.

"All right, then," Durnik said quietly. "We'll just have to go take him away from them." He stood up, and Toth silently joined him.

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"But our ship is almost ready," Sadi protested. "We could be out of here with no one the wiser."

"There's nothing we can do about that now." Belgarath's face was grimly determined.

"Let me see if I can salvage something out of this mess before any of you do anything irreversible," Sadi pleaded. "There'll always be time for more direct action if I can't talk our way out of this."

Garion looked around. "Where's Ce'Nedra?" he asked.

"She's asleep," Polgara replied. "Liselle's with her."

"Is she all right? Silk said that she was upset. She isn't sick again, is she?"

"No, Garion. It was the sounds coming from the Sanctum. She couldn't tolerate them."

A heavy fist suddenly pounded on the bolted door. Garion jumped and instinctively reached for his sword. "Open up in there!" a harsh voice commanded from outside.

"Quickly," Sadi hissed, "all of you get back into your cells and try to look as if you've been sleeping when you come out."

They hurried back into the cells and waited breathlessly while the thin eunuch went to the door and unbolted it. "What's the matter, reverend sirs?" he asked mildly as the Grolims burst into the room with drawn weapons.

"You have been summoned to an audience with the Hier-arch, slaver," one of them snarled. "You and all your servants."

"We're honored," Sadi murmured.

"You're not being honored. You're to be interrogated. I'd advise you to speak the truth, because Agachak has the power to pull you very slowly out of your skin if you lie to him."

"What an unpleasant notion. Has the Hierarch returned from the Drojim Palace then?"

"Word has been sent to him of the monstrous crime one of your servants has committed."

"Crime? What crime?"

The Grolim ignored him. "On Chabat's orders, you are all to be confined until Agachak returns to the Temple."

Garion and the others were roughly shaken out of their feigned sleep and marched through the smoky corridors and down a narrow flight of stone steps into the basement. Unlike the rooms above, these cells were secured with barred iron

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doors, and the narrow halls had about them that peculiar sour odor that permeates prisons and dungeons the world over. One of the Grolims opened a barred door and gestured for them to enter.

"Is this really necessary, good Priest?" Sadi protested. The Grolim put his hand threateningly on his sword hilt. "Calm yourself, sir," Sadi said. "I was merely asking." "Inside! Now!"

They all filed into the cell, and the black-robed priest slammed it behind them. The sound of the key grating in the lock seemed very loud for some reason.

"Garion," Ce'Nedra said in a frightened little voice, "What's happening? Why are they doing this?"

He put his arm comfortingly about her shoulders. "Eriond got into trouble," he explained. "Sadi's going to try to talk us all out of this." "What if he can't?" "Then we'll do it the other way." Silk looked around at the dimly lit cell with a disdainful sniff. "Dungeons always show such a lack of imagination," he remarked, scuffing at the moldy straw littering the floor with one foot.

"Have you had such a wide experience with dungeons, Kheldar?" Velvet asked him.

"I've been in a few from time to time." He shrugged. "I've never found it convenient to stay for more than a few hours." He raised up on his tiptoes to peer out through the small barred window in the door. "Good," he said, "no guards." He looked at Belgarath. "Do you want me to open this?" he asked, tapping on the door with one knuckle. "I don't think we can accomplish very much from in here."

"Please be patient, Prince Kheldar," Sadi said. "If we

break out of this cell, I'll never be able to smooth this over."

"I've got to find out what they've done with Eriond,"

Polgara told the eunuch firmly. "Go ahead and open it,

Silk,"

"Polgara?" a light, familiar voice came from the next cell. "Is that you?"

"Eriond!" she said with relief. "Are you all right?" "I'm fine, Polgara. They put chains on me, but they aren't too uncomfortable."

"Why did you do that—what you did in the Sanctum?" "I didn't like those fires."

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"I didn't either, but—"

"I really didn't like them, Polgara. That sort of thing has to be stopped, and we have to start somewhere."

"How did you put them out?" Belgarath asked through the barred window in the door. "Garion was there when you did it and he says that he didn't hear or feel anything."

"I'm not sure, Belgarath. I don't think I actually did anything special to make them go out. I just decided that I didn't want them to burn any more, so I sort of let them know how I felt, and they just went out."

"That's all?"

"As closely as I can remember, yes."

Belgarath turned from the door, his face baffled. "When we get out of here, that boy and I are going to have a very long talk about this. I've meant to do that about a half-dozen times, and every time I make up my mind, I get smoothly diverted." He looked at Garion. "The next time you talk to your friend, tell him to stop that. It irritates me."

"He already knows that, Grandfather. I think that's why he does it."

Somewhere down the corridor outside, a heavy iron door clanged open, and there came the sound of marching feet.

"Grolims," Silk said quietly from the barred window.

"Who else?" Belgarath asked sourly.

The approaching group stopped outside, and a key grated in the lock of Eripnd's cell. The door creaked open. "You, boy," a harsh voice

barked. "Come with us."

"Father," Polgara whispered urgently.

The old man held up one hand. "Wait," he muttered.

Then someone rattled a key in the lock of their cell door, and it also clanged open. "Agachak has returned," the Grolim in the open doorway announced curtly. "You will come out of there now."

"Splendid," Sadi said with relief. "Whatever this is all about, I'm sure it can be cleared up in just a few minutes."

"No talking!" The Grolim turned abruptly and started down the corridor while a dozen of his fellows fell in behind the prisoners with drawn weapons.

Agachak, the Hierarch of Rak Urga, was a cadaverous-looking man with a long beard. He sat upon a thronelike chair in a large room lighted by glaring torches and hung with dark maroon drapes. The Hierarch's hooded robe was bloodred, and his sunken eyes burned beneath their shaggy gray brows.

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Eriond, still in chains, sat calmly on a rough wooden stool before him, and the slim priestess, Chabat, her purple-lined hood pushed back and the red scars on her cheeks seeming to reflect the torchlight, stood at her master's elbow with a look of cruel triumph on her face.

"Which one of you is Ussa of Sthiss Tor?" the Hierarch demanded in a hollow-sounding voice.

Sadi stepped forward with an oily bow. "I am Ussa, Holy One," he said.

"You're in a great deal of trouble, Ussa," Chabat told him, her throaty voice almost purring. Her lips twisted into an ugly smirk.

"But I have done nothing."

"Here in Cthol Murgos, the master is responsible for the misdeeds of the servant."

Agachak's eyes bored into Sadi, though his bony white face remained expressionless. "Let us proceed," he commanded. "Who is to present the evidence in this matter?"

Chabat turned and gestured to a hooded Grolim standing near the wall. "Sorchak will serve as the priest-inquisitor, Master," she replied in the tone of one who feels fully in charge of a situation. "I'm sure you're aware of his zeal."

"Ah, yes," Agachak said in a noncommittal tone. "I might have guessed that it would be Sorchak." The faintest hint of sardonic amusement

touched his lips. "Very well, priest-inquisitor, you may present the charges."

The black-robed Grolim stepped forward, pushing his green-lined hood back from his tangled hair. "The matter itself is simple, my Lord," he declared in his strident voice. "There were dozens of witnesses present, so there can be no question of this young villain's guilt. The implications of that guilt, however, must be pursued."

"Pronounce your sentence, Great Hierarch," Chabat urged the dead-looking man on the throne. "I will wring the whole truth from this greasy Nyissan and from his servants."

"I have heard talk of guilt, Chabat," he replied, "but I have still not heard the charges or the evidence."

Chabat looked slightly taken aback by his words. "I but thought to spare you the tedium of a formal inquiry, Master. I am convinced of the truth of Sorchak's words. You have always accepted my judgment in such matters before."

"Perhaps," Agachak said, "but I think that this time I might like to judge for myself." He looked at the greasy-

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haired priest standing before him. "The charges, Sorchak," he said. "Exactly what is it that the young man is accused of doing?" There was a faint note of dislike in the Hierarch's voice.

Sorchak's bulging eyes grew slightly less certain as he sensed Agachak's unspoken animosity. Then he drew himself up. "Early this evening," he began, "just as the holiest rite of our faith was about to be performed on the altar in the Sanctum, this young man entered and extinguished the altar Fires. That is what he did, and it is that of which I accuse him. I swear that he is guilty."

"Absurd," Sadi protested. "Are the fires at the altar not perpetually attended? How could this boy have gotten close enough to them to put them out?"

"How dare you question the sworn word of a priest of Torak?" Chabat said angrily, her scarred cheeks writhing. "Sorchak has sworn to his guilt, and therefore he is guilty. To question the word of a priest is death."

Agachak's sunken eyes were veiled as he looked at her. "I think that I might like to hear the evidence that has so persuaded you and the priest-inquisitor for myself, Chabat," he said in a flat voice. "Accusation and guilt are not always the same thing, and the question raised by Ussa is quite relevant."

A faint hope surged through Garion at the Hierarch's words. Agachak knew. He was completely aware of Chabat's involvement with Sorchak, and the very eagerness with which she defended the rancid-smelling Grolim's every word affronted her master.

"Well, priest-inquisitor," Agachak continued, "how did this boy manage to put out the altar fires? Has there been some laxity in guarding them?"

Sorchak's eyes grew wary as he realized that he was on dangerous ground. "I have many witnesses, my Lord," he declared. "There is universal agreement by all who were present that the Sanctum was desecrated by means of sorcery."

"Ah, sorcery, is it? That would explain everything, of course." Agachak paused, his dreadful eyes fixed on the now-sweating Sorchak. "I have noticed, however, that the cry 'witch' or 'sorcerer' is frequently raised when there is a lack of solid evidence. Is there no other explanation for what happened in the Sanctum? Is the priest-inquisitor's case so

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weak that he must fall back on so tired and worn-out an accusation?"

Chabat's expression was incredulous, and Sorchak began to tremble.

"Fortunately, the matter is easily resolved," Agachak added. "The gift of sorcery has a slight drawback. Others with the same gift can clearly sense the use of the power." He paused. "You didn't know that, did you, Sorchak? A priest of the Green hoping for elevation to the Purple would have been more diligent in his studies and would have known that—but you have been otherwise occupied, haven't you?" He turned to the priestess at his side. "I am surprised, however, that you did not instruct your protegé here more completely before you let him make this kind of charge, Chabat. You might have prevented his making a fool of himself— and of you."

Her eyes blazed, and the flamelike scars on her face went livid; then suddenly they began to glow as if an inner fire were running beneath her skin.

"Well, Chabat," he said in a calm, deadly voice, "has the moment come then? Will you finally try your will against mine?"

The awful question hung in the air, and Garion found that he was holding his breath. Chabat, however, averted her eyes and turned her face away from the Hierarch, the fires in her cheeks fading.

"A wise decision, Chabat." Agachak turned to Sadi. "Well, Ussa of Sthiss Tor, how say you to the charge that your servant here is a sorcerer?"

"The priest of Torak is in error, my Lord," Sadi replied diplomatically. "Believe me, this young dunce is no sorcerer. He spends ten minutes every morning trying to decide which of his shoes goes on which foot. Look at him. There's not the faintest glimmer of intelligence in those eyes. He doesn't even have sense enough to be afraid."

Chabat's eyes grew angry again, though there was in them now a faint hint that she was no longer so sure of herself. "What would a Nyissan slaver know of sorcery, Master?" she sneered. "You know of the habits of the snake-people. Doubtless this Ussa's mind is so fuddled with drugs that one of his servants could be Belgarath himself, and he wouldn't know it."

"A very interesting point," Agachak murmured. "Now,

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let us examine this matter. We know that the altar fires went out. That much is certain. Sorchak declares that this young man extinguished them by means of sorcery—though he has no proof to substantiate that charge. Ussa of Sthiss Tor, who may be drugged to the point of insensibility, maintains that the young man is a simpleton and thus totally incapable of so extraordinary an act. Now, how may we resolve this dilemma?"

"Put them to the torment, Holy One," Chabat suggested eagerly. "I myself will wring the truth from them—one by one."

Garion tensed himself and looked carefully at Belgarath. The old man stood quite calmly with his short, silvery beard gleaming in the ruddy torchlight. He gave no sign that he might be preparing for any kind of direct action.

"Your fondness for the torture chamber is well known, Chabat," Agachak was saying coldly. "Your skill is such that your victims usually say exactly what you want them to say—which is not always the absolute truth."

"I do but serve my God, Master," she declared proudly.

"We all serve here, my Holy Priestess," he rebuked her, "and you would be wise not to assert your own excessive piety in order to elevate yourself—or your underling for that matter." He looked at Sorchak with undisguised contempt. "I am still Hierarch here, and / will make the final decision in this matter."

The scar-faced priestess shrank back, her eyes suddenly fearful. "Forgive me, Agachak," she stammered. "This monstrous crime has filled me with righteous outrage, but as you say, the final decision is wholly yours."

"I find your acceptance of my authority gratifying, Chabat. I thought you might have forgotten."

Just then there was a stir at the back of the torchlit room. Two burly Murgos with long, polished halberds in their hands rudely pushed aside the Grolims clustered near the door. With their dark faces impassive, they banged the butts of their weapons on the floor in unison. "Make way!" one of them boomed. "Make way for Urgit, High King of Cthol Murgos!"

The man who sauntered into the room surrounded by guards looked like

no Murgo Garion had ever seen before. He was short and had a slender but wiry build. His black hair was lank and his features narrow. His robe was care-

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lessly open at the front, revealing the fact that, instead of the customary mail shirt, he wore a western-style doublet and hose of rich purple. His iron crown was perched somewhat rakishly on one side of his head. His expression was sardonic, but his eyes were wary. "Agachak," he greeted the Hierarch perfunctorily, "I gave some thought to the news which was brought to you at the Drojim, and I finally concluded that I might be of some use to you in sorting out the cause of this regrettable incident."

"The Temple is honored by the presence of the High King," Agachak intoned formally.

"And the High King is honored to be so kindly received by the Hierarch of Rak Urga," Urgit replied. He looked around. "Do you have a chair handy?" he asked. "I've had along, tiring day."

"See to it," Agachak said flatly to the priestess standing beside his throne.

Chabat blinked, then a slow flush mounted her cheeks. "A chair for his Majesty," she commanded harshly, "and be quick about it."

One of the Grolims near the door scurried out and returned a moment later with a heavy chair.

"Thanks awfully," the King said, sinking into the chair. He looked at Agachak. "I have a small confession to make, Holy One," he said with an apologetic cough. "As I was about to enter your presence in this room, I lingered for a time in the hallway outside, hoping to acquaint myself with the details of this affair." He laughed shortly. "Listening at doors is an old habit of mine, I'm afraid. It comes from my anxious childhood. Anyway, I managed to hear the charges presented by the priest-inquisitor. To be perfectly candid, Agachak, he's got a very shaky case." He gave the Hierarch a quick, ingratiating look. "But of course you've already pointed that out, haven't you?"

Agachak nodded briefly, his face unreadable.

"Now," Urgit went on quickly, "I most certainly wouldn't want to interfere in what is clearly a Church matter, but wouldn't you say that there are dozens of possible natural explanations for this incident?" He looked hopefully at Agachak; then reassured by the look of agreement on the Hierarch's face, he continued. "I mean, we've all seen fires go out before, haven't we? Do we really need to go so far afield to come up with a reason for this really unremarkable

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occurrence? Isn't it more likely that the keepers of the Temple fires grew careless and that the fires just went out on their own—as fires starved for fuel are likely to do?"

"Absolute nonsense!" the greasy-haired Sorchak snapped.

Urgit flinched visibly, his eyes going in appeal to Agachak.

"You forget yourself, priest-inquisitor," the Hierarch said. —"Our guest is the High King of Cthol Murgos; if you offend him, I may decide to give him your head by way of apology."

Sorchak swallowed hard. "Please forgive me, your Majesty," he choked. "I spoke before I thought."

"Quite all right, old boy." Urgit forgave him with a magnanimous wave of his hand. "Sometimes we all speak too quickly when we're excited." He turned back to the Hierarch. "I regret this catastrophe as much as anyone, Agachak," he said, "but this Nyissan slaver was sent here by Jaharb, and both you and I know how desperately urgent his mission is to the Church and to the State. Don't you think that as a matter of policy we could let this incident pass?"

"Surely you're not just going to let these charges drop?" Chabat's voice was shrill as she faced the Hierarch. "Who is to be punished for the desecration of the Sanctum?"

Urgit's face grew unhappy, and he once again appealed to Agachak for support with pleading eyes. Garion clearly saw that this was not a strong king. Even the slightest resistance to his diffidently offered proposals made him instinctively retreat or seek support from someone he perceived to be stronger.

Agachak turned slowly to look the scarred priestess full in the face. "All this shouting is beginning to weary me, Chabat," he told her bluntly. "If you can't modulate your voice, you can leave."

She stared at him in stunned disbelief.

"There is far more at stake here than the fact that some fires went out," he said to her. "As was foretold ages ago, the time for the final meeting between the Child of Light and the Child of Dark is at hand. If / am not the one who is present at that meeting, you will find yourself bowing to either Urvon or Zandramas. I doubt that either one of them would find your antics amusing enough to make them decide to let you go on living. As for the charge of sorcery, there's an easy way to settle that once and for all." He rose from

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his throne, walked across to Eriond, and placed one hand on each side

of his head.

Aunt Pol drew in her breath sharply, and Garion carefully began to gather in his will.

Eriond looked up into the face of the dead-looking Hier-arch with a gentle smile on his face.

"Fagh!" Agachak said in disgust, pulling his hands quickly back, "This beardless boy is an innocent. There's no evidence in his mind that he has ever tasted power." He turned to look at Sorchak. "I find your charges groundless, priest-inquisitor, and I dismiss them."

Sorchak's face went white, and his eyes bulged.

"Have a care, Sorchak," the Hierarch said ominously. "If you protest my decision too strenuously, I might just decide that this whole incident was your fault. Chabat is sick with disappointment that she has no one to torture to death." His look grew sly as he glanced at the priestess. "Would you like to have Sorchak, my dear?" he asked her. "I have always delighted in giving you these little gifts. I'll even watch with some pleasure while you slowly pull out his entrails with red-hot hooks."

Chabat's flame-marked face was filled with chagrin. Gar-ion saw that she had been convinced that the Hierarch, as he apparently had so many times in the past, would meekly accede to her peremptory demands, and she had staked all of her prestige on the punishment of Sadi, for whom she had developed an instantaneous dislike. Agachak's unexpected and almost contemptuous rejection of the accusations she and Sorchak had leveled struck at the very foundations of her puffed-up self-esteem, but more importantly at her position of power here in the Temple. Unless she could somehow salvage something—anything—out of this, her many enemies would inevitably pull her down. Garion fervently hoped that Sadi realized that she was even more dangerous now than she had been when she had thought she held the upper hand.

Her narrowed eyes grew cautious as she assessed the Hierarch's mood, then she drew herself up and addressed King Urgit. "There is also a civil crime here, your Majesty," she told him. "I had believed that the desecration of the Sanctum was more serious, but since our revered Hierarch has discovered in his wisdom that those charges were un-

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founded, it is now my duty to advise you of a crime against the State."

Urgit exchanged a quick look with Agachak, then slouched lower in his chair, his eyes unhappy. "The Crown is always ready to listen to the words of the priesthood," he replied without much enthusiasm.

Chabat gave Sadi another look of smug triumph and open hatred. "Since the founding of our nation, the vile drugs and poisons of the snake-people have been forbidden in Cthol Murgps by royal decree," she pointed out. "After this Ussa and his servants were confined in the dungeon, I had their belongings searched." She turned. "Bring in that

case," she ordered.

A side door opened, and an obsequious underpriest entered, carrying Sadi's red leather case. The fanatic Sorchak took it from him, his face also gleefully triumphant. "Behold the evidence that Ussa of Sthiss Tor has violated our law and that his life is forfeit," he said in his strident voice. He undid the latch, opened the case, and displayed Sadi's many vials and the earthenware bottle where Zith resided.

Urgit's face grew even more unhappy. He looked uncertainly at Sadi. "Is there some explanation for this, Ussa?" he asked hopefully.

Sadi's face took on an exaggerated expression of innocence. "Surely your Majesty could not believe that I ever intended to try to distribute those items here in Cthol Mur-gos," he protested.

"Well," Urgit said lamely, "you have got them with you."

"Of course, but they're for trade with the Malloreans. There's quite a market for this sort of thing among those people."

"I wouldn't be in the least surprised," Urgit said, straightening in his chair. "Then you had no intention of peddling your drugs to my subjects?"

"Most certainly not, your Majesty," Sadi replied indignantly.

Urgit's expression grew relieved. "Well," he said to the glowering Chabat, "there you have it, then. Certainly none of us could object to the fact that our Nyissan friend here is bent on corrupting the Malloreans—the more the better, I'd say."

"What about this?" Sorchak said, putting Sadi's case on

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the floor and lifting out the earthenware bottle. "What secret is hidden in here, Ussa of Sthiss Tor?" He shook the bottle.

"Be careful, man!" Sadi exclaimed, leaping forward with his hand outstretched.

"Ah-ha!" Chabat exclaimed triumphantly. "It appears that there is something in that bottle that the slaver considers important. Let us examine the contents. It may yet be that some undiscovered crime lurks here. Open the bottle, Sorchak."

"I beg of you," Sadi pleaded. "If you value your life, do not tamper with that bottle."

"Open it, Sorchak," Chabat ordered relentlessly.

The smirking Grolim shook the bottle again and then began to work out the stopper.

"Please, noble Priest!" Sadi's voice was anguished.

"We'll just have a look." Sorchak grinned. "I'm sure that one look won't hurt anything." He drew out the cork and raised the bottle to his eye to peer in.

Zith, of course, took immediate action.

With a strangled shriek, Sorchak arched backward, flinging both arms into the air. The earthenware bottle sailed upward, and Sadi caught it just before it struck the floor. The stricken priest clapped both hands over his eye. There was a look of horror on his face, and blood spurted out from between his fingers. He began to squeal like a pig, all of his limbs convulsing. He suddenly pitched forward, threshing wildly and clawing tatters of skin from his face. He began to bang his head on the floor. His convulsions grew more violent and he began to froth at the mouth. With a shrill shriek, he suddenly leaped high into the air. When he came down, he was dead.

There was a moment of stunned silence, then Chabat suddenly shrieked, "Sorchak!" Her voice was filled with anguish and insupportable loss. She flew to the side of the dead man and fell across his body, sobbing uncontrollably.

Urgit stared in open-mouthed revulsion at Sorchak's corpse. "Torak's teeth!" he swore in a strangled whisper, "what have you got in that bottle, Ussa?"

"Uh—it's a pet, your Majesty," Sadi replied nervously. "I did try to warn him."

"Indeed you did, Ussa," Agachak crooned. "We all heard you. Do you suppose I might see this pet of yours?" A cruel

smile crossed his face as he looked gloatingly at the hysterically sobbing Chabat.

"Certainly, Holy One," Sadi answered quickly. He carefully laid the bottle on the floor. "Just a precaution," he apologized. "She's a little excited, and I wouldn't want her to make any mistakes." He leaned over the bottle. "It's all right now, dear," he said soothingly to the vengeful little reptile lurking inside. "The bad man has gone away, and everything is fine now."

Zith sulked in her bottle, still greatly offended.

"Really, dear," Sadi assured her, "it's all right. Don't you trust me?"

There was a snippy little hiss from inside the bottle.

"That's a very naughty thing to say, Zith," Sadi gently reproved her. "I did everything I could to keep him from disturbing you." He looked apologetically at Agachak. "I really don't know where she picks up

such language, Holy One," he declared. He turned his attention back to the bottle. "Please, dear, don't be nasty."

Another spiteful little hiss came from the bottle.

"Now that's going entirely too far, Zith. You come out of there at once."

Cautiously the little green snake poked her head out of the bottle, raised herself, and looked at the corpse on the floor. Sorchak's face was a ghastly blue color, and the foam was drying on his lips. Chabat, still weeping hysterically, clung to his stiffening body. Zith slithered the rest of the way out of her little house, dismissed the dead man with a contemptuous flick of her tail, and crawled to Sadi, purring with a smug little sound of self-satisfaction. Sadi reached down his hand to her, and she nuzzled affectionately at his fingers. "Isn't she adorable?" he said fondly. "She's always so kittenish after she bites someone."

A slight movement caught Garion's eye. Velvet was leaning forward, looking at the contentedly purring little reptile with an expression of wholly absorbed fascination.

"You've got her under control, haven't you, Ussa?" Urgit asked in a faintly apprehensive voice.

"Oh, yes, your Majesty," Sadi assured him. "She's perfectly content now. In a little bit, I'll give her a light snack and a nice little bath, and she'll sleep like a baby."

Urgit turned back to the Hierarch. "Well, Agachak?" he said, "what's your decision? Personally, I see no reason to

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continue this investigation. The slaver and his servants appear to be quite blameless."

The Hierarch considered it, his eyes hooded. "I believe you're right, your Majesty." He turned to one of his Gro-lims. "Free this idiot boy," he said, pointing at Eriond.

Chabat, her scarred face ravaged by grief, slowly raised herself from Sorchak's body. She looked first at Urgit and then at Agachak. "And what of this?" she demanded in a voice vibrant with her emotion. "What of this?" She indicated the stiffening Sorchak at her feet. "Who is to be punished for this? Upon whom shall I wreak my vengeance?"

"The man died through his own act, Chabat," Agachak dismissed her demand. "There was no crime involved."

"No crime?" Her voice was choked. "No crime?" It rose in a crescendo. "Are Grolim lives so cheap that you will now throw them away?" She spun and fixed Sadi with her burning eyes. "You will pay for this, Ussa of Sthiss Tor," she declared. "I swear it upon the body of

Sorchak and upon that of Torak. You will never escape me. I will have revenge upon you and all your servants for the death of Sorchak."

"Why are you so upset, Chabat?" Agachak asked with malicious amusement in his hollow voice. "There are scores of Grolims in the Temple. Sorchak was one like all the rest—greedy, ambitious, and deceitful. His death was the result of his own folly—and of yours." A cruel smile touched his thin lips. "Could it be that your interest in this dead Grolim was personal? You have long been my favorite, Chabat. I trusted you entirely. Is it possible that you have been unfaithful to me, seeking entertainment in the arms of another?"

Her face blanched, and she lifted one trembling hand to her lips as she realized that she had gone too far and revealed too much.

Agachak laughed, a chilling sound. "Did you actually believe that I was so engrossed in my search for the Sardion that I was not aware of your private amusements?" He paused. "Tell me, Chabat," he said in an offhand way, "did you and Sorchak ever succeed in raising a demon?"

She drew back, her eyes wide with sudden terror as she faced her master.

"I thought not," he murmured. "What a shame. All that effort wasted. Perhaps you need a new partner in your midnight rites, Chabat. Sorchak's heart was never really in your

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attempts anyway. He was nothing more than a cheap opportunist, so your loss is not as great as you might think. Do you know what he called you in private?" he asked her, his eyes alight.

She shook her head numbly.

"I have it on the very best authority that he customarily referred to you as 'that scar-faced hag.' Does that in any way mollify your grief?"

Chabat recoiled from him, her face suffused with mortification as she realized that she had just been cruelly humiliated in public. She whirled in rage and kicked the dead man in his unfeeling side. "Scar-faced hag?" she shrieked, kicking the body again. "Scar-faced hag? Rot, Sorchak! And may the worms enjoy your stinking carcass!" Then she spun and fled, sobbing, from the room.

"She seems a trifle distraught," Urgit observed mildly.

Agachak shrugged. "The shattering of illusions is always painful."

Urgit pulled absently at his pointed nose. "Her distraction, however, raises certain risks here, Agachak," he said thoughtfully. "The mission of this slaver is vital to both of us, and an hysterical woman—particularly one with the kind of power Chabat possesses—can be very dangerous. She obviously bears Ussa here a certain enmity, and since he was involved in both her humiliation and the death of

Sorchak, I'd say that right now the Temple might not be the safest place in the world for him."

Agachak nodded gravely. "Your Majesty's point is well taken."

Urgit's face brightened as if an idea had just occurred to him. "Agachak," he said, "what would you say to the notion of my keeping Ussa and his servants at the Drojim until we can see him safely on his way? That would put him beyond Chabat's reach in the event that her distraction impels her into any kind of rashness." He paused nervously. "It's entirely up to you, Holy Agachak," he added quickly.

"There is much to what you say, Urgit," Agachak replied. "A small slip here could put you at the mercy of Kal Zakath and me on my knees before either Urvon or Zandramas. Let us by all means avoid those disasters." He turned to Sadi. "You and your servants will accompany his Majesty to the Drojim Palace, Ussa. I'll have your belongings sent along later. You'll be safe there, and your ship will be ready in a

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few days." He smiled ironically. "I hope you appreciate our tender concern for your well-being."

Sadi bowed. "I am overwhelmed with gratitude, Holy One," he said.

"I'll keep the Dagashi Kabach here in the Temple, however," Agachak said to the King. "That way each of us will have in his hands a vital element in the mission to Rak Hagga. It should encourage us to co-operate."

"Of course," Urgit agreed hastily, "I quite understand." He rose to his feet. "The hour grows late," he noted. "I'll return to the Drojim now and leave you to your many religious duties, Dread Hierarch."

"Give my regards to the Lady Tamazin, your noble mother," Agachak responded.

"I will, Agachak. I know that she'll be smothered with joy to know that you remembered her. Come along then, Ussa." He turned and started toward the door.

"May the spirit of Torak go with you, your Majesty," Agachak called after him.

"I certainly hope not," Urgit muttered to Sadi as they passed through the doorway.

"Your Majesty's arrival came at a critical moment," Sadi said quietly as the two of them led the way down the hall. "Things were getting a bit tense."

"Don't flatter yourself," Urgit said sourly. "If it weren't for the absolute necessity of getting Kabach to Rak Hagga, I'd never have risked a confrontation with the Grolims. I'm sure you're a nice

enough fellow, but I have my own skin to consider."

When they were outside the nail-studded doors of the Temple, the Murgo King straightened and drew in a deep breath of the cool night air. "I'm always glad to get out of that stinking place," he declared. He motioned to one of his guards. "Go get the horses," he commanded.

"At once, your Majesty."

Then Urgit turned back to the shaven-headed Nyissan. "All right, you sly fox," he said in an amused tone, "now perhaps you'd like to tell me what you're doing down here in Cthol Murgos—and why you've assumed this pose. I almost fainted dead away when I discovered that the mysterious Ussa of Sthiss Tor was none other than my old friend Sadi, Chief Eunuch in the palace of Queen Salmissra."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

They clattered through the deserted midnight streets of Rak Urga with the king's torch-bearing guards drawn up closely around them. "It's all a sham, of course," Urgit was saying to Sadi. "I bow and scrape to Agachak, mouth pious platitudes to make him happy, and keep my real opinions to myself. I need his support, so I have to stay on the good side of him. He knows that, so he takes every possible advantage of the situation."

"The bond between Church and State here in Cthol Murgos is well known," Sadi noted as they entered a broad square where flaring torches painted the sides of nearby buildings a smoky orange.

Urgit made an indelicate sound. "Bond!" he snorted, "More like a chain, Sadi—and it's around my neck." He looked up at the murky sky, his sharp-featured face ruddy

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in the torchlight. "Agachak and I agree on one thing, though. It's absolutely essential to get the Dagashi Kabach to Rak Hagga before winter sets in. Jaharb's had his people combing all of western Cthol Murgos for months looking for a slaver to slip Kabach through Mallorean lines." He suddenly grinned at Sadi. "As luck had it, the one he found just happened to be an old friend of mine. I don't know that we need to let Agachak know that we're acquainted, though. I like to keep a few secrets from him."

Sadi made a sour face. "It's not too hard to guess why you're sending an assassin to the city where Kal Zakath's headquarters are located."

"I wouldn't advise lingering for any sight-seeing after you get him there," Urgit agreed. "But then, Rak Hagga's not a very attractive town anyway."

Sadi nodded glumly. "That's more or less what I thought." He

considered it, running one long-fingered hand over his shaven scalp. "The death of Zakath won't really solve your problem, though, will it? I can't really see the Mallolean generals packing up and going home just because their emperor's been killed."

Urgit sighed. "One thing at a time, Sadi. I can probably bribe the generals, or pay them tribute or something. The first step is to get rid of Zakath. You can't reason with that man." He looked around at the bleak stone buildings, harshly illuminated by flickering torchlight. "I hate this place," he said suddenly. "I absolutely hate it."

"Rak Urga?"

"Cthol Murgos, Sadi. I hate the whole stinking country. Why couldn't I have been born in Tolnedra—or maybe Sen-daria? Why did I have to get stuck in Cthol Murgos?"

"But you're the king."

"That wasn't by choice. One of our charming customs is that when a new king is crowned, all other possible contenders for the throne are put to death. For me, it was either the throne or the grave. I had a number of brothers when I became king, but now I'm an only child." He shuddered. "This is a gloomy subject, don't you think? Why don't we talk about something else? Just what are you doing in Cthol Murgos, Sadi? I thought you were Salmissra's right hand."

Sadi coughed. "Her Majesty and I had a slight misunderstanding, so I thought it might be better for me to leave Nyissafora while."

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"Why Cthol Murgos? Why didn't you go to Tol Honeth instead? It's much more civilized and much, much more comfortable." He sighed again. "I'd give anything to be able to live in Tol Honeth."

"I've made some powerful enemies in Tolnedra, your Majesty," Sadi replied. "I know my way around Cthol Murgos, so I hired these Alorn mercenaries to protect me and came here posing as a slaver."

"And then Jaharb picked you up," Urgit guessed. "Poor old Sadi, no matter where you go, you always seem to get mixed up in politics—even when you don't want to."

"It's a curse," Sadi told him mournfully. "It's been following me for all my life."

They rounded a corner and approached a vast, sprawling building surrounded by a high wall. Its domes and towers rose in barbaric, torchlit profusion, and, unlike the rest of Rak Urga, it was garishly painted in a half-dozen conflicting colors. "Behold the Drojim Palace," King Urgit said extravagantly to Sadi, "the hereditary home of the House of Urga."

"A most unusual structure, your Majesty," Sadi murmured.

"That's a diplomatic way to put it." Urgit looked critically at his palace. "It's gaudy, ugly, and in terribly bad taste. It does, however, suit my personality almost perfectly." He turned to one of his guards. "Be a good fellow and ride on ahead," he instructed. "Tell the gatekeepers that the High King approaches and that if I have to wait while they open the gate for me, I'll have then* ears cut off."

"At once, your Majesty."

Urgit grinned at Sadi. "One of my few amusements," he explained. "The only people I'm allowed to bully are servants and common soldiers, and all Murgos have a deep-seated need to bully somebody."

, They rode on through the hastily opened gate and dismounted in a ruddily torchlit courtyard. Urgit looked around at the garishly painted walls of the house. "Ghastly, isn't it?" He shuddered. "Let's go inside."

There was a large door at the top of a flight of stone stairs, and Urgit led them inside and down a long, vaulted corridor. He stopped before a pair of polished double doors guarded by two scar-faced soldiers. "Well?" he said to them.

"Yes, your Majesty?" one replied.

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"Do you suppose that I could prevail upon you to open the door?" Urgit asked him. "Or would you prefer an immediate transfer to the war zone?"

"At once, your Majesty," the soldier replied, quickly yanking the door open.

"Excellently done, my dear fellow. Just try not to jerk it off its hinges next time." The king strolled through the door and into the room beyond. "My throne room," he said grandiosely. "The product of whole generations of diseased imaginations."

The room was larger than the Hall of the Rivan King in Garion's Citadel. The ceiling was a maze of intersecting vaults, ali covered with sheets of the beaten red gold from the mines of Cthol Murgos. The walls and columns were ablaze with inset jewels, and the chairs lined up at the sides of the room were inlaid with more Angarak gold. At the far end of the room stood a bejeweled throne, backed by blood-red drapes. Seated in a simple chair beside that throne was a silver-haired lady, calmly embroidering.

"Hideous, isn't it?" Urgit said. "The Urgas have been pillaging the treasury at Rak Goska for centuries to decorate the Drojim Palace, but would you believe that the roof still leaks ?" He sauntered to the far end of the room and stopped before the black-gowned lady, who was still busy at her needlework, "Mother," he greeted her with a slightly mocking bow, "you're up late, aren't you?"

"I don't need as much sleep as I did when I was younger, Urgit." She set her sewing aside. "Besides," she added, "we usually talk over the day's events before you retire for the night."

"It's the high point of my day, mother," he replied with a faint smile tugging at his lips.

She returned his smile with good-humored affection. She was, Garion saw as that smile lighted her face, a remarkably attractive woman. Despite the silvery hair and the few lines at the corners of her eyes, her face still bore the signs of what had once been an extraordinary beauty. A faint movement caught his eye, and he saw Silk shrinking behind Toth's broad back and drawing up the hood of his green robe to conceal his face.

"Who are your friends, Urgit?" the silver-haired lady asked her son.

"Ah, forgive me, mother. My manners must be slipping.

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Allow me to present Sadi, Chief Eunuch to Queen Salmibsra of the land of the snake-people." \

"Formerly Chief Eunuch, I'm afraid," Sadi corrected. He bowed deeply. "I'm honored to meet the Queen Mother of the Kingdom of the Murgos."

"Oh," Urgit said, mounting the dais and sprawling on the throne with one leg cocked up over one of its jeweled arms, "I keep forgetting the amenities. Sadi, this is my royal mother, the Lady Tamazin, jewel of the House of Hagga and grieving widow of my royal father, Taur Urgas the Deranged—may blessings rain down on the hand that sent him to the bosom of Torak."

"Can't you ever be serious about anything, Urgit?" his mother chided him.

"But you do grieve, don't you mother? I know that in your heart you miss all those wonderful moments you spent with my father—watching him gnaw on the furniture, listening to his insane gibbering, and enjoying all those playful blows to the stomach and kicks to the head with which he demonstrated his affection for his wives."

"That will do, Urgit," she said firmly.

"Yes, mother."

"Welcome to the Drojim, Sadi," Lady Tamazin greeted the eunuch formally. She looked inquiringly at the others.

"My servants, Lady Tamazin," Sadi said quickly. "Alorns for the most part."

"A most unusual turn of circumstances," she murmured. "The age-old war between Murgo and Alorn has denied me the opportunity to meet

very many of that race." She looked directly then at Aunt Pol.
"Surely this lady is no servant," she said sceptically.

"A temporary arrangement, my Lady Tamazin," Polgara replied with a profoundly graceful curtsy. "I needed some time in another place to avoid some unpleasantness at home."

The Queen Mother smiled. "I do understand," she said. "Men play at politics, and women must pay the price for their folly." She turned back to her son. "And how did your interview with the Hierarch go?" she asked him.

"Not bad." He shrugged. "I groveled enough to keep him happy."

"That's enough, Urgit." Her voice was sharp. "Aga-

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chak's in a position to do you a great service, so show him the proper respect."

Urgit flinched slightly at her tone. "Yes, mother," he replied meekly. "Oh, I almost forgot," he went on. "The priestess Chabat had a bit of a setback."

The Queen Mother's expression became one of disgust. "Her behavior is a public scandal," she declared. "I can't understand why Agachak tolerates her."

"I think he finds her amusing, mother. Grolims have a peculiar sense of humor. Anyway, she had this friend—a very close friend—who had a bit of an accident. She'll need to find another playmate before she can scandalize the good people of Rak Urga any more."

"Why do you persist in being so frivolous, Urgit?"

"Why don't we just call it a symptom of my incipient madness?"

"You're not going to go mad," she said firmly.

"Of course I'm going to go mad, mother. I'm rather looking forward to it."

"You're impossible to talk with when you're like this," she chided him. "Are you going to stay up much longer?"

"I don't think so. Sadi and I have a few things to discuss, but they can wait until tomorrow,"

The Queen Mother turned back to Polgara. "My quarters are most spacious, Lady," she said. "Would you and your attendants care to share them with me during your stay here in the Drojim?"

"We would be honored, my Lady," Polgara said.

"Very well, then," Urgit's mother said. "Praia," she called.

The girl who stepped from the shadows behind the throne was slender and perhaps sixteen years old. She wore a black gown and had long, lustrous black hair. The dark, angular eyes that made most Murgo men look so alien were in her case very large and delicately almond-shaped, giving her features an exotic beauty. Her expression, however, was filled with a resolve uncommon in one so young. She stepped to Lady Tamazin's chair and helped her to her feet.

Urgit's face darkened, and his eyes grew flinty as he watched his mother limp down from the dais, leaning heavily on the girl's shoulder. "A little gift from the inestimable Taur Urgas," he said to Sadi. "One evening when he was feeling

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playful, he knocked my mother down a flight of stairs and broke her hip. She's had that limp ever since."

"I don't even notice it any more, Urgit."

"It's amazing how all of our minor aches and pains got better right after King Cho-Hag's saber slid through my father's guts." Urgit paused. "I wonder if it's too late to send Cho-Hag some small token of appreciation," he added.

"Oh," the Queen Mother said to Polgara, "this is Lady - Praia, a princess of the House of Cthan."

"Princess," Polgara greeted the slender girl supporting Lady Tamazin.

"My Lady," Praia responded in a clear voice.

Lady Tamazin, leaning on Praia's shoulder, slowly limped from the room with Polgara, Ce'Nedra, and Velvet close behind her.

"That girl makes me very nervous for some reason," Urgit muttered to Sadi. "My mother dotes on her, but she has something else on her mind. She never takes her eyes off me." He shook his head as if to dismiss an unwelcome thought. "You and your people have had a very busy day, Sadi. We can talk further tomorrow after we've both had a good night's sleep." He reached out and tugged at a silken bellpull, and there was the heavy note of a large gong somewhere outside the throne room. Urgit rolled his eyes toward the ceiling. "Why does it always have to be those great bongs and clangs?" he complained. "Someday, I'd like to tug on a bellpull and hear a tiny little tinkle."

The door at the far end of the throne room opened, and a heavy-shouldered Murgo of late middle age entered. His hair was gray, and his scarred face was heavily lined. There was no hint that a smile had ever touched that grim face. "Your Majesty rang?" he said in a rasping voice.

"Yes, Oskatat," Urgit replied in an oddly respectful tone.

"Do you suppose that you could escort my good friend Sadi and his servants to suitable quarters?" He turned back to Sadi. "Oskatat is Lord High Seneschal here," he said. "He Served my father in the same capacity at Rak Goska." There was no hint of his usual mockery as he spoke. "My mother and I were not popular in my father's house, and Oskatat I' was.the closest thing to a friend either of us had there."

"My Lord," Sadi said to the big, gray-haired man with a deep bow. The seneschal nodded a curt response, then returned his

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bleak gaze to the king. "Has my Lady Tamazin retired for the night?" he asked.

"Yes, Oskatat."

"Then you should also seek your bed. The hour is late."

"I was just on my way," Urgit answered, getting quickly to his feet. Then he stopped. "Oskatat," he said plaintively, "I'm not a sickly little boy any more. I don't really need to spend twelve hours in bed every night the way I used to."

"The burdens of the crown are many," the seneschal said shortly. "You need your rest." He turned back to Sadi. "Follow me," he said, starting toward the door.

"Until tomorrow then, Sadi," Urgit said. "Sleep well."

"My thanks, your Majesty."

The rooms to which the bleak-faced Oskatat took them were as garish as the rest of the Drojim Palace. The walls were painted an unwholesome mustard-yellow and hung with splotchy tapestries. The furnishings were carved from rare, priceless woods, and the blue Mallorean carpet was as deep as the wool on the back of a sheep. Once he had opened the door for them, Oskatat jerked his head in the briefest of nods, then turned and left them alone.

"Charming fellow there," Sadi murmured.

Garion had been looking curiously at Silk, who still had his face covered by his hood. "Why are you trying so hard to hide?" he asked.

The little man pulled back his hood with a rueful expression. "One of the disadvantages of being a world traveler is that one keeps running into old friends."

"I'm not sure I follow you."

"Do you remember that time when we were on our way to Rak Cthol and Taur Urgas caught me and stuck me in that pit?"

"Yes."

"And do you remember why he did that—and why he planned to peel off my skin inch by inch the next day?"

"You said that you'd been in Rak Goska once and accidentally killed his eldest son."

"Right. You have an excellent memory, Garion. Well, as it happened, I'd been engaged in some negotiations with Taur Urgas himself before that unfortunate incident. I visited the palace in Rak Goska frequently and met the Lady Tamazin several times. She's almost certain to remember me—

particularly in view of the fact that she said that she knew my father."

"That could cause some problems," Belgarath said.

"Not if I avoid her." Silk shrugged. "Murgo women seldom socialize with men—particularly with strangers—so I don't imagine we'll be bumping into each other very often in the next few days. Oskatat could be a different matter, though. I also met him while I was there."

"I think that, if it's at all possible, you ought to stay here in our rooms," the old man suggested. "It might even keep you out of trouble for a change."

"Why, Belgarath," Silk said mildly, "what a thing to say."

"Has King Urgit always been like this?" Durnik asked Sadi. "He seems awfully—well—humorous, I guess the word is. I didn't think that Murgos even knew how to smile."

"He's a very complex fellow," Sadi replied.

"Have you known him long?"

"He frequently visited Sthiss Tor when he was younger— usually on missions for his father. I think he jumped at any excuse to get out of Rak Goska. He and Salmissra got on rather well together. Of course, that was before Lady Polgara changed her into a snake." The eunuch rubbed his hand absently over his scalp. "He's not a very strong king," he noted. "His childhood in the palace of Taur Urgas made him timid, and he backs away from any sort of confrontation. He's a survivor, though. He's spent his entire life just trying to stay alive, and that tends to make a man very alert."

"You'll be talking with him again tomorrow," Belgarath said. "See if you can get him to give you some definite information about this ship they plan to give us. I want to get to the Isle of Verkat before the onset of winter, and various people in our party have been doing things that might attract attention, if we have to stay here too long." He gave Eriond a reproving look.

"It wasn't really my fault, Belgarath," the young man protested mildly. "I didn't like the fires in the Sanctum, that's all."

"Try to keep a grip on your prejudices, Eriond," the old man said in a faintly sarcastic voice. "Let's not get sidetracked on these moral crusades just now."

"I'll try, Belgarath."

"I'd appreciate it."

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The next morning, the seneschal, Oskatat, summoned them all to another audience with the Murgo King in a brightly candlelit chamber that was smaller and less garish than the vast throne room. Garion noticed that Silk remained carefully hooded until the gray-haired functionary had left the room. Urgil and Sadi spoke quietly together while the rest of them sat unobtrusively in the chairs lining the wall.

"It was probably the first hint that anyone really had that my father's brains were starting to come off their hinges," the Murgo King was saying. He was dressed again in his purple doublet and hose and was sprawled in a chair with his feet thrust out in front of him. "He was suddenly seized with the wild ambition to make himself Overking of Angarak. Personally, I think that Ctuchik planted the notion in his head as a means of irritating Urvon. Anyway," he continued, twisting the heavy gold ring on one of his fingers, "it took the combined efforts of all his generals to convince my manic father that Zakath's army was about five times the size of ours and that Zakath could squash him like a bug any time he chose. Once that notion had finally seeped into his head, he went absolutely wild."

"Oh?" Sadi said.

Urgit grinned. "Threw himself on the floor and started chewing on the carpet. After he calmed down, he decided to try subversion instead. He inundated Mallorean with Murgo agents—and Murgos are probably the clumsiest spies in the world. To keep it short—Zakath was about nineteen at the time and desperately in love with a Melcene girl. Her family was deeply in debt, so my father's agents bought up all their obligations and started putting pressure on them. The brilliant plan that emerged from my father's diseased wits was that the girl should encourage the love-struck young Zakath, marry him, and then slip a knife between the imperial ribs at her earliest opportunity. One of the Melcenes these highly intelligent Murgo spies had bought to help them in their scheme ran to Zakath with the whole sordid story, and

the girl and her entire family were immediately put to death."

"What a tragic story," Sadi murmured.

"You haven't heard the best part yet. Several of the Murgo spies were persuaded to reveal the whole story—Malloreans tend to be very good persuaders—and Zakath discovered to his horror that the girl had known absolutely

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nothing about my father's plan. He locked himself in his room in the palace at Mal Zeth for an entire month. When he went in, he was a pleasant, open young man who showed much promise of becoming one of Mallorea's greatest emperors. When he came out, he was the cold-blooded monster we all know and love. He rounded up every Murgo in Mallorea—including a fair number of my father's relatives—and he used to amuse himself by sending bits and pieces of them in ornate containers to Rak Goska, accompanied by highly insulting notes."

"But didn't the two of them join forces at the battle of Thull Mardu?"

Urgit laughed. "That may be the popular perception, Sadi, but in point of fact, the Imperial Princess Ce'Nedra's army was just unlucky enough to get between two opposing Angarak monarchs. They didn't care a thing about her or about that dungheap people call Mishrak ac Thull. All they were trying to do was kill each other. Then my addled father made the mistake of challenging King Cho-Hag of Algaria to single combat, and Cho-Hag gave him a very pointed lesson in swordsmanship." He looked thoughtfully into the fire. "I still think I ought to send Cho-Hag some token of appreciation," he mused.

"Excuse me, your Majesty." Sadi frowned. "But I don't altogether understand. Kal Zakath's quarrel was with your father, and Taur Urgas is dead."

"Oh yes, quite dead," Urgit agreed. "I cut his throat before I buried him—just to make sure. I think that Zakath's problem stems from the fact that he didn't get the chance to kill my father personally. Failing that, I guess he's willing to settle for me." He rose and began to pace moodily up and down. "I've sent him a dozen peace overtures, but all he does is send me back the heads of my emissaries. I think he's as crazy as my father was." He stopped his restless pacing. "You know, maybe I was a bit hasty on my way to the throne. I had a dozen brothers—all of the blood of Taur Urgas. If I'd kept a few of them alive, I might have been able to give them to Zakath. Perhaps, if he had drunk enough Urga blood, it might have made him lose his taste for it."

The door opened and a bulky Murgo with an ornate gold chain about his neck entered the room. "I need your signature on this," he said rudely to Urgit, thrusting a sheet of parchment at him.

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"What is it, General Kradak?" Urgit asked meekly.

The officer's face darkened.

"All right," Urgit said in a mollifying tone, "don't get yourself excited." He took the parchment to a nearby table where a quill pen lay beside a silver ink-pot. He dipped the pen, scribbled his name on the bottom of the sheet, and handed it back.

"Thank you, your Majesty," General Kradak said in a flat voice. Then he turned on his heel and left the room.

"One of my father's generals," Urgit told Sadi sourly. "They all treat me like that." He began to pace up and down again, scuffing his feet at the carpet. "How much do you know about King Belgarion, Sadi?" he asked suddenly.

The eunuch shrugged. "Well, I've met him once or twice."

"Didn't you say that most of your servants are Alorns?"

"Alorn mercenaries, yes. They're dependable and very good to have around if a fight breaks out."

The Murgos King turned to Belgarath, who sat dozing in a chair. "You—old man," he said abruptly. "Have you ever met Belgarion of Riva?"

"Several times," Belgarath admitted calmly.

"What kind of man is he?"

"Sincere," Belgarath replied. "He tries very hard to be a good king."

"Just how powerful is he?"

"Well, he has the whole Alorn Alliance to back him up, and technically he's the Overlord of the West—although the Tolnedrans are likely to go their own way, and the Arends would rather fight each other."

"That's not what I meant. How good a sorcerer is he?"

"Why ask me, your Majesty? Do I look like the kind of man who'd know very much about that sort of thing? He managed to kill Torak, though, and I'd imagine that took a bit of doing."

"How about Belgarath? Is there really such a person, or is he just a myth?"

"No, Belgarath is a real person."

"And he's seven thousand years old?"

"Seven thousand or so." Belgarath shrugged. "Give or take a few centuries."

"And his daughter Polgara?"

"She's also a real person."

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"And she's thousands of years old?"

"Something like that. I could probably figure it out if I needed to, but a gentleman doesn't ask questions about a lady's age."

Urgit laughed—a short, ugly, barking sound. "The words 'gentleman' and 'Murgo' are mutually exclusive, my friend," he said. "Do you think Belgarion would receive my emissaries, if I sent them to Riva?"

"He's out of the country just now," Belgarath told him blandly.

"I hadn't heard that."

"He does it from time to time. Every so often he gets bored with all the ceremonies and goes away."

"How does he manage that? How can he just pick up and leave?"

"Who's going to argue with him?"

Urgit began to gnaw worriedly on one fingernail. "Even if the Dagashi Kabach succeeds in killing Zakath, I'm still going to have a Mallorean army on my doorstep. I'm going to need an ally if I'm ever going to get rid of them." He began to pace up and down again. "Besides," he added, "if I can reach an agreement with Belgarion, maybe I'll be able to get Agachak's fist off my throat. Do you think he'd listen to a proposal from me?"

"You could ask him and find out, I suppose."

The door opened again and the Queen Mother, assisted by the girl Praia, entered.

"Good morning, mother," Urgit greeted her. "Why are you out roaming the halls of this madhouse?"

"Urgit," she said firmly, "you'd be much more admirable if you stopped trying to make a joke out of everything."

"It keeps me from brooding about my circumstances," he told her flippantly. "I'm losing a war, half of my subjects want to depose me and send my head to Zakath on a plate, I'll be going mad soon, and I think I'm developing a boil on my neck. There are only a few things left for me to laugh about, mother, so please let me enjoy a joke or two while I still can."

"Why do you keep insisting that you're going to go mad?"

"Every male in the Urga family for the past five hundred years has

gone mad before he reached fifty," he reminded her. "It's one of the reasons we make such good kings. Nobody in his right mind would want the throne of Cthol Mur-

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gos. Was there anything special you wanted, mother? Or did you just want to enjoy my fascinating companionship?"

She looked around the room. "Which of you gentlemen is married to that little red-haired girl?" she asked.

Garion looked up quickly. "Is she all right, my Lady?"

"Pol, the lady with the white lock at her brow, said that you should come at once. The young woman seems to be in some distress."

Garion stood up to follow as the Queen Mother started slowly back toward the door. Just before she reached it, she stopped and glanced at Silk, who had pulled up his hood as soon as she had entered. "Why don't you accompany your friend?" she suggested, "Just for the sake of appearances?"

They went out of the room and on down one of the garish halls of the Drojim to a dark-paneled door guarded by a pair of mail-shirted men-at-arms. One of them opened the door with a respectful bow to Lady Tamazin, and she led them inside. Her quarters were decorated much more tastefully than the rest of the Drojim. The walls were white, and the decor much more subdued. Aunt Pol sat on a low divan, holding the weeping Ce'Nedra in her arms with Velvet standing nearby.

-Is she all right?-Garion's fingers asked quickly.

-/ don't think it's too serious-Polgara's hands replied. -A bout of nerves most likely, but I don't want any of these fits of depression to go on for too long. She still hasn't fully recovered from her melancholia. See if you can comfort her.-

Garion went to the divan and enclosed Ce'Nedra gently in his arms. She clung to him, still weeping.

"Is the young lady subject to these crying-spells, Pol?" the Queen Mother asked as the two of them took chairs on opposite sides of the cheery fire that danced on the grate.

"Not all that frequently, Tamazin," Polgara answered. "There's been a recent tragedy in her family, though, and sometimes her nerves get the best of her."

"Ah," Urgit's mother said. "Could I offer you a cup of tea, Pol? I always find tea in the morning so comforting."

"Why, thank you, Tamazin. I think that would be very nice."

Gradually, Ce'Nedra's weeping subsided, though she still clung tightly to Garion. At last she raised her head and wiped

at her eyes with her fingertips. "I'm so very sorry," she apologized. "I don't know what came over me."

"It's all right, dear," Garion murmured, his arms still about her shoulders.

She dabbed at her eyes again, using a wispy little handkerchief. "I must look absolutely terrible," she said with a teary little laugh.

"Moderately terrible, yes," he agreed, smiling.

"I told you once, dear, that you should never cry in public," Polgara said to her. "You just don't have the right coloring for it."

Ce'Nedra smiled tremulously and stood up. "Perhaps I should go wash my face," she said. "And then I think I'd like to lie down for a bit." She turned to Garion. "Thank you for coming," she said simply.

"Any time you need me," he replied.

"Why don't you go with the lady, Praia?" Lady Tamazin suggested.

"Of course," the slender Murgo Princess agreed, coming quickly to her feet.

Silk had been standing nervously near the door with the hood of his green robe pulled up and his head down to keep his face concealed.

"Oh, do stop that, Prince Kheldar," the Queen Mother told him after Ce'Nedra and Praia had left the room. "I recognized you last night, so it's no good your trying to hide your face."

He sighed and pushed his hood back. "I was afraid you might have," he said.

"That hood doesn't hide your most salient feature anyway," she told him.

"And which feature was that, my Lady?"

"Your nose, Kheldar, that long, sharp, pointed nose that precedes you wherever you go."

"But it's such a noble nose, my Lady," Velvet said with a dimpled smile. "He wouldn't be nearly the man he is without it."

"Do you mind?" Silk asked her.

"You do get around, don't you, Prince Kheldar?" Lady Tamazin said to him. "How long has it been since you left Rak Goska with half of the Murgo army hot on your heels?"

"Fifteen or twenty years, my Lady," he replied, coming closer to the

fire.

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"I was sorry to hear that you'd left," she said. "You're not a very prepossessing-looking fellow, but your conversation was most entertaining, and there was very little in the way of entertainment in the house of Taur Urgas."

"You don't plan to make a general announcement about my identity then, I take it?" he said carefully.

"It's not my concern, Kheldar." She shrugged. "Murgo women do not involve themselves in the affairs of men. Over the centuries, we've found that it's safer that way."

"You're not upset, then, my Lady?" Garion asked her. "What I mean is if I'd heard that Prince Kheldar here accidentally killed the eldest son of Taur Urgas. Didn't that offend you just a little?"

"It had nothing to do with me," she replied. "The one Kheldar killed was the child of Taur Urgas' first wife—an insufferable, toothless hag of the House of Gorut who used to gloat over the fact that she had given birth to the heir apparent and that, as soon as he ascended the throne, she was going to have the rest of us strangled."

"I'm relieved to hear that you had no particular fondness for the young man," Silk told her.

"Fondness? He was a monster—just like his father. When he was just a little boy, he used to amuse himself by dropping live puppies into boiling water. The world's a better place without him."

Silk assumed a lofty expression. "I always like to perform these little public services," he declared. "I feel that it's a gentleman's civic duty."

"I thought you said that his death was accidental," Garion said.

"Well, sort of. Actually, I was trying to stab him in the belly—painful perhaps, but seldom fatal—but he bumped my arm as I made the thrust, and somehow my knife went straight into his heart."

"What a shame," Tamazin murmured. "I'd be sort of careful here in the Drojim though, Kheldar. I have no intention of revealing your identity, but the seneschal, Os-katat, also knows you by sight and he would probably feel obliged to denounce you."

"I'd already guessed as much, my Lady. I'll try to avoid him."

"Now tell me, Prince Kheldar, how is your father?"

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Silk sighed. "He died, I'm afraid," he replied sadly, "quite a few years ago. It was rather sudden."

As chance had it, Garion was looking directly at the Queen Mother's face as Silk spoke and he saw the momentary flicker of anguish touch her beautiful features. She recovered quickly, though her eyes still brimmed with sorrow. "Ah," she said very quietly. "I'm sorry, Kheldar—more sorry than you could possibly know. I liked your father very much. The memories of the months he was in Rak Goska are among the happiest of my life."

To avoid being caught staring, Garion turned his head, and his eyes fell on Velvet, whose expression was faintly speculative. She returned his look, and her eyes conveyed a world of meaning and several unanswered questions.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The following morning dawned clear and cold. Garion stood at the window of his room, looking out over the slate roof tops of Rak Urgan. The low, squat houses seemed to huddle together fearfully under the twin presence of the garish Drojim Palace at one end of town and the black Temple of Torak at the other. The smoke from hundreds of chimneys rose in straight blue columns toward the windless sky.

"Depressing sort of place, isn't it?" Silk said as he came into the room with his green robe carelessly slung over one shoulder.

Garion nodded. "It looks almost as if they deliberately went out of their way to make it ugly."

"It's a reflection of the Murgo mind. Oh, Urgit wants to see us again." The little man caught Garion's inquiring look. "I don't think it's anything particularly important," he

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added. "He's probably just starved for conversation. I imagine that talking with Murgos can get tedious after a while."

They all trooped through the garish halls on the heels of the mail-shirted guard who had brought the king's summons, returning to the room where they had met with Urgit the previous day. They found him lounging in a chair by the fire with one leg cocked up over the arm and a half-eaten chicken leg in his hand. "Good morning, gentlemen," he greeted them. "Please sit down." He waved his breakfast at the chairs lined against one wall. "I'm not much of a one for formality." He looked at Sadi. "Did you sleep well?" he asked.

"It got a bit cold on toward morning, your Majesty."

"It's the slipshod construction of this place. There are cracks in the walls big enough to push a horse through. In the wintertime we have snow storms in the corridors." He sighed. "Do you realize that

it's spring in Tot Honeth right now?" He sighed again, then glanced at Belgarath, who stood smiling peculiarly at him. "Was there something amusing, old boy?"

"Not really. Just remembering something I heard once." The old man went to the fire and held out his hands to the crackling flames. "How are your people coming on that ship?"

"I expect that it's going to be tomorrow at the earliest before it's ready," Urgit replied. "Winter's coming on, and the seas around the southern tip of the Urga peninsula are never what you'd call placid, even in the best of seasons, so I ordered the shipwrights to take special pains." He leaned forward and negligently tossed his chicken leg into the fireplace. "It was burned," he said absently. "Every meal I get in this place is either burned or raw." He looked peculiarly at Belgarath. "You intrigue me, old man. You don't seem like the type to wind up his career hiring himself out to a Nyissan slaver."

Belgarath shrugged. "Appearances can be deceiving." "You don't look much like a king, either, but you do have the crown, after all."

Urgit reached up and pulled off his iron circlet. He looked at it distastefully and then held it out to Belgarath. "You want this thing?" he asked. "I'm sure you'd look more regal than I do, and I'd be very happy to get rid of it—particularly in view of the fact that Kal Zakath so keenly wants to take

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my head out from under it." He dropped it on the floor beside his chair with a dull clink. "Let's go back to something we were discussing yesterday. You told me that you know Belgarion."

Belgarath nodded.

"How well?"

"How well can any man know another?"

"You're evading my question."

"It seems that way, doesn't it?"

Urgit let that pass. He looked intently at the old man. "How do you think Belgarion would really react if I proposed that he ally himself with me to drive the Malloreans off the continent? I'm sure their presence here worries him almost as much as it does me."

"The chances aren't very good," Belgarath told him. "You might be able to persuade Belgarion that it's a good idea, but the rest of the

Alorn monarchs would probably object."

"They reached an accommodation with Drosta, didn't they?"

"That was between Rhodar and Drosta. There's always been a certain wary friendship between the Drasnians and the Nadraks. The one you'd need to get to accept your idea would be Cho-Hag, and Cho-Hag's never been exactly cordial to Murgos."

"I need allies, old man, not platitudes." Urgit paused. "What if I got word to Belgarath?"

"What would you say to him?"

"I'd try to persuade him that Zakath's a much greater danger to the Kingdoms of the West than I am. Maybe he could make the Alorns listen to reason."

"I don't think you'd have much luck there, either." The old man looked into the dancing flames with the firelight gleaming on his short, silvery beard. "You have to understand that Belgarath doesn't live in the same world with ordinary men. He lives in the world of first causes and primal forces. I'd imagine that he looks upon Kal Zakath as little more than a minor irritation."

"Torak's teeth!" Urgit swore. "Where am I going to get the troops I need?"

"Hire mercenaries," Silk suggested without turning from the window where he stood.

"What?"

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"Dip into the royal vaults and bring out some of the fabled red gold of Angarak. Send word into the Kingdoms of the West that you need good men and that you're willing to pay them good gold. You'll be swamped with volunteers."

"I prefer men who fight for patriotism—or religion," Urgit declared stiffly.

Silk turned with an amused expression. "I've noticed that preference in many kings," he observed. "It doesn't put such a strain on royal treasuries. But believe me, your Majesty, loyalty to an ideal can vary in its intensity, but loyalty to money never changes. That's why mercenaries are better fighters."

"You're a cynic," Urgit accused.

Silk shook his head. "No, your Majesty. I'm a realist." He stepped over to Sadi and murmured something. The eunuch nodded, and the rat-faced little Drasnian quietly left the room.

Urgit raised one eyebrow inquiringly.

"He's going to go start packing, your Majesty," Sadi explained. "If we're going to sail tomorrow, we need to start getting ready."

, Urgit and Sadi talked quietly for about a quarter of an hour, and then the door at the far end of the room opened again. Polgara and the other ladies entered with the Lady Tamazin.

"Good morning, mother," Urgit greeted her. "You slept weU, I trust?"

"Quite well, thank you." She looked critically at him. "Urgit, where's your crown?"

"I took it off. It gives me a headache."

"Put it back on at once."

"What for?"

"Urgit, you don't look very much like a king. You're short and thin and you've got a face like a weasel. Murgos are not bright. If you don't wear your crown all the time, it's altogether possible that they'll forget who you are. Now put it back on."

. "Yes, mother." He picked up his crown and clapped it <-on his head. "How's that?"

: "It's lopsided, dear," she said in a calm tone so familiar ; that Garion gave Polgara a quick, startled look. "Now you It'flook like a drunken sailor."

Urgit laughed and straightened his crown.

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Garion looked closely at Ce'Nedra to see if there were any traces left of the storm of weeping that had swept over her the previous day, but he saw no evidence that it might immediately return. She was engaged in a murmured conversation with the Cthan Princess, Praia, and the Murgo girl's face clearly showed that she had already fallen under the queen's spell.

"And you, Urgit," Lady Tamazin said, "did you sleep well?"

"I never really sleep, mother. You know that. I decided years ago that sleeping nervously is infinitely preferable to sleeping permanently."

Garion found himself making a difficult readjustment in his thinking. He had never liked Murgos. He had always distrusted and even feared them. King Urgit's personality, however, was as un-Murgoish as his appearance. He was quick and volatile, and his moods swung from sardonic amusement to gloom so rapidly that Garion was quite uncertain what to expect next. He was obviously not a strong king, and Garion had been a king long enough himself to see where Urgit was making his mistakes. In spite of himself, though, Garion found that

he actually liked him and felt a peculiar sympathy for him as he struggled with a job for which he was hopelessly unsuited. That, of course, created a problem. Garion did not want to like this man, and this unwanted sympathy seemed wildly out of place. He rose from his chair and withdrew to the far end of the room, making some pretense of looking out the window so that he might put himself beyond the range of the Murgo King's urbane wit. With a kind of unbearable urgency, he wanted to be on board ship and away from this ugly Murgo city, huddled on its barren coast, and from the weak, fearful man who was not really such a bad fellow, but whom Garion knew he should regard as an enemy.

"What's the trouble, Garion?" Polgara asked quietly, coming up behind him.

"Impatience, I guess, Aunt Pol. I want to get moving."

"We all do, dear," she told him, "but we have to endure this for one more day."

"Why can't he just leave us alone?"

"Who's that?"

"Urgit. I'm not interested in his problems, so why does he have to sit around telling us about them all the time?"

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, "Because he's lonely, Garion."

"All kings are lonely. It comes with the crown. Most of us learn how to endure it, though. We don't sit around and snivel about it."

"That's unkind, Garion," she told him firmly, "and it's unworthy of you."

"Why are we all so concerned about a weak king with a clever mouth?"

"Perhaps it's because he's the first Murgo we've met in eons who shows some human qualities. Because he's the way he is, he raises the possibility that Alorns and Murgos might someday find ways to settle then- differences without resorting to bloodshed."

He continued to stare out the window, although a slow flush began to creep up his neck. "I'm being childish, aren't I?*" he admitted.

"Yes, dear, I'm afraid you are. Your prejudices are running away with you. Ordinary people can afford that. Kings Cannot. Go back to where he's sitting, Garion, and watch him very closely. Don't pass up this opportunity to get to (now him. The time may come when that knowledge will help you."

"All right, Aunt Pol." Garion sighed, squaring his shoulders resolutely.

It was almost noon when Oskatat entered the room. "Your Majesty," he announced in his rasping voice, "Agachak, Hierarch of Rak Urga, craves audience with you."

"Show him in, Oskatat," Urgit replied wearily. He turned to his mother. "I think I'm going to have to find another place to hide," he muttered. "Too many people know where to find me."

"I have a splended closet, Urgit," she replied, "warm and dry and dark. You could hide in there and cover yourself with a blanket. We'll slip food in to you from time to time."

"Are you making fun of me, mother?"

"No, dear," she said. "But like it or not, you're the king. You can either be king or you can be a spoiled child. The phoice is entirely up to you."

Garion glanced guiltily at Polgara.

"Yes?" she murmured.

But he decided not to answer.

The cadaverous-looking Agachak entered and bowed per-

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functorily to his king. "Your Majesty," he said in his hollow voice.

"Dread Hierarch," Urgit responded, his voice betraying no hint of his true feeling.

"Time is passing, your Majesty."

"It has a way of doing that, I've noticed."

"My point is that the weather is about to turn stormy. Is the ship nearly ready?"

"I expect it to sail tomorrow," Urgit replied.

"Excellent. I shaD instruct Kabach to make ready."

"Has the Priestess Chabat regained her composure?" Urgit asked.

"Not really, your Majesty. She still keenly feels the loss of her paramour."

"Even after she found out what his true feelings were about her? Who can ever hope to understand the workings of the female mind?"

"Chabat is not that difficult to fathom, your Majesty." Agachak shrugged. "A disfigured woman has little chance to attract lovers, and the loss of even an insincere one is most painful. Her loss in this particular case goes a bit deeper, however. Sorchak assisted her

in the performance of certain rites of magic. Without him, she will not be able to continue her efforts to summon up demons."

Urgit shuddered. "I thought that she was a sorceress. Isn't that enough for her? Why would she want to dabble in magic, too?"

"Chabat is not really that powerful a sorceress," Agachak replied. "She thinks that she will have a greater advantage when she finally confronts me if she has demons to aid her."

"Confront you? Is that what she's planning?"

"Of course. Her occasional dallying is merely an amusement. Her central goal has always been power. In time, she will have to try to wrest mine from me."

"If that's the case, why did you allow her to gain so much authority in the Temple?"

"It amused me," Agachak said with a chill smile. "I am not as repelled by ugliness as others are, and Chabat, despite her ambition—or perhaps because of it—is very efficient."

"You knew about her affair with Sorchak. Didn't that offend you?"

"Not really," the dead-looking Hierarch answered. "That's just a part of the entertainment I'm preparing for

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myself. Eventually, Chabat will succeed in raising a demon, and then she will challenge me. At the very instant that her triumph seems complete, I shall also raise a demon, and mine will destroy hers. Then I shall have her stripped and dragged to the Sanctum. There she will be bent backward across the altar and I myself will slowly cut out her heart. I look forward to that moment with a great deal of anticipation, and it will be all the sweeter because it will come just when she thinks she has beaten me." His dead face had come alive with a dreadful pleasure. His eyes burned, and there were flecks of spittle in the comers of his mouth. - Urgit, however, looked faintly sick. "Grolims appear to have more exotic amusements than ordinary men."

"Not really, Urgit. The only reason for power is to be able to use it to destroy your enemies, and it's particularly enjoyable to be able to drag them down from a height before you destroy them. Wouldn't you like to be present when the mighty Kal Zakath dies with a Dagashi knife in his heart?"

"Not really. I just want him out of the way. I don't particularly want to watch the procedure."

"You have not yet learned the true meaning of power, then. The understanding may come when you and I stand in the presence of Cthrag Sardius and witness the rebirth of the Dark God and the final triumph of the Child of Dark."

Urgit's expression grew pained.

"Do not flinch from your destiny, Urgit," Agachak said in his hollow voice. "It is foretold that a King of Angarak will be present at the final meeting. You will be that king— just as I will be the one to make the sacrifice and thus become the first disciple of the reborn God. We are bound together by a chain forged of fate. Your destiny is to become Overking of Angarak, and mine is to rule the Church." ' - Urgit sighed in resignation. "Whatever you say, Agachak," he said disconsolately. "We still have a few problems to overcome, however."

"They are of little concern to me," the Hierarch declared. "'':
"Well, they do concern me," Urgit said with surprising heat. "First we have to deal with Zakath, and then we'll need to get rid of Gethel and Drosta—just to be on the safe side. I've been involved in a race for a throne before and I think I'd feel more confident if I were the only one running. Your problems, however, are a bit more weighty. Urvon and JjEandramas are very serious opponents."

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"Urvon is a doddering old fool, and Zandramas is only a woman."

"Agachak," Urgit said pointedly, "Polgara is also only a woman. Would you care to face her"! No, Dread Hierarch, I think that Urvon doesn't dodder as much as you think, and Zandramas is probably more dangerous than you'd like to believe. She's managed to spirit away Belgarion's son, and that was no mean trick. She's also slipped past you and all the other Hierarchs as if you weren't even here. Let's neither of us take any of this too lightly."

"I know where Zandramas is," Agachak said with a chill smile, "and I will wrest Belgarion's son from her at the proper time. It is foretold that you and I and the babe who is to be sacrificed will come into the presence of the Sardion at the appointed time. There I will perform the sacrifice, and you will witness the rite, and we shall both be exalted. It is so written."

"Depending on how you read it," Urgit added morosely.

Garion moved to Ce'Nedra's side, trying to look casual, As the meaning of what the Grolim Hierarch had just said came to her, the blood slowly drained from her face. "It's not going to happen," he told her in a firm, quiet voice. "Nobody's going to do that to our baby."

"You knew," she accused him in a choked whisper.

"Grandfather and I found it in the Grolim Prophecies in the Temple library."

"Oh, Garion," she said, biting her lip to keep back the tears.

"Don't worry about it," he said. "The same Prophecy said that Torak was going to win at Cthol Mishrak. That didn't happen, and this isn't going to happen, either."

"But what if—"

"There aren't any ifs," he said firmly. "It's not going to happen."

After the Hierarch had left, King Urgit's mood changed. He sat in his chair, brooding sourly.

"Perhaps your Majesty might prefer to be left alone," Sadi ventured.

"No, Sadi." Urgit sighed. "No amount of worrying at it is going to change what we've already set in motion." He shook his head and then shrugged as if dismissing the whole matter. "Why don't you tell me the details of the little misdemeanor that made Salmisra so vexed with you? I adore

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stories of deceit and dishonesty. They always seem to hint that the world's not really such a bad place after all."

It was not long after, as Sadi was elaborating at some length on the involuted scheme that had caused his downfall, when the seneschal entered the room again. "A dispatch has arrived from the military governor at Cthaka, your Majesty," he rasped.

"What does he want now?" Urgit muttered plaintively.

"He reports that the Malloreans are mounting a major campaign in the south. Rak Gorut is under siege and must inevitably fall within a week."

"In the autumn?" Urgit exclaimed, coming up out of his chair in dismay. "They're mounting a campaign when the summer's already over?"

"So it appears," Oskatat replied. "I think that Kal Zak-ath's hoping to take you by surprise. Once Rak Gorut falls, there won't be anything between his forces and Rak Cthaka."

"And the garrison there is virtually nonexistent, isn't it?"

"I'm afraid so, Urgit. Rak Cthaka will also fall, and then Zakath will have all winter to consolidate his hold on the south."

Urgit began to swear and moved quickly to a map tacked up on the wall. "How many troops do we have up here in Morcth?" he demanded, tapping the map with one finger.

"A few score thousand. But by the time they had received the order to march south, the Malloreans would already be halfway to Rak Cthaka."

Urgit stared in consternation at the map. Then he suddenly smashed his fist against it. "He's outsmarted me again!" he raged. He

returned to his chair and collapsed in it.

"I think I'd better go get Kradak," Oskatat said. "The General Staff will need to know about this."

"Whatever you think best, Oskatat," Urgit replied in a defeated tone.

As the seneschal strode from the room, Garion crossed to look at the map. After only the briefest of glances, he saw a solution to Urgit's problem, but he was reluctant to speak. He did not want to become involved in this. There were a dozen good reasons why he should keep his mouth shut—the most important being the fact that should he offer his solution to the Murgo King, he would in a sense be committed, and he firmly desired to avoid any commitment to

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the man, no matter how slight. An unresolved problem, however, nagged at his sense of responsibility; to turn his back on one—even one that was not his own—violated something deep within him. He muttered a curse under his breath, then turned to the stricken Urgit. "Excuse me, your Majesty," he said, approaching the matter obliquely, "but how well fortified is Rak Cthaka?"

"It's like every Murgo city," Urgit replied abtactedly. "The walls are seventy feet high and thirty feet thick. What difference does it make?"

"The city could withstand a seige, then—if you had enough men there?"

"That's the whole problem—I don't."

"Then you need to get reinforcements there before the Malloreans can reach the city."

"What a brilliant observation. But if I can't get relief columns there in time, how could I possibly get reinforcements there before the streets are filled with Malloreans?"

Garion shrugged. "Send them by sea."

"By sea?" Urgit suddenly looked stunned.

"Your harbor is full of ships, and your city's bulging with troops. Load enough men on the ships to reinforce the garrison at Rak Cthaka and sail them around to the city. Even if Rak Gorut fell tomorrow, it's still going to take the Malloreans ten days to march overland. Your ships could be there in less than a week. Your reinforced garrison will be able to hold until the relief columns arrive."

Urgit shook his head. "Murgo armies do not move by ship," he said. "My generals wouldn't hear of it."

"You're the king, aren't you? Make them hear of it."

Urgit's face grew apprehensive. "They never listen to me."

Garion had a sudden urge to shake him. With some effort he got his irritation under control. "There's nothing holy about walking," he said, "particularly if marching your men to Rak Cthaka is going to cost you the city. Tell your generals to load the men on those ships and also tell them that the matter isn't open to discussion."

"They'll refuse."

"Then dismiss them from their posts and promote a few colonels."

Urgit stared at him, aghast. "I couldn't do that."

"You're the king. You can do anything you want to."

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Urgit wrestled with it indecisively.

"Do as he says, Urgit," Lady Tamazin commanded abruptly. "It's the only way to save Rak Cthaka."

He looked at her, a lost expression on his face. "Do you really think I should, mother?" he asked in a small voice.

"Just do it. As the young man said, you're the king—and I think it's about time that you started acting like one."

"There's something else we need to consider, your Majesty," Sadi said, his face grave. "If the Malloreans lay seige to Rak Cthaka, I won't be able to land there. I'm going to have to get past that vicinity before any fighting breaks out. Slavers can move around with very little interference, unless there's an actual battle going on, but once the fighting starts, the Malloreans are sure to detain us. If we don't move very quickly, your Dagashi won't reach Rak Hagga until sometime next summer."

Urgit's face grew even more disconsolate. "I hadn't considered that," he admitted. "I think you and your people had better get ready to leave here immediately. I'll send word to the Temple and tell Agachak that the plans have changed."

The door opened. Oskatat entered, and at his side was the Murgu officer who had so rudely demanded Urgit's signature the previous day.

"Ah, General Kradak," Urgit greeted the officer with an obviously feigned joviality, "so good of you to join us. You've heard about what's going on in the south?"

The general nodded shortly. "The situation is grave," he said. "Rak Gorut and Rak Cthaka are in great peril."

"What do you advise, General?" Urgit asked.

"There's nothing to advise," Kradak said. "We'll have to accept the

fact that Gorut and Cthaka are lost and concentrate our efforts on holding Urga, Morcth, and Araga."

"General, that only leaves three of the nine military districts of Cthol Murgos under my control. Zakath is eating my kingdom one bite at a time."

The general shrugged. "We cannot reach Rak Cthaka before the Malloreans do. The city will fall. There's nothing we can do about it."

"What if we were to reinforce the garrison there? Would that change things at all?"

"Certainly, but it's impossible."

"Maybe not," Urgit said with a quick look at Garion.

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"What do you think of moving reinforcements there by ship?"

"By ship?" The general blinked, and then his face hardened. "That's absurd."

"Why absurd?"

"It's never been done in Cthol Murgos before."

"I imagine that there are a lot of things that have never been done in Cthol Murgos before. Is there any specific reason why it won't work?"

"Ships sink, your Majesty," Kradak pointed out acidly, as if speaking to a child. "The troops know that and they'll refuse to go on board."

Oskatat stepped forward. "Not if you crucify the first ten or so who refuse right there on the dock," he said firmly. "That sort of example should lessen the reluctance of the rest."

Kradak gave the gray-haired man a look of undisguised hatred. "What would a house servant know about command?" he demanded. He looked back at Urgit with a barely concealed sneer. "Just stay on your throne, Urgit," he said harshly. "Play with your crown and your scepter and pretend that you're a real king. But keep your nose out of the business of running the war."

Urgit's face blanched, and he shrank back in his chair.

"Shall I send for the headsman, your Majesty?" Oskatat inquired in an icy voice. "It appears that General Kradak has outlived his usefulness."

Kradak stared at him incredulously. "You wouldn't dare!" he gasped.

"Your life hangs on his Majesty's pleasure just now, Kradak. One word

from him, and your head will roll in the dust."

"I am a general officer in the armies of Cthol Murgos." Kradak clutched at the gold chain about his neck as if for reassurance. "My appointment comes from Taur Urgas himself. You have no authority over me, Oskatat."

Urgit straightened in his chair, an angry flush moving up into his face. "Oh, really?" he said in a dangerously quiet voice. "Maybe it's time that we got a few things clarified." He took off his crown and held it up. "Do you recognize this, Kradak?"

The general glared at him with a stony face.

"Answer me!"

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"It's the crown of Cthol Murgos," Kradak replied sullenly.

"And the man who wears it has absolute authority, right?"

"Taur Urgas did."

"Taur Urgas is dead. I sit upon the throne now, and you will obey me in the same way you obeyed him. Do you understand me?"

"You are not Taur Urgas."

"That's painfully obvious, General Kradak," Urgit replied coldly. "I am your king, however, and I'm also an Urga. When I grow agitated, I feel the madness of the Urgas creeping up on me—and it's creeping very fast just now. If you don't do exactly as I tell you to do, you're going to be a head shorter before the sun sets. Now go give the order to load the troops on those ships."

"And if I refuse?"

Urgit's expression grew hesitant. For some reason he looked appealingly at Garion.

"Kill him," Garion said in the flat unemotional voice he had discovered immediately got people's attention.

Urgit straightened again and firmly yanked his bellpull. The great gong outside in the hallway clanged. Two burly guards responded immediately. "Yes, your Majesty?" one of them asked.

"Well, Kradak?" Urgit asked. "What's it to be? The ships or the block? Speak up, man. I haven't got all day."

Kradak's face went ashen. "The ships, your Majesty," he replied in a shaky voice.

"Splendid. I'm so happy that we were able to settle our little differences without unpleasantness." Urgit turned to his guards.

"General Kradak is going directly to the barracks of the Third Cohort now," he told them, "and you will accompany him. He's going to order those men to board the ships in the harbor and to sail to the relief of the garrison at Rak Cthaka." He gave Kradak a narrow, distrustful look. "If he gives them any other order, you will cut off his head immediately and bring it to me—in a bucket."

"As your Majesty commands," the Murgos replied in unison, each banging his fist against his mail shirt.

Kradak turned, trembling and suddenly broken, and went out with the grim Murgo guards flanking him closely.

Urgit retained his imperious expression until the door

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closed, and then he threw both arms in the air and began beating his feet on the floor, whooping with delight. "Oh, Gods!" he said ecstatically. "I loved that! I've been wanting to do that all my life!"

The Lady Tamazin rose gravely from her chair, limped to where her son sat, and wordlessly embraced him.

"Affection, mother?" he asked lightly, a broad grin still creasing his sharp-featured face. "How terribly un-Murgoish." And then he laughed and caught her in a rough bear hug.

"There may be hope after all," she observed calmly to Oskatat.

A slow smile crept across the big Murgo's lips. "It looks a bit more promising, my Lady," he agreed.

"Thank you for your support, Oskatat," Urgit said to his friend. "I might not have gotten through that without your help." He paused. "I must say, though, that I'm a little surprised that you approved of my scheme."

"I don't. I think it's an absurd idea almost certainly doomed from the start."

Urgit blinked.

"There was another issue at stake, however—one that is much more important." There was a peculiar pride on the big man's face. "Do you realize that this is the very first time you've ever faced down one of your generals? They've been running roughshod over you since the day you took the throne. The loss of a few ships and a few thousand men is a small price to pay for a real king on the throne of Cthol Murgos."

"Thank you for your candor, Oskatat," Urgit said gravely. "It may just be, though, that things may not turn out so disastrously as you think."

"Perhaps, but Taur Urgas would not have done this."

"It might just be that someday we'll all rejoice in the fact that Taur Urgas is no longer with us, Oskatat.'" A faint ironic smile crossed the king's lips. "As a matter of fact, I seem to feel a small surge of rejoicing coming over me already. I'm losing this war, my old friend, and a man who's losing can't afford to be conservative. I've got to take a few gambles if I want to keep Kal Zakath from parading through the streets of Rak Urga with my head on a pole."

"As your Majesty commands," the seneschal said with a

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bow. "I'm also going to have to give certain orders. Have I your permission to withdraw?"

"Of course."

Oskatat turned and started toward the door. Before he reached it, however, it opened and Silk came into the room. The seneschal stopped, staring hard at the Drasnian. Silk's hand moved swiftly toward the hood of his robe, but then he let it drop with a rueful grimace.

Garion groaned inwardly. He moved carefully into position not far behind Oskatat, aware that Dumik and the gigantic Toth were also coming up on either side of him, ready to move quickly to prevent any outcry.

"You!" Oskatat exclaimed to Silk. "What are you doing here?"

Silk's expression grew resigned. "Just passing through, Oskatat," he replied casually. "You've been well, I trust?"

Urgit looked up. "What's this?"

"The seneschal and I are old friends, your Majesty," Silk replied. "We met in Rak Goska some years ago."

"Is your Majesty aware of this man's true identity?" Oskatat demanded.

Urgit shrugged. "He's one of Sadi's servants," he said. "Or so I was told."

"Hardly that, Urgit. This is Prince Kheldar of Drasnia, the most notorious spy in the entire world."

"The seneschal is perhaps a bit lavish in his praise," Silk noted modestly.

"Do you deny that you murdered the soldiers Taur Urgas sent to detain you when your scheme in Rak Goska was exposed?" Oskatat said

accusingly.

"I don't know that I'd use the word 'murdered,' exactly, my Lord." Silk winced. "Oh, I'll admit that there was a bit of unpleasantness, but that's such an awkward way to sum up."

"Your Majesty," the grim old Murgo said. "This man was responsible for the death of Dorak Urgas, your eldest brother. There is a long-standing warrant for his immediate execution, so I will send for the headsman at once."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Urgit's face had grown cold. His eyes were narrowed, and he chewed nervously on a fingernail. "All right, Sadi," he said, "what's this all about?"

"Your Majesty—I—" The eunuch spread his hand.

"Don't try to play the innocent with me," Urgit snapped. "Did you know about this man?" He pointed at Silk.

"Well, yes, but—"

"And you chose not to tell me? What's your game, Sadi?"

The eunuch hesitated, and Garion saw beads of sweat breaking out on his forehead. Durnik and Toth, moving casually as if merely removing themselves from the vicinity of the confrontation, went past Oskatat and leaned idly against the wall, one on each side of the door.

"Well, Sadi?" Urgit pressed. "I've heard about this Prince Kheldar. He's not merely a spy; he's an assassin as

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well." His eyes suddenly grew wide. "So that's it!" he gasped, staring at Silk. "Belgarion sent you here to kill me, didn't he—you and these other Aloms."

"Don't be absurd, Urgit," Lady Tamazin said from her chair. "You've been alone with these people for hours at a time since they arrived here. If they were here to kill you, you'd already be dead."

He thought about that. "All right, you—Prince Kheldar—speak up. I want to know exactly what you're doing here. Now talk."

Silk shrugged. "It's as I told my Lord Oskatat, your Majesty. I'm merely passing through. My business is in another part of the world."

"Which part?"

"Here and there," Silk said evasively.

"I'm going to get some straight answers here," Urgit declared.

"Shall I send for the headsman, your Majesty?" Oskatat asked ominously.

"Perhaps that might not be a bad idea," Urgit agreed.

The seneschal turned, but found Durnik and the impassive Toth barring his way from the room. Urgit, perceiving the situation at once, reached quickly for the bellpull which would fill the room with armed Murgos.

"Urgit!" Lady Tamazin snapped. "No!"

He hesitated.

"Do as I say!"

"What's this?" he asked.

"Look around you," she told him. "If you even touch that cord, one of these people will have a knife against your throat before you can tug it even once."

His expression grew suddenly frightened, and he slowly lowered his hand.

Sadi cleared his throat. "Ah—your Majesty," he said. "I believe that the Queen Mother has seen directly to the heart of the matter here. We are both in positions to greatly inconvenience each other. Wouldn't it be wiser for us to discuss things rationally before we resort to any unpleasantness?"

"What is it that you want, Sadi?" Urgit asked him in a slightly quavering voice.

"Only what you had intended all along, your Majesty. As Kheldar said, our business is in another part of the world,

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and it does not directly concern you. Give us the ship that you were going to give us anyway, and in return we'll deliver your Dagashi to Rak Hagga as we promised. After that, we'll proceed with our own affairs. What could be fairer than that?"

"Listen to him, Urgit," Lady Tamazin urged. "He makes a great deal of sense."

Urgit's expression was filled with doubt. "Do you really think so, mother?"

"What harm can they do you, once they've crossed the Mallorean lines?" she asked. "If you're nervous about them, then get them out of Rak Urga as quickly as possible."

"Al! except this one." Oskatat pointed at Silk.

"We really need him, my Lord," Sadi said politely.

"He killed Dorak Urgas," the seneschal said stubbornly.

"We can give him a medal for that later, Oskatat," Urgit said.

Oskatat stared at him.

"Oh, come now, my friend. You despised Dorak as much as I did."

"He was a Murgo prince, your Majesty. His murder cannot go unpunished."

"You seem to forget that / murdered a dozen of my other brothers—also Murgo princes—on my way to the throne. Were you planning to punish me as well?" Urgit looked back at Sadi. "I think, however, that it might not hurt for me to keep Kheldar here in the Drojim. Sort of as a performance bond. As soon as you deliver Kabach to Rak Hagga, I'll release him. He can catch up with you later."

Sadi's expression grew pained.

"You're overlooking something important here, Urgit," Lady Tamazin said, leaning forward intently.

"Oh? What's that, mother?"

"Prince Kheldar of Drasnia is reputed to be one of King Belgarion's closest friends. You have there the perfect envoy to convey a message to the Rivan King."

He looked sharply at Silk. "Is that true?" he asked. "Do you really know Belgarion?"

"Quite well, actually," Silk replied. "I've known him since he was a little boy."

"That old man over there said that Belgarion isn't at Riva just now. Do you have any idea where you might be able to find him?"

"Your Majesty," Silk answered with a perfectly straight face, "I can honestly tell you that I know exactly where Belgarion is at this very moment."

Urgit scratched at one cheek, his eyes suspicious. "I don't think I like this," he said. "Let's say that I give you a message to deliver to Belgarion. What's to prevent you from just throwing it away and then circling around to rejoin your friends?"

"Ethics." Silk shrugged. "I always do the things I'm paid to do. You were planning to pay me, weren't you?"

Urgit stared at Silk for a moment and then he threw back his head and laughed. "You're absolutely outrageous, Kheldar," he said. "Here you are, about two steps from the headsman's block, and you have the nerve to try to extort money from me."

Silk sighed and looked around tragically. "Why is it that the word 'pay' always brings that same look of consternation into the eyes of kings the world over?" he asked. "Surely your Majesty would not expect me to perform this truly unique service for you without some small recompense, would you?"

"Wouldn't you say that getting to keep your head is more than adequate payment?"

"Oh, I'm fairly safe, I think. Since I'm the only one in the world who can guarantee delivery of your message, I'm far too valuable to kill, wouldn't you say?"

Lady Tamazin suddenly laughed, a whimsical expression on her face as she looked at the two of them.

"Something amusing, mother?" Urgit asked her.

"Nothing, Urgit. Nothing at all."

The king's eyes were still indecisive. He looked hopefully at his seneschal. "What do you think, Oskatat?" he asked. "Can I trust this little knave?"

"It's your Majesty's decision," the big Murgo replied stiffly.

"I'm not asking you as your king," Urgit told him. "I'm asking as a friend."

Oskatat winced. "That's cruel, Urgit," he said. "You're forcing me to decide between duty and friendship." "All right, then. Let's put it on that basis. What should I do?"

"As king, you should obey the law—even if it means flying in the face of your own best interests. As a man, how-

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ever, you should seize every opportunity that presents itself to avert disaster."

"Well? What should I do? Should I be a king or a man? Which do you advise?"

It hung there in the air between them. The seneschal refused to meet Urgit's eyes. Instead, he cast one quick, appealing look at Lady Tamazin. "Torak forgive me," he muttered finally. He straightened and looked his king full in the face. "Save yourself, Urgit," he said. "If this Drasnian can arrange an alliance with Belgarion, then pay him whatever he demands and send him on his way. Belgarion may deceive you at some later date, but Kal Zakath seeks your head now.

You need that alliance, no matter what the cost."

"Thank you, Oskatat," the king said with genuine gratitude. He turned back to Silk. "How quickly do you think you could reach Belgarion with my message?" he asked.

"Your Majesty," Silk replied, "I can have your message in Belgarion's hands more quickly than you could possibly imagine. Now, shall we talk about money?" His long, pointed nose began to twitch in a manner Garion recognized at once.

"How much do you want?" Urgit asked warily.

"Oh," Silk pretended to think about it, "I suppose a hundred Tolnedran goldmarks ought to cover it."

Urgit gaped at him. "A hundred marks? You're insane!"

Silk casually examined the fingernails of one hand. "The figure's open to negotiation, your Majesty," he admitted. "I just wanted to establish a general price range sort of to get things off to a smooth start."

Urgit's eyes took on a strange light. He leaned forward, tugging absently at his nose. "I might be able to see my way clear to pay you ten—or so," he countered. "I don't really have all that much Tolnedran coin in my vaults."

"Oh, that's all right, your Majesty," Silk said magnanimously. "I'd be willing to accept Angarak coins—at a slight discount, of course."

"Discount?"

"Angarak gold is obviously adulterated, King Urgit. That's why it's red instead of yellow."

Urgit eyed him narrowly. "Why don't you draw up a chair, old boy?" he suggested. "This might take a while." Strangely enough, his nose had also begun to twitch.

What followed was a display of astonishing virtuosity on

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the part of both negotiators. Garion had seen Silk in this sort of situation many times before and had always believed that his sharp-nosed friend was without peer when it came to getting the best of every bargain he struck. Urgit, however, quickly demonstrated that he too was an expert at the game. When Silk pointed out in suitably exaggerated terms the dangers he would have to face on his way to deliver the message, Urgit countered by offering an escort of Murgo soldiers rather than increased compensation. Silk dropped that line of attack and concentrated for a time on the unusual expenses he would incur—fresh horses, food and lodging, bribes and the like. In each case the Murgo King proposed assistance rather than money—horses, food and lodging at Murgo embassies or trade missions,

and the good offices of Murgos officials to step around the necessity for bribes. Silk made some pretense at considering that, his watchful eyes never leaving his adversary's face. Then he fell back to his previously prepared position, re-emphasizing his friendship with the Rivan King and the fact that he, perhaps better than any man in the world, could present the proposed alliance to Belgarion in the most favorable light. "After all," he concluded, "what it finally comes down to is how much the alliance is worth to you, doesn't it?"

"It's worth a very great deal," Urgit admitted with deceptive candor, "but, although I'd be the first to admit that you're probably the perfect messenger, there's no guarantee that Belgarion will agree to an alliance, now is there?" He paused, his expression announcing that a notion had just struck him. "I'll tell you what," he said then with an artfully feigned enthusiasm, "why don't we set a relatively modest figure for the actual delivery of the message—oh, let's say the ten marks I suggested previously."

Silk's face grew flinty, but Urgit lifted one hand. "Hear me out, your Highness," he said. "As I just suggested, we agree on that figure as payment for carrying the message. Then, if Belgarion agrees to an alliance, I'd be more than happy to pay you the rest of the money you asked for."

"That's hardly fair, your Majesty," Silk protested. "You're putting the entire question into the hands of a third party. I can guarantee delivery, but not acceptance. Belgarion is a sovereign king. I can't tell him what to do, and I have no way of knowing how he would react to your proposal."

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"Didn't you say that you were his oldest friend? Surely you know him well enough to have at least some idea of how he would view the matter."

"You're shifting the entire basis of the negotiations, your Majesty," Silk accused him.

"Yes, I know." Urgit smirked.

"The payment for actually cementing an alliance between you and Belgarion would have to be much, much higher," Silk countered. "What you propose is extremely hazardous, after all."

"Hazardous? I don't follow you, old boy."

"Belgarion is not entirely a free agent. Even though he's the Overlord of the West, he's still answerable to the other kings—particularly the Alorns; and let's be honest about it, Alorns despise Murgos. If I persuade him to accept an alliance with you, those other Alorn Kings might very well believe that I'm a traitor. I

could find myself dodging their assassins for the rest of my life."

"I find that very hard to believe, Kheldar."

"You don't know them. The Alorns are a fearfully unforgiving race. Even my aunt would give orders to have me hunted down if she thought that I'd betrayed a basic Alorn concept of the world. What you propose is absolutely out of the question—unless we start talking about really significant amounts of money, of course."

"Just how significant?" Urgit asked warily.

"Well now, let's see—" Silk pretended to consider the matter. "Naturally I'd have to abandon all my enterprises in the Kingdoms of the West. If the Alorn Kings declare me an outlaw, all my assets would be expropriated anyway. My commercial ventures are far-flung, and it's going to take some time to establish their fair value. Then, of course, I'll have the expense of setting up operations in a part of the world where the Alorns can't track me down."

"That's simplicity in itself, Kheldar. Come to Cthol Murgos. I'll protect you."

"No offense, your Majesty, but Cthol Murgos doesn't suit me. I was thinking perhaps of Mal Zeth or maybe Melcene. I could probably do quite well in Melcene."

"Silk," Belgarath said abruptly, "what's the point of all this?"

"I was just—"

"I know what you were doing. You can amuse yourself some other time. Right now we've got a ship to catch."

"But, Belg—" Silk caught himself abruptly with a quick sidelong glance at Urgit.

"You're not in a position to be giving orders, old man," the Murgos King said. Then he looked around suspiciously. "There's something going on here that I don't like. I don't think anybody's going anyplace today. I'm not going to turn any of you loose until I get to the bottom of all this."

"Don't be absurd, Urgit," his mother interrupted him. "These people must leave at once."

"Don't interfere, mother."

"Then stop acting like a child. Sadi must get past Rak Cthaka before the fighting starts there, and Kheldar must be on his way to Belgarion within the hour. Don't throw away this opportunity out of sheer pique."

Their eyes locked. Urgit's face was suddenly angry, and his mother's unrelenting. After a long moment, his eyes dropped. "This isn't like you, mother," he mumbled. "Why are you deliberately trying to humiliate me in public?"

"I'm not, Urgit. I'm just trying to bring you to your Senses. A king must always bow to reality—even if it injures his pride." ,

He gave her a long, penetrating look. "The time isn't really all that pressing, mother," he said. "Sadi has time to spare, and Kheldar really doesn't have to leave for a day or so. If I didn't know better, I'd say that you have some personal reason for not wanting me to talk to them any more."

"Nonsense!" But her face had grown quite pale.

"You're upset, mother," he pressed. "Why is that?"

"She can't tell you," Eriond said suddenly. The young man was seated on a bench in front of a nearby window with the autumn sun streaming golden on his pale hair.

"What?"

"Your mother can't tell you," Eriond repeated. "There's a secret she's had locked in her heart since before you were born."

"No!" Lady Tamazin gasped involuntarily. "You musn't!"

"What is this secret?" Urgit demanded, his eyes flickering suspiciously from face to face.

A slow flush crept up Eriond's cheeks. "I'd really rather not say," he replied in a slightly embarrassed tone.

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Velvet had been watching the exchange with wholly absorbed fascination; even as a startling suspicion dawned in Garion's mind, she suddenly began to laugh.

"What's so funny, young lady?" Urgit asked irritably.

"A peculiar thought just occurred to me, your Majesty," she replied. She turned to Lady Tamazin. "Didn't you say that you knew Prince Kheldar's father, my Lady?"

Tamazin's chin lifted suddenly. Her face was still deadly pale, and she did not answer.

"How long ago would you say that was?" Velvet asked.

Tamazin's h'ps remained tightly closed.

Velvet sighed, then looked at Silk. "Kheldar," she said, "quite a long time back your father visited Rak Goska, didn't he? I think it had something to do with some trade negotiations on behalf of King Rhodar. Do you happen to recall just how many years ago that was?"

He looked puzzled. "I don't know," he replied. "It must have been—" He thought about it. "I remember that my mother and I stayed at the

palace in Boktor while he was gone. I think I was eight or so at the time. That would make it about forty years, I guess. What's this all about, Liselle?"

"Interesting," she murmured, ignoring his question. "My Lady Tamazin," she said, "you keep telling your son that he isn't going to go mad-but doesn't every male in the Urga line fall prey to that hereditary affliction? What is it that makes you so positive that he's somehow going to escape the family curse?"

Tamazin's face grew even paler, and her lips were resolutely sealed.

"My Lord High Seneschal," Velvet said to Oskatat, "just out of curiosity, how old is his Majesty?"

Oskatat's face had also gone deadly pale. He looked at Lady Tamazin with a stricken expression, and then his lips also clamped shut.

"I'm thirty-nine," Urgit snapped. "What difference does it-" Then he suddenly stopped, his eyes going very wide. He turned with a look of stunned incredulity. "Mother!" he gasped.

Sadi began to laugh.

"I just adore happy endings, don't you?" Velvet said brightly to Ce'Nedra. She looked impishly at Silk. "Well, don't just sit there, Kheldar. Go embrace your brother."

The Lady Tamazin rose slowly from her chair, her face

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proud. "Summon the executioner, Oskatat," she said. "I am ready."

"No, my Lady," he replied. "I won't do that."

"It's the law, Oskatat," she insisted. "A Murgo woman who dishonors her husband is to be put to death immediately."

"Oh, sit down, mother," Urgit said, abstractedly gnawing at one of his knuckles. "This is no time for histrionics."

Silk's eyes were a bit wild. "You're very quick, Liselle," he said in a strained voice.

"Not really," she admitted. "I should have guessed quite some time ago. You and his Majesty could almost use each other for shaving mirrors, and he negotiates almost as shrewdly as you do." She looked at the stunned Murgo King, her cheeks dimpling. "If your Majesty ever grows weary of the throne, I'm certain that my uncle could find work for you."

"This alters things quite a bit, Urgit," Beigarath said. "The prejudices of your subjects are well known. If they find out that you're not a real Murgo, it might agitate them just a bit, wouldn't you say?"

Urgit had been staring at Silk. "Oh, just shut up, old man," he said absently. "Let me think my way through this."

"I'm sure that your Majesty realizes that you can rely totally on our discretion," Sadi said smoothly.

"Of course," Urgit replied drily. "Just as long as I do exactly what you tell me to do."

"Well, there's that, naturally."

Urgit looked at his seneschal. "Well, Oskatat," he said, "will you now dash to the highest window of the Drojim to proclaim this to the entire city?"

"Why should I?" Oskatat shrugged. "I've known since you were a little boy that you were not the son of Taur Urgas."

Lady Tamazin gasped, her hand going suddenly to her lips. "You've known, Oskatat? And you've kept my shame a secret?"

"My Lady," he said with a stiff bow, "I would not have betrayed you even on the rack."

She gave him a peculiar look. "And why is that, Oskatat?" she asked gently.

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"You are of the House of Hagga," he replied, "as am I. Loyalty to blood is very strong in Cthol Murgos."

"And is that all, Oskatat? Is that the only reason you befriended me and protected my son?"

He looked her full in the face. "No, my Lady," he said almost proudly, "it is not."

She lowered her eyelashes.

"There were other reasons for my keeping your secret, however," he continued, "less personal, perhaps, but just as compelling. The Urga Dynasty has brought Cthol Murgos to the brink of disaster. I saw in young Urgit the best hope for the kingdom. I might have wished him to be stronger, but his agility of mind showed much promise. In the long run a clever king is often preferable to a strong one without any brains."

Belgarath rose from his chair. "I hate to break up these festivities," he said, "but it's time for us to leave. Too many secrets are starting to come out into the open." He looked at Urgit.

"Did you send that messenger to the Temple? If Agachak's Dagashi wants to go along with us, he's going to have to get down to the harbor at once."

Urgit started to rise from his chair, his face angry. Then he stopped, his eyes narrowing. "Just who are you, old man?" he demanded. "You look like a vagabond, but you've been throwing commands around here like an emperor."

Lady Tamazin, however, had been looking at Belgarath with eyes suddenly gone wide. Then she turned to stare in awe at Aunt Pol. "Urgit!" she said in a half-strangled whisper.

"What is it, mother?"

"Look at him. Look very closely—and then look at his daughter here."

"His daughter? I didn't know they were related."

"Neither did I—until just now." The Queen Mother looked directly at Polgara. "He is your father, isn't he, Lady Polgara?"

Polgara straightened, and the white lock at her brow caught the candlelight. "I think this has gone far enough, father," she said to the old man with a wry expression. "There's not much point in trying to hide things any more, is there?"

"Old friend," Silk said lightly, "you really ought to do something about your appearance, you know. Your descrip-

tion's been noised about the world for all these centuries, so people are bound to recognize you every so often. Have you ever considered shaving off your beard?"

Urgit was staring at the old man with an expression of near-terror.

"Oh, don't do that," Belgarath said in disgust.

Urgit flinched.

"And don't do that either. No matter what you've been told, I don't make a practice of biting off the heads of Murgo babies just for amusement." He tugged thoughtfully at one ear, looking first at Urgit, then at Lady Tamazin, and finally at Oskatat and Praia. "I think there's going to have to be a small change of plans," he said. "I believe that you people are all going to develop an irresistible craving for sea-travel—just as a precaution. You have some secrets you want kept, and so do we. This way we can sort of keep an eye on each other."

"You're not serious!" Urgit burst out.

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I am. I don't like leaving loose ends behind me."

The door opened, and Garion spun quickly, but stopped his hand halfway to his sword hilt. The Murgo officer who had just entered looked curiously at the people in the room, sensing the tension.

"Uh—excuse me, your Majesty," he said a bit warily.

Urgit looked at him, a swift flash of hope fleeting across his face. Then he cast a quick, fearful glance at Belgarath. "Yes, Colonel," he replied in a carefully neutral voice.

"A message has just arrived from the Hierarch, your Majesty. I am directed to advise you that the Dagashi Kabach will be at the harbor within the hour."

Durnik and Toth, moving in unison, had carefully sidled up until one of them stood on each side of Oskatat, and Polgara had crossed to Lady Tamazin's chair.

Urgit's face was faintly sick with fright. "Very good, Colonel," he replied. "Thank you for your trouble."

The officer bowed and then turned toward the door.

"Colonel," Praia's clear voice stopped him.

He turned back, his face respectful. "Yes, Princess?"

Velvet was moving toward the Murgo girl with a deceptive casualness. Garion inwardly flinched at the potential for sudden, awful violence that hung heavily in the air—even as he measured the distance to the unsuspecting colonel.

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"Have you had any reports about the weather conditions along the coast to the south?" Praia asked calmly.

"There's some wind, your Highness," the colonel replied, "and there are almost always rain squalls around the tip of the peninsula."

"Thank you, Colonel."

He bowed and quietly left the room.

Garion let out his breath explosively.

"Lord Belgarath." Praia's voice was crisp. "You cannot expose the Lady Tamazin to that kind of weather. I will not permit it."

Belgarath blinked. "Will not permit?" he asked incredulously.

"Absolutely not. If you persist, I'll scream the roof down." She turned coolly to Velvet. "Don't come one step closer, Liselle," she warned. "I can scream at least twice before you can kill me, and that will bring every guard in the Drojim to this room on the run."

"She's right, you know, father," Polgara said very calmly. "Tamazin could not possibly endure the rigors of the voyage."

"Couldn't we—"

"No, father," she said firmly, "it's absolutely out of the question."

He muttered a sour curse and jerked his head at Sadi. The two of them moved down to the far end of the room for a brief, murmured conversation.

"You've got a knife under your doublet, haven't you, Kheldar?" Urgit asked.

"Two, actually," Silk replied in a matter-of-fact tone, "and one in my boot and another on a string at the back of my neck. I like to be prepared for little emergencies when they arise—but why dwell on an unpleasantness that never happened?"

"You're a dreadful man, Kheldar."

"I know."

Belgarath came back from his low-voiced conference with Sadi, "Lady Tamazin," he said.

The Queen Mother's chin lifted. "Yes?" she replied.

"Under the circumstances, I believe we can rely on your discretion," he said. "You've already proved that you know how to keep a secret. You do realize that your life—and

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your son's—depends on your not revealing what you've learned here, don't you?"

"Yes, I suppose I do."

"We're going to need to leave someone ostensibly in charge here anyway, so things will work out, I suppose."

"What you propose is quite impossible, Lord Belgarath."

"I do wish people would stop using that word. What's the problem now?"

"Murgos will not take orders from a woman."

Belgarath grunted sourly. "Oh, yes. I'd forgotten about that peculiar Murgo prejudice."

"My Lord Oskatat," Sadi said.

The seneschal's face was stony as he glanced briefly at Durnik and Toth standing one on each side of him.

"Wouldn't you be the logical one to attend to the affairs of state during his Majesty's absence?"

"It's possible."

"Just how far does your loyalty to your kinswoman, the Lady Tamazin, go?"

Oskatat scowled at him.

"Eriond," Ce'Nedra said then.

"Yes?"

"Can the seneschal be trusted not to send a fleet after us as soon as we leave?"

Garion looked up sharply. He had forgotten his young friend's peculiar ability to see directly into the minds and hearts of others.

"He won't say anything," Eriond replied confidently.

"Are you sure?" Ce'Nedra asked.

"Absolutely. He'd rather die than betray Tamazin."

A dull flush crept up into the big Murgo's scarred cheeks, and he turned his face so that he could avoid the Queen Mother's eyes.

"All right then." Belgarath's tone was decisive. "Urgit will go with us." He looked at the seneschal. "We'll drop him off not far from Rak Cthaka. You have my word on that. You stay here with Tamazin. It's up to you, but I'd recommend that you follow through on the plan to send reinforcements to the city by sea. Otherwise, your king may have to hold off the Malloreans all by himself."

"What about Praia?" Ce'Nedra asked.

Belgarath scratched his ear. "There's no real point in taking her along," he said. "I'm sure that if she stays here,

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Tamazin and Oskatat can keep her from blurting out any secrets."

"No, my Lord Belgarath," the slender Cthan Princess said firmly. "I will not stay behind. If his Majesty is going to Rak Cthaka, then so am I. I will not give you my word to remain silent. You have no choice but to take me along— or to kill me."

"What's this?" Urgit asked, puzzled.

Silk, however, had already guessed. "If you want to start running right now, Urgit, I'll try to hold her until you get a good head start."

"What are you talking about, Kheldar?"

"If you're very, very lucky, my brother, Kal Zakath won't get you,

but I'm afraid that your chances of escaping this young lady are far more slender. Take my advice and start running right now."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

A heavy bank of gray cloud had moved in off the Great Western Sea, and a stiff offshore breeze tugged at their garments as they mounted their horses in the courtyard of the Drojim.

"You know what to do, Oskatat?" Urgit asked his seneschal.

The big Murgo nodded. "The ships carrying the reinforcements will depart within two days, your Majesty. You have my word on that."

"Good. I'd rather not fight this battle all by myself. Try not to use any more of those warrants than you absolutely have to."

"Trust me." Oskatat's face creased into a bleak smile.

Urgit's quick answering grin was wolfish. "And look after my mother," he added.

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"I've done that for many years—without her even being aware of it."

Gravely the Murgo King leaned down from his saddle and shook hands with his friend. Then he straightened resolutely. "All right," he said to the officer in charge of the guard detachment, "let's go."

They clattered out of the courtyard, and Silk drew in beside his brother. "What was that business about warrants?" he asked curiously.

Urgit laughed. "The generals might want to refuse to obey Oskatat's orders," he explained, "so I signed warrants for the execution of every one of them and left them with him to use as he sees fit." "Clever."

"I should have thought of it years ago." Urgit looked up at the racing clouds overhead, with his robe flapping in the rising wind. "I'm not a very good sailor, Kheldar," he admitted with a shudder. "I tend to throw up a lot in rough weather."

Silk laughed. "Then just remember always to stand at the leeward rail."

The murky sky seemed somehow to Garion to be suited to the bleakness of Rak Urga. A city so devoid of any kind of beauty seemed unnatural when the sky was clear and the sun was shining. Now, however, it squatted under the roiling clouds like some torpid stone toad. The

black-robed Murgos in the narrow streets stood aside for their king. Some of them bowed; others stood stony-faced and unbending as the party passed.

They rode through a square and then on down the stone-paved street that led to the Temple. "Captain," Urgit called to the officer in the lead, "have one of your men stop by and tell the Hierarch that we're leaving. He has someone in the Temple that he wants to send along with us."

"As your Majesty commands," the officer replied.

The cobbled street they were following rounded a corner, and they were able to see the harbor. It lay in a sheltered bay behind the headland standing at the narrow mouth of the Gulf of Urga and was dotted with black-painted Murgo ships. The familiar smell of the meeting of sea and land, a mixture of brine, seaweed, and dead fish, rose to meet Gar-ion's nostrils, and his blood began to race at the prospect of once again going to sea.

"I The black ship moored at the side of the stone quay onto which they rode was larger than most of the other vessels in the harbor. It was a squat, broad-beamed scow with slanting masts and tarred planking. Silk eyed it distrustfully. "Do , - you really call that thing a ship?" he asked his brother. "I warned you about Murgo boats." There was a brief disagreement about the horses when they reached the ship. "Totally out of the question, your >! Majesty," the ship captain, a huge, evil-looking man, declared adamantly. "I don't carry livestock on board my ship." He stood towering over his king with a self-important expression slightly tinged with contempt on his face. Urgit's expression became one of distress. "I'd say that it's time for another exercise of the royal assertiveness," Silk murmured to him.

Urgit gave him a quick look and then squared his shoulders. He turned back to the hulking ship's master. "Load these horses on your ship, Captain," he repeated his com-, mand in a firmer tone.

"I just told you that I don't--"

"Did I say it too fast for you? Listen carefully this time. Put-the-horses-on-the-boat. If you don't do exactly what I . tell you to do, I'll have you nailed to the prow of your ship in place of a figurehead. Do we understand each other?"

The captain stepped back, his look of arrogance becoming one of doubt and apprehension. "Your Majesty--"

"Do it, Captain!" Urgit barked, "Now!" ;. The captain drew himself up sharply, saluted, and then turned to his crew. "You heard the king," he said harshly. "Load the horses." He stalked away, muttering to himself. . "You see," Silk said. "It gets easier every time you do it, doesn't it? All you have to remember is that your commands are not subjects for debate."

"You know," Urgit said with a tight grin, "I could ac-tually get to like that."

The sailors began to push the skittish horses up the narrow gangplank and then down a steeply slanting ramp into the hold of the vessel. They had loaded perhaps half of the animals when Garion heard the sound of a sullen drum coming from the narrow, cobbled steel leading down to the quay. A double file of black-robed Grolims in polished steel masks marched down the hill toward the water, moving with that peculiar, swaying gait Garion had seen in the Temple. Bel-

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garath took Urgit by the sleeve and drew him out of earshot of his guards and the busy sailors. "We don't need any surprises, here, Urgit," he said firmly, "so let's get through the formalities with Agachak as quickly as possible. Tell him that you're going to Rak Cthaka to take personal command of the defense of the city. Let's get your Dagashi on board ship and get out of here."

"I don't really have any choice about this, do I?" Urgit asked unhappily.

"No," Belgarath replied. "Not very much at all." The cadaverous Agachak rode in a litter carried by a dozen Grolims. At his side, her head erect, came the scarred priestess Chabat. Her eyes were ravaged from weeping, and her face was dreadfully pale. The look she directed at Sadi, however, was filled with implacable hatred.

Behind Agachak's litter there came a hooded figure that did not walk with the stiff-legged, swaying gait of the Grolims in the Hierarch's entourage, and Garion surmised that this man was the mysterious Kabach. He looked at the man curiously, but could not see the face concealed beneath the hood.

As the litter reached the gangway, Agachak signaled his bearers to a halt. "Your Majesty," he greeted Urgit hollowly as his litter was lowered to the stones. "Dread Hierarch."

"I received your message. Is the situation in the south as grave as I was led to believe?"

"I'm afraid so, Agachak. I'm going to take advantage of this ship to go to Rak Cthaka and take personal command." "You, your Majesty?" Agachak looked startled. "Is that altogether wise?"

"Perhaps not, but I'm sure I can't do much worse than my generals have done. I've left orders that reinforcements are to be sent to the city by ship."

"By ship? A daring innovation, your Majesty. I'm surprised that your generals agreed to it."

"I didn't ask them to agree. I finally realized that their duty to advise me doesn't give them the authority to order me around."

Agachak looked at him, his eyes thoughtful. "This is a new side of you, your Majesty," he noted, stepping out of his litter to stand on the stones of the quay. "I thought it was time for a change."

It was at that point that Garion felt a warning tingle and an oppressive kind of weight that seemed centered just above his ears. He glanced quickly at Polgara, and she nodded. It did not appear to be emanating from the Hierarch, who seemed wholly engrossed in his conversation with Urgit. Chabat stood to one side with her burning eyes fixed bale-fully on Sadi, but there was no hint of any mounting of her wUl. The quiet probing was coming from somewhere else.

"We should be able to reach Rak Cthaka in five or six days," Urgit was saying to the red-robed Hierarch. "As soon as we arrive, I'll get Ussa and his people started toward Rak Hagga with our Dagashi. They might have to swing south a bit to avoid the Mallolean advance, but they won't lose too much time."

"You must be very careful at Rak Cthaka, your Majesty," Agachak cautioned. "It's not only the fate of Cthol Murgos you carry on your shoulders; it's the fate of the entire world."

"I don't concern myself too much with fate, Agachak. A man whose main concern has always been staying alive for the next hour or so doesn't have much time to worry about next year. Where's Kabach?"

The man in the hooded robe stepped out from behind the litter. "I'm here, your Majesty," he said in a deep, resonant voice. There was something familiar about that voice, and a warning prickle ran up between Garion's shoulder blades.

"Good," Urgit said. "Have you any final instructions for him, Agachak?"

"I have said to him all that needs to be said," the Hierarch responded.

"That covers everything, then." Urgit looked around. "All right," he said, "let's all get on board that ship."

"Perhaps not just yet, your Majesty," the black-robed Dagashi said to him, stepping forward and pushing back his hood. Garion suppressed a start of surprise. Although his black beard had been shaved off, there was no question about the man's identity. It was Harakan.

"There is one last thing your Majesty should know before

we board," Harakan declared in a voice clearly intended to

be heard by everyone on the quay. "Were you aware of the

feet that the man with the sword over there is Belgarion of Riva?"

Urgit's eyes went very wide as a ripple of amazement went

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through the priests and the soldiers standing on the slippery stones of the quay. The Murgo King, however, was quick to recover. "That's a very interesting thing to suggest, Ka-bach," he said carefully. "I'd be interested to know what makes you so sure."

"It's absolute nonsense," Sadi spluttered.

Agachak's sunken eyes were boring into Garion's face. "I have seen Belgarion myself," he intoned hollowly. "He was much younger then, but there is a resemblance."

"A resemblance certainly, Dread Hierarch," Sadi agreed quickly, "but that's all. The young man has been in my service since he was a boy. Oh, I'll admit that there are some superficial similarities of features, but I can assure you that this most definitely is not Belgarion."

Silk was standing just behind Urgit, and his Hps were moving very fast as he whispered to his new-found brother. The Murgo King was a skilled enough politician to control his expression, but his eyes darted nervously this way and that as he began to realize that he stood at the very center of an incipient explosion. Finally, he cleared his throat. "You still haven't told us what makes you believe that this is Belgarion, Kabach," he said.

"I was in Tol Honeth some years ago," Harakan shrugged. "Belgarion was there at the same time—for a funeral, I think. Someone pointed him out to me."

"I think the noble Dagashi is mistaken," Sadi said. "His identification is based entirely on a fleeting glance from a distance. That hardly qualifies as definitive proof. I tell you that this is not Belgarion."

"He lies," Harakan said flatly. "I am of the Dagashi. We are trained observers."

"That raises an interesting point, Agachak," Urgit said, his eyes narrowing as he looked at Harakan. "In spite of everything, the Dagashi are still Murgos, and every Murgo alive slashes his face as a blood offering to Torak." He turned and pointed at two faint, thin white lines on his cheek. The king's scarcely visible scars gave mute evidence that his self-mutilation had been none too fervent. "Look at our Dagashi there," he continued. "I don't see a single mark on his face, do you?"

"I was instructed by my elder not to make the customary blood offering," Harakan said quickly. "He wanted me un-

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marked so that I could move around freely in the Kingdoms of the

West."

"I'm sorry, Kabach," Urgit said with heavy scepticism, "but that story doesn't hold water at all. The blood offering to Torak is a part of the rite of passage into manhood. Were you so precocious as a child that your elder decided to make you a spy before you were ten years old? And even if he had, you would still have been required to go through the rite before you could marry or even enter the Temple. The scars may not be on your face, but if you're a Murgo, you've got scars on you someplace. Show us your scars, noble Dagashi. Let us see the proof of your fidelity to Torak and your uncontaminated Murgo blood."

"Dread Hierarch," Sadi said with a thoughtful expression on his face, "this is not the first accusation leveled at one of my servants." He looked meaningfully at Chabat. "Is it possible that there is a faction among your Grolims that does not want this mission to succeed—some group hiding behind false beards?"

"Beard!" Silk exclaimed, snapping his fingers. "That's why I couldn't place him! He's shaved off his beard!"

Urgit turned to look inquiringly at him. "What are you talking about, fellow?"

"Excuse me, your Majesty," Silk said with exaggerated humility. "I just realized something, and it surprised me. I think I can clarify things here."

"I certainly hope someone can. All right, go ahead."

"Thank you, your Majesty." Silk looked around with a beautifully feigned expression of nervousness. "I'm an Alorn, your Majesty," he said, then held up one hand quickly. "Please hear me out," he begged, half of the king and half of the surrounding Murgos. "I'm an Alorn, but I'm not a fanatic about it. The way I look at it, there's plenty of room in the world for Alorns and Murgos. Live and let live, I always say. Anyway, last year I hired myself out as a soldier in King Belgarion's army—the one that he raised to lay seige to the Bear-cult at Rheon in northeastern Drasnia. Well, to make it short, I was present when Belgarion and his friend from Sendaria—Durnik, I think his name is—captured the cult-leader, Ulfgar. He had a beard then, but I swear to you that this Kabach is the selfsame man. I ought to know. I helped to carry him into a house after Durnik knocked him senseless."

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"What would a Dagashi be doing in Drasnia?" Urgit asked with an artfully puzzled expression on his face,

"Oh, he's not a Dagashi, your Majesty," Silk explained. "When King

Belgarion and his friends questioned him, it came out that he's a Mallorean Grolim. Harakan, I think his name is."

"Harakan?" Agachak said, turning quickly to fix the counterfeit Dagashi with his suddenly smoldering eyes.

"Ridiculous," Harakan scoffed. "This little weasel is one of Belgarion's servants. He's lying to protect his master." "Is the name Harakan in any way significant, Agachak?" Urgit asked.

The Hierarch straightened, his eyes intent. "Harakan is Urvon's underling," he replied, "and I've heard that he's been seen here in the west."

"I think we've got a problem on our hands here, Agachak," Urgit said. "These charges—both of them—are too serious to be ignored. We've got to get to the truth here." The priestess Chabat's eyes were narrowed, and her expression cunning. "Finding that truth is a simple matter, your Majesty," she declared. "My master Agachak is the most powerful sorcerer in all of Cthol Murgos. He will have no difficulty in probing the minds of all who are here to find out who is speaking truth and who is lying." "Can you really do that, Agachak?" Urgit asked. Agachak shrugged. "It's a simple matter." "Then by all means, do it. I'm not going on board that scow over there until I find out exactly who my shipmates are going to be."

Agachak took a deep breath and began to draw in his will. "Master!" a Grolim with a purple satin lining on the hood of his robe exclaimed, leaping forward with one hand outstretched. "Beware!"

"How dare you?" Chabat shrieked at him, her eyes blazing.

The Grolim ignored her. "Master," he said to Agachak, "there is great danger in what the priestess proposes. Should either of these men be telling the truth, you will be probing the mind of a powerful sorcerer, and your own mind will be totally vulnerable. A single thought could erase your entire consciousness."

Agachak slowly relaxed his wilt, "Ah, yes," he murmured. "I had not considered that danger." He turned to

Chabat, catching the brief flicker of disappointment that crossed her face. "How curious that my Holy Priestess did not think of that before she suggested the probing—or did you, Chabat? Have you given up the notion of raising a demon to destroy me, then? Will you now fall back on so commonplace a thing as simple deceit? I'm terribly disappointed in you, my beloved."

She shrank back, her scar-laced face frightened.

"This matter has to be settled, Agachak," Urgit said. "I'm not going to go near that ship until I find out the truth here. I haven't succeeded in staying alive for all these years by being foolhardy."

"The question is largely academic now anyway," Agachak replied. "None of these people will be leaving."

"Agachak, I have to get to Rak Cthaka immediately."

"Then go. I will find another party of slavers and hire another Dagashi."

"That could take months/' Urgit protested. "Personally, I'm inclined to believe these slavers. Ussa has been very honest with me, and the young man over there has none of the bearing of a king. This one who calls himself Kabach, however, is highly suspect. If you were to look along the trail between here and Mount Kahsha, I think you might find the real Kabach in a shallow grave someplace. This man-- whoever he is--has come very close to forestalling the mission to Rak Hagga with his accusation. Wouldn't that be exactly what Urvon would want?"

"There's a logic to what you say, your Majesty, but I don't think I want any of them going on board that ship until I find out the truth."

"Why not let them settle it for us, then?"

"I don't follow you."

"One of them--or possibly both--is a sorcerer. Let them fight each other, and we'll see which one tries to destroy the other by sorcery."

"Trial by combat?"

"Why not? It's a bit antique, but the circumstances here seem to be appropriate."

"There is merit in your plan, your Majesty."

Urgit suddenly grinned. "Why don't we clear a space?" he suggested. "We wouldn't want to get singed when these two start hurling thunderbolts at each other." He came over and took Garion's arm. "Just stay calm," he whispered,

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"and don't do anything conspicuous. Try to force him to use sorcery." Then he pushed Garion forward into the circle that had quickly been formed on the stone quay. "Here is the supposed King of Riva," he said to Agachak. "Now, if the ostensible Mallorean Grolim will be so good as to step forth, we'll find out who's been telling the truth."

"I have no sword," Harakan said sullenly.

"Simplicity in itself. Somebody give him a sword."

Several were offered at once.

"I think you're in deep trouble, Harakan," Urgit smirked. "If you so much as twitch one finger, you'll reveal yourself as a Mallorean Grolim, and my soldiers will shoot you full of arrows. On the other hand, if this is really Belgarion and you don't use sorcery to defend yourself, he'll burn you right down into a little pile of cinders. All in all, I think you're in for a very bad afternoon."

Garion ground his teeth together and began talking fervently to the Orb, telling the stone over and over again not to do anything out of the ordinary. Then he steeled himself and reached back over his shoulder. The great blade made a steely hiss as it came out of the scabbard.

Harakan handled his borrowed sword nervously, but the way he held it and his stance clearly indicated that he was a competent swordsman. A sudden anger filled Garion. This was the man who had been responsible for the attempt on Ce'Nedra's life and for the murder of Brand. He dropped into a half crouch with Iron-grip's sword extended in front of him. Harakan desperately tried to slap that great blade away with his own sword, and there was a steely ring as the two swords came together. Implacably, Garion stalked his enemy. His anger was so great that he had even forgotten the reason for this duel. He was no longer interested in unmasking Harakan. All he wanted to do was to kill him.

There was a rapid exchange of thrusts and parries, and the entire harbor rang with the steel song of the swords. Step by step Harakan retreated, and his eyes began to fill with fear. But finally Garion lost all patience with fencing. With his eyes ablaze he seized the hilt of his huge sword in both hands and swung it back over his shoulder. Had he delivered that blow, nothing could have stopped it.

Harakan's cheeks blanched as he looked directly into the face of death. "Curse you!" he shouted at Garion, then flickered and vanished, to reappear briefly at the far end of the

quay. He shimmered and swooped away in the form of a swift sea hawk.

"That sort of answers the question, doesn't it, Agachak?" Urgit said quite calmly.

Agachak, however, his eyes ablaze with hate, also flashed into the form of a hawk. With two powerful strokes of his pinions, he drove himself into the air, shrieking for blood as : he raced after the fleeing Harakan.

Garion's hands were shaking. He turned and stalked toward Urgit with a scorching fury rising in his throat. With a great effort he restrained his sudden desire to take hold of the front of the smaller man's doublet and hurl him far out into the harbor.

"Now--now don't be hasty," Urgit said, backing fearfully away.

Garion spoke from between clenched teeth in a dreadfully quiet voice. "Don't ever do that again."

"Naturally not," Urgit agreed hastily. He stopped, a curious expression suddenly crossing his rat-like face. "Are you really

Belgarion?" he asked in a hoarse whisper. "Would you like some proof?"

"No, no—that's quite all right." Urgit's words came tumbling out. He stepped quickly around the still infuriated Gar-ion and crossed the quay to where Chabat stood. "Let us pray that your Hierarch succeeds in capturing that impostor," he said. "Give him my regards upon his return. I'd wait, but I must board ship and depart at once."

"Of course, your Majesty," she replied in a voice that was nearly a purr. "I will take charge of these slavers until the Hierarch's return." ; He stared at her.

"Since the entire purpose of this mission was to convey the Dagashi assassin to Rak Hagg, there's no point in their going now, is there? They will have to remain here while we send to Kahsha for another Dagashi." She looked at Sadi with an unconcealed smirk. "I will place them under my personal protection."

Urgit looked at her narrowly. "Holy Priestess," he said ; to her, "to be quite candid about it, I don't think you can be trusted. Your personal enmity toward this Nyissan is painfully obvious, and he's far too important to risk. I don't think that you would be able to restrain yourself, once both Agachak and I are gone from Rak Urgan. I think I'll just take

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Ussa and his people with me—just to be on the safe side. When the Dagashi arrives from Mount Kahsha, send him along."

Chabat's eyes hardened, and her face grew angry. "The purpose of the mission to Rak Hagg is to fulfill a prophecy," she declared, "and the fulfillment of prophecy is clearly in the domain of the Church."

Urgit drew in a deep breath. Then he straightened from his usual slouching posture. "The mission is also a State matter, Holy Priestess. Agachak and I have been co-operating in this affair, and in his absence I assert the authority of the crown. Ussa and his people will go with me, and you will take your Grolims back to the Temple to await the return of your Hierarch."

Chabat seemed taken aback by his sudden show of strength. She had obviously expected to brush aside any feeble objections he might raise, but this seemed to be a new Urgit. Her face hardened, and the flamelike scars writhed on her pale cheeks. "So," she said, "it appears that our king is finally maturing. I think, however, that you will come to regret your passage into manhood at this particular time. Watch closely, High King of Cthol Murgos." She bent, holding something in her hand, and began to mark symbols on the stones of the quay—symbols that glowed with an unholy light.

"Garion!" Silk cried in alarm, "Stop her!"

But Garion had also seen the glowing circle Chabat had drawn on the

wet stones and the burning five-pointed star she was inscribing in its center and he recognized the meaning of those symbols immediately. He took a half step toward Chabat, even as she stepped into the protection of the circle and began muttering words in some unknown language.

As fast as he was, however, Polgara was even faster. "Chabat!" she said sharply, "Stop! This is forbidden!"

"Nothing is forbidden to one who has the power," the priestess replied, her scarred and beautiful face filled with an overwhelming pride, "and who here can prevent me?"

Polgara's face grew grim, "I can," she said calmly. She raised her hand in a curious lifting gesture, and Garion felt the surge of her will. The sullen swells washing against the stones of the quay slowly rose until they broke across the top to swirl about the ankles of those who stood there.

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The burning symbols Chabat had marked on the stones vanished as the water washed over them.

The Grolim priestess drew in her breath sharply and stared at Aunl Pol, realization slowly dawning in her eyes. "Who are you?"

"One who would save your life, Chabat," Polgara answered. "The punishment for raising demons has always been the same. You might succeed once or twice—or even a few more times—but in the end, the demon will turn on you and tear you to pieces. Not even Torak in all his twisted madness would have dared to step across this line."

"But I do dare! Torak is dead, and Agachak is not here to prevent me. No one can stop me."

"I can, Chabat," Polgara said quietly. "I will not permit you to do this."

"And how will you stop me? I have the power."

"But mine is greater." Polgara let her cioak fall to the stones at her feet, bent, and removed her shoes. "You may have been able to control your demon the first time you raised him," she said, "but your control is only temporary. You are no more than the doorway through which he enters this world. As soon as he feels his full strength, he will destroy you and be loosed upon this world to raven as he chooses. I beg of you, my sister, do not do this. Your life—and your very soul—are in deadly peril."

"I have no fear," Chabat rasped. "Not of my demon and not of you."

"Then you're a fool—on both counts."

"You challenge me?"

"If I must. Will you meet me on my own ground, Chabat?" Polgara's blue eyes were suddenly like ice, and the white lock at her brow flamed incandescently as she gathered in her will. Once again she raised her hand and the lead-gray swells again raised obediently to the edge of the quay. With that same dreadful calm, she stepped out onto the surface of the water and stood there, as if what lay under her feet was firm earth. A sudden moan rose from the Grolims as she turned to look at the awe-stricken priestess. "Well, Chabat," she said, "will you join me here? Can you join me?"

Chabat's scarred face grew ashen, but her eyes clearly

"showed that she could not refuse Aunt Pol's challenge. "I

will," she rasped through clenched teeth. Then she, too,

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stepped off the quay, but floundered awkwardly as she sank to the knees in the dirty waters of the harbor.

"Is it so very difficult for you, then?" Polgara asked her. "If this little thing take sail of your will, how do you imagine that you will have enough power to control a demon? Abandon this desperate plan, Chabat. There is still time to save your own life."

"Never!" Chabat shrieked with flecks of froth coming to her lips. With an enormous effort, she lifted herself until she stood on the surface and laboriously strode out several yards. Then, with her face once again twisted into that overwhelming triumph, she drew the symbols on the face of the water, inscribing them with sooty orange flame. Her voice rose again in the evil incantation of the summoning, rising and falling in its hideous cadences. The red scars on her cheeks seemed to grow pale, then suddenly glowed with a burning white light as she continued to recite the spell.

"Kheldar, what's happening?" Urgit's voice was shrill as he stared at the impossibility that was occurring before his eyes.

"Something very unpleasant," Silk told him.

Chabat's voice had risen to a shriek, and the surface of the harbor suddenly erupted before her in a seething cauldron of steam and fire. Out of the midst of those flames there arose something so hideous that it was beyond comprehension. It was vast and clawed and fanged, but the worst of all were its red, glowing eyes.

"Kill her!" Chabat cried, pointing at Polgara with a trembling hand. "I command thee to kill this witch!"

The demon looked at the priestess standing safely within the flaming circle of her protective symbols and then, with the still-boiling water surging around his vast trunk, he turned and started toward Polgara. But, with her face still calm, she raised one hand. "Stop!" she commanded, and Garion felt the enormous jolting force of her will.

The demon suddenly howled, his fanged muzzle lifted toward the gray clouds in a sudden agony of frustration.

"I said kill her!" Chabat shrieked again.

The monster slowly sank into the water, extending his two huge arms just beneath the surface. He began to turn, rotating slowly in the seething water. Faster and faster he spun, with the water sizzling around him. A vortex began to appear

around him as he whirled, a sudden maelstrom very nearly as dreadful as the Cherek Bore.

Chabat howled her triumph, dancing on the surface of the water in an obscene caper, unaware that the flames with which she had drawn her symbols had been suddenly whirled away by the surging vortex.

As the spinning waters reached the spot where Polgara stood, she began to be drawn toward the deadly whirlpool and the slaver demon still whirling in its center.

"Pol!" Durnik shouted. "Look out!"

But it was too late. Caught in that inexorable maelstrom, she was carried round and round, slowly at first but then faster and faster as she was pulled in long spirals toward the center. As she neared it, however, she once again raised her hand and very suddenly she disappeared beneath the surging surface.

"Pol!" Durnik shouted again, his face suddenly gone deathly white. Struggling to pull off his tunic, he ran toward the edge of the quay. Belgarath, however, his face grimly set, caught the smith's arm. "Stay out of it, Durnik!" he snapped, his voice cracking like a whip.

Durnik struggled with him, trying to pull himself free. "Let me go!" he yelled.

"I said not to interfere!"

Beyond the edge of the demon-created vortex, a single rose bobbed to the surface. It was a curiously familiar flower, its petals white on the outside and a deep, blushing crimson in the center. Garion stared at it, a sudden wild hope springing up in him.

At the center of the swirling vortex, the monstrous demon suddenly stopped, his burning eyes filled with bafflement. Without any warning he rose, arched forward, and plunged headfirst into the seething water.

"Find her!" the flame-marked Chabat screamed after her enslaved fiend. "Find her and kill her!"

The leaden waters of the harbor boiled and steamed as the huge demon surged this way and that beneath the surface. Quite suddenly, the movement stopped, and the air and the water grew deadly calm.

Chabat, still standing on the water and with the glowing light still illuminating the cruel scars on her cheeks, lifted both arms above her head in a gesture of exaltation. "Die,

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witch!" she shouted. "Feel the fangs of my servant rend your flesh!"

Suddenly a monstrous, scaly claw came up out of the water directly in front of her. "No!" she shrieked, "you cannot!" Then she looked in horror at the water upon which she stood, realizing at last that her protective symbols had been swept away. She took a faltering step backward, but the huge hand closed on her, its needle-sharp claws biting deeply into her body. Her blood spurted, and she screamed in agony, writhing in that awful grasp.

Then, with a huge bellow, the demon rose from the depths with his great, fanged muzzle agape. He lifted the struggling priestess aloft with a howl of hellish triumph. The Grolims and the Murgo soldiers on the quay broke and fled in terror as the monster started toward them.

The single rose that had floated to the surface of the harbor, however, had begun to glow with a strange blue light. It seemed to grow larger as the glow intensified. Then, her face calm, Polgara appeared in the very center of that coruscating incandescence. A few feet to her left there also appeared a nimbus of flickering light. Before the stunned eyes of those on the quay, the nimbus suddenly coalesced, and there, standing beside Polgara, Garion saw the glowing form of the God Aldur.

"Must it be so, Master?" Polgara asked in a voice that clearly revealed her reluctance.

"It must, my daughter," Aldur replied sadly.

Polgara sighed. "Then so be it, Master." She extended her left hand, and the God enclosed it in his. The gathering-in of her will roared in Garion's mind like a tornado, and the force of it pushed against him with an awful power. Enclosed in blue light and linked by their touching hands, Polgara and Aldur stood side by side on the surface of the water, facing the hideous demon who still held the weakly struggling Cha-bat high in the air.

"I abjure thee, creature of darkness," Polgara said in a great voice. "Return to the hell that spawned thee and never more corrupt this world by thy foul presence. Begone and take with thee the one who summoned thee." She raised her hand, and the force of her will,

combined with the will of the God Aldur, blazed forth from her palm. There was a vast thunderclap as the demon suddenly exploded into a huge ball of fire with the waters of the harbor geysering up around it.

'Then he was gone, and with him disappeared the priestess

When Garion looked back, Aldur no longer stood at Pol-"aara's side. She turned and slowly walked back across the "waves toward the quay. As she approached, Garion clearly saw that her eyes were filled with anguish.

Part Three

THE ISLE OF VERKAT

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The barren coast of the Urga peninsula slid by on their left the following morning as the Murgo scow beat steadily southward with a good following breeze. Cliffs rose sharply out of the crashing surf, and there was only the scantiest of vegetation to break the monotony of the desolation of rust-colored rock. The autumn sky was a deep, chill blue, but the sun stood far to the north, for winter came early to these extreme southern latitudes.

Garion, as he always did when he was at sea, had risen at first light of day and gone up on deck. He stood at the rail amidships, half-bemused by the sparkle of the morning sun on the waves and by the steady creak and roll of the vessel under his feet.

The slanting door that opened onto the short flight of steps leading down to the aft companionway creaked, and Durnik

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came out on deck, bracing himself against the awkward roll of the ship and squinting in the bright sunlight. The smith wore his usual plain brown tunic, and his face was somber.

Garion crossed the deck to his friend's side. "Is she all right?" he asked.

"She's very tired," Durnik replied wearily. His own nearly exhausted face clearly showed that he had slept very little himself. "She tossed and fretted for a long time before she finally went to sleep last night. That was a terrible thing she had to do."

"Did she talk to you about it at all?"

"Some. The demon had to be sent back to where he came from. Otherwise he'd have spread horror and death across the whole world. Since Chabat summoned him, he could have used her as a doorway to come into this world any time he wanted to. That's why Chabat had to go with

him-to close that doorway."

"Exactly where do they come from-demons, I mean?"

"She didn't say very much about that, but I got the feeling that I wouldn't really want to know about it."

"Is she sleeping now?"

Durnik nodded. "I'm going to go talk with the ship's cook. I want to have something hot for her to eat when she wakes up."

"You'd better get some sleep yourself."

"Perhaps. Would you excuse me, Garion? I don't want to stay away too long-just in case she wakes up and needs me." He went on forward toward the ship's galley.

Garion straightened and looked around. The Murgo sailors worked with fearful looks on their faces. What had taken place the previous afternoon had washed away all traces of the stiff arrogance that usually marked a Murgo's expression, and they all cast frightened, sidelong glances at every one of their passengers, as if expecting them to turn into - ogres or sea monsters without any warning.

Silk and Urgit had emerged from the companionway door while Garion and Durnik had been talking and stood at the rail near the stern, idly watching the bubbly wake tracing its path across the dark green swells and the white-winged gulls screeching and hovering in a greedy cloud behind them. Gar-ion moved a bit closer, but did not actually join them.

"Uninviting sort of place," Silk observed, looking at the stark cliffs rising from the sea. The little man had discarded

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the shabby clothing he had worn when they had begun this journey and he now wore a plain, unadorned gray doublet.

Urgit grunted morosely. Idly, he tossed chunks of stale bread into their wake, watching without much interest as the squawking gulls trailing the ship swooped down to fight over them. "Kheldar," he said, "does she do that all the time?"

"Who's that?"

"Polgara." Urgit shuddered. "Does she obliterate everybody who displeases her?"

"No," Silk replied. "Poigara doesn't do that-none of them do. It's not allowed."

"I'm sorry, Kheldar. Allowed or not, I know what I saw yesterday."

"I talked to Belgarath about it," Silk told him, "and he explained

it. Chabat and the demon weren't actually destroyed. They were just sent back to the place where the demon came from. The demon absolutely had to be sent back; unfortunately, Chabat had to go with him."

"Unfortunately? I didn't feel all that much sympathy for her."

"I don't think you quite understand, Urgit. Killing somebody is one thing, but destroying someone's soul is quite something else. That's what made Polgara miserable. She was forced to condemn Chabat to eternal pain and horror. That's the most terrible thing anybody can be forced to do."

"Who was that who came up out of the water with her?"

"Aldur."

"You're not serious!"

"Oh, yes. I've seen him once or twice. It was Aldur, all right."

"A God? Here? What was he doing?"

"He had to be here." Silk shrugged. "No human, however powerful, can face a demon unaided. When the magicians of the Morindim raise a demon, they always are very careful to set rigid limits on him. Chabat just unleashed hers without any limits at all. Only a God can deal with a demon with that kind of freedom; and since the Gods work through us, Polgara had to be involved as well. It was a very tricky business."

Urgit shuddered. "I don't think I'm going to be able to deal with this."

They stood side by side, leaning on the rail and looking out at the long waves rolling in off the Great Western Sea

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to crash against the barren cliffs. As Garion looked at the two of them, he wondered how it had been possible for anyone to miss the relationship. Although they were not exactly identical, their features were so much alike that there could be no doubt they were brothers.

"Kheldar," Urgit said finally, "what was our father really like?"

"He was taller than either of us," Silk replied, "and very distinguished-looking. His hair was son of iron-gray, and this nose we've all got made him look more like an eagle than a rat."

"We do look a bit like rodents, don't we?" Urgit agreed with a brief smile. "That's not what I meant, though. What was he really like?"

"Polished. He had exquisite manners, and he was very civilized and urbane. I never heard him use a harsh word to anyone." Silk's face

was melancholy.

"But he was deceitful, wasn't he?"

"What makes you say that?"

"He did cheat, after all. I'm not the product of any sort of lasting fidelity."

"You don't exactly understand," Silk disagreed. He looked thoughtfully out at the green swells topped by an occasional whitecap. "For all his polish, our father was very much an adventurer. He'd accept any challenge—just for the fun involved—and he had an insatiable wanderlust. He was always looking for something new. I think that when you put the two of those traits together, you might begin to understand exactly why he was attracted to your mother. I visited the palace in Rak Goska when Taur Urgas was still alive. His wives were all either closely guarded or kept under lock and key. It was the sort of thing our father would have viewed as a challenge."

Urgit made a sour face. "You aren't bolstering my ego very much, Kheldar. I'm here because a Drasnian gentleman liked to pick locks."

"Not entirely. I didn't have much chance to talk with your mother about it, but I gather that she and our father were genuinely fond of each other. Taur Urgas was never fond of anyone. At least our father and your mother were having fun."

"Maybe that explains my sunny disposition."

Silk sighed. "He didn't have too much fun after my moth-

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er's illness, though. That put an end to all the wandering and adventures."

"What kind of illness was it?"

"A pestilence that breaks out in Drasnia from time to time. It disfigures its victims horribly. My mother was blinded by its effects, fortunately."

"Fortunately?"

"She couldn't look into a mirror. Our father stayed by her side for the rest of his life and never once gave any hint about what he saw whenever he looked at her." Silk's face was bleak, and his jaws were tightly clenched together. "It was the bravest thing I've ever seen any man do—and it was all the worse because it went on and on and on until the day he died." He looked away quickly. "Do you suppose we could talk about something else?"

"I'm sorry, Kheldar," Urgit said sympathetically. "I didn't mean to open old wounds."

"What was it like growing up in Rak Goska?" Silk asked after a moment.

"Grim," Urgit replied. "Taur Urgas had begun to show signs of his madness much earlier than was usual in the Urga family, and there were all kinds of rituals we had to observe."

"I've seen some of them."

"Not just the ones in the Temple, Kheldar—although there were plenty of those as well. I'm talking about his personal peculiarities. No one was ever supposed to stand to his right, and it was worth a man's life to let his shadow fall on the royal person. My brothers and I were taken from our mothers at the age of seven and set to training—military exercises for the most part—involving a great deal of grunting and sweating. Lapses of any kind were punished with flogging—usually at the supper table."

"That might tend to cool one's appetite."

"It does indeed. I don't even eat supper any more—too many unpleasant memories. My brothers and I all started plotting against each other very early. Taur Urgas had many wives and whole platoons of children. Since the crown falls to the eldest surviving son, we all schemed against our older brothers and tried to protect ourselves against the plots of the younger ones. One charming little fellow ran a knife into one of the others when he was nine."

"Precocious," Silk murmured.

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"Oh, he was indeed. Taur Urgas was delighted, of course. For a time, the little back-stabber was his favorite. That made me and my older brothers quite nervous, since it was entirely possible that our insane sire might have seen fit to have us all strangled to make room for the little monster, so we took steps."

"Oh?"

"We caught him alone in the upper floors of the palace one day and threw him out a window." Urgit looked somberly out over the long swells sweeping in off the Great Western Sea. "From the day we were taken from our mothers, we lived a life of constant fear and senseless brutality. We were supposed to be perfect Murgos—strong, brave, insanely loyal, and absolutely dedicated to Torak. Each of us had a Grolim for a tutor, and we had to listen to hours of gibberish about the God of Angarak every day. It wasn't what you might call a pleasant childhood."

"Taur Urgas never showed any kind of affection?"

"Not to me, he didn't. I was always the smallest, and he had a great deal of contempt for me. Murgos are supposed to be big and muscular. Even after I'd managed to work my way up to the point where I was

heir apparent, he never had a civil word for me and he encouraged my younger brothers to try to murder me."

"How did you manage to survive?"

"By my wits—and by using a key I managed to steal."

"A key?"

"To the palace strong room. You'd be amazed at how much help a man with unlimited funds at his command can get—even in Cthol Murgos."

Silk shivered. "It's getting definitely chilly out here on deck," he said. "Why don't we go inside and share a flagon of spiced wine?"

"I don't drink, Kheldar."

"You don't?" Silk sounded amazed.

"I need to keep my wits about me. A man with his head stuck in a wine barrel can't see someone creeping up behind him with a knife, can he?"

"You're quite safe with me, brother."

"I'm not safe with anyone, Kheldar—particularly not with a brother. Nothing personal, you understand—just the result of a very nervous childhood."

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"All right," Silk said amiably. "Let's go inside, and you can watch me drink. I'm very good at it."

"I can imagine. You're an Alorn, after all."

"So are you, dear brother." Silk laughed. "So are you. Come along, and I'll introduce you to all the fun that goes with your heritage."

Garion was on the verge of turning to follow them, but at that moment Belgarath came out on deck, stretching and yawning. "Is Pol up yet?" he asked Garion.

Garion shook his head. "I talked with Durnik a little while ago. He said that she's very tired after what she did yesterday."

Belgarath frowned slightly. "It really shouldn't have tired her all that much," he said. "It was spectacular, I'll admit, but hardly exhausting."

"I don't think it's that kind of exhaustion, Grandfather. Durnik said she was troubled for about half the night."

The old man scratched at his beard. "Oh," he said, "sometimes I lose sight of the fact that Pol's a woman. She can't seem to put things behind her, and sometimes her compassion gets the better of her."

"That's not necessarily a bad trait, Grandfather."

"Not for a woman, perhaps."

"I seem to remember something that happened in the fens once," Garion told him. "Didn't you sort of go out of your way to do something for Vordai—more or less out of compassion?"

Belgarath looked around guiltily. "I thought we agreed that you weren't going to mention that."

"You know something, Grandfather?" Garion said with a faint smile. "You're a fraud. You pretend to be as cold as ice and as hard as a rock, but underneath you've got the same emotions as all the rest of us."

"Please, Garion, don't bandy that about too much."

"Does it bother you being human?"

"Well, not really, but after all, I do sort of have a reputation to maintain."

By late afternoon the coast line they had been following had grown even more jagged, and the surf boiled and thundered against the rocks. Silk and Urgit came up out of the aft companion way, and Garion noted that both were a trifle unsteady as they walked.

"Hello there, Belgarion," Urgit said expansively. "How

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would you like to join us? Kheldar and I have decided that we'd like to sing for a bit."

"Uh—thanks ail the same," Garion replied carefully, "but I don't sing very well."

"That doesn't matter, old boy. It doesn't matter in the slightest. I might not be very good at it myself. I can't say for sure, because I've never sung a note in my whole life." He giggled suddenly. "There are a lot of things I've never done before, and I think it might be time I tried a few."

Ce'Nedra and the Murgo girl, Praia, came up on deck. Instead of her customary black, Praia was dressed in a stunning gown of pale rose, and her jet-black hair was caught in an intricate coil at the nape of her neck.

"My ladies," Urgit greeted them with a formal bow, marred only slightly by an unsteady lurch.

"Careful, old boy," Silk said, catching him by the elbow. "I don't want to have to fish you out of the sea."

"You know something, Kheldar?" Urgit said, blinking owlily. "I don't think I've ever felt quite this good." He looked at Ce'Nedra and the dark-haired Praia. "You know something else? Those are a couple of awfully pretty girls there. Do you think they might like to sing with us?"

"We could ask them."

"Why don't we?"

The pair of them descended on Ce'Nedra and her Murgo companion, imploring them outrageously to join them in song. Praia laughed as the Murgo King lurched forward and back with the roll of the ship. "I think you two are drunk," she declared.

"Are we drunk?" Urgit asked Silk, still swaying on his feet.

"I certainly hope so," Silk replied. "If we aren't, we've wasted a great deal of very good wine."

"I guess we're drunk then. Now that's been settled, what shall we sing?"

"Alorns!" Ce'Nedra sighed, rolling her eyes skyward.

It was raining the following morning when they awoke, a chill drizzle that hissed into the sea and collected to run in heavy droplets down the tarred ropes of the rigging. Polgara joined them for breakfast in the larger cabin at the extreme aft end of the companionway, though she seemed silent and withdrawn.

Velvet looked brightly around the cabin, where stoutly

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constructed windows instead of portholes stretched across the stern and heavy beams held up a ceiling which was actually the deck above. She looked pointedly at the two conspicuously empty chairs at the breakfast table. "What's become of Prince Kheldar and his wayward royal brother?" she asked.

"I think they lingered a bit too long over their wine cups yesterday," Ce'Nedra replied with a slightly malicious smirk. "I'd imagine that they're feeling just a bit delicate this morning."

"Would you believe that they were singing?" Praia said.

"Oh?" Velvet said. "Were they doing it well?"

Praia laughed. "They frightened away the seagulls. I've never heard such dreadful noise."

Polgara and Durnik had been talking quietly at the far end of the table. "I'm perfectly fine, Durnik," she assured him. "You go right ahead."

"I don't want to leave you alone, Pol," he told her.

"I won't be alone, dear. Ce'Nedra, Praia, and Liselle will all be with me. If you don't find out for yourself, you'll wonder about it for the rest of your life and always regret the fact that you passed the opportunity by."

"Well—if you're sure, Pol."

"I'm certain, dear," she said, laying her hand fondly on his and kissing his cheek.

After breakfast, Garion pulled on a cloak and went out on deck. He stood squinting up into the drizzle for a few minutes, then turned as he heard the companionway door open behind him. Durnik and Toth emerged with fishing poles in their hands. "It only stands to reason, Toth," Durnik was saying. "With that much water, there almost have to be fish."

Toth nodded, then made a peculiar gesture, extending both his arms out as if measuring something.

"I don't quite follow you."

Toth made the gesture again.

"Oh, I'm sure they wouldn't be all that big," the smith disagreed. "Fish don't get that big, do they?"

Toth nodded vigorously.

"I don't mean to doubt you," Durnik said seriously, "but I'd have to see that."

Toth shrugged,

"Quite a beautiful morning, isn't it, Garion?" Durnik said,

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smiling up at the dripping sky. Then he went up the three steps to the aft deck, nodded pleasantly to the steersman at the tiller, and then made a long, smooth cast out into the frothy wake. He looked critically at his trailing lure. "I think we're going to need some weight on the lines to hold them down, don't you?" he said to Toth.

The giant smiled slightly, then nodded his agreement.

"Have Silk and Urgit managed to get up yet?" Garion called to them.

"Hmm?" Durnik replied, his eyes fixed intently on his brightly colored lure bobbing far back in their wake.

"I said, are Silk and his brother up yet?"

"Oh—yes, I think I heard them stirring around in their cabin. Toth,

we're definitely going to need something to weight down the lines."

Belgarath came up on deck just then, with his shabby old cloak pulled tightly around his shoulders. He looked sourly out through the drizzle at the half-concealed coast sliding by to port and went forward to stand amidships.

Garion joined him there. "How long do you think it's going to take us to get to Verkat, Grandfather?" he asked.

"A couple of weeks," the old man replied, "if this weather doesn't get any worse. We're a long way south and we're coming up on the stormy season."

"There's a faster way, though, isn't there?" Garion suggested.

"I don't quite follow you."

"You remember how we got from Jarvikshohn to Riva? Couldn't you and I do it that way? The others could catch up later."

"I don't think we're supposed to. I think the others are supposed to be with us when we catch up with Zandramas."

Garion suddenly banged his fist on the rail in frustration. "Supposed to!" he burst out. "I don't care about what we're supposed to do. I want my son back. I'm tired of creeping around trying to satisfy all the clever little twists and turns of the Prophecy. What's wrong with just ignoring it and going right straight to the point?"

Belgarath's face was calm as he looked out at the rust-colored cliffs half-hidden in the gray drizzle. "I've tried that a few times myself," he admitted, "but it never worked— and usually it put me even further behind. I know you're impatient, Garion, and sometimes it's hard to accept the idea

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that following the Prophecy is really the fastest way to get where you want to go, but that's the way it always seems to work out." He put his hand on Garion's shoulder. "It's sort of like digging a well. The water's at the bottom, but you have to start at the top. I don't think anybody's ever had much luck digging a well from the bottom up."

"What's that got to do with it, Grandfather? I don't see any connection at all."

"Maybe you will if you think about it for a while."

Durnik came running forward. His eyes were wide in stunned amazement, and his hands were shaking.

"What's wrong?" Belgarath asked him.

"That was the biggest fish I've ever seen in my life!" the smith

exclaimed. "He was as big as a horse!"

"He got away, I take it."

"Snapped my line on the second jump." Durnik's voice had a peculiar pride in it, and his eyes grew very bright. "He was beautiful, Belgarath. He came up out of the water as if he'd just been shot out of a catapult and he actually walked across the waves on his tail. What a tremendous fish!"

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to catch him, of course—but I'm going to need a stouter line—maybe even a rope. What a fish! Excuse me." He hurried toward the bow to talk to the Murgo ship captain about some rope.

Belgarath smiled. "I love that man, Garion," he said. "I really love him."

The door to the aft companionway opened again, and Silk and his brother emerged. Although Garion was usually the first one on deck, he had noticed that, sooner or later during the course of any day, everyone came out to take a turn or two in the bracing salt air.

The two weasel-faced men came forward along the rain-slick deck. Neither of them looked particularly well. "Are we making any headway?" Silk asked. His face was pale, and his hands were trembling noticeably.

"Some," Belgarath grunted. "You two slept late this morning."

"I think we should have slept longer," Urgit replied with a mournful look. "I seem to have this small headache—in my left eye." He was sweating profusely, and there was a faint greenish cast to his skin. "I feel absolutely dreadful,"

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he declared. "Why didn't you warn me about this, Kheldar?"

"I wanted to surprise you."

"Is it always like this the next morning?"

"Usually," Silk admitted. "Sometimes it's worse."

"Worse? How could it possibly get any worse? Excuse me." Urgit hurried to the rail and leaned over it, retching noisily.

"He's not handling this too well, is he?" Belgarath noted clinically.

"Inexperience," Silk explained.

"I honestly believe I'm going to die," Urgit said weakly, wiping at his mouth with a shaking hand. "Why did you let me drink so much?"

"That's a decision a man has to make for himself," Silk told him.

"You seemed to be having a good time," Garion added.

"I really wouldn't know. I've lost track of several hours. What did I do?"

"You were singing."

"Singing? Me?" Urgit sank onto a bench and dropped his face into his trembling hands. "Oh dear," he moaned. "Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear."

Praia came out of the aft door wearing a black coat and a smug little smile. She carried a pair of tankards forward through the drizzle to the two suffering men. "Good morning, my Lords," she said brightly with a little curtsy. "Lady Polgara says that you're to drink this."

"What's in it?" Urgit asked suspiciously.

"I'm not sure, your Majesty. She and the Nyissan mixed it up."

"Maybe it's poison," he said hopefully. "I would sort of like to die quickly and get it over with." He seized a tankard and gulped it down noisily. Then he shuddered, and his face went deathly pale. His expression was one of sheer horror, and he began to shake violently. "That's terrible!" he gasped.

Silk watched him closely for a moment, then took the other tankard and carefully dumped it out over the side.

"Aren't you going to drink yours?" Urgit asked accusingly.

"I don't think so. Polgara has a peculiar sense of humor

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sometimes. I'd rather not take any chances—until I see how many fish come floating to the top."

"How are you feeling this morning, your Majesty?" Praia asked the suffering Urgit with a feigned look of sympathy on her face.

"I'm sick."

"It's your own fault, you know."

"Please don't."

She smiled sweetly at him.

"You're enjoying this, aren't you?" he accused.

"Why, yes, your Majesty," she replied with a little toss of her head, "As a matter of fact, I am." Then she took the two tankards and went back along the rail toward the stern.

"Are they all like that?" Urgit asked miserably. "So cruel?"

"Women?" Belgarath shrugged. "Of course. It's in their blood."

Somewhat later that gloomy morning, after Silk and Belgarath had returned aft to seek refuge from the weather in one of the cabins and also, Garion suspected, for a touch of something to ward off the chill, Urgit sat miserably on a rain-wet bench with his head in his hands while Garion moodily paced the deck not far away. "Belgarion," the Murgo King said plaintively, "do you have to stamp your feet so hard?"

Garion gave him a quick, amused smile. "Silk really should have warned you about this," he said.

"Why do people call him Silk?"

"It's a nickname he picked up from his colleagues in Dras-nian Intelligence."

"Why would a member of the Drasnian royal family want to be a spy?"

"It's their national industry."

"Is he really any good at it?"

"He's just about the best there is."

Urgit's face had definitely grown green. "This is dreadful," he groaned. "I can't be sure if it's the drink or seasickness. I wonder if I'd feel better if I stuck my head in a bucket of water."

"Only if you held it down long enough."

"That's a thought." Urgit laid his head back on the rail to let the rain drizzle into his face. "Belgarion," he said finally, "what am I doing wrong?"

"You drank a little too much."

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"That's not what I'm talking about. Where am I making my mistakes—as a king, I mean?"

Garion looked at him. The little man was obviously sincere, and the sympathy for him which had welled up back in Rak Urga rose again. Garion finally admitted to himself that he liked this man. He drew in a deep breath and sat down beside the suffering Urgit. "You know part of it already," he said. "You let people bully you."

"It's because I'm afraid, Belgarion. When I was a boy, I let them bully me because it kept them from killing me. I guess it just got to be a habit."

"Everybody's afraid."

"You aren't. You faced Torak at Cthol Mishrak, didn't you?"

"It wasn't altogether my idea—and believe me, you can't even begin to guess how frightened I was when I was on my way there for that meeting."

"You?"

"Oh, yes. You're beginning to get some control over that problem, though. You handled that general—Kradak, wasn't it?—fairly well back at the Drojim. Just keep remembering that you're the king, and that you're the one who gives the orders."

"I can try, I guess. What else am I doing wrong?"

Garion thought about it. "You're trying to do it all yourself," he replied finally. "Nobody can do that. There are just too many details for one man to keep up with. You need help—good, honest help."

"Where am I going to find good help in Cthol Murgos? Whom can I trust?"

"You trust Oskatat, don't you?"

"Well, yes, I suppose so."

"That's a start, then. You see, Urgit, what's happening is that you've got people in Rak Urga who are making decisions that you should, be making. They're taking it upon themselves to do that because you've been too afraid or too busy with other things to assert your authority."

"You're being inconsistent, Belgarion. First you say that I should get some people to help me, then you turn around and tell me that I shouldn't let other people make my decisions."

"You weren't listening. The people who are making your decisions for you aren't the people you might have chosen."

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They've just stepped in on their own. In a lot of cases, you probably don't even know who they are. That simply won't work. You have to choose your people rather carefully. Their first qualification has to be ability. Right behind that comes personal loyalty to you—and to your mother."

"Nobody's loyal to me, Belgarion. My subjects despise me."

"You might be surprised. I don't think there's any question about Oskatat's loyalty—or his ability. That's probably a good place to start. Let him pick your administrators. They'll start out by being loyal to him, but in time they'll come to respect you as well."

"I hadn't even considered that. Do you think it might work?"

"It won't hurt to try. To be perfectly honest with you, my friend, you've made a mess of things. It's going to take you a while to straighten them out, but you've got to start somewhere."

"You've given me quite a bit to think about, Belgarion." Urgit shivered and looked around. "It's really miserable out here," he said. "Where did Kheldar go?"

"Back inside. I think he's trying to get well."

"You mean that there's actually something that will cure this?"

"Some Alorns recommend some more of what made you sick in the first place."

Urgit's face went pale. "More?" he said in a horrified voice. "How can they?"

"Alorns are notoriously brave people."

Urgit's eyes grew suspicious. "Wait a minute," he said. "Wouldn't that just make me feel exactly the same way tomorrow morning?"

"Probably, yes. That could explain why Alorns are usually so foul-tempered when they first get up."

"That's stupid, Belgarion."

"I know. Murgos don't have an absolute monopoly on stupidity." Garion looked at the shivering man. "I think you'd better go inside, Urgit," he advised. "You don't want a chill, on top of all your other problems."

The rain let up by late afternoon. The Murgo captain looked up at the still-threatening sky and then at the cliffs and the jagged reefs jutting out of the turbulent water and

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prudently ordered his crew to lower the sails and drop the anchor.

JDurnik and Toth rather regretfully rolled up their stout fishing lines and stood looking proudly at the dozen or so gleaming silver fish lying on the deck at their feet.

Garion drifted back to where they stood and looked admiringly at their catch. "Not bad," he said.

Durnik carefully measured the biggest fish with his hands. "About three feet," he said, "but they're minnows compared to the big one that got away."

"It always seems to work out that way," Garion said. "Oh," he added, "one thing, Durnik. I'd clean them before I showed them to Aunt Pol. You know how she feels about that."

Durnik sighed. "You're probably right," he agreed.

That evening, after they had all dined on some of the catch, they sat around the table in the aft cabin conversing idly.

"Do you think Agachak's caught up with Harakan yet?" Durnik asked Belgarath.

"I sort of doubt it," the old man replied. "Harakan's tricky. If Beldin couldn't catch him, I don't think Agachak's going to have much luck either."

"Lady Polgara," Sadi suddenly protested in a tone of outrage, "make her stop that."

"What's that, Sadi?"

"The Margravine Liselle. She's subverting my snake."

Velvet, with a mysterious little smile on her face, was delicately feeding Zith fish eggs taken from one of the large fish Durnik and Toth had caught. The little green snake was purring contentedly and was half-raised in anticipation of the next morsel.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The wind came up during the night, a raw, gusty wind, smelling strongly of dusty old ice, and the drizzle which had fallen for most of the previous day turned to sleet that rattled in the rigging and clattered on the deck like hand-fuls of pebbles. As usual, Garion rose early and tiptoed on unshod feet from the tiny cabin he shared with his sleeping wife. He made his way down the dark companionway past the doors to the cabins where the others slept and entered the aft cabin. He stood for a time at the windows running across the stem of the ship, looking out at the wind-tossed waves and listening to the slow creak of the tiller post running down through the center of the cabin to the rudder that probed the dark water beneath the stern.

As he sat down to put on his boots, the door opened and Durnik came in, brushing the ice pellets of the sleet squall

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chattering on the decks from the folds of his cloak. "It's going to be slow going for a while, I'm afraid," he said to Garion. "The wind's swung around and it's coming directly up out of the south. We're running right straight into it. The sailors are breaking out the oars."

"Could you get any idea of how far it is to the tip of the peninsula?" Garion asked, standing up and stamping his feet to settle his boots into place.

"I talked with the captain a bit. From what he said, it's only a few leagues. There's a cluster of islands that runs off the south end of it, though, and he wants to let this blow over before he tries to thread his way through the passage. He's not much of a sailor, and this isn't much of a boat, so I guess he's a little timid."

Garion leaned forward, put his hands on the sill of one of the stern windows and looked out again at the stormy sea. "This could blow for a week," he observed. He turned to look at his friend. "Has our captain recovered his composure at all?" he asked. "He was a little wild-eyed when we sailed out of RakUrga."

Durnik smiled. "I think he's been talking to himself very hard. He's trying to convince himself that he didn't really see what happened back there. He still tends to cringe a lot when Pol goes out on deck, though."

"Good. Is she awake?"

Durnik nodded. "I fixed her morning tea for her before I went out on deck."

"How do you think she'd react if I asked her to bully the captain for me—just a little bit?"

"I don't know that I'd use the word 'bully,' Garion," Durnik advised seriously. "Try 'talk to' or 'persuade' instead. Pol doesn't really think of what she does as bullying."

"It is, though."

"Of course, but she doesn't think of it that way."

"Let's go see her."

The cabin Polgara shared with Durnik was as tiny and cramped as all the rest aboard this ungainly vessel. Two-thirds of the space inside was given over to the high-railed bed, built of planks and seeming to grow out of the bulkheads themselves. Polgara sat in the center of the bed in her favorite blue dressing gown, holding a cup of tea and gazing out the porthole at the sleet-spattered waves.

"Good morning, Aunt Pol," Garion greeted her.

"Good morning, dear. How nice of you to visit."

"Are you all right, now?" he asked. "What I mean is, I understand that you were quite upset about what happened back at the harbor."

She sighed. "I think the worst part was that I had no choice in the matter. Once Chabat raised the demon, she was doomed—but I was the one who had to destroy her soul." Her expression was somber with a peculiar overtone of a deep and abiding regret. "Could we talk about something else?" she asked.

"All right. Would you like to speak to someone for me?"

"Who's that?"

"The ship's captain. He wants to drop his anchor until this weather clears, and I'd rather not wait."

"Why don't you talk with him yourself, Garion?"

"Because people tend to listen to you more attentively than they do me. Could you do it, Aunt Pol—talk to him, I mean?"

"You want me to bully him."

"I wouldn't exactly say 'bully,' Aunt Pol," he protested.

"But that's what you mean, Garion. Always say what you mean."

"Will you?"

"All right, if you want me to. Now, will you do something for me?"

"Anything, Aunt Pol."

She held out her cup. "Do you suppose you could fix me another cup of tea?"

After breakfast, Polgara put on her blue cloak and went out on deck. The Murgo captain changed his plans almost as soon as she began to speak to him. Then he climbed the mainmast and spent the rest of the morning with the lookout . in the wildly swaying crow's nest high aloft.

At the southern tip of the Urga peninsula, the steersman swung his tiller over, and the ship heeled sharply to port. It was not hard to understand why the captain had originally wanted to avoid the passage through the islands in anything remotely resembling rough weather. The currents and tides swirled through the narrow channels, the wind tore the tops ; of the dark-rolling waves to tatters, and the surf boomed and crashed on the knife-edged rocks rearing up out of the sea. ;, The Murgo sailors rowed fearfully, casting wild-eyed looks Q at the looming cliffs on all sides of them. After the first league

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or so, the captain clambered down the mast to stand tensely beside the steersman as the ship cautiously crawled through the gale-lashed islands.

It was midafternoon when they finally passed the last of the rocky islets, and the sailors began to row away from the land toward open water where the wind-driven sleet sizzled into the whitecaps.

Belgarath and Garion, with their cloaks pulled tightly about them, stood on the deck watching the oarsmen for a few minutes; then the old man went to the companionway door. "Urgit!" he shouted down the narrow hall, "come out here!"

The Murgo King stumbled up the stairs out onto the deck, his eyes fearful.

"Don't your people know how to set their rigging so that they can quarter into the wind?" Belgarath demanded.

Urgit looked at him blankly. "I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about," he said.

"Durnik!" Belgarath shouted.

The smith, standing with Toth at the stern of the ship, was intently watching his trailing lure and did not answer.

"Durnik!"

"Hmmm?"

"We have to reset the rigging. Come and show the captain how it's done."

"In a minute."

"Now, Durnik!"

The smith sighed and began to coil up his line. The fish struck without warning, and Durnik's excited whoop was whipped away by the rising wind. He seized the line and jerked hard to set his hook. The great, silver-sided fish came boiling up out of the water, shaking his head angrily and threshing his way across the wind-driven chop. Durnik's shoulders bowed as he pulled hard on his line, struggling manfully to haul the huge fish in hand over hand.

Belgarath started to swear.

"I'll show the captain how to set his rigging, Grandfather," Garion said.

"How much do you know about it?"

"I've been on at least as many ships as Durnik has. I know how it's done." He went toward the bow to talk to the Murgo captain who now stood staring ahead at the tossing sea. "You want to slack off your lines on this side over here,"

Garion explained to him, "and draw them in on the other. The idea is to angle your sails so that they catch the wind. Then you put your rudder over to compensate."

"Nobody's ever done it that way before," the captain declared stubbornly.

"The Alorns do, and they're the best sailors in the world."

"The Alorns control the wind by sorcery. You can't use your sails unless the wind is behind you."

"Just try it, Captain," Garion said patiently. He looked at the heavy-shouldered sailor and saw that he was wasting his time. "If you'd rather not do it because I ask you to," he added, "I could probably persuade Lady Polgara to ask you—as a personal favor."

The captain stared at him. Then he swallowed hard. "How was it you said you wanted the rigging reset, my Lord?" he asked in a much milder tone.

It took perhaps a quarter of an hour to set the lines to Garion's satisfaction. Then, with the dubious captain in tow, he went aft and took the tiller from the steersman. "All right," he said, "raise the sails."

"It's not going to work," the captain predicted under his breath. Then he lifted his voice to a bellow. "Hoist the sails!"

The pulleys began to creak, and the sails, flapping in the wind, crawled up the masts. Then they boomed and bellied out, angled sharply to catch the wind. Garion pulled the tiller over as the ship heeled sharply to leeward. The prow knifed sharply through the heaving waves.

The Murgo captain gaped up at his sails. "I don't believe it!" he exclaimed. "Nobody's ever done that before."

"You see how it works now, don't you?" Garion asked him.

"Of course. It's so simple that I can't understand why I didn't think of it myself."

Garion had an answer, but he decided to keep it to himself. The captain had already had a bad enough day. He turned to the steersman. "You have to keep your tiller over like tillers to compensate for the force of the wind coming in on your starboard beam," he explained.

"I understand, my Lord."

Garion relinquished the tiller and stepped back to watch Durnik and Toth. They were still hauling at their line, and the great fish, no longer dancing on the sleet-swept surface,

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swept back and forth in long arcs across the boiling wake; the stout rope connecting his jaw to the two fishermen sizzled through the water as if it were hot.

"Nice fish," Garion called to the struggling pair.

Durnik's quick answering grin was like the sun coming up.

They quartered into an increasingly stiff wind for the remainder of the day. As the light began to fade, they were far from land. Garion was by now certain that the captain and the steersman could manage and he went forward to join the little group standing amidships around Durnik's huge fish.

"Now that you've got him, where are you going to find a pan big enough to cook him in?" Silk was asking the smith.

A brief frown crossed Durnik's face, but then he smiled again. "Pol will know how to take care of it," he said and went back to admiring the monster lying on the deck. "Pol knows how to take care of everything."

The sleet had abated, and the dark-rolling waves stretched sullenly to the faintly luminous line of the horizon that divided the black waves from an even blacker sky. The Murgo captain came forward in the windy twilight with a worried look on his face. Respectfully, he touched Urgit's sleeve.

"Yes, Captain?"

"I'm afraid there's trouble, your Majesty."

"What kind of trouble?"

The captain pointed toward the line of the southern horizon. A half-dozen ships were running before the wind, coming directly toward them.

Urgit's face grew slightly sick. "Malloreans?"

The captain nodded.

"Do you think they've seen us?"

"Almost certainly, your Majesty."

"We'd better go talk to Belgarath," Silk said. "I don't think any of us counted on this."

The conference in the aft cabin was tense. "They're making much

better time than we are, Grandfather," Garion said. "We're quartering the wind, and they're running with it dead astern. I think we're going to have to turn north—at least until we can get out of their sight."

The old man was staring at a tattered map the captain had brought with him. He shook his head, "I don't like it," he said. "This gulf we're in right now funnels into the mouth of the Gorand Sea, and I don't want to get trapped in there."

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He turned to Silk. "You've been to Malloreia a few times. How good are their ships?"

Silk shrugged. "About the same as this one. I'm not trying to be offensive, Captain, but Angaraks aren't the same kind of sailors—or shipbuilders—that Chereks are." He considered it. "There might be a way to escape them," he said. "Malloreans are timid sailors, so they won't spread all sail at night. If we turned north and put up every ounce of canvas we can, we could be a long way ahead of them—no more than a blinking light on the horizon once it gets dark. Then we drop the sails, reset the rigging, and put out every light on board ship."

"But we can't do that," the captain objected. "It's against the law."

"I'll write you an excuse, Captain," Urgit said drily.

"It's too dangerous, your Majesty. If we run without lights, we could collide with another ship out there in the dark. We could be sunk."

"Captain," Urgit said in a patient tone, "there are six Mallorean ships chasing us. What do you imagine they're going to do if they catch up with us?"

"They'll sink us, of course."

"What difference does it make, then? At least if we put out the lights, we'll have a chance. Go ahead, Kheldar."

Silk shrugged. "There isn't much more. After we blow out the running lights, we hoist sail and run east again. The Malloreans won't be able to see us, and they'll charge right on across our wake. By tomorrow morning, they won't have any idea about where we are."

"It might just work," Belgarath conceded.

"It's dangerous," the captain said disapprovingly.

"Sometimes even breathing is dangerous, Captain," Urgit told him. "Let's try it and see what happens. What I can't understand, though, is what Mallorean ships are doing this far west."

- "It's possible that they're marauders sent to harry the coast lines," Sadi suggested.

"Perhaps," Urgit said dubiously.

They ran due north before the rising wind that swept up from the south polar icecap. The deck lanterns swung and bobbed in the wind, peopling the storm-whipped rigging with wildly dancing shadows. The six Malloorean vessels, running cautiously under half sail, dropped behind until their running

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lights looked no larger than tiny twinkling stars on the horizon far astern. Then, about midnight, the captain gave the order to drop the sails. The sailors quickly reset the rigging and the ship's master came aft to where Garion stood beside the steersman. "Everything's ready, my Lord," he reported.

"All right then. Let's blow out all the lights and see if we can sneak out of here."

The Murgo's stiff face creased uncertainly into a rueful grin. "When we get out of this--i/we get out of it--I think I'll take to my bed for a month," he said. He raised his voice to a shout. "Extinguish all the deck lights!" he commanded.

The resulting blackness was so intense as to be very nearly palpable.

"Hoist the sails!" the captain shouted.

Garion could hear the creaking pulleys and the flapping of canvas. Then there was the heavy boom of the sails catching the wind and the ship heeled over as she swung to starboard.

"There's no way to be sure of our direction, my Lord," the captain warned. "We haven't got a fixed point of any kind to refer to,"

"Use those," Garion suggested, pointing at the winking deck lights on the Malloorean vessels trailing far behind. "We might as well get some use out of them."

Their darkened scow moved eastward with her sharply angled sails cracking in the wind. The deck lights of the Malloorean ships that had been pursuing them continued their cautious northward course, crossed far behind, and winked out of sight.

"May Torak guide them to a reef," the captain muttered fervently.

"It worked!" Urgit said delightedly, clapping the seaman on the shoulder. "By the Gods, it actually worked!"

"I just hope that nobody catches me running at night without any lights," the captain brooded.

Dawn came smudged and bleary to the murky eastern horizon, rising slowly up out of a low-lying shadow some ten leagues or so ahead. "That's the coast of Cthaka," the captain said, pointing.

"Is there any sign of those Malloorean ships?" Urgit asked, peering around at the heaving sea.

The captain shook his head. "They passed astern of us

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during the dogwatch, your Majesty. They're halfway up the Gorand Sea by now." The seaman looked at Garion. "You wanted to get closer in to shore and then swing around to starboard again, my Lord?"

"To starboard, of course."

The captain squinted up at the sails. "We'll have to reset the rigging again, I suppose."

"I'm afraid not," Garion told him regretfully. "When we turn south, we'll be sailing directly into the wind. You'll have to furl your sails and break out the oars." He noted the disappointed expression on the seaman's face. "I'm sorry, Captain, but there are limits. Your sails are the wrong shape, and when you get right down to it, rowing in this case will actually be faster. How far north were we swept last night?"

"A goodly way, my Lord," the captain replied, peering at the indistinct coastline lying ahead. "You can put a lot of water behind you moving under full sail before a wind like that. I wouldn't be surprised to see the mouth of the Gorand Sea somewhere ahead."

"We don't want to go in there. Let's not start playing tag with those Malloorean ships again—particularly in tight quarters. I'm going below for a bite of breakfast and some dry clothes. Send someone down if anything happens."

"I will, my Lord."

They had fish for breakfast that morning. At Polgara's suggestion, Durnik's huge catch had been cut into steaks and then delicately broiled over a low flame.

"Delicious, isn't he?" Durnik asked proudly.

"Yes, dear," Polgara agreed. "He's a very nice fish."

"Did I tell you how I caught him, Pol?"

"Yes, dear—but that's all right. You can tell me again, if you'd like."

As they were just finishing their meal, the Murgo captain entered, wearing a tarred cape and an anxious expression. "There's more of them, my Lord," he blurted to Garion.

"More of what?"

"Mallooreans. There's another squadron coming up the Cthaka coast."

Urgit's face blanched, and his hands started to tremble.

"Are you sure they aren't the same ones who were chasing us last night?" Garion asked, getting quickly to his feet.

"There's no way they could be, my Lord. It's a different group of ships."

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Silk was looking narrowly at the ship's master. "Captain," he said, "have you ever been in business for yourself?"

The captain threw a brief, guilty glance at Urgit. "I don't know what you're talking about," he mumbled.

"This is no time for false modesty, Captain," Silk said. "We're charging headlong into the midst of a Mallorealan squadron. Are there any coves or inlets around here where we could get out of sight?"

"Not along this coast, your Highness; but right after you go through the channel into the Gorand Sea, there's a small bay to starboard. It's well hidden by some reefs. If we were to unstep the masts and tie bushes along the sides, I think we could escape notice."

"Let's do it then, Captain," Belgarath said shortly. "What's the weather look like?"

"Not very pleasant. There's a heavy cloud bank coming up from the south. I think we can expect a gale before noon."

"Good."

"Good?"

"We're not alone in these waters," Belgarath reminded him. "A nice gale ought to give the Mallorealans something to do beside line the rails of their ships looking for us. Go give the orders, Captain. Let's turn around and make a run for it,"

"How were you so sure that the captain knew about a secluded cove or bay somewhere?" Urgit asked Silk after the seaman had left.

Silk shrugged. "You levy taxes on merchandise that gets moved from one place to another, don't you?"

"Of course. I need the revenue."

"A resourceful man with his own boat can sort of forget to stop by the customs dock at the end of a voyage—or he can locate some quiet place to store things until he finds customers for them."

"That's smuggling!"

"Why, yes, I believe some people do call it that. Anyway, I'd guess that every sea captain in the world has dabbled in the business at one time or another."

"Not Murgos," Urgit insisted.

"Then how is it that your captain knew of a perfect hiding place not five leagues from our present location—and probably knows of hundreds more?"

"You're a corrupt and disgusting man, Kheldar."

"I know. Smuggling is a very profitable business, though. You ought to give some thought to going into it."

"Kheldar, I'm the king. I'd be stealing from myself."

"Trust me," Silk said. "It's a bit complicated, but I can show you how to set things up so that you can make a very handsome profit."

The ship rolled then, and they all looked out through the windows along the stern to watch the waves sweep by as the steersman pulled his tiller over hard and the ship came about. Far astern they could see a half-dozen red sails looking tiny in the distance.

"Are there any Grolims on board those ships, Pol?" Belgarath asked his daughter.

Her lavender eyes became distant for a moment, then she passed one hand over her brow. "No, father," she replied, "just ordinary Malloreans."

"Good. We shouldn't have too much trouble hiding from them, then."

"That storm the captain mentioned is coming up behind them," Durnik said.

"Won't it just hurry them along?" Urgit asked nervously. "Probably not," the smith answered. "Most likely they'll come about to head into the wind. That's the only safe way to ride out a storm."

"Won't we have to do the same thing?"

"We're outnumbered six to one, my brother," Silk pointed out. "We're going to have to take a few chances, I think."

The advancing wave of darkness that marked the leading edge of the oncoming storm engulfed the red sails far astern and came racing up the coast. The waves grew higher, and the Murgo ship bucked and plunged as the wind picked up. The timbers shrieked and groaned in protest as the heavy seas wrenched at their vessel, and high overhead there was the heavy booming of the sails. Garion actually listened to that booming sound for several minutes before the significance of it began to dawn on him. It was an ominous grinding noise from amidships that finally alerted him.

"That idiot!" |;' he exclaimed, leaping to his feet and snatching up his cloak.

"What's the matter?" Sadi asked in alarm.

"He's carrying full sail! If his mainmast doesn't break, we'll be driven under!" Garion whirled, dashed out of the

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cabin, and staggered along the lurching companionway to the three steps leading up to the deck. "Captain!" he shouted as he dashed out onto the rain-swept deck. He caught one of the hastily strung lifelines as a wave broke over the stern and came rushing knee-deep down the deck, sweeping his feet out from under him. "Captain!" he shouted again, hauling himself hand over hand up the rope toward the aft deck.

"My Lord?" the captain shouted back with a startled look.

"Shorten your sail! Your mainmast is starting to tear free!"

The captain stared aloft, his face filled with sudden chagrin. "Impossible, my Lord," he protested as Garion reached him. "The men can't furl sail in this storm."

Garion nibbed the rain out of his eyes and looked back up over his shoulder at the tautly bellied mainsail. "They'll have to cut it away, then."

"Cut it? But, my Lord, that's a new sail."

"Right now it's the sail or the ship. If the wind uproots your mainmast, it's going to tear your ship apart—and if it doesn't, we'll be driven under. Now get that sail off the mast—or I will."

The captain stared at him.

"Believe me," Garion told him, "if I have to do it, I'll sweep your deck clean—masts, rigging, sails, and all."

The captain immediately began giving orders.

Once the mainsail had been cut free and allowed to kite off into the storm, the dreadful shuddering and grinding eased, and the vessel ran before the wind more smoothly, propelled only by a small foresail.

"How far is it to the mouth of the Gorand Sea?" Garion asked.

"Not far, my Lord," the captain replied, mopping his face. He looked around at the storm-lashed morning and the low, nearly invisible coast sliding by on their right. "There it is," he said, pointing at

a scarcely visible hillock jutting up a mile or so ahead. "You see that headland—the one with the white bluff facing us? The channel's just on the other side of it." He turned to the sailors clinging to the aft rail. "Drop the sea anchor," he commanded.

"What's that for?" Garion asked him.

"We've got too much headway, my Lord," the seaman explained. "The channel's a little difficult, and we have to

trim sharply to get through it. We have to slow down. The sea anchor drags behind and keeps us from going quite so

fast"

Garion thought about it, frowning. Something seemed wrong, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it. He watched as the sailors rolled what appeared to be a long canvas sack on a heavy rope over the stern rail. The sack streamed out behind them; the rope went taut, and the ship shuddered and slowed perceptibly.

"That's better," the captain said with some satisfaction.

Garion shielded his eyes from the icy rain being driven into his face and peered back behind them. The Malloreans were nowhere in sight. "Just how tricky is this channel you mentioned?" he asked.

"There are some reefs in the center, my Lord. You have to hug the coast on one side or the other to avoid them. We'll stay close to the south shore, since that bay I mentioned is on that side."

Garion nodded. "I'll go warn the others that we're about to make a turn to the right. A sudden change of direction might toss them around a bit down there."

"Starboard," the captain said disapprovingly.

"What? Oh, no. To most of them, it's to the right." Garion started forward, peering out through the rain at the low coast sliding past. The bluff and the rounded headland looming above it was almost dead amidships now. He could see the channel just ahead cluttered with jagged, up-thrusting rocks. He swung down into the narrow, dark companionway and shook as much water out of his cloak as possible as he stumbled aft. He opened the main cabin door and poked his head v inside. "We're at the mouth of the Gorand Sea," he announced. "We'll be turning to starboard here." Then he cursed at forgetting.

"Which way is starboard?" Ce'Nedra asked.

"Right."

*• "Why didn't you say right, then?"

* He let that pass. "When we come about, we could bounce j; around a bit, so you'd all better hang on to something. ^ There's a reef in the center of the channel, so we're going ~i. to have to swing in tight to the south shore to avoid—" Then jvit came to him, even as the ship heeled over and plunged |)into the channel. "Belar!" he

swore. He spun, reaching over his shoulder for Iron-grip's sword, and then plunged back

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down the companionway. He banged out through the slanting companionway doors and jumped up to the rain-swept aft deck with the great blade aloft. "Cut it!" he screamed. "Cut the rope to the sea anchor!"

The captain gaped at him, uncomprehending.

"Cut the cursed rope!" Garion bellowed. Then he was on them, and they stumbled clumsily over each other, trying to get out of his way. The ship had already swept in a tight curve close in to the headland, avoiding the reefs and up-thrusting boulders in mid-channel. The submerged sea anchor, however, pulled by the force of the waves running before the wind, continued on across the mouth of the channel. The rope that had slackened until it was lost in the white-caps suddenly snapped taut, jerking the Murgo scow askew. The force of that sudden sideways jerk threw Garion off his feet, and he crashed into the tangle of arms and legs at the rail. "Cut it!" he shouted, struggling to free himself. "Cut the rope!"

But it was too late. The heavy sea anchor, pulled by the irresistible force of the storm-driven waves, had not only jerked the Murgo vessel to a halt but was now pulling her inexorably backward—not toward the safe channel through which she had just passed, but instead directly toward the jagged reefs.

Garion staggered to his feet, kicking the floundering sailors out from around his ankles. Desperately he swung a massive blow at the tautly thrumming rope, shearing away not merely the rope itself but the stout windlass to which it was attached.

"My Lord!" the captain protested.

"Get that tiller!!" Garion shouted. "Turn starboard! Turn! Turn! Turn!" He pointed at the deadly reefs foaming directly in their path.

The captain gaped at the huge knife-edged rocks standing in his vessel's course. Then he whirled and tore the tiller from the hands of his frozen steersman. Instinctively, he swung the tiller hard over for a turn to port.

"Starboard!" Garion shouted. "Turn to starboard!"

"No, my Lord," the captain disagreed. "We have to turn to port—to the left."

"We're going backward, you jackass! Turn right!"

"Starboard," the captain corrected absently, still wrestling with an idea he was not yet fully prepared to grasp—

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all the while still firmly holding the tiller locked into the fatal course he had originally set.

Garion began to clamber over the still-floundering sailors desperately trying to reach the bemused captain, but there came a sudden tearing sound from below the waterline and a lurching jolt as their ship crashed stern-first into the reef. Timbers shrieked and snapped as the sharp rocks knifed into the vessel's bottom. Then they hung there, impaled on the rocks, while the waves began the deadly pounding that would soon break the ship to pieces.

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Garion struggled to his feet, shaking his head to clear it of the ringing sound and to chase the dancing sparks from before his eyes. The sudden jolt of the ship's striking the reef had tumbled him headlong into the aft rail, and there was a great, stinging welt across the top of his scalp. The air around him was filled with sounds. There were shouts from the deck and cries for help coming from the water. The ship groaned and shook as she hung on the reef, and the surging waves pounded her splintered bottom on the unseen rocks beneath her keel. Wincing, Garion shook his head again and began to slip and slide his way across the heaving aft deck toward the companionway door. As he reached it, however, Belgarath and Durnik came crashing out. "What's happened?" the old man demanded.

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"We hit a reef," Garion said. "Is anybody down there hurt?"

"They're all right—a little tumbled about is all."

Garion touched the welt on top of his head, wincing at the sharp sting. Then he looked at his fingers, noting that there didn't seem to be any blood.

"What's the matter?" Belgarath asked.

"I hit my head."

"I thought we all decided that you weren't going to do that any more."

A deadly, jarring boom came from under their feet and with it the sound of splintering timbers.

"Belgarath," Durnik said with alarm, "we're caught on the reef. This surf is going to pound the ship to pieces."

Belgarath looked around quickly. "Where's the captain?" he demanded.

Garion turned to look aft. "He was right there at the tiller, Grandfather," he said. He clambered up the short incline to the aft deck and caught hold of the steersman, who was stumbling forward. "Where's the captain?" he shouted.

"Lost. He was thrown over the aft rail when we hit the reef." The steersman's eyes were filled with shock and fright. "We're all doomed!" he cried, clinging to Garion.

"Oh, stop that!" Garion snapped. "The captain's gone, Grandfather," he shouted over the noise of the storm and the confusion on deck. "He fell over the side."

Belgarath and Durnik came quickly up the three steps to the aft deck. "We'll have to take care of it ourselves, then," the old man said. "How much time do you think we've got, Durnik?"

"Not much. There are a lot of timbers breaking down in the hold, and you can hear water pouring in."

"We have to get her off this reef, then—before the rocks break any more holes in her bottom."

"The reef's the only thing that's keeping us up right now, Belgarath," the smith objected. "If we lift her off, she'll sink in minutes."

"Then we'll have to beach her. Come along, both of you." He led them aft and took hold of the tiller bar. He jiggled it back and forth a couple times and then swore. "The rudder's gone." He drew in a deep breath to calm himself and then turned to Garion and Durnik. "We'll do this all at one time and all together," he told them. "If we start heaving and

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hauling and bouncing her around, we'll just tear her up all the more." He wiped the rain and spray out of his face and peered toward the shore, perhaps a mile distant. He pointed at the up-thrusting headland with the white bluff on one side dropping straight down into the thundering surf. "There's a beach just to the left of that bluff," he said. "We'll try for that. It's not too well sheltered, and there are a lot of rocks sticking up out of the sand, but it's the closest."

Durnik leaned far out over the aft rail and peered down. "She's been badly broached, Belgarath," he reported gravely. He squinted across the intervening water toward the beach. "Our only hope is speed. Once she's clear of the reef, she'll start to go down. We're going to have to push her toward the beach as fast as we can—and without a rudder, it's going to be very hard to control our direction." "Do we have any other options?" Belgarath asked him. "Not that I can think of, no."

"Let's do it then." The old man looked at them. "Are we ready?"

Garion and Durnik both nodded, then straightened, concentrating hard

as each of them drew in and focused his will. Garion began to tingle all over and clenched himself tightly, holding in the pent-up force. "Now!" Belgarath barked. "Lift!" the three of them said in unison. The battered stern of the ship came sluggishly up out of the churning waves with her shattered timbers shrieking as the hull pulled free of the jagged reef.

"There!" Belgarath snapped, pointing at the half-obsured beach.

Garion thrust, bracing his will astern at the boiling reef. The ship settled sickeningly as she came free, going down rapidly by the stern; then, slowly at first, but quickly gaining speed, she surged forward. Even over the sound of the howling wind, he could hear the rushing wash of water along her sides as she raced toward the safety of the beach.

When they hit the currents in the main channel, however, the rudderless ship began to veer and yaw, threatening to swing broadside. "Keep her straight!" Belgarath shouted. The veins were standing out in his forehead, and his jaws were tightly clenched.

Garion labored at it. As long as their broken ship moved fast enough, they could keep the water from pouring in

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through the shattered stern, but if she went broadside to the waves, the loss of momentum would be fatal. The sea would inexorably drag her under. Garion gripped the bow with the force of his will, holding the ship rigidly on course, even as he continued to drive toward the beach with all his strength.

Three hundred more yards. Sweating and straining, Gar-ion could see the foaming surf seething on the sandy, boulder-strewn beach.

Two hundred yards. He could hear the thunder of the waves.

One hundred yards. He could feel the ponderous, upward-heaving swell of the great wave that rose beneath them and rushed them toward the safety only scant yards away.

And then, even as the prow touched the froth-covered sand, the great swell that had driven them up onto the beach subsided, and there was a dreadful, shocking crash from amidships as they came down onto a submerged boulder lurking beneath the surf. Again Garion was thrown face down on the deck and half stunned by the impact.

The surf still boomed about them, and the snapping and splintering of timbers amidships was deafening, but they were safe. The prow of the stricken vessel was firmly embedded in the wet sand of the beach. As Garion painfully hauled himself to his feet, he felt drained and weak from his efforts. Then the deck beneath his feet gave a peculiar, sickening lurch, and there were more cracking and splintering noises coming from amidships.

"I think we broke the keel when we hit that rock," Durnik said

shakily. His face was gray with exhaustion, and he was shaking visibly. "We'd better get everybody off the ship and onto the beach."

Belgarath rose from the scuppers. There was a ruddy contusion on his cheek, rain and spray streaming down his face, and a vast anger in his eyes. He was swearing sulfurously. Then his rage suddenly vanished. "The horses!" he exclaimed. "They're down in the hold! Durnik!"

But the smith was already running forward toward the sprung hatchway amidships. "Get Toth to come and help me!" he shouted back over his shoulder. "We have to get those horses out!"

"Garion!" Belgarath barked. "Let's get-everybody out of the cabins and onto dry land. I don't think we've got a lot of time before this wreck starts to break apart."

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They started forward, moving carefully on the slanting deck of the broken ship, with the wind-whipped spray and driving rain stinging their faces. They ducked into the slanting aft door and down the companionway. The narrow hall echoed and rang with the noise of cracking timbers coming from amidships.

The aft cabin was a total shambles. The shock of striking the reef and the even worse one that had broken the ship's back had torn most of the bolted-down furniture loose. Sprung timbers flopped and clattered, and the windows across the stern had all been broken and wrenched from their casings. Spray and rain were splashing in through those gaping holes.

Ce'Nedra and Praia looked frightened as they clung to each other, Urgit held tightly to the keel-post as if expecting yet another crashing impact, and Sadi half-lay in a corner with his arms protectively wrapped around his red leather case. Polgara, however, looked dreadfully angry. She was also wet. The water pouring in through the shattered stern had drenched her clothes and her hair, and her expression was that of one who has been enormously offended. "Exactly what did you do, old man?" she demanded of Belgarath as he and Garion entered through the broken door.

"We hit a reef, Pol," he replied. "We were taking water, so we had to beach the ship."

She considered that for a moment, obviously trying to find something wrong with it.

"We can talk about it later," he said. He looked around. "Is everyone all right? We've got to get off this wreck immediately."

"We're as well as can be expected, father," she said. "What's the problem? I thought you said we were on the beach."

"We hit a submerged rock and broke the keel. This part of the ship's still in the water, and about the only thing that's holding this tub

in one piece right now is the pitch in her seams. We've got to get forward and off the ship at once."

She nodded. "I understand, father." She turned to the others. "Gather up whatever you can carry," she instructed. "We have to get ashore."

"I'll go help Durnik with the horses," Garion said to Belgarath.

"Toth, Eriond, come with me." He turned toward

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the door, but paused a moment to look at Ce'Nedra. "Are you all right?" he asked her.

"I think so," she replied, sounding frightened and rubbing at an ugly bruise on her knee.

"Stay with Aunt Pol," he instructed curtly and then went out.

The scene in the ship's hold was even worse than he had expected. Knee-deep water swirled and sloshed in the half-light coming in through the splintered hull. Boxes, bags, and bales floated everywhere, and the top of the sloshing, bilge-smelling water was littered with splinters from the broken timbers. Durnik had herded the wild-eyed horses forward, and they were bunched together in the ship's bow where the water was the shallowest. "We lost three of them," he reported, "two with broken necks and one that drowned."

"Horse?" Eriond asked quickly.

"He's all right, Eriond," Durnik assured him. He turned back to Garion. "I've been trying to gather up our packs. Everything's pretty wet, I'm afraid. The food packs were all back in the stern, though. There's no way to get to them."

"We can deal with that later," Garion said. "The main thing now is to get the horses out."

Durnik squinted at the jagged edges of the two-foot square keel grinding together as the aft end of the ship swung sluggishly in the surging waves. "Too dangerous," he said shortly. "We'll have to go out through the bow. I'll get my axe."

Garion shook his head. "If the aft end breaks loose, the bow-section's likely to roll. We could lose another four or five horses if that happens and we might not have too much time left."

Durnik drew in a deep breath and squared his broad shoulders. His face was not happy.

"I know," Garion said, putting his hand on his friend's arm. "I'm tired, too. Let's do it up forward. There's no point in breaking out of the hull someplace where we'll have to jump into deep water."

It was not quite as difficult as they had expected. The assistance of Toth made a noticeable difference. They selected a space in the

ship's side between a pair of stout ribs and went to work. As Durnik and Garion began carefully to break out the ship's timbers between those ribs with the force of concentrated will, Toth attacked the same area with

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a large iron pry bar. The combination of sorcery and the mute's enormous physical strength quickly opened a low, narrow opening in the ship's bow.

Silk stood on the beach out of range of the splinters their efforts had sent flying. His cloak was whipping wildly in the wind, and the surf was swirling about his ankles. "Are you all right?" he shouted over the noise of the storm.

"Good enough," Garion shouted back. "Give us a hand with the horses."

It eventually took blindfolds. Despite the best efforts of Durnik and Eriond to calm them, the terrified horses could be moved only if they could not see the dangers in the sloshing water surging around their knees. One by one they had to be led and coaxed through the litter lying half-awash in the shattered hold and out into the foaming surf. When the last of their animals was clear and stood flinching on the sand with the driving rain lashing at his flanks, Garion turned back to the sluggishly heaving wreck. "Let's get the packs out," he shouted at the others. "Save what you can, but don't take any chances."

The Murgo sailors, after leaping from the bow of the ship to the sand, had retreated up the beach and taken dubious shelter on the leeward side of a large, up-thrusting rock. They stood clustered together, sullenly watching the unloading. Garion and the others heaped up the packs above the frothy line that marked the highest point reached by the waves.

"We lost three horses and all the food packs," Garion reported to Belgarath and Polgara. "I think we got everything else—except what we had to leave behind in the cabins."

Belgarath squinted upward into the rain. "We can redistribute the packs," he said, "but we're going to need food."

"Is the tide going in or out?" Silk asked as he deposited the last pack on their heap of belongings.

Durnik squinted at the storm-tossed channel leading into the Gorand Sea. "I think it's just turning."

"We don't really have too much of a problem, then," the little man said. "Let's find someplace out of the wind and wait for the tide to go out. Then we can come back and ransack the wreck at our leisure. She ought to be completely out of the water at low tide."

"There's just one thing wrong with your plan, Prince

Kheldar," Sadi told him, squinting toward the upper end of the beach. "You're forgetting those Murgo sailors. They're stranded on a deserted coast with at least a dozen Mallorean ships cruising up and down the shore line looking for them. Malloreans enjoy killing Murgos almost as much as Alorns do, so those sailors are going to want to get far away from here. It might be wise to get these horses quite some distance away-if we want to keep them."

"Let's load the pack horses and get mounted," Belgarath decided. "I think Sadi's right. We can come back and pick over what's left of the ship later."

They broke down the packs and redistributed the weight to make up for the three lost animals, then began to saddle their mounts.

The sailors, led by a tall, heavy-shouldered Murgo with an evil-looking scar under his left eye, came back down the beach. "Where do you think you're taking those horses?" he demanded.

"I can't really see where that's any of your business," Sadi replied coolly.

"We're going to make it our business, aren't we, mates?"

There was a rumble of agreement from the rain-soaked sailors.

"The horses belong to us," Sadi told him.

"We don't care about that. There are enough of us so that we can take anything we want."

"Why waste time with talk?" one of the sailors behind the scar-faced man shouted.

"Right," the big Murgo agreed. He drew a short, rusty sword from the sheath at his hip, looked back over his shoulder as he raised it aloft, and shouted, "Follow me!" Then he fell writhing and bellowing in pain to the wet sand, clutching at his broken right arm. Toth, without any change of expression and with an almost negligent side-arm flip, had sent the iron pry bar he still held in one hand spinning through the air with a whirring flutter that ended with a sharp crack as the sword-wielding Murgo's arm snapped.

The sailors drew back, alarmed by their leader's sudden collapse. Then a stubble-cheeked fellow in the front rank lifted a heavy boat hook. "Rush them!" he bellowed. "We want those horses and we outnumber them."

"I think you might want to count again," Polgara said in a cool voice. Even as Garion stepped forward, drawing his

sword out of its sheath, he felt a peculiar shadowy presence to his left. He blinked unbelievably. As real as if he were actually there, the huge, red-bearded shape of Barak stood

at his side.

A clinking sound came from the right, and there, his armor gleaming wet in the rain, stood Mandorallen, and somewhat beyond him, the hawk-faced Hettar. "What thinkest thou, my Lords?" the figure that appeared to be the invincible Baron of Vo Mandor said gaily. "Should we afford these knaves the opportunity to flee, ere we fall upon them and spill out their lifeblood?"

"It seems like the decent thing to do," the apparition of Barak rumbled its agreement. "What do you think, Hettar?"

"They're Murgos," the shade of Hettar said in his quiet, chilling voice as he drew his saber. "Kill them all right here and now. That way we won't have to waste time chasing them down one by one later."

"Somehow I knew you were going to look at it that way." Barak laughed. "All right, my Lords, let's go to work." He drew his heavy sword.

The three images, larger actually than they were in life, advanced grimly on the shrinking sailors. In their midst, painfully aware that he was in fact quite alone, Garion moved forward, his huge sword held low. Then, on the far side of the apparition of Barak, he saw Toth advancing with his huge staff. Beyond him, Sadi held a small poisoned dagger. At the opposite end of the line, Duraik and Silk moved into place.

The image of Barak glanced over at Garion. "Now, Gar-ion!" Polgara's whispered voice came from those bearded

lips.

Instantly he understood. He relaxed the restraints he usually kept on the Orb. The great sword he held leaped into flame, spurring blue fire from its tip almost into the faces of the now-terrified Murgos.

"Will all of you who would like to die immediately and save yourselves the inconvenience and discomfort of being chased down and slowly hacked to pieces please step forward?" the red-bearded shadow at Garion's side roared in tones more grandiose than Barak himself could ever have managed. "We can have you in the arms of your one-eyed God in the blinking of an eye."

It hung there for a moment; then the sailors fled.

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"Oh, Gods!" Garion heard Polgara's ringing voice coming from behind him. "I've wanted to do that for a thousand years!" He turned and saw her, standing with the raging sea and racing black clouds behind her

and the wind tearing at her blue cloak. The rain had plastered her hair to her face and neck, but her glorious eyes were triumphant.

"My Pol!" Belgarath exulted, catching her in a rough embrace. "Gods, what a son you'd have made!"

"I'm your daughter, Belgarath," she replied simply, "but could any son have done better?"

"No, Pol," he laughed suddenly, crushing her to him and soundly planting a kiss on her rain-wet cheek. "Not one bit."

They stopped, startled and even a little embarrassed that the enormous love they had each tried to conceal for millennia had finally come out into the open on this storm-swept beach here at the bottom of the world. Almost shyly they looked at each other and then, unable to hold it in, they began to laugh.

Garion turned away, his eyes suddenly brimming.

Urgit was bending over the sailor with the broken arm. "If you wouldn't mind taking some advice from your king, my man," he said urbanely, "might I remind you that the sea out there is crawling with Maillorens, and Mallorens take a childlike delight in crucifying every Murgo they come across. Don't you think it might be prudent for you and your shipmates to remove yourselves from the vicinity of all that scrap lumber?" He looked meaningfully at the wreck.

The sailor cast a sudden, frightened glance at the storm-tossed channel and scrambled to his feet. Cradling his broken arm, he scurried back up the beach to rejoin his frightened mates.

"He shows a remarkable grasp of the situation, doesn't he?" Urgit said to Silk.

"He does seem uncharacteristically alert," Silk agreed. He looked at the rest of them. "Why don't we mount up and get off this beach?" he suggested. "That wreck stands out like a beacon, and our injured friend and his companions might decide to give horse rustling another try." He looked appraisingly at the hulking images Polgara had conjured up. "Just out of curiosity, Polgara, could those apparitions of yours actually have done any good if it had gotten down to a fight?"

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Polgara was still laughing, her lavender eyes alight. "To be perfectly honest with you, my dear Silk," she replied gaily, "I haven't got the faintest idea."

For some reason her answer sent them all off into helpless gales of laughter.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The slope leading to the top of the headland was covered with rank

grass, drooping under the rain that swept in from the south. As they started up from the beach, Garion looked back. The Murgo sailors had swarmed over the wreck to salvage whatever they could, stopping often to look fearfully out at the storm-racked channel.

At the top of the headland, the full force of the gale struck them, tearing at their clothes and raking them with sheets of rain. Belgarath pulled to a halt, held one hand above his eyes to shield them, and surveyed the treeless expanse of grassland lying sodden and wind-whipped ahead.

"This is totally impossible, father," Polgara declared, drawing her wet cloak more tightly about her. "We're going to have to find shelter and wait this out."

"That might be difficult, Pol." He gazed out over a grass-

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land that showed no signs of any sort of human habitation. The broad valley lying below them was laced with deep gullies where turbulent creeks had cut down through the turf and exposed the rounded boulders and beds of gravel lying beneath the thin topsoil and its tenacious cover of grass. The wind sheeted across that grass, tossing it like waves, and the rain, mingled with icy sleet, raked at it. "Urgit," the old man said, "are there any villages or settlements hereabouts?"

Urgit wiped his face and looked around. "I don't think so," he replied. "The maps don't show anything in this part of Cthaka except the high road leading inland. We might stumble across some isolated farmstead, but I doubt it. The soil here is too thin for crops, and the winters are too severe for cattle."

The old man nodded gloomily. "That's more or less what I thought."

"We might be able to pitch the tents," Durnik said, "but we'll be right out in the open, and there's no firewood anywhere out there."

Eriond had been patiently sitting astride his stallion, staring out at the featureless landscape with a peculiar look of recognition. "Couldn't we take shelter in the watchtower?" he asked.

"What watchtower?" Belgarath asked him, looking around again, "I don't see anything."

"You can't see it from here. It's mostly all tumbled down. The cellar's still all right, though."

"I don't know of any watchtowers on this coast," Urgit said.

"It hasn't been used for a long time."

"Where, Eriond?" Polgara asked. "Can you show us where it is?"

"Of course. It's not too far." The young man turned his stallion and angled up toward the very top of the headland. As they climbed the

hill, Garion looked down and saw a fair number of stone blocks protruding up out of the grass. It was difficult to say for sure, but at least some of those blocks bore what looked vaguely like chisel marks.

When they reached the top, the gale shrieked around them, and the tossing grass whipped at their horses' legs.

"Are you sure, Eriond?" Polgara shouted over the wind.

"We can get in from the other side," he replied confi-

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dently. "It might be better to lead the horses, though. The entrance is fairly close to the edge of the bluff." He slid out of his saddle and led the way across the grassy, rounded top of the hill. The rest of them followed him. "Be careful here," he warned, moving around a slight depression. "Part of the roof is sagging a bit."

Just past that grass-covered depression was a bank that angled steeply downward to a narrow ledge. Beyond that, the bluff broke away sharply. Eriond picked his way down the bank and led his horse along the ledge. Garion followed him; when he reached the ledge, he glanced over the edge of the bluff. Far below, he saw the wreck lying on the beach. A broad line of footprints stretched away from it at the water's edge to disappear in the rain.

"Here it is," Eriond said. Then he disappeared, leading his horse, it seemed, directly into the grass-covered bank.

The rest of them followed curiously and found a narrow, arched opening that had quite obviously been built by human hands. The long grass above and on each side of the arch had grown over it until it was barely visible. Gratefully, Garion pushed his way through that grass-obscured opening into a calm, musty-smelling darkness.

"Did anyone think to bring any torches?" Sadi asked.

"They were with the food-packs, I'm afraid," Durnik apologized. "Here, let's see what I can do." Garion felt a light surge and heard a faint rushing sound. A dimly glowing spot of light appeared, balanced on the palm of Durnik's hand. Gradually that dim light grew until they could see the interior of the ancient ruin. Like so many structures that had been built in antiquity, this low-ceilinged cellar was vaulted. Stone arches supported the ceiling, and the walls were solidly buttressed. Garion had seen precisely the same construction in King Anheg's eons-old palace in Val Alorn, in the ruins of Vo Wacune, in the lower floors of his own Citadel at Riva, and even in the echoing tomb of the one-eyed God in Cthol Mishrak.

Silk was looking speculatively at Eriond. "I'm sure you have an explanation," he said. "How did you know that this place was here?"

"I lived here for a while with Zedar. It was while he was waiting until I'd grow old enough to steal the Orb."

Silk looked slightly disappointed. "How prosaic," he said.

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"I'm sorry," Eriond said as he led the horses over to one side of the vaulted room. "Would you like to have me make up some kind of story for you instead?" "Never mind, Eriond," the little man told him. Urgit had been examining one of the buttresses. "No Murgo ever built this," he declared. "The stones fit too closely."

"It was built before the Murgos came to this part of the world," Eriond said.

"By the slave race?" Urgit asked incredulously. "All they know how to make are mud huts."

"That's what they wanted you to think. They were building towers—and cities—when Murgos were still living in goatskin tents."

"Could somebody please make a fire?" Ce'Nedra asked through chattering teeth. "I'm freezing." Garion looked at her closely and saw that her lips had a bluish tinge to them. "The firewood's over here," Eriond said. He went behind one of the buttresses and emerged with an armload of white-bleached sticks. "Zedar and I used to carry driftwood up from the beach. There's still quite a bit left." He went to the fireplace in the back wall, dropped the wood, and bent over to peer up the chimney. "It seems to be clear," he said. Durnik went to work immediately with his flint, steel, and tinder. In a few moments, a small curl of orange flame was licking up through the little peaked roof of splinters he had built on the bed of ash in the fireplace. They all crowded around that tiny flame, thrusting twigs and sticks at it in their eagerness to force it to grow more quickly.

"That won't do," Durnik said with uncharacteristic sternness. "You'll only knock it apart and put it out." They reluctantly backed away from the fireplace. Dumik carefully laid twigs and splinters on the growing flame, then small sticks, and finally larger ones. The flames grew higher and began to spread quickly through the bone-dry wood. The light from the fireplace began to fill the musty cellar, and Garion could feel a faint warmth on his face.

"All right, then," Polgara said in a crisp, businesslike way, "what are we going to do about food?"

"The sailors have left the wreck," Garion said, "and the tide's gone out enough so that all but the very aft end of the ship is out of the water. I'll take some packhorses and go back down there to see what I can find."

Durnik's fire had begun to crackle. He stood up and looked at Eriond. "Can you manage here?" he asked.

Eriond nodded and went behind the buttress for more wood.

The smith bent and picked up his cloak. "Toth and I can go with you, Garion," he said, "just in case those sailors decide to come back. But we're going to have to hurry. It's going to start getting dark before too long."

The gale still howled across the weather-rounded top of the headland, driving rain and sleet before it. Garion and his two friends picked their way carefully down the slope again toward the forlorn-looking ship, lying twisted and broken-backed on the boulder that had claimed her life.

"How long do you think this storm is going to last?" Gar-ion shouted to Durnik.

"It's hard to say," Durnik shouted back. "It could blow over tonight or it could keep it up for several days."

"I was afraid you might say that."

They reached the wreck, dismounted, and entered the hold through the opening they had previously made in the bow. "I don't think we'll find too much down here," Durnik said. "Our own food is all spoiled, and I don't think the sailors stored anything perishable in the hold."

Garion nodded. "Can we get Aunt Pol's cooking things?" he asked. "She'll want those, I think."

Durnik peered aft at the bilge-soaked bags and bales lying in a tumbled heap in the shattered stern, with surf sloshing over them through the holes rent in the hull in that end of the ship. "I think so," he said. "I'll take a look."

"As long as we're here, we might as well pick up the rest of the things we had in those aft cabins," Garion said. "I'll go gather them up while you and Toth see what the sailors left behind in the galley." He climbed carefully over the splintered timbers at the point where the keel had broken and went up a ladder to the hatch above. Then he slipped and slid down the deck to the aft companion way.

It took him perhaps a quarter of an hour to gather up the belongings they had left behind when they had fled the

^ wreck. He wrapped them all in a sheet of sailcloth and went

;->t back up on deck. He carried his bundle forward and dropped

- it over the side onto the wet sand of the beach.

Durnik poked his head out of the forward companionway.

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"There isn't much, Garion," he said. "The sailors picked it over pretty thoroughly."

"We'll have to make do with whatever we can find, I guess." Garion squinted up through the rain. The sky was growing noticeably darker. "We'd better hurry," he added. They reached the top of the headland in a gale-torn twilight and carefully led their horses along the edge of the bluff to the entrance of the cellar as the last tatters of daylight faded from the sky. The inside of the vaulted chamber was warm now and filled with the light of the fire dancing on the hearth. The others had strung lines from the arches during their absence, and their blankets and clothing hung dripping and steaming along the walls.

"Any luck?" Silk asked as Garion led his horse inside. "Not much," Garion admitted. "The sailors cleaned out the galley pretty thoroughly."

Durnik and Toth led in the other horses and lifted down a number of makeshift packs. "We found a bag of beans," the smith reported, "and a crock full of honey. There was a sack of meal back in a corner and a couple of sides of bacon. The sailors left the bacon behind because it was moldy, but we ought to be able to cut most of the mold away."

"That's all?" Polgara asked.

"I'm afraid so, Pol," Durnik replied. "We picked up a brazier and a couple of bags of charcoal—since there doesn't seem to be any firewood in this part of the world."

She frowned slightly, running over the inventory he had just given her.

"It's not very much, Pol," he apologized, "but it was the best we could do."

"I can manage with it, dear," she said, smiling at him. "I picked up the clothes we left in those aft cabins, too," Garion said as he unsaddled his horse. "A few of them are even dry."

"Good," Polgara said. "Let's all change into whatever dry clothing will fit, and I'll see what I can do about something to eat."

Silk had been looking suspiciously at the sack of meal. "Gruel?" he asked, looking unhappy.

"Beans would take much too long to cook," she replied. "Porridge and

honey—and a bit of bacon—will get us through the night."

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He sighed.

The following morning, the rain and sleet had let up, although the wind still tore at the long grass atop the headland. Garion, wrapped in his cloak, stood on the ledge outside the entrance to the cellar, looking out over the froth-tipped waves in the gulf and the surf pounding on the beach far below. Off to the southeast, the clouds seemed to be growing thinner, and patches of blue raced along through the dirty-looking murk covering the rest of the sky. Sometime during the night, the tide had once again washed over the wreck of their ship, and the aft end had broken away and been carried off. A number of huddled lumps bobbed limply at the edge of the surf, and Garion resolutely kept his eyes away from those mute remains of the Murgo sailors who had been washed overboard and drowned when the ship had crashed into the reef.

Then, far up the coast, he saw a number of red-sailed ships beating their way along the south shore of the Gorand Sea toward the broken remains of the ship lying on the beach below.

Belgarath and Eriond pushed their way past the sailcloth door Durnik had hung across the arched entrance to the cellar the night before to join Garion on the ledge. "It's quit raining at least," Garion reported, "and the wind seems to be dropping. There's that problem though." He pointed at the Malloreal ships coming up the coast.

Belgarath grunted. "They're certain to come ashore when they see the wreck," he agreed. "I think it's time for us to leave here."

Eriond was looking around with a strange expression on his face. "It hasn't changed much," he noted. He pointed toward a small, grassy bench at the far end of the ledge. "I used to play there," he said, "when Zedar let me come outside, anyway."

"Did he talk to you very much while you were staying here?" Belgarath asked him.

"Not very often." Eriond shrugged. "He kept pretty much to himself. He had some books with him and he used to spend most of his time with them."

"It must have been a lonely way to grow up," Garion said.

"It wasn't so bad. I used to spend a lot of my time watching the clouds—or the birds. In the springtime the birds nest in holes in the face of this bluff. If you lean out over the

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edge, you can see them coming and going, and I always used to like

watching the fledglings when they first tried out their wings,"

"Do you have any idea of how far it is to the high road that leads inland?" Belgarath asked him.

"It used to take us about a day to get there. Of course I was small then, and I couldn't walk very fast."

Belgarath nodded. He shaded his eyes with one hand and looked at the Malloreal ships laboring up the coast. "I think we'd better tell the others," he said. "We won't accomplish too much by trying to hold this place against several shiploads of the Malloreal sailors."

It took perhaps an hour to gather up their still-wet clothing and their meager food supply and load the pack horses. Then they pushed their way out past the sailcloth door and led their horses to the far side of the headland. Garion noticed that Eriond looked back once with a faintly regretful expression, then resolutely turned his back on his childhood home to face the grassland lying ahead. "I sort of know the way," he said. "Those creeks out there are running bank-full, though, so we'll have to be careful." He swung lightly up into his saddle. "I'll go on ahead and pick the best route." He leaned forward and stroked his stallion's neck. Then he smiled. "Horse wants to run a bit anyway." He moved off down the hill at a rolling gallop.

"That's a very strange boy," Urgit said as he mounted. "Did he really know Zedar?"

"Oh, yes," Silk replied, "and also Ctuchik." He gave Polgara a sly look. "He's been consorting with strange people all his life, so his peculiarities aren't really all that hard to understand."

The small patches of blue that had touched the southeastern sky when Garion had first awakened had spread now, and columns of bright morning sunlight streamed down through the misty air to stalk ponderously across the stream-laced grassland below. The wind had abated to little more than a gusty breeze, and they rode on down through the still-wet grass at a brisk canter, following the trail of Eriond and his exuberant horse.

Ce'Nedra, dressed now in one of Eriond's tunics and a pair of woolen leggings, pulled in beside Garion.

"I like your outfit, my Queen." He grinned.

"All my dresses were still wet," she said. She paused,

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her face growing somber. "It's not working out very well, is it, Garion? We were counting so much on that ship."

"Oh, I don't know," he replied. "We saved a bit of time and we managed to get around most of the war zone. Once we get past Rak Cthaka, maybe we'll be able to find another ship. I don't think we actually lost any time."

"But we didn't gain any either, did we?"

"It's hard to say exactly."

She sighed and rode on beside him in silence.

They reached the high road about noon and turned eastward, making good time for the rest of the day. There was 'no sign that any other travelers had recently used the road, but Silk ranged out in front of them as a precautionary scout. A clump of willows at the side of the road afforded some shelter that night and also provided the poles necessary for erecting their tents. Supper that evening consisted of beans and bacon, a meal which Urgit in particular found less than satisfying. "I'd give anything for a chunk of beef right now," he complained, "even one as badly prepared as the cooks at the Drojim used to offer me."

"Would you prefer a bowl of boiled grass, your Majesty?" Praia asked him pertly, "or perhaps a nice plate of fried willow bark?"

He gave her a sour look, then turned to Garion. "Tell me," he said, "do you and your friends plan to remain long in Cthol Murgos?"

"Not too long, why?"

"Western ladies seem to have a broad streak of independence in their nature—and a regrettable tendency to speak their minds. I find their influence on certain impressionable Murgo ladies to be unwholesome." Then, as if suddenly realizing that he might have gone too far, he threw an apprehensive glance in Polgara's direction. "No offense intended, my Lady," he apologized quickly. "Just an old Murgo prejudice."

"I see," she replied.

Belgarath set aside his plate and looked over at Silk. "You were out in front all day," he noted. "Did you happen to see any game moving around?"

"There were herds of what looked like some sort of large deer moving north," the little man answered, "but they stayed a long way out of bow shot."

"What have you got in mind, old man?" Polgara asked.

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"We need fresh meat, Pol," he replied, rising to his feet. "Moldy bacon and boiled beans aren't going to get us very far." He stepped out of the small circle of light and squinted up at the moon-speckled clouds drifting across the stars. "It might be a good night for hunting," he observed. "What do you think?"

A curious smile touched her lips, and she also rose. "Do you think you can still keep up, old wolf?" she asked him.

"Well enough, I suppose," he said blandly. "Come along, Garion. Let's get a tittle way away from the horses."

"Where are they going?" Urgit asked Silk.

"You don't want to know, my brother. You really don't want to know."

The moon touched the grass waving in the night breeze with silvery light. The scents of the grassland around them came sharply to Garion's nostrils as his ten-fold heightened sense of smell tasted the odors of the night. He loped easily at the side of the great silvery wolf while the snowy owl ghosted through the moonlight above them. It was good again to run tirelessly with the wind ruffling his fur and his toenails digging into the damp turf as he and his grandfather wolf ranged out across the moon-silvered grass in the ancient rite of the hunt.

They started a herd of deerlike creatures from their matted grass beds some leagues east of their camp and pursued them hard for miles across the rolling hills. Then, as the terrified animals plunged across a rain-swollen creek, an old buck, pushed to exhaustion, missed his footing, tumbled end over end, throwing up a great spray of water, and came to rest against the far bank, his antlers dug into the shore and his grotesquely twisted head proclaiming that his fall had snapped his neck.

Without thinking, Garion leaped from the bank into the swollen creek, drove himself rapidly across, and caught the dead buck by the foreleg with his powerful jaws. Straining, he dragged the still-warm carcass up onto the bank before the rushing creek could sweep it away.

Belgarath and Polgara, who had once again resumed their natural forms, came sauntering up the gravel bank as calmly as if they were on an evening stroll. "He's very good, isn't he?" Polgara observed.

"Not bad," Belgarath admitted. Then he drew his knife from his belt and tested its edge with his thumb. "We'll dress

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the deer out," he said to her. "Why don't you go back and get Durnik and a pack horse?"

"All right, father," she agreed, shimmered in the moonlight, and swooped away on silent wings.

"You're going to need your hands, Garion," the old man said pointedly.

"Oh," Garion said in the manner of wolves and rose from his haunches. "Sorry, Grandfather. I forgot." He changed back into his own form a little regretfully.

There were some queer looks the following morning when Polgara served up steaks instead of porridge, but no one chose to say anything about

the sudden change of diet.

They rode on for the next two days, with the last wrack and tatter of the dying storm flowing overhead. About noon, they crested a long hill and saw before them the broad blue expanse of a great body of water.

"Lake Cthaka," Urgit said. "Once we circle that, we're only two days from Rak Cthaka itself."

"Sadi," Belgarath said, "have you got your map?"

"Right here, Ancient One," the eunuch replied, reaching inside his robe.

"Let's have a look." The old sorcerer swung down from his horse, took the parchment map from Sadi, and opened it. The wind coming off the lake rattled and fluttered it, threatening to tear it from his grasp. "Oh, stop that," he snapped irritably. Then he stared at the map for several long moments. "I think we're going to have to get off the road," he said finally. "The storm and the wreck delayed us, and we can't be absolutely certain how far the Malloreans have marched since we left Rak Urga. I don't want an army catching us with the lake at our backs. The Malloreans don't have any reason to be on the south side of the lake, so we'll go that way instead." He pointed at a large area on the map covered with a representation of trees. "We'll find out what the situation is in Rak Cthaka," he said, "and if we need to, we'll be able to get into the Great Southern Forest."

"Belgarath," Durnik said urgently, pointing toward the north, "what's that?"

A low smudge of black smoke was streaming low to the horizon in the stiff breeze.

"Grass fire perhaps?" Sadi suggested.

Belgarath began to swear. "No," he said shortly, "it's not the right color." He pulled the map open again. "There

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are some villages up there," he said. "I think it's one of them."

"Malloreans!" Urgit gasped.

"How could they have gotten this far west?" Silk asked.

"Wait a minute," Garion said as a sudden thought came to him. He looked at Urgit. "Who wins when you fight the Malloreans in the mountains?" he asked.

"We do, of course. We know how to use the mountains to our advantage."

"But when you fight them on the plains, who wins?"

"They do. They've got more people."

"Then your armies are safe only as long as they stay in the mountains?"

"I already said that, Belgarion."

"If I were the one who was fighting you then, I'd try to figure out a way to lure you down onto the plains. If I moved around, making threatening noises at Rak Cthaka, you'd almost have to respond, wouldn't you? You'd send all your troops out of Urga and Morcth to defend the city. But if, instead of attacking the city, I moved my forces north and west, I could intercept and ambush you out in the open on flat ground. I could pick my battlefields and destroy both your armies in a single day."

Urgit's face had grown very pale. "That's what those Mal-lorean ships were doing in the Gorand Sea!" he exclaimed. "They were there to spy out the movements of my troops coming from Rak Urga. Zakath's setting traps for me." He spun, his eyes wild. "Belgarath, you've got to let me go warn my troops. They're completely unprepared for an attack. The Malioreans will wipe my army out, and they're the only force between here and Rak Urga."

Belgarath tugged at one earlobe, squinting at him.

"Please, Belgarath!"

"Do you think you can move fast enough to get ahead of the Malloreans?"

"I have to. If I don't, Cthol Murgos will fall. Blast it, old man, I've got a responsibility."

"I think you're finally beginning to learn, Urgit," Belgarath told him. "We might make a king out of you, after all. Durnik, give him whatever food we can spare." He turned back to Silk's anxious brother. "Don't take chances," he cautioned. "Stay off the hilltops where you'll be outlined against the sky. Make the best time you can, but

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don't kill your horse in the process." He stopped, then gruffly grasped the weasel-faced man by the shoulders. "Good luck," he said shortly.

Urgit nodded, then turned toward his horse.

Praia was right behind him.

"What do you think you're doing?" he demanded.

"I'm going with you."

"You most certainly are not!"

"We're wasting time."

"There's probably going to be a battle, girl. Use your head."

"I'm a Murgo, too," she declared defiantly, "I'm descended from the Cthan Dynasty. I'm not afraid of battles!" She caught the reins of her horse and lifted the long black leather case down from her saddle. She untied the fastenings and snapped the case open. Inside lay a sword, its hilt encrusted with rubies. She lifted it from the case and held it aloft. "This is the sword of the last king of the Cthan Dynasty," she announced dramatically. "He took the field with it at Vo Mimbire. Do not dishonor it." She reversed the blade and offered him the hilt across her forearm.

He stared first at her and then at the sword.

"It was to have been my gift to you on our wedding day," she said to him, "but you need it now. Take the sword, King of the Murgos, and get on your horse. We have a battle to win."

He took the sword and held it up. The rubies caught the sun like drops of blood on the hilt. Then he suddenly turned, as if on an impulse. "Cross swords, with me, Belgarion," he said, "for luck."

Garion nodded and drew his great sword. The fire that ran up its blade was a bright blue; when he touched Urgit's extended weapon with it, the smaller man winced as if the hilt of his sword had suddenly burned his hand. Then he stared at it incredulously. The stones on the hilt of his sword were no longer rubies, but bright blue sapphires. "Did you do that?" he gasped.

"No," Garion replied. "The Orb did. It seems to like you for some reason. Good luck, your Majesty."

"Thanks, your Majesty," Urgit answered. "And good luck to you, too—all of you." He started toward his horse again, then turned back and wordlessly caught Silk in a rough embrace. "All right, girl," he said to Praia, "let's go."

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"Good-bye, Ce'Nedra," Praia called as she mounted her horse. "Thank you—for everything." The two of them wheeled their horses and raced off toward the north.

Silk sighed. "I'm afraid I'm going to lose him," he said mournfully.

"To the Malloreans, you mean?" Durnik asked.

"No—to that girl. She had a marrying sort of expression on her face

when they left."

"I think it's sweet," Ce'Nedra sniffed.

"Sweet? I think it's revolting." He looked around. "If we're going around the south end of the lake, we'd better get started."

They galloped south along the lake shore through the long, golden-slanting beams of afternoon sunlight until they were a couple of leagues from the place where Urgit and Praia had so abruptly left them. Then Silk, ranging once again ahead of them, crested a hill and motioned them to come ahead, but cautiously.

"What is it?" Belgarath asked when they joined him.

"There's something else burning up ahead," the little man reported. "I didn't get too close, but it looks like an isolated farmstead."

"Let's go look," Durnik said to Toth, and the two of them rode off in the direction of the smudge of smoke lying low on the horizon to the east.

"I'd certainly like to know if Urgit's doing all right," Silk said with a worried frown.

"You really like him, don't you?" Velvet asked him.

"Urgit? Yes, I think I do. We're very much alike in many ways." He looked at her. "I suppose that you're going to mention all of this in your report to Javelin?"

"Naturally."

"I really wish you wouldn't, you know."

"Why on earth not?"

"I'm not entirely sure. It's just that for some reason I don't think I want Drasnian Intelligence using my relationship to the King of Cthol Murgos for its own advantage. I think I want to keep it private."

A silver twilight was settling over the lake when Durnik and Toth returned with grim faces. "It was a Murgo farmstead," Durnik reported. "Some Malloreans had been there. I don't think they were regular troops—probably deserters of some kind. They looted and burned, and regular troops

don't usually do that, if they've got officers around to control them. The house is gone, but the barn is still partially intact."

"Is there enough of it left to shelter us for the night?" Garion wanted to know.

Durnik looked dubious, then shrugged. "The roofs still mostly there."

"Is something wrong?" Belgarath asked him.

Durnik made a small gesture and then walked away until he was out of earshot of the rest. Garion and Belgarath followed him.

"What's the matter, Durnik?" Belgarath asked.

"The barn's good enough to give us shelter," the smith said quietly, "but I think you ought to know that those Mal-lorean deserters impaled everybody on the farmstead. I don't think you want the ladies to see that. It isn't very pleasant."

"Is there someplace where you can get the bodies under cover?" the old man asked.

"I'll see what we can do," Durnik sighed. "Why do people do that sort of thing?"

"Ignorance, usually. An ignorant man falls back on brutality out of a lack of imagination. Go with them, Garion. They might need some help. Wave a torch to let us know when you get finished."

The fact that it was nearly dark helped a little. Garion was unable to see the faces of the people on the stakes. There was a sod-roofed cellar at the back of the still-smoldering house, and they put the bodies there. Then Garion took up a torch and walked some distance from the house to signal to Belgarath. The barn was dry, and the fire Durnik built in a carefully cleared area on the stone floor soon wanned it.

"This is actually pleasant," Ce'Nedra declared with a smile as she looked around at the dancing shadows on the walls and rafters. She sat on a pile of fragrant hay and bounced tentatively a few times. "And this will make wonderful beds. I hope we can find a place like this every night."

Garion walked over to the door and looked out, not trusting himself to answer. He had grown up on a farm not really all that much different from this one, and the thought of a band of marauding soldiers swooping down on Faldor's farm, burning and killing, filled him with a vast outrage. A sudden image rose in his mind. The shadowy faces of the dead Murgos hanging on those stakes might very well have been the faces of his childhood friends, and that thought

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shook him to the very core of his being. The dead here had been Murgos, but they had also been farmers, and he felt a sudden kinship with them. The savagery that had befallen them began to take on the aspect of a personal affront, and dark thoughts began to fill his mind.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

By morning it was raining again, a drizzly sort of rain that made the surrounding countryside hazy and indistinct. They rode out from the ruins of the farmstead, dressed again in their slaver's robes, and turned northward along the eastern shore of the lake.

Garion rode in silence, his thoughts as somber as the leaden waters of the lake lying to his left. The rage he had felt the previous evening had settled into an icy resolve. Justice, he had been told, was an abstraction, but he was determined that, should the Mallorean deserters responsible for the atrocity at the farm ever cross his path, he would turn the abstract into an immediate reality. He knew that Bel-garath and Polgara did not approve of the sort of thing he had in mind, so he kept his peace and contemplated the idea of vengeance, if not justice.

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When they reached the muddy road coming in off the northern end of the lake and stretching out toward the southeast and the city of Rak Cthaka, they found it clogged with a horde of terrified civilians, dressed for the most part in ragged clothing and carrying bundles of what few possessions they had been able to salvage.

"I think we'll stay off the road," Belgarath decided. "We could never make any time through that mob."

"Are we going on to Rak Cthaka?" Sadi asked him.

Belgarath looked at the crowd streaming along the road. "I don't think you could find a raft in Rak Cthaka right now, much less a ship. Let's go on into the forest and work our way south through the trees. I don't much like staying out in the open in hostile territory, and fishing villages are better places to hire boats than the piers of a major city."

"Why don't you and the others ride on," Silk suggested. "I'd like to ask a few questions."

Belgarath grunted. "That might not be a bad idea. Just don't be too long at it. I'd like to reach the Great Southern Forest sometime before the end of winter, if I can possibly manage it."

"I'll go with him, Grandfather," Garion offered. "I need to get my mind off some things I've seen lately, anyway."

The two of them rode through the knee-high grass toward the broad stream of frightened refugees fleeing southward. "Garion," Silk said, reining in his horse, "isn't that a Sen-dar—the one pushing the wheelbarrow?"

Garion shielded his eyes from the rain and peered at the sturdy fellow Silk had pointed out. "He sort of looks like a Sendar," he agreed. "What would a Sendar be doing down here in Cthol Murgos?"

"Why don't we go ask him? Sendars love to gossip, so he can probably give us some idea of what's happening." The little man walked his horse over until he was riding beside the stout man with the wheelbarrow. "Morning, friend," he said pleasantly. "You're a long

way from home, aren't you?"

The stout man set down his barrow and eyed Silk's green Nyissan robe apprehensively. "I'm not a slave," he declared, "so don't get any ideas."

"This?" Silk laughed, plucking at the front of the robe. "Don't worry, friend, we're not Nyissans. We just found these on some bodies back there a ways. We thought they

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might be a help if we happened to run into somebody official. What in the world are you doing in Cthol Murgos?"

"Running," the Sendar said ruefully, "just like all the rest of this rabble. Didn't you hear about what's been happening?"

"No. We've been out of touch."

The stout man lifted the handles of his barrow again and trudged along the grassy shoulder of the road. "There's a whole Mallorean army marching west out of Gorut," he said. "They burned the town I lived in and killed half the people. They didn't even bother with Rak Cthaka, so that's where we're all going. I'm going to see if I can find a sea captain who's going in the general direction of Sendaria. For some reason, I'm suddenly homesick."

"You've been living in a Murgo town?" Silk asked with some surprise.

The fellow made a face. "It wasn't altogether by choice," he replied. "I had some trouble with the law in Tolnedra when I was there on business ten years ago and I took passage on board a merchantman to get out of the country. The captain was a scoundrel; when my money ran out, he sailed off and left me on the wharf at Rak Cthaka. I drifted on up to a town on the north side of the lake. They let me stay because I was willing to do things that are beneath Murgo dignity, but were too important to trust a slave to do. It was sort of degrading, but it was a living. Anyway, a couple days ago the Malloreans marched through. When they left, there wasn't a single building standing."

"How did you escape?" Silk asked him. : "I hid under a haystack until dark. That's when I joined '. this mob." He glanced over at the crowd of refugees slogging through the ankle-deep mud of the road. "Isn't that pathetic? They don't even have sense enough to spread out and walk on the grass. You certainly wouldn't see soldiers doing that, let me tell you."

"You've had some military experience, then?"

"I most certainly have," the stout man replied proudly. "I was a sergeant in Princess Ce'Nedra's army. I was at Thull Mardu with her."

"I missed that one," Silk told him with aplomb. "I was busy someplace else. Are there any Malloreans between here and the Great Southern

Forest?"

"Who knows? I don't go looking for Malloreans. You

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don't really want to go into the forest, though. AH this killing has stirred up the Haveners."

"Raveners? What's that?"

"Ghouls. They feed on dead bodies most of the time, but I've heard some very ugly stories lately. I'd make a special point of staying out of the forest, my friend."

"We might have to keep that in mind. Thanks for the information. Good luck when you get to Rak Cthaka, and I hope you make it back to Camaar."

"Right now, I'd settle for Tol Honeth. Tolnedran jails aren't really all that bad."

Silk grinned at him quickly, turned his horse, and led Gar-ion away from the road at a gallop to rejoin the others.

That afternoon they forded the River Cthaka some leagues upstream from the coast. The drizzle slackened as evening approached, though the sky remained cloudy. Once they had reached the far side of the river, they could see the irregular, dark shape of the edge of the Great Southern Forest, looming up beyond perhaps a league of open grassland.

"Shall we try for it?" Silk asked.

"Let's wait," Belgarath decided. "I'm just a little concerned about what that fellow you talked with said. I'm not sure I want any surprises—particularly in the dark."

"There's a willow thicket downstream a ways," Durnik said, pointing at a fair-sized grove of spindly trees bordering the river a half mile or so to the south. "Toth and I can pitch the tents there."

"All right," Belgarath agreed.

"How far is it to Verkat now, Grandfather?" Garion asked as they rode down along the rain-swollen river toward the willows.

"According to the map, it's about fifty leagues to the southeast before we reach the coast opposite the island. Then we'll have to find a boat to get us across."

Garion sighed.

"Don't get discouraged," Belgarath told him. "We're making better time than I'd originally expected, and Zan-dramas can't run forever. There's only so much land in the world. Sooner or later we'll chase

her down."

As Durnik and Toth pitched the tents, Garion and Eriond ranged out through the sodden willow thicket in search of firewood. It was difficult to find anything sufficiently dry to burn, and the effort of an hour yielded only enough twigs

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and small branches from under fallen trees to make a meager cook fire for Polgara. As she began to prepare their evening meal of beans and venison, Garion noted that Sadi was walking about their campsite, combing the ground with his eyes. "This isn't funny, dear," he said quite firmly. "Now you come out this very minute."

"What's the matter?" Durnik asked him.

"Zith isn't in her bottle," Sadi replied, still searching.

Durnik rose from where he was sitting quite rapidly. "Are you sure?"

"She thinks it's amusing to hide from me sometimes. Now, you come out immediately, you naughty snake."

"You probably shouldn't tell Silk," Belgarath advised. "He'll go directly into hysterics if he finds out that she's loose." The old man looked around. "Where is he, by the way?"

"He and Liselle went for a walk," Eriond told him.

"In all this wet? Sometimes I wonder about him."

Ce'Nedra came over and sat on the log beside Garion. He put his arm about her shoulders and drew her close to him. She snuggled down and sighed. "I wonder what Geran is doing tonight," she said wistfully.

"Sleeping, probably."

"He always looked so adorable when he was asleep." She sighed again and then closed her eyes.

There was a crashing back in the willows, and Silk suddenly ran into the circle of firelight, his eyes very wide and his face deathly pale.

"What's the matter?" Durnik exclaimed.

"She had that snake in her bodice!" Silk blurted.

"Who did?"

"Liselle!"

Polgara, holding a ladle in one hand, turned to regard the violently trembling little man with one raised eyebrow. "Tell me, Prince Kheldar," she said in a cool voice, "exactly what were you doing in

the Margravine Liselle's bodice?"

Silk endured that steady gaze for a moment; then he actually began to blush furiously.

"Oh," she said, "I see." She turned back to her cooking.

It was past midnight, and Garion was not sure what it was that had awakened him. He moved slowly to avoid waking Ce'Nedra and carefully parted the tentflap to look out. A dense, clinging fog had arisen from the river, and all that he

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could see was a curtain of solid, dirty white. He lay quietly, straining his ears to catch any sound.

From somewhere off in the fog, he heard a faint clinking sound; it took him a moment to identify it. Finally he realized that what he was hearing was the sound of a mounted man wearing a mail shirt. He reached over in the darkness and took up his sword.

"I still think you ought to tell us what you found in that house before you set it on fire," he heard someone say in a gruff, Malloreal-accented voice. The speaker was not close, but sounds at night traveled far, so Garion could clearly understand what was being said.

"Oh, it wasn't much, Corporal," another Malloreal voice replied evasively. "A bit of this; a bit of that."

"I think you ought to share those things with the rest of us. We're all in this together, after all."

"Isn't it odd that you didn't think of that until after I managed to pick up a few things? If you want to share in the loot, then you should pay attention to the houses and not spend all your time impaling the prisoners."

"We're at war," the corporal declared piously. "It's our duty to kill the enemy."

"Duty," the second Malloreal snorted derisively. "We're deserters, Corporal. Our only duty is to ourselves. If you want to spend your time butchering Murgo fanners, that's up to you, but I'm saving up for my retirement."

Garion carefully rolled out from under the tent flap. He felt a peculiar calm, almost as if his emotions had somehow been set aside. He rose and moved silently to where the packs were piled and burrowed his hand into them one by one until his fingers touched steel. Then, carefully, so that it made no sound, he drew out his heavy mail shirt. He pulled it on and shrugged his shoulders a couple of times to settle it into place.

Toth was standing guard near the horses, his huge bulk looming in the

fog.

"There's something I have to take care of," Garion whispered softly to the mute giant.

Toth looked at him gravely, then nodded. He turned, untied a horse from the picket line, and handed him the reins. Then he put one huge hand on Garion's shoulder, squeezed once in silent approval, and stepped back.

Garion did not want to give the Mallorean deserters time

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to lose themselves in the fog, so he pulled himself up onto the unsaddled horse and moved out of the willow thicket at a silent walk.

The fading voices that had come out of the fog had seemed to be moving in the direction of the forest, and Garion rode quietly after them, probing the foggy darkness ahead with his ears and with his mind.

After he had ridden for perhaps a mile, he heard a raucous laugh coming from somewhere ahead and slightly to the left. "Did you hear the way they squealed when we impaled them?" a coarse voice came out of the clinging mist.

"That does it," Garion grated from between clenched teeth as he drew his sword. He directed his horse toward the sound, then nudged his heels at the animal's flanks. The horse moved faster, his hooves making no sound on the damp earth.

"Let's have some light," one of the deserters said.

"Do you think it's safe? There are patrols out looking for deserters."

"It's after midnight. The patrols are all in bed. Go ahead and light the torch."

After a moment, there was a fatally ruddy beacon glowing in the dark and reaching out to Garion.

His charge caught the deserters totally by surprise. Several of them were dead before they even knew that he was upon them. There were screams and shouts from both sides as he crashed through them, chopping them out of their saddles with huge strokes to the right and the left. His great blade sheared effortlessly through mail, bone, and flesh. He sent five of them tumbling to the ground as he thundered through their ranks. Then he whirled on the three who still remained. After one startled look, one of them fled; another dragged his sword from its sheath, and the third, who held the torch, sat frozen in astonished terror.

The Mallorean with the sword feebly raised his weapon to protect his head from the dreadful blow Garion had already launched. The great

overhand sweep, however, shattered the doomed man's sword blade and sheared down through his helmet halfway to his waist. Roughly, Garion kicked the twitching body off his sword and turned on the torch bearer.

"Please!" the terrified man cried, trying to back his horse away. "Have mercy!"

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For some reason, that plaintive cry infuriated Garion all the more. He clenched his teeth together. With a single broad swipe, he sent the murderer's head spinning off into the foggy darkness.

He pulled his horse up sharply, cocked his head for a moment to pick up the sound of the last Mallolean's galloping flight, and set out in pursuit.

It took him only a few minutes to catch up with the fleeing deserter. At first he had only the sound to follow, but then he was able to make out the dim, shadowy form racing ahead of him in the fog. He veered slightly to the right, plunged on past the desperate man, then pulled his horse directly into the shadowy deserter's path.

"Who are you?" the unshaven Mallolean squealed as he hauled his mount to a sudden, rearing stop. "Why are you doing this?"

"I am justice," Garion grated at him and quite deliberately ran the man through.

The deserter stared in horrified amazement at the huge sword protruding from his chest. With a gurgling sigh, he toppled to one side, sliding limply off the blade.

Still without any real sense of emotion, Garion dismounted and wiped the blade of his sword on the dead man's tunic. Almost as an afterthought, he caught the reins of the fellow's horse, remounted, and turned back toward the place where he had killed the others. Carefully, one by one, he checked each fallen body for signs of life, then rounded up three more horses and rode back to the camp concealed in the willows.

Silk stood beside the huge Toth near the picket line. "Where have you been?" he demanded in a hoarse whisper as Garion dismounted.

"We needed some more horses," Garion replied tersely, handing the reins of the captured mounts to Toth.

"Mallolean ones, judging from the saddles," Silk noted. "How did you find them?"

"Their riders were talking as they went by. They seemed to be quite amused by a visit they paid to a Murgo farmstead a few days ago."

"And you didn't even invite me to go along?" Silk accused.

"Sorry," Garion said, "but I had to hurry. I didn't want to lose them in the fog."

"Four of them?" Silk asked, counting horses.

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"I couldn't find the other four mounts." Garion shrugged. "These ought to be enough to make up for the ones we lost during the shipwreck, though."

"Eight?" Silk looked a bit startled at that.

"I came on them by surprise. It wasn't much of a fight. Why don't we get some sleep?"

"Uh-Garion," Silk suggested, "it might not be a bad idea for you to wash up before you go back to bed. Ce'Nedra's nerves are a little delicate, and she might be upset, if she wakes up and sees you covered with blood the way you are."

The fog was even thicker the following morning. It was a heavy fog, chill and clinging, lying densely along the river bank and bedewing the tangled limbs of the willow thicket at their backs with strings of pearllike droplets.

"It hides us, at least," Garion observed, still feeling that peculiar remoteness.

"It also hides anybody else who might be out there," Sadi told him, "or any thing. That forest up ahead has a bad reputation."

"Just how big is it?"

"It's probably the largest forest in the world," Sadi replied, lifting a pack up onto a horse's back. "It goes on for hundreds of leagues." He looked curiously down the picket line. "Is it my imagination, or do we have more horses this morning?"

"I happened across a few last night," Garion replied.

After breakfast, they packed up Polgara's cooking utensils, mounted, and started out across the intervening grassland toward the forest lying hidden in the fog.

As Garion rode, he heard Silk and Durnik talking right behind him. "Just what were you doing last night?" Durnik asked directly. "When you found Zith in Liselle's bodice, I mean?"

"She's going to make a report to Javelin when this is all over," Silk replied. "There are some things I'd rather he didn't know. If I can get on friendly terms with her, maybe I can persuade her to overlook those things in her report."

"That's really rather contemptible, you know. She's just a girl."

"Believe me, Durnik, Liselle can take care of herself. The two of us are playing a game. I'll admit that I hadn't counted on Zith, though."

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"Do Drasnians always have to play games?"

"Of course. It helps to pass the time. Winters are very long and tedious in Drasnia. The games we play sharpen our wits and make us better at what we do when we aren't playing." The little man raised his voice slightly. "Garion?" he said.

"Yes?"

"Are we avoiding the place where you found those horses last night? We wouldn't want to upset the ladies so soon after breakfast."

"It was over that way." Garion gestured off to the left.

"What's this?" Durnik asked.

"The extra animals came from a group of Mallorean deserters who used to creep up on isolated Murgo farmlands," Silk replied lightly. "Garion saw to it that they won't be needing horses any more."

"Oh," Durnik said. He thought about it for a moment. "Good," he said finally.

The dark trees loomed out of the fog as the company approached the edge of the forest. The leaves had turned brown and clung sparsely to the branches, for winter was not far off. As they rode in under the twisted branches, Garion looked about, trying to identify the trees, but they were of kinds that he did not recognize. They were gnarled into fantastic shapes, and their limbs seemed almost to writhe up and out from their massy trunks, reaching toward the sunless sky. Their gnarled stems were dotted with dark knots, deeply indented in the coarse bark, and those knots seemed somehow to give each tree a grotesque semblance of a distorted human face with wide, staring eyes and a gaping mouth twisted into an expression of unspeakable horror. The forest floor was deep with fallen leaves, blackened and sodden, and the fog hung gray beneath the branches spreading above.

Ce'Nedra drew her cloak more tightly about her and shuddered. "Do we have to go through this forest?" she asked plaintively.

"I thought you liked trees," Garion said.

"Not these." She looked about fearfully. "There's something very cruel about them. They hate each other."

"Hate? Trees?"

"They struggle and push each other, trying to reach the sunlight. I don't like this place, Garion."

"Try not to think about it," he advised.

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They pushed deeper and deeper into the gloomy wood, riding in silence for the most part, their spirits sunk low by the pervasive gloom and by the cold antagonism seeping from the strange, twisted trees.

They took a brief, cold lunch, then rode on toward a somber twilight which seemed hardly more than a deepening of the foggy half-dark spread beneath the hateful trees.

"I guess we've gone far enough," Belgarath said finally. "Let's get a fire going and put up the tents."

It might have been only Garion's imagination or perhaps the cry of some hunting bird of prey, but as the first few flickering tongues of flame curled up around the sticks in the fire pit, it seemed that he heard a shriek coming from the trees themselves—a shriek of fear mingled with a dreadful rage. And as he looked around, the distorted semblances of human faces deeply indented in the surrounding tree trunks seemed to move in the flickering light, silently howling at the hated fire.

After they had eaten, Garion walked away from the fire. He still felt strangely numb inside, as if his emotions had been enclosed in some kind of protective blanket. He found that he could no longer even remember the details of last night's encounter, but only brief, vivid flashes of blood spurting in ruddy torchlight, of riders tumbling limply out of their saddles, and of the torch bearer's head flying off into the fog.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Belgarath asked quietly from just behind him.

"Not really, Grandfather. I don't think you'll approve of what I did, so why don't we just let it go at that? There's no way that I could make you understand."

"Oh, I understand, Garion. I just don't think that you accomplished anything, that's all. You killed—how many was it?"

"Eight."

"That many? All right—eight Malloreans. What did you prove by it?"

"I wasn't really out to prove anything, Grandfather. I just wanted to make sure that they never did it again. I can't even be absolutely certain that they were the men who killed those Murgo farmers. They did kill some people someplace, though, and people who do that sort of thing need to be stopped."

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"You did that, all right. Does it make you feel any better?"

"No. I suppose not. I wasn't even angry when I killed them. It was just something that had to be done, so I did it. Now it's over, and I'd just as soon forget about it."

Belgarath gave him a long, steady look. "All right," he said finally. "As long as you keep that firmly in mind, I guess you haven't done yourself any permanent injury. Let's go back to the fire. It's chilly out here in the woods."

Garion slept badly that night, and Ce'Nedra, huddled almost fearfully in his arms, stirred restlessly and often whimpered in her sleep.

The next morning, Belgarath rose and looked about with a dark scowl. "This is absurd," he burst out quite suddenly. "Where is the sun?"

"Behind the clouds and fog, father," Polgara replied as she calmly brushed her long, dark hair.

"I know that, Pol," he retorted testily, "but I need to see it—even if only briefly—to get our direction. We could wind up wandering around in circles."

Toth, who had been building up the fire, looked over at the old man, his face impassive as always. He raised one hand and pointed in a direction somewhat at an oblique from that which they had been following the previous evening.

Belgarath frowned. "Are you absolutely sure?" he asked the giant.

Toth nodded.

"Have you been through these woods before?"

Again the mute nodded, then firmly pointed once more in the same direction.

"And if we go that way, we're going to come out on the south coast in the vicinity of the Isle of Verkat?"

Toth nodded again and went back to tending the fire.

"Cyradis said that he was coming along to aid us in the search, Grandfather," Garion reminded him.

"All right. Since he knows the way, we'll let him lead us through this forest. I'm tired of guessing."

They had gone perhaps two leagues that cloudy morning, with Toth confidently leading them along a scarcely perceptible track, when Polgara quite suddenly reined in her horse with a warning cry. "Look out!"

An arrow sizzled through the foggy air directly at Toth, but the huge man swept it aside with his staff. Then a gang

of rough-looking men, some Murgos and some of indeterminate race, came rushing out of the woods, brandishing a variety of weapons.

Without a moment's hesitation, Silk rolled out of his saddle, his hands diving under his slaver's robe for his daggers. As the bawling ruffians charged forward, he leaped to meet them, his heavy daggers extended in front of him like a pair of spears.

Even as Garion jumped to the ground, he saw Toth already advancing, his huge staff whirling as he bore down on the attackers, and Durnik, holding his axe in both hands, circling to the other side.

Garion swept Iron-grip's sword from its scabbard and ran forward, swinging the flaming blade in great arcs. One of the ruffians launched himself into the air, twisting as he did so in a clumsy imitation of a maneuver Garion had seen Silk perform so many times in the past. This time, however, the technique failed. Instead of driving his heels into Garion's face or chest, the agile fellow encountered the point of the burning sword, and his momentum quite smoothly skewered him on the blade.

Silk ripped open an attacker with one of his daggers, spun, and drove his other knife directly into the forehead of another.

Toth and Durnik, moving in from opposite sides, drove several of the assailants into a tight knot, and methodically began to brain them one after another as they struggled to disentangle themselves from each other.

"Garion!" Ce'Nedra cried, and he whirled to see a burly, unshaven man pull the struggling little queen from her saddle with one hand, even as he raised the knife he held in the other. Then he dropped the knife, and both his hands flew up to grasp the slim, silken cord that had suddenly been looped about his neck from the rear. Calmly, the golden-haired Velvet, her knee pushed firmly against the wildly threshing man's back, pulled her cord tighter and tighter. Ce'Nedra watched in horror as her would-be killer was efficiently strangled before her eyes.

Garion grimly turned and began to chop his way through the now-disconcerted attackers. The air around him was suddenly filled with shrieks, groans, and chunks of clothing and flesh. The ragged-looking men he faced flinched back as his

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huge sword laid a broad windrow of quivering dead in his wake. Then they broke and ran.

"Cowards!" a black-robed man screamed after the fleeing villains. He held a bow in his hand and he raised it, pointing his arrow directly at Garion. Then he suddenly doubled over sharply, driving his arrow into the ground before him as one of Silk's daggers flickered end

over end to sink solidly into his stomach.

"Is anybody hurt?" Garion demanded, spinning around quickly, his dripping sword still in his hand.

"They are." Silk laughed gaily, looking around with some satisfaction at the carnage in the forest clearing.

"Please stop!" Ce'Nedra cried to Velvet in an anguished voice.

"What?" the blond girl asked absently, still leaning back against the silken cord drawn tightly about the neck of the now-limp man she had just strangled. "Oh, I'm sorry, Ce'Nedra," she apologized. "My attention wandered a bit, I guess." She released the cord, and the black-faced dead man toppled to the ground at her feet.

"Nice job," Silk congratulated her.

"Fairly routine." She shrugged, carefully coiling up her garrote.

"You seem to be taking it quite calmly."

"There's no particular reason to get excited, Kheldar. It's part of what we were trained to do, after all."

He looked as if he were about to reply, but her matter-of-fact tone obviously baffled him.

"Yes?" she asked.

"Nothing."

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"Stop that!" Durnik said in disgust to Sadi, who was moving about the clearing casually sticking his small, poisoned dagger into each of the bodies littering the ground.

"Just making sure, Goodman," Sadi replied coolly. "It's not prudent to leave an enemy behind you who might be feigning death." He moved over to the black-robed man whom Silk had felled. "What's this?" he said with some surprise. "This one's still alive." He reached down to push the dying man's hood aside to look at his face, then pulled back his hand with a sharp intake of his breath. "You'd better have a look at this one, Belgarath," he said.

Belgarath crossed the clearing to the eunuch's side.

"Doesn't that purple lining on the inside of his hood mean that he's a Grolim?" Sadi asked.

Belgarath nodded bleakly. He bent and lightly touched the

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hilt of Silk's dagger that still protruded from the robed man's

stomach. "He doesn't have much time left," he said. "Can you get him conscious enough to answer a few questions?"

"I can try," Sadi told him. He went to his horse and took a vial of yellow liquid from his red case. "Could you get me a cup of water, Goodman?" he asked Durnik.

The smith's face was disapproving, but he fetched a tin cup from one of the packs and filled it from one of their water bags.

Sadi carefully measured a few drops of the yellow liquid into the cup, then swirled it around a few times. He knelt beside the dying man and almost tenderly lifted his head. "Here," he said gently, "drink this. It might make you feel better." He supported the Grolim's head on his arm and held the cup to his lips. Weakly, the stricken man drank, then lay back. After a moment, a serene smile came to his ashen face.

"There, isn't that better?"

"Much better," the dying man croaked.

"That was quite a skirmish, wasn't it?"

"We thought to surprise you," the Grolim admitted, "but we were the ones who got the surprise."

"Your Master—what was his name again? I'm terrible at names."

"Morgat," the Grolim supplied with a bemused look on his face, "Hierarch of Rak Cthan."

"Oh, yes, now I remember. Anyway, Morgat should have given you more men to help you."

"I hired the men myself—at Rak Cthaka. They told me that they were professionals, but—" He began to cough weakly.

"Don't tire yourself," Sadi said. He paused. "What's Morgat's interest in us?" he asked.

"He's acting on the instructions of Agachak," the Grolim replied, his voice little more than a whisper. "Agachak is not one to take chances, and some very serious accusations were made back at Rak Urga, I understand. Agachak has ordered that every Grolim priest of the purple seek you out."

Sadi sighed. "It's more or less what I'd expected," he said mournfully. "People always seem to distrust me. Tell me, how did you ever manage to find us?"

"It was Cthrag Yaska," the Grolim replied, his breathing growing even more labored. "Its accursed song rings across Cthol Murgos like a beacon, drawing every Grolim of the

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purple directly to you." The dying man drew in a deep breath, and his unfocused eyes suddenly became alert. "What was in that cup?" he demanded sharply. He pushed Sadi's arm away and tried to rise to a sitting position. A great gush of blood spurted from his mouth, and his eyes went blank. He shuddered once with a long, gurgling groan. Then he fell limply back.

"Dead," Sadi noted clinically. "That's the problem with oret. It's a little hard on the heart, and this fellow wasn't in very good shape to begin with. I'm sorry, Belgarath, but it was the best I could do."

"It was enough, Sadi," the old man replied bleakly. "Come with me, Garion," he said. "Let's go someplace quiet. You and I are going to have to have a long talk with the Orb."

"Do you suppose that you could hold off on that, Belgarath?" Sadi asked, looking around nervously. "I think we want to get as far away from here as we can—almost immediately."

"I hardly expect those fellows to come back, Sadi," Silk drawled.

"That's not what concerns me, Kheldar. It's not prudent to remain in the vicinity of so many dead bodies in this forest, and we've lingered much too long already."

"Would you like to explain that?" Garion asked.

"Do you remember the warning the Sendar on the road gave to you and Kheldar?"

"About something he called the Raveners, you mean?"

"Yes. How much did he tell you?"

"He said that they're ghouls—creatures that feed on the dead. But that's just a ghost story, isn't it?"

"I'm afraid not. I've heard the story from people who've actually seen them. We definitely want to get away from here. Most of the people who live in this forest—or near it—don't bury their dead. They burn them instead."

"I've never cared much for that idea," Durnik said.

"It has nothing to do with respect, Goodman—or the lack of it. It's done to protect the living."

"All right," Silk said. "What are these ghouls supposed to look like? There are a lot of animals around that try to dig up dead bodies."

"The Raveners aren't animals, Kheldar. They're men— or at least that's what they look like. Normally, they're quite

torpid and only come out at night, but during a war or a pestilence, when there are a large number of bodies unburied, they go into a kind of frenzy. The smell of death attracts them and makes them wild. They'll attack anything when they're like that." "Father," Polgara said, "is this true?"

"It's possible," he admitted. "I've heard some unpleasant things about these woods myself. I don't usually pursue ghost stories, so I didn't bother to investigate."

"Every country has its stories of ogres and monsters," Silk said sceptically. "Only children are frightened by them."

"I'll strike a bargain with you, Kheldar," Sadi said. "If we make it through these woods without seeing any Rave-ners, you can laugh at my timidity if you like, but for the sake of the ladies, let's get away from here."

Belgarath was frowning. "I don't altogether accept the notion of ghouls," he said, "but then, I didn't believe there was such a thing as an Eldrak either—until I saw one. We want to move along anyway, and Garion and I can talk with the Orb later."

With Toth once more in the lead, they rode away at a gallop, still following the scarcely visible track that angled off toward the southeast. Their horses' hooves tossed up clots of the leaves lying thick-spread on the forest floor as they plunged through the misty wood. The misshapen trees seemed to gape at them as they pounded past, and, though Garion knew it was only his imagination, those grotesque, almost human features seemed somehow to have taken on expressions of malicious glee.

"Wait!" Silk barked suddenly. "Stop!"

They all reined in.

"I thought I heard something—off that way," Silk said.

They all sat straining their ears, trying to listen over the heavy panting of their horses.

Faintly, from somewhere to the east, a scream came out of the fog.

"There it is again," Silk said. He pulled his horse around.

"What are you doing?" Belgarath asked him.

"I'm going to have a look."

But Toth had moved his horse around until it was blocking the Drasnian's path. Gravely the giant shook his head.

"Toth, we have to know what's happening," Silk said.

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Toth shook his head again.

"Toth," Garion said, "is what Sadi told us really true? Is there really such a thing as a Ravener?"

Toth's face grew bleak, and he nodded.

Another scream came out of the dim woods, seeming much closer this time. The scream was filled with horror and agony.

"Who is it?" Ce'Nedra demanded, her voice shrill with fright. "Who's screaming?"

"The men who attacked us," Eriond replied in a sick voice. "The ones who survived the fight. Something's running them down one by one."

"Raveners?" Garion asked him.

"I think so. Whatever it is, it's horrible."

"They're coming this way," Sadi said. "Let's get away from here." He drove his heels into his horse's flanks.

They plunged off into the gloomy wood, no longer even trying to follow the track. Their blind flight took them perhaps a half mile farther into the forest when Polgara suddenly pulled her horse to a halt. "Stop!" she commanded.

"What is it, Pol?" Durnik asked her.

But she pushed forward carefully to peer at a thicket half-obscured in the mist. "There's someone ahead," she whispered.

"A Ravener?" Garion asked in a low voice.

She concentrated for a moment. "No. It's one of the attackers. He's trying to hide."

"How far away is he?"

"Not far." She continued to peer into the shrouding mist. "There," she said. "He's behind that tree at the edge of the thicket—the one with the broken limb hanging down."

Garion vaguely saw a dark patch half-concealed behind a gnarled tree root rising out of the sodden leaves. Then a movement caught his eye, and he glimpsed a shambling figure coming out of the trees. It seemed gray, almost invisible in the hazy fog, and it was so gaunt that it resembled a skeleton. It was dressed in rags, stained with earth and blood. Its pale skull was covered with scanty hair, and it was half-crouched, snuffling audibly as it walked with its arms hanging loosely. Its eyes were vacant and its mouth agape.

Then another emerged from the woods, and yet another. As the creatures advanced, they made a low moaning sound

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that expressed nothing remotely intelligible, but rather seemed to convey only a dreadful hunger.

"He's going to run!" Pofgara said.

With a despairing cry, the hidden assassin leaped to his feet and desperately began to run. The Raveners took up the chase, their moaning coming faster. Their shambling gait quickened, and their emaciated legs carried them through the wood at a surprising rate of speed.

Twisting and dodging, the panic-stricken ruffian fled among the trees, with his hideous pursuers gaining on him at every step. When he finally disappeared far back into the fog and gloom, they were no more than a few yards behind him.

His shriek was a shocking, horrible sound. Again he screamed—and again.

"Are they killing him?" Ce'Nedra's voice was shrill.

Polgara's face had gone absolutely white, and her eyes were filled with horror. "No," she replied in a shaking voice.

"What are they doing?" Silk demanded.

"They're eating him."

"But—" Silk broke off as more shrieks came out of the fog. "He's still—" He stared at her, his eyes gone very wide and the blood draining from his cheeks.

Ce'Nedra gasped. "Alive?" she said in a choked whisper. "They're eating him while he's still alive?"

"That's what I was trying to warn you about, your Majesty," Sadi said grimly. "When they go into their frenzy, they don't make any distinction between the living and the dead. They feed on anything."

"Toth," Belgarath said sharply. "Can they be frightened off?"

The mute shook his head, then turned to Durnik, gesturing rapidly, touching his head and then his stomach.

"He says that they aren't able to think enough to be afraid," the smith told him. "All they know is hunger."

"What are we going to do, father?" Polgara demanded.

"We're going to try to outrun them," he replied, "and if any of them get in our way, we'll have to kill them." He looked back at Toth. "How far can they run?" he asked.

Toth raised one hand and traced an arc over his head, then another, and then another.

"For days," Durnik interpreted.

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Belgarath's face became very grim. "Let's go," he said "and stay together."

Their pace through the dreadful wood was more measured now, and the men all rode with their weapons in their hands.

The first attack came after they had gone no more than a mile. A dozen gray-faced Raveners shambled out from among the trees, moaning their hideous hunger and spreading out to block the path.

Garion spurred forward, swinging his sword in great arcs. Savagely, he chopped a path through the ranks of the slaving Raveners, who reached out mindlessly to pull him from his saddle. A terrible, rotting stink rose from them as he rode them down. He killed fully half of them as he crashed through, then whirled his horse to smash into them again, but pulled up sharply, his gorge rising. The Raveners who had escaped his sword were tearing at the bodies of those who had gone down, ripping out dripping gobbets of flesh and feeding them into their gaping mouths with their clawlike hands, even as they continued their awful moan.

Cautiously Belgarath and the others circled around that dreadful feeding, averting their eyes as they passed.

"It won't work, father," Polgara declared. "Sooner or later one of us is going to make a mistake. We're going to have to shield."

He thought about it for a moment. "You might be right, Pol," he admitted finally. He looked at Garion. "You and Durnik pay attention to how this is done," he instructed. "I want you to be able to take over when we get tired."

They started out at a walk as Belgarath and Polgara adjusted the barrier they were creating with the force of their combined will. They had gone no more than a little way when a gray-faced Ravener came loping out from among the twisted trees, slobbering and moaning. When it was perhaps ten yards from Durnik's horse, it suddenly stumbled back as if it had just run headlong into something solid. Moaning dreadfully, it came forward again and began to claw at the empty air with its filthy, long-nailed hands.

"Durnik," Polgara said quite calmly, "would you deal with it, please?"

"All right, Pol." The smith's face creased into an expression of extreme concentration, and he muttered a single word. The Ravener flickered and popped momentarily out of sight. When it reappeared, it was twenty yards away, be-

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side a large tree. It struggled to lurch forward at them again, but seemed for some reason unable to move.

"That should hold it," Durnik said.

"What did you do?" Silk asked, peering at the struggling creature.

"I stuck its arm into that tree," Durnik replied. "If it wants to attack again, it's either going to have to bring the tree along or leave the arm behind. I didn't really hurt it, but it's going to take it a day or so to get its arm loose."

"Have you got a good hold on our shield, Pol?" Belgarath asked over his shoulder.

"Yes, father."

"Let's pick up the pace a trifle then. A bit of momentum won't hurt."

They moved, first at a trot and then at a loping canter. The shield Belgarath was projecting to the front ran ahead of them like a battering-ram, hurling the rag-clothed Rave-ners from their path.

"Where do they get those clothes?" Silk asked as he rode.

Toth made a kind of digging motion with one hand.

"He says that they take them off the bodies of the dead that they dig up," Dumik translated.

Silk shuddered. "That would explain the smell, then."

The next few days began to blur in Garion's mind. It was necessary to relieve Polgara and Belgarath every four hours or so, and the weight of the shield he and Durnik erected seemed to grow with each passing mile. The fog continued, making it impossible to see more than a hundred yards in any direction, and the twisted trees, with their semblance of human faces, emerged with a shocking suddenness out of that obscuring mist. Shapes, gray and emaciated, moved through that fog, and the mindless moaning came from all around them as they plunged through the ghoulish-haunted wood.

Night was a time of dreadful terror as the Raveners gathered around the shield, clawing at it and moaning their hideous longing. Exhausted by his efforts of the day, Garion was forced to use every ounce of his will—not merely to hold the shield in place when his turn came to maintain it, but also to ward off sleep. Even more than the Raveners, sleep was the enemy. He forced himself to walk up and down. He pinched himself. He even went so far as to put a large pebble in his left boot in hopes that the discomfort

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would help to keep him awake. Once, all his devices failed, and his head began to sag slowly forward as sleep finally overcame him.

It was the putrid smell that jerked him awake. There, directly before him as his head came up, stood a Ravener. Its eyes were empty of all thought, its gaping mouth revealed broken, rotting teeth, and its black-nailed hands groped out-reaching for him. With a startled cry, he unleashed a heavy blow with his will, hurling the creature backward. Trembling violently, he re-established the barrier that had begun to falter.

Then, at last, they reached the southernmost fringe of the dreadful forest and rode out from under the twisted trees onto a fog-shrouded heath.

"Will they keep up the chase?" Durnik asked his giant friend. The smith's voice dropped from his lips with a great weariness.

Toth made a number of obscure gestures.

"What did he say?" Garion asked.

Durnik's face was bleak. "He says that for as long as the fog lasts, they probably won't give up. They don't like the sun, but the fog's hiding it, so—" He shrugged.

"We have to keep the shield up then, don't we?"

"I'm afraid so."

The heath across which they rode was a blasted, ugly place, covered with low thorn bushes and dotted with shallow tarns filled with rusty-looking water. The fog eddied and billowed, and always at the farthest edge of vision lurked the shadowy forms of the Ravens.

They rode on. Polgara and Belgarath took the burden of the shield, and Garion slumped in his saddle, trembling with exhaustion.

Then, very faintly, he caught the smell of salt brine.

"The sea!" Durnik exulted. "We've reached the sea."

"Now all we need is a boat," Silk reminded him.

Toth, however, pointed ahead confidently and made a curious gesture.

"He says that there's a ship waiting for us," Durnik told them.

"There is?" Silk seemed astonished. "How did he manage that?"

"I really don't know," Durnik replied. "He didn't say."

"Durnik," Silk said, "exactly how do you know what he's

saying? Those gestures of his don't make much sense to me at all."

Durnik frowned. "I really don't know," he admitted. "I hadn't even thought about it. I just seem to know what he wants to say."

"Are you using sorcery?"

"No. Maybe it's because we've worked with each other a few times. That always seems to bring men closer together."

"I'll take your word for it."

They crested a moundlike hill to look down at a gravel beach where long rollers came in off the foggy sea to crash against the rounded pebbles and then slide back with a mournful hissing sound as the foam-flecked water slithered down the strand, only to pause and then crash back up again.

"I don't see your ship, Toth," Silk said almost accusingly. "Where is it?"

Toth pointed out into the fog.

"Really?" Silk's voice was sceptical.

The mute nodded.

The Haveners trailing behind grew more agitated as the company started down toward the beach. Their moans became more urgent, and they began to run back and forth along the crest of the hill, reaching out their clawed hands with a kind of desperate longing. They did not, however, pursue any farther.

"Is it my imagination, or does it seem that they're afraid of something?" Velvet suggested.

"They aren't coming down the hill," Durnik agreed. He turned to Toth. "Are they afraid?" he asked.

Toth nodded.

"I wonder what it is," Velvet said.

The giant made a motion with both hands.

"He says that it has to do with something being even more hungry than they are," Durnik said. "They're afraid of it."

"Sharks, maybe?" Silk suggested.

"No. It's the sea itself."

When they reached the gravel strand, they dismounted and stood in a weary little group at the water's edge. "Are you all right, father?" Polgara asked the old man, who was leaning against his saddle, staring out into the fog that lay thick and pale on the dark water.

"What? Oh, yes. I'm fine, Pol—just a little puzzled, that's

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all. If there is a ship out there, I'd sort of like to know who arranged for it and how they knew that we were going to arrive at this particular spot."

"More important than that," Silk added, "I'd like to know how we're going to tell them that we've arrived. That fog's like a blanket out there."

"Toth says they already know we're here," Durnik told him. "They'll probably show up in the next half hour or so."

"Oh?" Belgarath said curiously. "And who sent this ship in the first place?"

"He said it was Cyradis."

"I'm going to have to have a long talk with that young lady one of these days," Belgarath said. "She's starting to make me just a little uneasy about certain things."

"They went back," Eriond told them as he stood stroking the bowed neck of his stallion.

"Who did?" Garion asked.

"The Haveners," the boy replied, pointing back up the hill. "They gave up and started back toward the woods."

"And without even saying good-bye," Silk added with a tight grin. "I don't know what's happened to people's manners these days."

The ship that came ghosting out of the fog was curiously built with a high prow and stern and broad sails on her twin masts.

"What's making it go?" Ce'Nedra asked, staring curiously at the shadowy shape.

"I don't quite follow you," Garion said.

"They aren't rowing," she pointed out, "and there isn't even a hint of a breeze."

He looked sharply back at the ship and saw immediately that she was right. There were no oars protruding from the ghostly ship's sides; but in spite of the dead-calm, foggy air, the sails were bellied outward, and the vessel moved smoothly through the oily-looking water.

"Is it sorcery?" she asked him.

He pushed his mind out, searching for some hint. "It doesn't seem to be," he replied. "At least not any kind that I know about."

Belgarath stood not far away, his expression profoundly disapproving.

"How are they moving the ship, Grandfather?" Garion asked him. •

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"It's a form of witchcraft," the old man told him, still scowling, "unpredictable and usually not very reliable." He turned to Toth. "You want us to go on board that?" he asked.

Toth nodded.

"Will it take us to Verkat?"

Toth nodded again.

"You mean that it will, if the sprite that's pushing it doesn't get bored with the idea—or decide that it might be funny to take us in the opposite direction."

Toth held out both hands.

"He says to trust him," Durnik supplied.

"I wish people would quit saying that to me."

The ship slowed, and her keel ground gently on the gravel bottom. A broad ramp came sliding out over the side, and its weighted end sank in about three feet of water. Toth, leading his reluctant horse, waded out to the ramp. Then he turned and looked inquiringly back at the rest of them. He motioned with his arm.

"He says we're supposed to board now," Durnik said.

"I heard him," Belgarath growled. "All right, I suppose we might as well." Sourly, he took his horse's reins and waded out into the water.

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The crew of the strange ship all wore rough, cowled tunics made of heavy cloth. The bones of their faces were prominent, giving their features a peculiarly hewn-out look and, like Toth, they were all mutes. They went about their work in absolute silence. Garion, accustomed to the bawling and cursing which accompanied the labors of Cherek sailors, found this stillness peculiar, even slightly unnerving. The ship itself made none of the usual sounds. There was no rasp of oars in their locks, no creak of rigging, no groaning of timbers—only the faint wash and run of water along the sides as they were propelled out across the fog-muffled sea by some force or spirit Garion could not even comprehend.

Once the shore behind had sunk into the fog, there was no reference point, no hint of direction. The silent ship moved on.

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Garion stood with his arm about Ce'Nedra's shoulders. The peculiar combination of his near-exhaustion from the ordeal in the wood of the Raveners and the pervading gloom of dark, unbroken water and thick-hanging fog made his mood melancholy and his thoughts abstracted. It was enough merely to stand at the side of his weary wife, holding her in the protecting curve of his arm and to look blankly, uncomprehendingly into the fog.

"What in the world is that?" Velvet exclaimed from somewhere behind him. He turned and looked toward the stern. From out of the pearly fog, there came a ghostly white bird with impossible wings-pinions that appeared longer than a tall man might stretch his arms. The wings did not move, and yet the silent bird came on, gliding through the misty air like a disembodied spirit.

"Albatross," Polgara identified the magnificent creature.

"Aren't they supposed to be bad luck?" Silk asked.

"Are you superstitious, Prince Kheldar?"

"Not exactly, but—" He left it hanging.

"It's a sea bird, nothing more," she told him.

"Why does it have such enormous wings?" Velvet asked curiously.

"It flies great distances over open water," Polgara said. "The wings hold it aloft without any effort. It's very practical."

The great-winged bird tilted in the air, giving forth a strange, lonely cry, a sound that carried in it all the emptiness of a vast, rolling sea.

Polgara inclined her head in response to that strange greeting.

"What did he say, Pol?" Durnik asked her in an oddly subdued voice.

"It was quite formal," she replied. "Sea birds have a great deal of dignity—perhaps because they spend so much time alone. It gives them leisure to formulate their thoughts, I suppose. Land birds babble a great deal, but sea birds try to be profound."

"They're strange creatures, aren't they—birds I mean?"

"Not once you get used to them." She looked out at the alabaster bird coasting in the silent air beside the ship with an indecipherable expression on her face.

The albatross moved his great wings and pulled ahead of

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the ship to station himself just in front of the prow, hanging apparently motionless in the mist.

Belgarath had been staring up at the sails, which bellied out improbably in the dead-calm air. Finally he grunted and turned to Toth. "How long does the trip to Verkat take?" he asked.

Toth measured out a short space with his hands.

"That's not very specific, my friend."

Toth pointed upward and spread his fingers wide.

"He says about five hours, Belgarath," Durnik translated.

"We're moving faster than it appears then," the old man observed. "I wonder how they managed to persuade the sprite to concentrate on one thing for that long, though. I've never run into one before that could keep hold of an idea for more than a minute."

"Do you want me to ask him?" Durnik offered.

Belgarath squinted back up at the sails. "No," he said. "I guess not. I might not like the answer."

The northwest coast of the Isle of Verkat rose dark and indistinct out of the fog as evening approached. They sailed closer, with the gleaming albatross hovering just ahead, and Garion saw that the low hills behind the gravel strand were thickly covered with dark evergreens wreathed in fog. Some distance back up from the beach, a few scattered lights gleamed golden in the windows of a village, and a line of torches wound down from that village toward the shore. Faintly, Garion could hear the sound of singing. The words were indistinct, but the overall tone of the song conveyed a great sadness and an endless longing.

Their ship moved silently across a shallow bay, then coasted gently up beside a rude stone quay that looked more like a natural rock formation than any man-made structure.

A tall man in a white linen robe stood on the quay. Although his face was unlined and his eyebrows were black as ravens' wings, his flowing hair was as silver as Belgarath's. "Welcome," he greeted them. His voice was deep and peculiarly gentle. "I am Vard. We have long awaited your coming, which the Book of the Heavens revealed to us ages past."

"Now you see why I don't like these people," Belgarath muttered. "I hate it when someone pretends to know everything."

"Forgive us, Holy Belgarath," the man on the quay said

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with a slight smile. "If it will make you more comfortable, we will conceal what we have read in the stars."

"You've got sharp ears, Yard," the old man noted.

"If you wish to believe so." Yard shrugged. "A place has been made ready for you—and food prepared. Your journey has been long and difficult, and I'm sure you are all very tired. If you will come with me, I will show you the way. My people will bring your mounts and your belongings."

"You are very kind, Yard," Polgara said across the rail of the ship as the mute sailors ran their ramp out to the stones of the quay.

Yard bowed. "We are honored by your presence, Lady Polgara," he replied. "We have stood in awe of you since the beginning of the Third Age."

The path leading up from the bay was narrow and it wound about with no seeming purpose. "I fear that you will find our village rude by comparison with the mighty cities of the west," the white-robed man apologized. "We have ever been indifferent to our surroundings."

"One place is much the same as another," Belgarath agreed, peering ahead toward the cluster of lighted windows glowing in the mist.

The village consisted of a score or so buildings constructed of rough field stone and thatched with straw. They seemed scattered at random with nothing resembling an organized street anywhere in sight. The place was tidy, however, with none of the clutter that inevitably seemed to spring up in such places, and the doorstep of each house showed signs of frequent scrubbing.

Yard led them to a fair-sized house in the center of the village and opened the door for them. "This will be yours for as long as you remain," he said. "The table is prepared, and some of my people will attend you. Should you require anything else, please send for me." Then he bowed, turned, and walked away into the foggy twilight.

The inside of the house was by no means palatial, but it belied the crude-appearing exterior. Each room contained a low, cheery fireplace, exuding warmth and light. The doorways were arched and the walls all whitewashed. The furniture was plain, but stoutly made, and the beds were covered with thick, down-filled comforters.

A table and benches stood in the central room, and a number of covered earthenware pots stood on that table. The

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smells coming from those pots reminded Garion that he had not eaten a hot meal in several days.

"They're a strange sort of people," Velvet observed, removing her cloak, "but you certainly can't fault their hospitality."

Silk had been eyeing the table. "We wouldn't want to offend them by letting supper get cold, would we? I don't know about the rest of

you, but I'm famished."

The supper that had been laid for them was delicious. None of the dishes were anything out of the ordinary, but each was delicately seasoned. The main course was a well-browned haunch of some animal Garion did not recognize, but he found it rich and full-flavored.

"What is this delicious roast?" Ce'Nedra asked, helping herself to another piece.

"Goat, I think," Polgara replied.

"Goat?"

"It seems to be."

"But I hate goat."

"That's your third slice, dear," Polgara pointed out.

After they had eaten, they sat around the fireplace. Garion felt a vast weariness and knew that he should go to bed, but he was simply too comfortable to move.

"Did you get any hints that Zandramas came through here?" Silk asked him.

"What? Oh-no. Nothing."

"She seems to want to avoid inhabited places," Belgarath noted. "I don't think she'd have come to the village here. Probably tomorrow you're going to have to ride out and see if you can cross her trail."

"Wouldn't she have gone straight to Rak Verkat?" Silk suggested. "That's where all the ships are, and she wants to go to Mallorean, doesn't she?"

"She might have made other arrangements," the old man told him. "She does have a price on her head, and the Mal-loreans at Rak Verkat are probably as interested in collecting it as the ones at Rak Hagga. She's made careful preparations in advance for every step of this journey. I don't think she'd have left anything to chance, once she got this far."

Sadi came back into the room, holding the small earthenware bottle. "Margravine Liselle," he said acidly, "do you suppose I could have my snake back?"

"Oh, I'm ever so sorry, Sadi," she apologized. "I com-

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pletely forgot I had her." She dipped into the front of her dress and gently removed the little green reptile.

Silk drew back with a sharp intake of his breath.

"I wasn't really trying to steal her," Velvet assured Sadi. "It was just that the poor dear was cold."

"Of course." He took his snake from her.

"I was only trying to keep her warm, Sadi. You certainly wouldn't want her to get sick, would you?"

"Your concern touches my heart." He turned and went back toward the sleeping rooms with Zith lazily coiled about his wrist.

The following morning, Garion went into the shed attached to the back of the house, saddled his horse, and rode back down to the gravel strand, where the waves rolled endlessly in off the foggy sea to crash against the shore. He stopped, looking first up the beach, then down. He shrugged and turned his horse toward the northeast.

The upper edge of the rock-strewn beach was thick with windrows of white-bleached driftwood. As he rode, he idly ran his eyes along those tangled heaps of branches and broken logs. Occasionally, he noted a squared-off timber lying among the other bits and pieces, mute evidence that some ship had come to grief. The possibility occurred to him that the shipwreck that had set those timbers adrift might have taken place as long as a century ago and that the debris might well have floated half around the world to wash up on this strand of salt-crustured pebbles.

"That's all very interesting," the dry voice in his mind told him, "but you're going the wrong way."

"Where have you been?" Garion asked, reining in.

"Why do we always have to start these conversations with that same question? The answer wouldn't mean anything to you, so why pursue it? Turn around and go back. The trail is on the other side of the village, and you don't have time to ride all the way around the island."

"Is Zandramas still here with my son?" Garion asked quickly, wanting to get that question out in the open before the elusive voice went off again.

"No," the voice replied. "She left about a week ago."

"We're gaining on her then," Garion said aloud, a sudden hope springing up in him.

"That would be a logical assumption."

"Where did she go?"

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"Mallorea—but you knew that already, didn't you? " "Could you get a little more specific? Mallorea's a big place."

"Don't do that, Garion," the voice told him. "UL told you that finding your son was your task. I'm not permitted to do it for you any more than he was. Oh, incidentally, keep an eye on Ce'Nedra."

"Ce'Nedra? What for?"

But the voice had already gone. Garion swore and rode back the way he had come.

A league or so to the south of the village, where a cove sheltered by two jutting headlands ran back into the shore line, the sword strapped across his back tugged at him. He reined in sharply and drew the blade. It turned in his hand to point unerringly due inland.

He trotted his horse up the hill, with the blade of Iron-grip's sword resting on the pommel of his saddle. The trail did not veer. Ahead of him lay a long, grassy slope and then the misty edge of the evergreen forest. He considered the situation for a moment and decided that it might be better to go back and tell the others, rather than pursue Zandramas alone. As he turned his horse toward the village, he glanced down at the shallow waters of the cove. There, lying on its side beneath the water, lay the sunken wreck of a small ship. His face grew bleak. Once again, Zandramas had rewarded those who had aided her by killing them. He kicked his mount into a loping canter and rode back across the foggy meadows lying between the sea and the dark forest toward the village.

It was nearly noon when he reached the house Vard had provided for them, and he swung down out of his saddle, controlling his excitement as best he could.

"Well?" Belgarath, who sat before the fire with a mug in his hand, asked as Garion entered the room.

"The trail's about a league to the south."

Polgara, seated at the table, looked up quickly from the piece of parchment she had been examining. "Are you sure?" she asked.

"The Orb is." Garion unfastened his cloak. "Oh—I had another visit from our friend." He tapped his forehead. "He told me that Zandramas left the island about a week ago and that she's going to Mallorea. That's about all I could get out

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of him. Where's Ce'Nedra? I want to tell her that we're getting closer."

"She's asleep," Polgara said, carefully folding the parchment.

"Is that part of one of those books Grandfather's been looking for?" he asked.

"No, dear. It's the recipe for that soup we had at supper last

night." She turned to Belgarath. "Well, father? Do we take up the trail again?"

He thought about it, staring absently into the fire dancing on the hearth. "I'm not sure, Pol," he answered finally. "We were deliberately brought here to this island for something, and I don't think that locating the trail was the only reason. I think we ought to stay here for another day or so."

"We've gained a great deal of time on Zandramas, father," she reminded him. "Why waste it by just sitting in one place?"

"Call it a hunch, Pol. I've got a very strong feeling that we're supposed to wait here for something—something fairly important."

"I think it's a mistake, father."

"That's your privilege, Pol. I've never told you what to think."

"Only what to do," she added tartly.

"That's my privilege. It's a father's duty to guide His children. I'm sure you understand."

The door opened, and Silk and Velvet came in out of the sunless noon. "Did you find the trail?" Silk asked, removing his cloak.

Garion nodded. "She came ashore a league or so down the beach. Then she sank the boat that brought her. It's lying on the bottom with the full crew aboard, about fifty yards from shore."

"She's running true to form, then," Silk noted.

"What have you been up to this morning?" Garion asked him.

"Snooping."

"The term is 'intelligence gathering,' Kheldar," Velvet said primly, also removing her cloak and smoothing the front of her dress.

"It amounts to the same thing, doesn't it?"

"Of course, but 'snooping' has such a nasty ring to it."

"Did you find out anything?" Garion asked.

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"Not much," Silk admitted, coming to the fire to warm himself. "All these people are terribly polite, but they're very good at evading direct questions. I can tell you one thing, though. This place isn't a real village—at least not in the sense that we understand it. It's all very carefully set up to look crude and rustic, and the people here go through the motions of tending crops and herds, but it's all for show. Their tools show almost no signs of use, and their animals are just a bit too well groomed."

"What are they doing, then?" Garion asked.

"I think they spend their time in study," Velvet replied. "I was visiting with one of the women, and there was a sort of a chart on the table in her house, I got a look at it before she put it away. It looked like a map of some constellations— a sort of a picture of the night sky."

Belgarath grunted. "Astrologers. I've never had much faith in astrology. The stars seem to say something different every quarter-hour or so," He thought about it for a moment. "Back at Prolgu, the Gorim said that these people are Dais— the same as the ones who live in southern Mallorea—and no one has ever been able to figure out what the Dais are up to. They seem to be docile and placid, but I suspect that's only a mask. There are several centers of learning in Dalasia, and I wouldn't be surprised to find out that this place is very similar. Did either of you see anyone wearing a blindfold— the way Cyradis does?"

"A seer?" Silk said. "I didn't." He looked at Velvet.

She shook her head.

"Toth might be able to give us some answers, father," Polgara said. "He seems to be able to communicate with these people in ways that we can't."

"How do you propose to get answers out of a mute, Polgara?" Silk asked her.

"Durnik seems to be able to talk with him," she replied. "Where are they, by the way?"

"They found a pond on the upper edge of the village," Velvet answered. "They're checking to see if it's occupied. Eriond is with them."

"Inevitably." Polgara smiled.

"Doesn't it get a little tedious?" Velvet asked. "Having him spend all his time fishing, I mean?"

"It's a healthy activity," Polgara said. She looked meaningfully at the mug in Belgarath's hand. 'And probably much

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better for him than the amusements of some others I could name."

"What next, old friend?" Silk asked Belgarath.

"Let's sit tight for a while and keep our eyes and ears open. I've got a nagging sort of feeling that something important's going to happen here."

That afternoon a faint breeze began to stir the fog that had plagued them for the past week or so. When evening approached, the sky had blown clear except for a heavy cloud bank off toward the west, dyed a deep scarlet by the setting sun.

Sadi had spent the day with Yard; when he returned, his expression was frustrated.

"Were you able to get anything out of him?" Silk asked.

"Nothing that I could make any sense out of," the eunuch replied. "I think the grip these people have on reality is rather tenuous. The only thing that seems to interest them is some obscure thing they call the task. Yard wouldn't tell me exactly what this task is, but they seem to have been gathering information about it since the beginning of time."

As twilight began to settle over the Isle, Durnik, with Er-iond at his side, returned with his fishing pole across his shoulder and a frustrated look on his face.

"Where's Toth?" Garion asked him.

"He said that he had something to attend to," Durnik replied, carefully examining his tackle. "I think that maybe I need a smaller hook," he mused.

As Polgara and Velvet began preparing supper, Silk looked over at Garion. "Why don't we go stretch our legs?" he suggested.

"You mean right now?"

"I'm a little restless." The weasel-faced man rose from his chair. "Come along," he said. "If you sit in that chair much longer, you're going to put down roots."

Puzzled, Garion followed his friend outside. "What was that all about?" he asked.

"I want to find out what Toth's up to and I don't want Liselle tagging along."

"I thought you liked her."

"I do, but I'm getting a little tired of having her looking over my shoulder every place I go." He stopped. "Where are they going?" he said, pointing at a line of torches strung

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out across the meadow lying between the village and the edge of the forest.

"We could follow them and find out," Garion suggested.

"Right. Let's go."

Yard led the line of torch-bearing villagers toward the dark forest at the upper end of the meadow, and Toth, towering above all the rest, strode beside him. Garion and Silk, bent low to the tall grass, paralleled their course, but remained some distance away.

As the torchlit file of villagers approached the edge of the woods, several dim figures emerged from the shadows under the trees and stood waiting. "Can you make them out at all?" Garion whispered.

Silk shook his head. "Too far," he murmured, "and there's not enough light. We're going to have to get closer." He dropped down onto his stomach and began to worm his way through the grass.

The meadow was still wet from the days of dense fog; by the time Garion and Silk reached the protecting shadows at the edge of the trees, they were both soaking wet.

"I'm not enjoying this much, Silk," Garion whispered somewhat crossly.

"I don't think you'll melt," Silk whispered back. Then he raised his head and peered out through the trees. "Are those people blindfolded?" he asked.

"It sort of looks that way," Garion replied.

"That would mean that they're seers then, wouldn't it? We didn't see any of them in the village, so maybe they live somewhere in these woods. Let's see if we can get a little closer. All of this is definitely stirring up my curiosity."

The villagers, still carrying their torches, moved into the damp forest for several hundred yards and finally stopped in a large clearing. Around the edge of that clearing stood a series of roughly squared-off blocks of stone, each of them about, twice the height of a tall man. The villagers spaced themselves among those stone blocks, forming a torchlit circle, and the blindfolded seers, perhaps a dozen or so of them, gathered in the center and joined hands to form another circle. Standing immediately behind each of the seers was a large, muscular man—their guides and protectors, Garion surmised. In the very center, enclosed within that inner ring of seers, stood the silver-haired Yard and the giant Toth.

Garion and Silk crept closer.

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The only sound in the clearing was the guttering of torches; then, very quietly at first, but with growing strength, the people in the circle began to sing. In many ways, their song was similar to the discordant hymn of the Ulgos, yet there were subtle differences. Though he was not schooled in musicology or harmony, Garion perceived that this hymn was older and perhaps more pure than the one which had rung through the caves of Ulgo for five millennia. In a sudden flash of insight, he also understood how endless centuries of confusing

echos had gradually corrupted the Ulgos' song. This hymn, moreover, was not raised to UL, but to a God unknown, and it was a plea to that unnamed God to manifest himself and to come forth to guide and protect the Dais, even as UL guided and protected the Ulgos.

Then he heard or felt another sound joining with that unbelievably ancient hymn. A peculiar sighing within his mind signaled that these people, gathered in their strange circles, were bringing their combined wills to bear in a mystic accompaniment to the song their voices raised to the starry sky.

There was a shimmering in the air in the very center of the clearing, and the glowing form of Cyradis appeared, robed and cowed in white linen and with her eyes covered by a strip of cloth.

"Where did she come from?" Silk breathed. *

"She's not really there," Garion whispered. "It's a projection. Listen."

"Welcome, Holy Seeress," Vard greeted the glowing image. "We are grateful that thou hast responded to our summons."

"Thy gratitude is unnecessary, Vard," the clear voice of the blindfolded girl replied. "I respond out of the duty imposed upon me by my task. Have the seekers arrived, then?"

"They have, Holy Cyradis," Vard answered, "and the one called Belgarion hath found that which he sought here."

"The quest of the Child of Light hath but only begun," the image stated. "The Child of Dark hath reached the coast of far-off Mallorea and even now doth journey toward the House of Torak at Ashaba. The time hath come for the Eternal man to open the Book of Ages."

Vard's face grew troubled. "Is that wise, Cyradis?" he asked. "Can even Ancient Belgarath be trusted with what

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he may find in that volume? His entire life hath been devoted to but one of the two spirits which control all things."

"It must be so, Vard, else the meeting of the Child of Light and the Child of Dark will not come to pass at the appointed time, and our task will remain uncompleted." She sighed. "The time draws nigh," she told them. "That for which we have waited since the beginning of the First Age fast approaches, and all must be accomplished ere the moment in which I must perform that task which hath lain upon us throughout the weary centuries. Give the Book of Ages to Eternal Belgarath that he may lead the Child of Light to the place which is no more—where all will be decided forever." Then she turned to the towering mute standing impassively beside the white-robed Vard. "My heart is empty without thee," she told him in a voice very near to tears. "My steps falter, and I am alone. I pray thee, my dear companion, make haste in the completion of thy task, for I am made

desolate by thine absence."

Quite clearly in the flickering torchlight Garion could see the tears in Toth's eyes and the anguish on his face. The giant reached out toward the glowing image, then let his hand fall helplessly.

Cyradis also raised her hand, it seemed almost involuntarily.

Then she vanished.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

"Are you sure she said Ashaba?" Belgarath asked intently.

"I heard her, too, Grandfather," Garion confirmed what Silk had just reported. "She said that the Child of Dark had reached Mallorea and was journeying to the House of Torak at Ashaba."

"But there's nothing there," Belgarath objected. "Beldin and I ransacked that place right after Vo Mimbire." He began to pace up and down, scowling darkly. "What could Zan-dramas possibly want there? It's just an empty house."

"Maybe you can find some answers in the Book of Ages," Silk suggested.

Belgarath stopped and stared at him.

"Oh, I guess we hadn't got to that part yet," the little man 378

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said. "Cyradis told Yard that he was supposed to give you the book. He didn't like it very much, but she insisted."

Belgarath's hands began to tremble, and he controlled himself with an obvious effort.

"Is it important?" Silk asked curiously.

"So that's what this has all been about!" the old man burst out. "I knew there was a reason for bringing us here."

"What's the Book of Ages, Belgarath?" Ce'Nedra asked him.

"It's a part of The Mallorean Gospels—the holy book of the Seers at Kell. It looks as if we were led here specifically for the purpose of putting that book into my hands."

"This is all just a little obscure for me, old friend," Silk said, shivering. "Let's go get cleaned up, Garion. I'm soaked all the way through."

"How did you two get so wet?" Velvet asked.

"We were crawling around in the grass."

"That would account for it, I suppose."

"Do you really have to do that, Liselle?"

"Do what?"

"Never mind. Come on, Garion."

"What is it about her that irritates you so much?" Garion asked as the two of them went down the hall toward the back of the house.

"I'm not really sure," Silk replied. "I get the feeling that she's laughing at me all the time—and that she's got something on her mind that she isn't telling me. For some reason, she makes me very nervous."

After they had dried themselves and changed into clean clothing, they returned to the warm, firelit main room of the house to find that Toth had returned. He sat impassively on a bench near the door, with his huge hands folded on his knees. All traces of the anguish Garion had seen on his face in the clearing were gone now, and his expression was as enigmatic as ever.

Belgarath sat beside the fire holding a large leather-bound book tilted to catch the light, his eyes poring over it intently.

"Is that the book?" Silk asked.

"Yes," Polgara replied. "Toth brought it."

"I hope that it says something to make this trip worth all the trouble."

As Garion, Silk, and Toth ate, Belgarath continued to read, turning the crackling pages of the Book of Ages impatiently.

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"Listen to this," he said. He cleared his throat and began to read aloud: "Know ye, oh my people, that all adown the endless avenues of time hath division marred all that is—for there is division at the very heart of creation. But the stars and the spirits and the voices within the rocks speak of the day when the division will end and all will be made one again, for creation itself knows that the day will come. And two spirits contend with each other at the very center of time, and these spirits are the two sides of that which hath divided creation. Now the day must come when we must choose between them, and the choice we must make is the choice between absolute good and absolute evil, and that which we choose—good or evil—will prevail until the end of days. But how may we know which is good and which is evil?"

"Behold also this truth; the rocks of the world and of all other worlds murmur continually of the two stones which lie at the center of the division. Once these stones were one, and they stood at the

very center of all of creation, but, like all else, they were divided, and in the instant of division were they rent apart with a force that destroyed whole suns. And where these stones are found together, there surely will be the last confrontation between the two spirits. Now the day will come when all division will end and all will be made as one again—except that the division between the two stones is so great that they can never be rejoined. And in the day when the division ends shall one of the stones cease forever to exist, and in that day also shall one of the spirits forever vanish.'"

"Are they trying to say that the Orb is only half of this original stone?" Garion asked incredulously.

"And the other half would be the Sardion," Belgarath agreed. "That would explain a great deal."

"I didn't know there was any connection between the two."

"Neither did I, but it does sort of fit together, doesn't it? Everything about this whole business has come in pairs from the very beginning—two Prophecies, two fates, a Child of Light and a Child of Dark—it only stands to reason that there'd have to be two stones, doesn't it?"

"And the Sardion would have the same power as the Orb," Polgara added gravely.

Belgarath nodded. "In the hands of the Child of Dark, it

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could do just about anything that Garion can do with the Orb—and we haven't even tested the limits of that yet."

"It gives us just a little more incentive to keep Zandramas from reaching the Sardion, doesn't it?" Silk said.

"I already have all the incentive in the world," Ce'Nedra said sadly.

Garion rose early the next morning. When he came out of the room he shared with Ce'Nedra, he found Belgarath seated at the table in the main room with the Book of Ages lying before him in the light of a guttering candle.

"Didn't you go to bed, Grandfather?"

"What? Oh—no. I wanted to read this all the way through without any interruptions."

"Did you find anything helpful?"

"A great deal, Garion. A very great deal. Now \ know what Cyradis is doing."

"Is she really involved in this?"

"She believes that she is." He closed the book and leaned back, staring thoughtfully at the far wall. "You see, these people, and the ones at Kell in Dalasia, believe that it's their task to choose between the two Prophecies—the two forces that have divided the universe—and they believe that it's their choice that's going to settle the matter once and for all."

"A choice? That's all? You mean that all they have to do is pick one or the other, and that's the end of it?"

"Roughly, yes. They believe that the choice has to be made during one of the meetings of the Child of Light and the Child of Dark—and both stones, the Orb and the Sardion, have to be present. Down through history, the task of making the choice has always been laid on just one of the seers. At every meeting between the Child of Light and the Child of Dark, that particular seer has been present. I expect that there was one lurking about somewhere at Cthol Mish-rak when you met Torak. At any rate, the task has finally fallen to Cyradis. She knows where the Sardion is and she knows when this meeting is going to take place. She'll be there. If all the conditions have been met, she'll choose."

Garion sat down in a chair by the dying fire. "You don't actually believe all that, do you?"

"I don't know, Garion. We've spent our entire lives living out the pronouncements of the Prophecy, and it's gone to a great deal of trouble to get me here and put this book into

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my hands. I may not entirely believe all this mysticism, but I'm certainly not going to ignore it."

"Did it say anything at all about Geran? What's his part in all this?"

"I'm not sure. It could be as a sacrifice—the way Agachak believes. Or, it's possible that Zandramas abducted him just to force you to come after her and bring the Orb with you. Nothing is ever going to be settled until the Orb and the Sardion are brought together in the same place."

"The place which is no more," Garion added sourly.

Belgarath grunted. "There's something about that phrase that keeps nagging at me," he said. "Sometimes I can almost put my finger on it, but it keeps slipping away from me. I've seen it or heard it before, but I can't seem to remember where."

Polgara came into the room. "You're both up early," she said.

"Garion is," Belgarath replied. "I'm up late."

"Did you stay up all night, father?"

"It seems that way. I think that this was what I was waiting for." He laid his hand on the book in front of him. "As soon as the others get up, let's pack and get ready to leave. It's time for us to move on."

There was a light tap on the outer door. Garion rose, crossed the room, and opened it.

Yard stood outside in the pale gray light of the dawning day. "There's something I need to tell you," he said:

"Come in." Garion held the door open for him.

"Good morning, Yard," Belgarath greeted the white-robed man. "I didn't get the chance to thank you for this book."

"You must thank Cyradis for that. We gave it to you at her instruction. I think you and your friends should leave. There are soldiers coming."

"Malloreans?"

Yard nodded. "There's a column moving out from Rak Verkat. They'll probably reach our village before noon."

"Can you give us a ship of any kind?" Belgarath asked him. "We need to get to Matlorea."

"That wouldn't be wise just now. There are also Mallo-rean ships patrolling the coast."

"Do you think they're searching for us?" Polgara asked.

"It's possible, Lady Polgara," Yard admitted, "but the

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commander at Rak Verkat has ordered these sweeps through the countryside before—usually to round up any Murgos who still might be hidden on the Isle. They stir around for a few days and then return to their garrison in Rak Verkat. If this present excursion is merely one of those periodic searches, the troops won't be very thorough and they won't be in this vicinity for long. As soon as they're gone, you can come back here, and we'll provide you with a ship."

"Just how extensive is that forest out there?" Belgarath asked him.

"It's quite large, Ancient One."

"Good. Malloreans aren't comfortable in forests. Once we get back into the trees, it shouldn't be much of a problem to slip around them."

"You will need to avoid the hermit who dwells in the forest, however."

"The hermit?"

"A poor deranged fellow. He's not really an evil person, but he's mischievous and he likes to play tricks on travelers."

"We'll keep that in mind," Belgarath said. "Garion, go wake the others. Let's get ready to leave."

By the time everything was ready for their departure, the sun had risen over the low range of hills to the east. Sadi looked out the door at the bright sunlight streaming over the village and sparkling on the waves in the harbor. "Where's the fog when you need it?" he asked of no one in particular.

Belgarath looked around. "We've got about four hours until the Malloreans get here," he told them. "Let's use that time to put some distance between us and this place." He turned to Yard. "Thank you," he said simply, "for everything."

"May all of the Gods be with you," the silvery-haired man replied. "Now go—quickly."

They rode out of the village and up across the meadow to the edge of the dark forest.

"Any particular direction, old friend?" Silk asked Belgarath.

"I don't think it matters all that much," the old man replied. "Probably about all we're going to need is a thicket to hide in. Malloreans get nervous when they can't see for a mile or so in every direction, so they aren't very likely to search these woods too extensively."

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"I'll see what I can find," the little man offered. He turned his horse toward the northeast, but suddenly reined in sharply as two figures stepped out from among the trees. One was robed and cowled, and the other was a large, watchful man.

"I greet thee, Ancient Belgarath," the hooded figure said in the clear voice of a woman. She lifted her face, and Garion saw that her eyes were bound with a dark strip of cloth. "I am Onatel," she continued, "and I am here to point out a safe path to thee."

"We're grateful for your aid, Onatel."

"Thy path lies southward, Belgarath. Some small way into this wood thou wilt discover an ancient track, much overgrown. It will lead thee to a place of concealment."

"And have you seen what is to come, Onatel?" Polgara asked. "Will the soldiers search this wood?"

"Thou and thy companions are the ones they seek, Polgara, and they will search in all parts of the island, but they will not find thee

and thy friends—unless it come to pass that someone doth point thee out to them. Beware of the hermit who doth dwell in this wood, however. He will seek to test thee." She turned then with one hand outstretched. The large man standing in the shadows took that groping hand and gently led her back into the forest.

"How convenient," Velvet murmured. "Perhaps a little too convenient."

"She wouldn't lie, Liselle," Polgara said. *

"But she's not obliged to tell the whole truth, is she?"

"You've got a very suspicious nature," Silk told her.

"Let's just say that I'm cautious. When a perfect stranger goes out of her way to help me, it always makes me a little nervous."

"Let's go ahead and find this path of hers," Belgarath said. "If we decide later on to change direction, we can do it some place private."

They pushed into the shadows beneath the spreading evergreens. The forest floor was damp and thickly covered with fallen needles from the limbs overhead. The sun streamed down in long, slanting shafts of golden light, and the shadows had that faint bluish tinge of morning. The thick loam muffled the sound of their passage, and they rode in a kind of hushed silence.

The track to which the seeress had directed them lay per-

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haps a mile back in the wood. It was deeply indented in the forest floor, as if at some time in the long-distant past it had been much traveled. Now, however, it lay unused, and weeds and grass had reclaimed it.

As the sun mounted in the sky, the blue cast to the shadows beneath the trees faded, and a myriad of tiny insects swirled and darted in the shafts of sunlight. Then, quite suddenly, Belgarath reined in his horse. "Listen!" he said sharply.

From far behind them, Garion heard a series of sharp yelps.

"Dogs?" Sadi asked, looking nervously back over his shoulder. "Did they bring dogs to sniff out our trail?"

"Those aren't dogs," Belgarath told him. "They're wolves."

"Wolves?" Sadi exclaimed. "We must flee!"

"Don't get excited, Sadi," the old man told him. "Wolves don't hunt people."

"I'd rather not chance that, Belgarath," the eunuch said. "I've heard some very alarming stories."

"That's all they were—stories. Believe me, I know wolves. No self-respecting wolf would even consider eating a human. Stay here, all of you. I'll go see what they want." He slid down out of his saddle.

"Not too close to the horses, father," Polgara warned. "You know how horses feel about wolves."

He grunted and went off into the forest.

"What's he doing?" Sadi asked nervously.

"You wouldn't believe it," Silk replied.

They waited in the cool dampness of the forest, listening to the faint yelping sounds and an occasional bell-like howl echoing among the trees.

When Belgarath returned some time later, he was swearing angrily.

"Whatever is the matter, father?" Polgara asked him.

"'Somebody' s playing games," he retorted angrily. "There aren't any wolves back there."

"Belgarath," Sadi said, "I can hear them. They've been yapping and howling on our trail for the past half-hour."

"And that's all there is back there—just the noise. There isn't a wolf within miles of here."

"What's making all the noise, then?"

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"I told you. Somebody's playing games. Let's move on— and keep your eyes open."

They rode warily now, with the phantom baying filling the woods behind them. Then there came a sudden, high-pitched bellow from somewhere in front of them.

"What's that?" Durnik exclaimed, reaching for his axe.

"It's an absurdity," Beigarath snapped. "Ignore it. It's no more real than the wolves were."

But there was something swaying in the shadows beneath the spreading trees ahead—something gray and ponderously vast.

"There! What is that thing?" Ce'Nedra's voice was shrill.

"It's an elephant, dear," Polgara told her calmly. "They live in the jungles of Gandahar on the east coast of Mallorea."

"How did it get here, then?"

"It didn't. It's an apparition. Father was right. Someone in these woods has a very twisted sense of humor."

"And I'm going to show this comedian exactly what I think of his little jokes," Beigarath growled.

"No, father," Polgara disagreed. "I think that perhaps you should leave it to me. You're irritated, and that sometimes makes you go a little far with things. I'll take care of it."

"Polgara—" he started angrily.

"Yes, father?" Her look was cool and direct.

He controlled himself with some effort. "All right, Pol " he said. "Don't take any chances, though. This funny fellow might have some other tricks in his bag."

"I'm always careful, father," she replied. Then she moved her horse at a walk until she was several yards in advance of the rest of the party. "It's a very nice elephant," she called into the woods as she eyed the huge gray shape swaying menacingly in the shadows ahead of her. "Have you anything else you might like to show us?"

There was a long pause.

"You don't seem very impressed," a rusty-sounding voice growled from somewhere nearby.

"Well, you did make a few mistakes. The ears aren't big enough, for one thing, and the tail is much too long."

"The feet and tusks are about right, though," the voice in the woods snapped, "as you're about to find out."

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The gray shape raised its huge snout and bellowed. Then it lumbered forward directly toward Polgara.

"How tiresome," she said, making a negligent-appearing gesture with one hand.

The elephant vanished in mid-stride.

"Well?" she asked.

A figure stepped out from behind a tree. It was a tall, gaunt man with wild hair and a very long beard, with twigs and straw clinging to it. He was dressed in a filthy smock, and his bare legs were as white as fish bellies, with knobby knees and broken veins. In one hand he carried a slender stick.

"I see that you have power, woman," he said to her, his voice filled with an unspoken threat.

"Some," she admitted calmly. "You must be the hermit I've heard about."

A look of cunning came into his eyes. "Perhaps," he replied. "And who are you?"

"Let's just say that I'm a visitor."

"I don't want any visitors. These woods are mine, and I prefer to be left alone."

"That's hardly civil. You must learn to control yourself."

His face suddenly twisted into an insane grimace. "Don't tell me what to do!" he screamed at her. "I am a God!"

"Hardly that," she disagreed.

"Feel the weight of my displeasure!" he roared. He raised the stick in his hand, and a glowing spark appeared at its tip. Suddenly, out of the insubstantial air, a monster leaped directly at her. It had scaly hide, a gaping muzzle filled with pointed fangs, and great paws tipped with needle-sharp claws.

Polgara lifted one hand, palm outward, and the thing suddenly stopped and hung motionless in midair. "A trifle better," she said critically. "This one even seems to have a bit of substance to it."

"Release it!" the hermit howled at her, jumping up and down in fury.

"Are you really sure you want me to?"

"Release it! Release it! Release it!" His voice rose to a shriek as he danced about wildly.

"If you insist," she replied. Slowly the slaver monster turned about in midair and then dropped to the ground. With a roar, it charged the startled hermit.

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The gaunt man recoiled, thrusting his wand out in front of him. The creature vanished.

"You always have to be careful with monsters," she advised. "You never know when one of them might turn on you."

His mad eyes narrowed, and he leveled his stick at her. A series of incandescent fireballs burst from its tip, sizzling through the air directly at her.

She held up her hand again, and the smoldering chunks of fire bounced off into the woods. Garion glanced at one and saw that it was actually burning, setting the damp needles on the forest floor to smoking. He put his heels to his horse's flanks, even as Durnik also

spurred forward, brandishing his cudgel.

"Stay out of it, you two!" Belgarath barked. "Pol can take care of herself."

"But, Grandfather," Garion protested, "that was real fire."

"Just do as I say, Garion. You'll throw her off balance if you go blundering in there now."

"Why are you being so difficult," Polgara asked the madman who stood glaring at her. "All we're doing is traveling through these woods."

"The woods are mine!" he shrieked. "Mine! Mine! Mine!" Again he danced his insane caper of fury and shook both his fists at her.

"Now you're being ridiculous," she told him.

The hermit leaped backward with a startled exclamation as the ground directly in front of his feet erupted with a seething green fire and a boiling cloud of bright purple smoke.

"Did you like the colors?" she inquired. "I like a little variety now and then, don't you?"

"Pol," Belgarath said in exasperation, "will you stop playing?"

"This isn't play, father," she replied firmly. "It's education."

A tree some yards behind the hermit suddenly bent forward, enfolding him in its stout limbs and then straightening back up again, lifting him struggling into the air.

"Have you had enough of this yet?" she asked, looking up at the startled man, who was trying desperately to free

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himself from the branches wrapped about his waist. "Decide quickly, my friend. You're a long way from the ground, and I'm losing interest in keeping you up there."

With a curse, the hermit wrenched himself free and tumbled heavily to the loam beneath the tree.

"Did you hurt yourself?" she inquired solicitously.

Snarling, he cast a wave of absolute blackness at her.

Still sitting her horse with unruffled calm, she began to glow with an intensely blue light that pushed the blackness away.

Again the look of mad cunning came into his eyes. Garion felt a disjointed surge. Jerkily, one portion of his body at a time, the deranged hermit began to expand, growing larger and larger. His face was wholly insane now, and he lashed out with one huge fist,

shattering a nearby tree. He bent, picked up a long branch, and broke it in two. He discarded the shorter end and advanced upon Polgara, swinging his great club.

"Pol!" Belgarath shouted in sudden alarm. "Be careful of him!"

"I can manage, father," she replied. Then she faced the ten-foot-tall madman. "I think this has gone quite far enough," she told him. "I hope you know how to run." She made a peculiar gesture.

The wolf that appeared between them was impossibly large—half again as big as a horse—and its snarl was thunderous.

"I do not fear your apparitions, woman," the towering hermit roared. "I am God, and I fear nothing."

The wolf bit him, its teeth sinking into his shoulder. He screamed and jerked back, dropping his cloth. "Get away!" he shouted at the snarling wolf.

The beast crouched, its fangs bared.

"Get away!" the hermit screamed again. He flopped his hands in the air, and Garion again felt that disorganized surge as the insane man tried with all his might to make the wolf vanish.

"I recommend immediate flight," Polgara suggested. "That wolf hasn't been fed for a thousand years and it's dreadfully hungry."

The hermit's nerve broke at that point. He spun and ran

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desperately back into the woods, his pale, skinny legs flashing and his hair and beard streaming behind him. The wolf gave chase at a leisurely lope, snapping at his heels and growling horribly. "Have a pleasant day," Polgara called after him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Polgara's expression was unreadable as she looked after the fleeing hermit. At last she sighed. "Poor fellow," she murmured.

"Will the wolf catch him?" Ce'Nedra asked in a small voice.

"The wolf? Oh no, dear. The wolf was only an illusion."

"But it bit him. I saw the blood."

"Just a small refinement, Ce'Nedra.'l

"Then why did you say 'poor fellow'?"

"Because he's completely mad. His mind is filled with all kinds of shadows."

"That happens sometimes, Polgara," Belgarath told her. "Let's move along. I want to get deeper into these woods before the sun goes down."

Garion pulled his horse in beside Belgarath's as they rode 391

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on into the forest. "Do you think he might have been a Gro-lim at one time?" he asked.

"What makes you say that?"

"Well—I sort of thought—" Garion struggled to put it into words. "What I mean is, there are two groups of sorcerers in the world—the Grolims and us. He wasn't one of us, was he?"

"What a peculiar notion," Belgarath said. "The talent is latent in everybody. It can show up any place—and does. It takes different directions in different cultures, but it's all related—magic, witchcraft, sorcery, wizardry, and even the peculiar gift of the seers. It all comes from the same place, and it's all basically the same thing. It just shows up in different ways, that's all."

"I didn't know that."

"Then you've learned something today. No day in which you learn something is a complete loss."

The autumn sun was very bright, though it was low on the northern horizon. Winter was almost upon them. Once again Garion was reminded that they were in a strange part of the world where the seasons were reversed. Back at Faldor's farm it was nearly summer now. The fields had been ploughed and the crops planted, and the days were long and warm. Here at the bottom of the world, however, it was quite the opposite. With a start, he realized that, except for that brief time in the desert of Araga, he had entirely missed summer this year. For some reason, he found that thought profoundly depressing. *

They had been climbing steadily for the past hour or more as they moved up into the low range of hills that formed the spine of the island. The land became more broken, with wooded gullies and ravines wrinkling the floor of the forest.

"I hate mountain country," Sadi complained, looking at a cliff that suddenly reared up out of the trees. "Broken terrain is always so inconvenient."

"It's going to be just as troublesome for the Malloreans," Silk pointed out.

"That's true, I suppose," Sadi admitted, "but I'm afraid I still don't like hills and valleys. They seem so unnatural for some reason. Give me a nice flat swamp anytime."

"Let me check that ravine just ahead," Durnik said. "It's getting on

toward sunset, and we're going to need a safe place to spend the night." He cantered his horse to a narrow

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notch, splashed across the turbulent brook that issued from its mouth, and disappeared upstream.

"How far do you think we've come today?" Velvet asked.

"Six or eight leagues," Belgarath replied. "We should be deep enough into the forest to avoid being noticed—unless the Malloreans intend to take this search of theirs seriously."

"Or unless that seeress we met accidentally happens to mention the fact that we're here," she added.

"Why are you so suspicious about those people?" Ce'Nedra asked her.

"I'm not entirely sure," the blond girl replied, "but I get an uneasy feeling everytime one of them sends us off in some direction or other. If they're supposed to be so neutral, why are they going out of their way to help us?"

"It's her Academy training, Ce'Nedra," Silk said. "Scepticism is one of the major branches of study there."

"Do you trust her, Kheldar?" Velvet asked pointedly.

"Of course not—but then I graduated from the Academy, too."

Durnik came back out of the ravine with a satisfied look on his face. "It's a good place," he announced. "It's secure, sheltered, and well out of sight."

"Let's have a look," Belgarath said.

They followed the smith up the ravine, with the brook gurgling and splashing beside them. After a few hundred yards, the ravine angled sharply to the left; farther along, it twisted back to the right again and opened out into a wooded basin. The brook they had been following upstream spilled out over the edge of a steep limestone cliff above the basin to fall as a misty spray into a pond at the upper end of the little canyon.

"Very nice, Durnik," Polgara congratulated her husband. "And that pond really didn't have anything at all to do with your choice, did it?"

"Well—" he said.

She laughed a rich, warm laugh, leaned across, and kissed him lightly. "It's all right, Durnik," she said, "but first we'll need shelter. Then you can see if the pond is occupied."

"Oh, it is, Pol," he assured her. "I saw one jumping." He hesitated.

"I mean--well, I just happened to notice it in passing, is all."

"Of course, dear."

He lowered his head slightly, much like an abashed school-

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boy, but Garion could see the faint flicker of a smile playing about the smith's lips. It was almost with a shock that he realized that his plain, honest friend was far more devious than he sometimes appeared. Since Polgara enjoyed catching him in these little subterfuges so much, Durnik often arranged things so that she could catch him--just for the sake of the pleasure it gave her.

They set the tents back under the trees, not too far from the edge of the pond. As usual, the chore of gathering firewood fell to Garion and Eriond while Dumik and Toth put up the tents. Also, as usual, Silk and Belgarath disappeared until all the work was completed. Sadi sat chatting with Velvet and Ce'Nedra, and his contralto voice seemed somehow as feminine as theirs.

As Polgara began to busy herself with supper, Durnik looked critically around at the campsite. "I guess that's about it," he said.

"Yes, dear," Polgara agreed.

"Do you need anything else?"

"No, dear."

"Well, I suppose--" He glanced toward the pond.

"Go ahead, Durnik," she told him. "Just be sure to come back when supper's ready."

"Are you coming, Toth?" Durnik asked his friend.

As evening darkened their concealed basin, and the stars came out in the velvety sky overhead, they gathered about the fire and ate a supper consisting of lightly grilled lamb, steamed vegetables, and dark bread, all drawn from the sun^ plies Yard had pressed upon them before they had left the village near the beach.

"A meal fit for a king, Lady Polgara," Sadi said expansively, leaning back.

"Yes," Garion murmured.

Sadi laughed. "I keep forgetting," he said. "You're such an unassuming fellow, Belgarion. If you asserted yourself a bit, people might take more note of your royalty."

"I couldn't agree more, Sadi," Ce'Nedra said.

"I'm not sure that's such a good idea at the moment," Garion told them. "Just now, I don't really want that kind of recognition."

Silk rose from the place where he had been sitting.

"Where are you going, Kheldar?" Velvet asked him.

"I'm going to have a look around," he replied. "I'll give

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you a full report when I come back, so that you can make note of it in the document you're preparing for Javelin."

"You're not taking this situation well at all, Prince Kheldar."

"I just don't like being spied on."

"Try to look at it as a friendly concern for your welfare. It's not really spying, if you consider it in that light, is it?"

"It amounts to the same thing, Liselle."

"Of course, but it doesn't seem quite so unpleasant that way, now does it?"

"Very clever."

"I thought so myself. Try not to get lost out there."

He went off into the darkness muttering to himself.

"How long do you think the soldiers will keep searching, Grandfather?" Garion asked.

The old man scratched absently at his bearded chin. "It's hard to say," he replied. "Malloreans don't have the same kind of brainless tenacity that Murgos do; but if the orders came from someone with enough authority, they probably won't give up until they've at least gone through the motions of making a thorough search."

"Several days, then?"

"At least."

"And all the time Zandramas is getting farther and farther ahead of us with my son."

"I'm afraid that can't be helped."

"Don't you think the slavers' robes would deceive them, Belgarath?" Sadi asked.

"I don't believe I want to take the chance. Murgos have seen Nyissan slavers moving around down here for so many years that they don't give them a second glance. Malloreans are probably more

alert—besides, we don't know exactly what they're looking for. For all we know, they could be specifically looking for a group of slavers."

Silk quietly came back to the fire. "We've got company," he said. "I saw several campfires out there." He gestured off to the northeast.

"How close?" Garion asked quickly.

"Probably several leagues or so. I was up on top of that ridge, and you can see for quite a distance. The fires are pretty well spread out."

"Malloreans?" Durnik asked him.

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"Probably. I'd say that they're making a sweep through the woods.1'

"Well, father?" Potgara asked.

"I don't think we can make any decisions until daylight," the old man replied. "If they're just making a cursory pass, we can probably sit tight. If they're serious about it, we might have to think of something else. We'd all better get some sleep. Tomorrow might be hectic."

Silk was up the next morning before daylight. As the rest of them rose to gather about the fire in the growing light of the dawn, he came back down the ridge. "They're coming," he announced, "and they're combing the woods inch by inch. I think we can be fairly sure that some of them will come up this ravine."

Belgarath stood up. "One of you put that fire out," he said. "We don't want the smoke to lead them right to us."

As Durnik quickly shoveled dirt over their cook fire, Toth stood up and peered off across the basin. Then he tapped Belgarath on the shoulder and pointed.

"What did he say, Durnik?" the old man asked.

The smith and his huge friend exchanged a series of somewhat obscure gestures.

"He says that there's a bramble thicket on the other side of the pond," Durnik interpreted. "He thinks that if we go around to the back side where the cliff comes down behind it, we might be able to find a good place to hide."

"Go look," Belgarath said shortly, "while the rest of us brush out any traces to show we've been here." f

It took about a quarter of an hour to break down their tents and to obliterate any footprints that might alert the soldiers to the fact that someone had spent the night in this secluded place. As Silk was

giving the campsite a critical last scrutiny, Durnik and Toth returned. "It's adequate," the smith reported. "There's an open place in the center of the thicket. We won't leave any tracks, if we're careful getting in there with the horses."

"What about from up there?" Garion asked him, pointing at the top of the cliff.

"We can cover the open place over with brambles," Durnik replied. "It shouldn't take too long." He looked at Silk. "'How much time do you think we have? How close are the soldiers?"

"Probably about an hour away."

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"That's more than enough time."

"All right," Belgarath said, "let's do it. I'd rather hide than run, anyway."

It was necessary to push the brambles aside to lead the horses into the center of the thicket. As Garion and Silk carefully rearranged them to conceal the game trail that had given them access to the hiding place, Durnik and Toth cut enough of the long, thorny tendrils to roof over the opening in the center. In the very midst of the task, Toth stopped suddenly, and his eyes grew distant, as if he were listening to something. His expression became oddly reluctant, and then he sighed.

"What's the matter, Toth?" Durnik asked him.

The giant shrugged and went back to his work.

"Grandfather," Garion said, "if there are Grolims with the soldiers, won't they look for us with their minds?"

"It's not very likely that any Grolims would be along, Garion," Silk told him. "This is a fairly small expedition, and the church and the army don't get along very well in Mallorea."

"They're coming, father," Polgara told him.

"How far are they?"

"A mile or so."

"Let's work our way out to the edge of the thicket," Silk suggested to Garion. "I'd sort of like to keep an eye on things." He dropped to the ground and began to worm his way among the roots of the prickly brambles.

After a few yards, Garion began to mutter a few choice curses. No matter which way he twisted, the sharp thorns managed to find any number of sensitive spots.

"I don't want to interrupt your devotions," Silk whispered, "but it might be a good time for a fair amount of silence."

"Can you see anything?" Garion whispered back.

"Not yet, but you can hear them crashing around at the mouth of the ravine. Stealth is not a Malloorean's strong point."

Faintly from far down the ravine, Garion could hear several men talking. The sound, distorted by echoes bouncing off the twisting rock walls, came in odd bursts. Then there was a clatter of hooves on the rocks beside the tumbling brook as the Mallooreans began their search of the narrow course.

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There were a dozen or so soldiers in the party. They wore the usual red tunics and they rode their horses stiffly, like men who were not at all comfortable in the saddle.

"Did anybody ever say why we're looking for these people?" one of them asked, sounding a bit surly about it.

"You've been in the army long enough to know better than that, Brek," one of his companions replied. "They never tell you why. When an officer tells you to jump, you don't ask why. You just say, 'How far?'"

"Officers." Brek spat. "They get all the best of everything and they never do any work. Someday the ordinary soldiers like you and me are going to get sick of it, and then all those fine generals and captains had better look out."

"You're talking mutiny, Brek," his companion said, looking around nervously. "If the captain hears you, he'll have you crucified on the spot."

Brek scowled darkly. "Well, they'd better look out, that's all," he muttered. "A man can take being pushed around for just so long."

The red-clad soldiers rode directly through the campsite Garion and his friends had carefully obliterated and rode along the edge of the pond.

"Sergeant," Brek said in his complaining voice to the heavy man in the lead, "isn't it about time to stop and rest?"

"Brek," the sergeant replied, "sometime not too far off, I'd like to get through a day without hearing you whine about everything that happens."

"You don't have any reason to talk to me like that," Brek objected. "I follow my orders, don't I?"

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"But you complain, Brek. I'm so sick of hearing you snivel about everything that happens that, about the next time you open your

mouth, I'm going to bash in your teeth."

"I'm going to tell the captain what you just said," Brek threatened. "You heard what he told you about hitting us."

"How do you plan to make him understand you, Brek?" the sergeant asked ominously. "A man mumbles when he doesn't have any teeth, you know. Now, water your horse and keep your mouth shut."

Then a stern-faced man with iron-gray hair astride a raw-boned horse came cantering up the ravine and into the basin. "Any signs?" he demanded curtly.

The sergeant saluted. "Nothing at all, Captain," he reported.

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The officer glanced around. "Did you look into that thicket?" he asked, pointing toward the place where Garion and the others were concealed.

"We were just about to, sir," the sergeant replied. "There aren't any tracks, though."

"Tracks can be brushed out. Have your men go look."

"Right away, Captain."

As the soldiers rode up to the thicket, the officer dismounted and led his horse to the pond to drink.

"Did the general say anything about why he wants these people captured, sir?" the sergeant asked, also dismounting.

"Nothing that concerns you, Sergeant."

The soldiers were riding around the thicket, making some show of peering through the brambles.

"Tell them to get off their horses, Sergeant," the captain said disgustedly. "I want that thicket thoroughly searched. That white-haired man back at the village said that the ones we're looking for would be in this part of the forest."

Garion muffled a sudden gasp. "Yard!" he whispered to Silk. "He told them exactly where to find us."

"So it would seem," Silk breathed back grimly. "Let's get back a little farther into the thicket. Those soldiers are likely to get a bit more serious about this now."

"The thicket's all thorn bushes, Captain," Brek shouted back his report. "We can't get in there at all."

"Use your spears," the captain ordered. "Poke around and see if you can flush anybody out."

The Mallorean troopers untied their spears from their saddles and began to stab them into the thicket.

"Keep down," Silk whispered.

Garion pressed himself closer to the ground, wincing as he found a fair number of thorns with his thighs.

"It's solid brambles, Captain," Brek shouted after several moments of probing. "Nobody could possibly be in there— not with horses."

"All right," the officer told him. "Mount up and come on back down here. We'll try the next ravine."

Garion carefully let out the breath he had been holding. "That was close," he breathed to Silk.

"Too close," Silk replied. "I think I'll have a talk with Yard about this."

"Why would he betray us like that?"

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"That's one of the things we're going to talk about when I see him."

As the soldiers reached the pond, the captain swung back up into his saddle. "All right, Sergeant," he said, "form up your men, and let's move on."

Then, directly in front of him, there was a peculiar shimmering in the air, and Cyradis, robed and cowed, appeared.

The officer's startled horse reared, and the man kept his saddle only with difficulty. "Torak's teeth!" he swore. "Where did you come from?"

"That is of no moment," she replied. "I have come to aid thee in thy search."

"Look out, Captain!" Brek called warningly. "That's one of those Dalasian witches. She'll put a curse on you if you're not careful."

"Shut up, Brek," the sergeant snapped.

"Explain yourself, woman," the captain said imperiously. "Just what did you mean by that last remark?"

Cyradis turned until she was facing the bramble thicket. She raised her hand and pointed. "The ones you seek are concealed there," she said.

From somewhere behind him Garion heard Ce'Nedra gasp.

"We just searched there," Brek objected. "There's nobody in that

thicket."

"Thy sight is faulty then," she told him.

The captain's face had grown cold. "You're wasting my time," he told her. "I watched my men make the search with my own eyes." He gave her a narrow glance. "What is a Seeress from Kell doing here in Cthol Murgos?" he demanded. "You people are neither wanted nor welcome here. Go home and fill your mind with the shadows of brain-sickly imagining. I have no time for the babblings of adolescent witches."

"Then I must prove to thee that my words are true," she replied. She lifted her face and stood quite still.

From somewhere behind where Garion and Silk lay concealed there came a crashing sound, and a moment later the huge Toth, responding to the silent summons of his mistress, burst out of the bramble thicket, carrying the struggling Ce'Nedra in his arms.

The captain stared at him.

"That's one of them, Captain!" Brek exclaimed. "That's

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the big one you told us to look for—and the red-haired wench!"

"It is as I told thee," Cyradis said. "Seek the others in the same place." Then she vanished.

"Take those two!" the sergeant commanded, and several of his men jumped down from their saddles and surrounded Toth and the still-struggling Ce'Nedra with drawn weapons.

"What are we going to do?" Garion whispered to Silk. "They've got Ce'Nedra."

"I can see that."

"Let's go, then." Garion reached for his sword.

"Use your head," the little man snapped. "You'll only put her in more danger if you go running down there."

"Garion—Silk," Belgarath's whispered voice came to them, "what's happening?"

Garion twisted around to look back over his shoulder and saw his grandfather peering through the brambles. "They've got Toth and Ce'Nedra," he reported softly. "It was Cyradis, Grandfather. She told them exactly where we are."

Belgarath's face went stony, and Garion could see his lips shaping a number of curses.

The Mallorean captain rode up to the thicket with the sergeant and

the rest of his men closely behind him. "I think that the rest of you had better come out of there," he ordered crisply. "I have your two friends already and I know that you're in there."

No one answered.

"Oh, come now," he said, "be reasonable. If you don't come out, I'll just send for more soldiers and have them cut down the thicket with their swords. No one's been hurt yet, and I give you my word that none of you will be harmed in any way, if you come out now. I'll even let you keep your weapons—as a gesture of good faith."

Garion heard a brief whispered consultation back in the center of the thicket.

"All right, Captain," Belgarath called in a disgusted tone of voice. "Keep your men under control. We're coming out. Garion, you and Silk, too."

"Why did he do that?" Garion asked. "We could have stayed hidden and then worked out a way to get them all free again."

"The Malloreans know how many of us there are,

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replied. "That captain's got the upper hand for the moment. Let's go." He started to worm his way out of the thicket.

Garion swore and then followed him.

The others emerged from the back of the thicket and began to walk toward the Mallorean officer. Durnik, however, pushed past them, his face livid with anger. He strode quickly down the slope to confront Toth. "Is this your idea of friendship?" he demanded. "Is this the way you repay all our kindness?"

Toth's face grew melancholy, but he made no gesture of reply or explanation.

"I was wrong about you, Toth," the smith continued in a dreadfully quiet voice. "You were never a friend. Your mistress just put you in a position where the two of you could betray us. Well, you won't get the chance again." He started to raise his hand, and Garion could feel the surge as he gathered in his will.

"Durnik!" Polgara cried. "No!"

"He betrayed us, Pol. I'm not going to let him get away with that."

The two of them stared at each other for a long moment, their eyes locked. In that moment, something passed between them, and Durnik

finally lowered his gaze. He turned back to the mute. "You and I are through, Toth. I'll never trust you again. I don't even want to see your face any more. Give me the princess. I don't want you touching her."

Wordlessly Toth held out Ce'Nedra's tiny form. Durnik took her and then deliberately turned his back on the huge mute.

"All right, Captain," Belgarath said, "what now?"

"My orders are to escort you all safely to Rak Verkat, Ancient Belgarath. The military governor there awaits your arrival. It will, of course, be necessary for me to separate certain of your companions from you—just as a precaution. Your power, and that of Lady Polgara, is well known. The well-being of your friends will depend upon your restraint. I'm sure you understand."

"Of course," Belgarath replied drily.

"And do the plans of your military governor involve dungeons and the like?" Silk asked him.

"You do his Excellency an injustice, Prince Kheldar," the captain told him. "He has been instructed to treat you all with the utmost respect."

"You seem remarkably well informed as to our identities, Captain," Polgara observed.

"The one who ordered you detained was most specific, my Lady," he answered with a curt, military bow.

"And just who might that have been?"

"Can there be any doubt in your mind, Lady Polgara? The orders come directly from his Imperial Majesty, Kai Zakath. He has been aware of the presence of your party in Cthol Murgos for some time now." He turned to his men. "Form up around the prisoners," he ordered sharply. Then he turned back to Polgara. "Forgive me, my Lady," he apologized. "I meant guests, of course. The military vocabulary is sometimes blunt. A ship awaits you at Rak Verkat. Immediately upon your arrival there, you will set sail. His Imperial Majesty awaits your arrival at Rak Hagga with the keenest anticipation."

Here ends Book II of The Malloreon.

Book HI, Demon Lord of Karanda,

will reveal what the Emperor Zakath intends for the company and lead us further into the dark designs of Zandramas and the strange ways of demons.

About the Author

David Eddings was born in Spokane, Washington, in 1931 and was raised in the Puget Sound area north of Seattle. He received a Bachelor of

Arts degree from Reed College in Portland, Oregon, in 1954 and a Master of Arts degree from the University of Washington in 1961. He has served in the United States Army, worked as a buyer for the Boeing Company, has been a grocery clerk, and has taught English. He has lived in many parts of the United States.

His first novel, *High Hunt* (published by Putnam in 1973), was a contemporary adventure story. The field of fantasy has always been of interest to him, however, and he turned to *The Belgariad* in an effort to develop certain technical and philosophical ideas concerning that genre.

Eddings currently resides with his wife, Leigh, in the southwest.

DAVID EDDINGS - DEMON LORD OF KARANDA
Book 2 of the Malloreon

PROLOGUE

Being a brief history of Malloreon and the races that dwell there.

-Digested from The Chronicles of Angarak
University of Melcene Press

Tradition places the ancestral home of the Angaraks somewhere off the south coast of present-day Dalasia. Then Torak, Dragon God of Angarak, used the power of the Stone, Cthrag Yaska, in what has come to be called "the cracking of the world." The crust of the earth split, releasing liquid magma from below and letting the waters of the southern ocean in to form the Sea of the East.

This cataclysmic process continued for decades before the world gradually assumed its present form.

As a result of this upheaval, the Alorns and their allies were forced to retreat into the unexplored reaches of the western continent, while the Angaraks fled into the wilderness of Malloreon.

Torak had been maimed and disfigured by the Stone, which rebelled at the use to which the God put it, and the Grolim priests were demoralized. Thus leadership fell by default to the military; by the time the Grolims recovered, the military had established de facto rule of all Angarak. Lacking their former preeminence, the priests set up an opposing center of power at Mal Yaska, near the tip of the Karandese mountain range.

At this point, Torak roused himself to prevent the imminent civil war between priesthood and military rule. But he made no move against the military headquarters at Mal Zeth; instead, he marched to the extreme northwest of Malloreon Antiqua with a quarter of the Angarak people to build the Holy City of Cthol Mishrak. There he remained, so absorbed by efforts to gain control of Cthrag Yaska that he was oblivious to the fact that the people had largely turned from their previous preoccupation with theological matters. Those with him in Cthol Mishrak were mostly a hysterical fringe of fanatics under the rigid control of Torak's three disciples, Zedar, Ctuchik, and Urvon. These three maintained the old forms in the society of Cthol Mishrak while the rest of Angarak changed.

When the continuing friction between the Church and military finally came to Torak's attention, he summoned the military High Command and the Grolim Hierarchy to Cthol Mishrak and delivered his commands in terms that brooked no demur. Exempting only Mal Yaska and Mal Zeth, all towns and districts were to be ruled jointly by the military and priesthood. The subdued Hierarchy and High Command immediately settled their differences and returned to their separate enclaves. This enforced truce freed the generals to turn their attention to the other peoples living in Malloreon.

The origins of these people are lost in myth, but three races had predated the Angaraks on the continent: the Dalasians of the southwest; the Karands of the north; and the Melcenes of the East. It was to the Karands the military turned its efforts.

The Karands were a warlike race with little patience for cultural niceties. They lived in crude cities where hogs roamed freely in the muddy streets. Traditionally, they were related to the Morindim of the far north of Gar og Nadrak. Both races were given to the practice of demon worship.

At the beginning of the second millennium, roving bands of Karandese brigands had become a serious problem along the eastern frontier, and the Angarak army now moved out of Mal Zeth to the western fringes of the Karandese Kingdom of Pallia. The city of Rakand in southwestern Pallia was sacked and burned, and the inhabitants were taken captives.

At this point, one of the greatest decisions of Angarak history was made. While the Grolims prepared for an orgy of human sacrifice, the generals paused. They had no desire to occupy Pallia, and the difficulties of long-distance communication made the notion unattractive. To the generals, it seemed far better to keep Pallia as a subject kingdom and exact tribute, rather than to occupy a depopulated territory. The Grolims were outraged, but the generals were adamant. Ultimately, both sides agreed to take the matter before Torak for his decision.

Not surprisingly, Torak agreed with the High Command; if the Karands could be converted, he would nearly double the congregation of his Church as well as the size of his army for any future confrontation with the Kings of the West. "Any man who liveth in boundless Mallorean shall bow down and worship me," he told his reluctant missionaries. And to insure their zeal, he sent Urvon to Mal Yaska to oversee the conversion of the Karands.

There Urvon established himself as temporal head of the Mallorean Church in pomp and luxury hitherto unknown to the ascetic Grolims.

The army moved against Katakora, Jenno, and Delchin, as well as Pallia. But the missionaries fared poorly as the Karandese magicians conjured up hordes of demons to defend their society. Urvon finally journeyed to Cthol Mishrak to consult with Torak. It is not clear what Torak did, but the Karandese magicians soon discovered that the spells previously used to control the demons were no longer effective. Any magician could now reach into the realms of darkness only at the peril of life and soul. The conquest of the Karands absorbed the attention of both military and priesthood for the next several centuries, but ultimately the resistance collapsed and Karanda became a subject nation, its peoples generally looked upon as inferiors.

When the army advanced down the Great River Magan against the Melcene Empire, however, it met a sophisticated and technologically superior people. In several disastrous battles, in which Melcene war chariots and elephant cavalry destroyed whole battalions, the Angaraks abandoned their efforts. The Angarak generals made overtures of peace. To their astonishment, the Melcenes quickly agreed to normalize relations and offered to trade horses, which the Angaraks

previously lacked. They refused, however, even to discuss the sale of elephants.

The army then turned to Dalasia, which proved to be an easy conquest. The Dalasians were simple farmers and herdsmen with little skill for war. The Angaraks moved into Dalasia and established military protectorates during the next ten years. The priesthood seemed at first equally successful. The Dalasians meekly accepted the forms of Angarak worship. But they were a mystical people, and the Grolims soon discovered that the power of the witches, seers, and prophets remained unbroken. Moreover, copies of the infamous Mallolean Gospels still circulated in secret among the Dalasians.

In time, the Grolims might have succeeded in stamping out the secret Dalasian religion. But then a disaster occurred that was to change forever the complexion of Angarak life. Somehow, the legendary sorcerer Belgarath, accompanied by three Alorns, succeeded in evading all the security measures and came unobserved at night to steal Cthrag Yaska from the iron tower of Torak in the center of Cthol Mishrak. Although pursued, they managed to escape with the stolen Stone to the West.

In furious rage, Torak destroyed his city. Then he ordered that the Murgos, Thulls, and Nadraks be sent to the western borders of the Sea of the East. More than a million lives were lost in the crossing of the northern land bridge, and the society and culture of the Angaraks took long to recover.

Following the dispersal and the destruction of Cthol Mishrak, Torak became almost inaccessible, concentrating totally on various schemes to thwart the growing power of the Kingdoms of the West. The God's neglect gave the military time to exploit fully its now virtually total control of Mallorea and the subject kingdoms.

For many centuries, the uneasy peace between Angaraks and Melcenes continued, broken occasionally only by little wars in which both sides avoided committing their full forces. The two nations eventually established the practice of each sending children of the leaders to be raised by leaders of the other side. This led to a fuller understanding by both, as well as to the growth of a body of cosmopolitan youths that eventually became the norm for the ruling class of the Mallolean Empire.

One such youth was Kallath, the son of a high-ranking Angarak general. Brought up in Melcene, he returned to Mal Zeth to become the youngest man ever to be elevated to the General Staff. Returning to Melcene, he married the daughter of the Melcene Emperor and managed to have himself declared Emperor following the old man's death in 3830. Then, using the Melcene army as a threat, he managed to get himself declared hereditary Commander in Chief of the Angaraks.

The integration of Melcene and Angarak was turbulent. But in time, the Melcene patience won out over Angarak brutality. Unlike other peoples, the Melcenes were ruled by a bureaucracy. And in the end, that bureaucracy proved far more efficient than the Angarak military administration. By 4400, the ascendancy of the bureaucracy was complete. By that time, also, the title of Commander in Chief had been forgotten and the ruler of both peoples was simply the Emperor of Mallorea.

To the sophisticated Melcenes, the worship of Torak remained largely superficial. They accepted the forms out of

expediency, but the Grolims were never able to command the abject submission to the Dragon God that had characterized the Angaraks.

Then in 4850, Torak suddenly emerged from his eons of seclusion to appear before the gates of Mal Zeth.

Wearing a steel mask to conceal his maimed face, he set aside the Emperor and declared himself Kal Torak, King and God. He immediately began mustering an enormous force to crush the Kingdoms of the West and bring all the world under his domination.

The mobilization that followed virtually stripped Mallorea of able-bodied males. The Angaraks and Karands were marched north to the land bridge, crossing to northernmost Gar og Nadrak, and the Dalasians and Melcenes moved to where fleets had been constructed to ferry them across the Sea of the East to southern Cthol Murgos. The northern Malloreans joined with the Nadraks, Thulls, and northern Murgos to strike toward the Kingdoms of Drasnia and Algaria. The second group of Malloreans joined with the southern Murgos and were to march northwesterly. Torak meant to crush the West between the two huge armies.

The southern forces, however, were caught in a freak storm that swept off the Western Sea in the spring of 4875 and that buried them alive in the worst blizzard of recorded history. When it finally abated, the column was mired in fourteen-foot snowdrifts that persisted until early summer. No theory has yet been able to explain this storm, which was clearly not of natural origin. Whatever the cause, the southern army perished. The few survivors who struggled back to the East told tales of horror that were truly unthinkable.

The northern force was also beset by various disasters, but eventually laid siege to Vo Mimbire, where they were completely routed by the combined armies of the West.

And there Torak was struck down by the power of Cthrag Yaska (there called the Orb of Aldur) and lay in a coma that was to last centuries, though his body was rescued and taken to a secret hiding place by his disciple Zedar.

In the years following these catastrophes, Mallorean society began to fracture back into its original components of Melcene, Karanda, Dalasia, and the lands of the Angaraks. The Empire was saved only by the emergence of Korzeth as Emperor.

Korzeth was only fourteen when he seized the throne from his aged father. Deceived by his youth, the separatist regions began to declare independence of the imperial throne. Korzeth moved decisively to stem the revolution. He spent the rest of his life on horseback in one of the greatest bloodbaths of history, but when he was done, he delivered a strong and united Mallorea to his successors. Henceforth, the descendants of Korzeth ruled in total and unquestioned power from Mal Zeth.

This continued until the present Emperor, Zakath, ascended the throne. For a time, he gave promise of being an enlightened ruler of Mallorea and the western kingdoms of the Angaraks. But soon there were signs of trouble.

The Murgos were ruled by Taur Urgas, and it was evident that he was both mad and unscrupulously ambitious. He instigated some plot against the young Emperor. It has never been established clearly what form his scheming took. But

Zakath discovered that Taur Urgas was behind it and vowed vengeance. This took the form of a bitter war in which Zakath began a campaign to destroy the mad ruler utterly.

It was in the middle of this struggle that the West struck. While the Kings of the West sent an army against the East, Belgarion, the young Overlord of the West and descendant of Belgarath the Sorcerer, advanced on foot across the north and across the land bridge into Mallorean. He was accompanied by Belgarath and a Drasnian and he bore the ancient Sword of Riva, on the pommel of which was Cthrag Yaska, the Orb of Aldur. His purpose was to slay Torak, apparently in response to some prophecy known in the West.

Torak had been emerging from his long coma in the ruins of his ancient city of Cthol Mishrak. Now he roused himself to meet the challenger. But in the confrontation, Belgarion overcame the God and slew him with the Sword, leaving the priesthood of Mallorean in chaos and confusion.

PART ONE - RAK HAGGA

CHAPTER ONE

The first snow of the season settled white and quiet through the breathless air onto the decks of their ship. It was a wet snow with large, heavy flakes that piled up on the lines and rigging, turning the tarred ropes into thick, white cables. The sea was black, and the swells rose and fell without sound. From the stem came the slow, measured beat of a muffled drum that set the stroke for the Mallorean oarsmen. The sifting flakes settled on the shoulders of the sailors and in the folds of their scarlet cloaks as they pulled steadily through the snowy morning. Their breath steamed in the chill dampness as they bent and straightened in unison to the beat of the drum.

Garion and Silk stood at the rail with their cloaks pulled tightly around them, staring somberly out through the filmy snowfall.

"Miserable morning," the rat-faced little Drasnian noted, distastefully brushing snow from his shoulders.

Garion grunted sourly.

"You're in a cheerful humor today."

"I don't really have all that much to smile about, Silk." Garion went back to glowering out at the gloomy black-and-white morning.

Belgarath the Sorcerer came out of the aft cabin, squinted up into the thickly settling snow, and raised the hood of his stout old cloak. Then he came forward along the slippery deck to join them at the rail.

Silk glanced at the red-cloaked Mallorean soldier who had unobtrusively come up on deck behind the old man and who now stood leaning with some show of idleness on the rail several yards aft. "I see that General Atesca is still concerned about your well-being," he said, pointing at the man who had dogged Belgarath's steps since they had sailed out of the harbor at Rak Verkat.

Belgarath threw a quick disgusted glance in the soldier's direction. "Stupidity," he said shortly. "Where does he think

I'm going?"

A sudden thought came to Garion. He leaned forward and spoke very quietly. "You know," he said, "we could go someplace, at that. We've got a ship here, and a ship goes wherever you point it -Mallorea just as easily as the coast of Hagga."

"It's an interesting notion, Belgarath," Silk agreed.

"There are four of us, Grandfather," Garion pointed out. "You, me, Aunt Pol, and Durnik. I'm sure we wouldn't have much difficulty in taking over this ship. Then we could change course and be halfway to Mallorea before Kal Zakath realized that we weren't coming to Rak Hagga after all." The more he thought about it, the more the idea excited him. "Then we could sail north along the Mallorean coast and anchor in a cove or inlet someplace on the shore of Camat. We'd only be a week or so from Ashaba. We might even be able to get there before Zandramas does." A bleak smile touched his lips. "I'd sort of like to be waiting for her when she gets there."

"It's got some definite possibilities, Belgarath," Silk said. "Could you do it?"

Belgarath scratched thoughtfully at his beard, squinting out into the sifting snow. "It's possible," he admitted. He looked at Garion. "But what do you think we ought to do with all these Mallorean soldiers and the ship's crew, once we get to the coast of Camat? You weren't planning to sink the ship and drown them all, were you, the way Zandramas does when she's finished using people?"

"Of course not!"

"I'm glad to hear that -but then how did you plan to keep them from running to the nearest garrison just as soon as we leave them behind? I don't know about you, but the idea of having a regiment or so of Mallorean troops hot on our heels doesn't excite me all that much."

Garion frowned. "I guess I hadn't thought about that," he admitted.

"I didn't think you had. It's usually best to work your way completely through an idea before you put it into action. It avoids a great deal of spur-of-the-moment patching later on."

"All right," Garion said, feeling slightly embarrassed.

"I know you're impatient, Garion, but impatience is a poor substitute for a well-considered plan."

"Do you mind, Grandfather?" Garion said acidly.

"Besides, it might just be that we're supposed to go to Rak Hagga and meet with Kal Zakath. Why would Cyradis turn us over to the Malloreans, after she went to all the trouble of putting The Book of Ages into my hands? There's something else going on here, and I'm not sure we want to disrupt things until we find out a little more about them."

The cabin door opened, and General Atesca, the commander of the Mallorean forces occupying the Isle of Verkat, emerged. From the moment they had been turned over to him, Atesca had been polite and strictly correct in all his dealings with them. He had also been very firm about his intention to deliver them personally to Kal Zakath in Rak Hagga. He was a tall, lean man, and his uniform was bright scarlet, adorned with numerous medals and decorations. He carried himself with erect dignity, though the fact that his nose had been broken

at some time in the past made him look more like a street brawler than a general in an imperial army. He came up the slush-covered deck, heedless of his highly polished boots.

"Good morning, gentlemen," he greeted them with a stiff, military bow. "I trust you slept well?"

"Tolerably," Silk replied.

"It seems to be snowing," the general said, looking about and speaking in the tone of one making small talk for the sake of courtesy.

"I noticed that," Silk said. "How long is it likely to take us to reach Rak Hagga?"

"A few more hours to reach the coast, your Highness, and then a two-day ride to the city."

Silk nodded. "Have you any idea why your Emperor wants to see us?" he asked.

"He didn't say," Atesca answered shortly, "and I didn't think it appropriate to ask. He merely told me to apprehend you and to bring you to him at Rak Hagga. You are all to be treated with utmost courtesy as long as you don't try to escape. If you do that, his Imperial Majesty instructed me to be more firm." His tone as he spoke was neutral, and his face remained expressionless. "I hope you gentlemen will excuse me now," he said. "I have some matters that need my attention." He bowed curtly, turned, and left them.

"He's a gold mine of information, isn't he?" Silk noted dryly. "Most Melcenes love to gossip, but you've got to pry every word out of this one."

"Melcene?" Garion said. "I didn't know that."

Silk nodded. "Atesca's a Melcene name. Kal Zakath has some peculiar ideas about the aristocracy of talent. Angarak officers don't like the idea, but there's not too much they can do about it -if they want to keep their heads."

Garion was not really that curious about the intricacies of Mallorean politics, so he let the matter drop, to return to the subject they had been discussing previously. "I'm not quite clear about what you were saying, Grandfather," he said, "about our going to Rak Hagga, I mean."

"Cyradis believes that she has a choice to make," the old man replied, "and there are certain conditions that have to be met before she can make it. I've got a suspicion that your meeting with Zakath might be one of those conditions."

"You don't actually believe her, do you?"

"I've seen stranger things happen and I always walk very softly around the Seers of Kell."

"I haven't seen anything about a meeting of that kind in the Mrin Codex."

"Neither have I, but there are more things in the world than the Mrin Codex. You've got to keep in mind the fact that Cyradis is drawing on the prophecies of both sides, and if the prophecies are equal, they have equal truth. Not only that, Cyradis is probably drawing on some prophecies that only the Seers know about. Wherever this list of preconditions came from, though, I'm fairly certain that she won't let us get to this 'place which is no more' until every item's been crossed off her list."

"Won't let us?" Silk said.

"Don't underestimate Cyradis, Silk," Belgarath cautioned. "She's the receptacle of all the power the Dals possess. That

means that she can probably do things that the rest of us couldn't even begin to dream of. Let's look at things from a practical point of view, though. When we started out, we were a half a year behind Zandramas and we were planning a very tedious and time-consuming trek across Cthol Murgos -but we kept getting interrupted." .

"Tell me about it," Silk said sardonically.

"Isn't it curious that after all these interruptions, we've reached the eastern side of the continent ahead of schedule and cut Zandramas' lead down to a few weeks?"

Silk blinked, and then his eyes narrowed.

"Gives you something to think about, doesn't it?" The old man pulled his cloak more tightly about him and looked around at the settling snow. "Let's go inside," he suggested. "It's really unpleasant out here."

The coast of Hagga was backed by low hills, filmy-looking and white in the thick snowfall. There were extensive salt marshes at the water's edge, and, the brown reeds bent under their burden of wet, clinging snow. A black-looking wooden pier extended out across the marshes to deeper water, and they disembarked from the Mallorean ship without incident. At the landward end of the pier a wagon track ran up into the hills, its twin ruts buried in snow.

Sadi the eunuch looked upward with a slightly bemused expression as they rode off the pier and onto the road. He lightly brushed one long-fingered hand across his shaved scalp. "They feel like fairy wings," he smiled.

"What's that?" Silk asked him.

"The snowflakes. I've almost never seen snow before -only when I was visiting a northern kingdom- and I actually believe that this is the first time I've ever been out of doors when it was snowing. It's not too bad, is it?"

Silk gave him a sour look. "The first chance I get, I'll buy you a sled," he said.

Sadi looked puzzled. "Excuse me, Kheldar, but what's a sled?" he asked.

Silk sighed. "Never mind, Sadi. I was only trying to be funny."

At the top of the first hill a dozen or so crosses leaned at various angles beside the road. Hanging from each cross was a skeleton with a few tattered rags clinging to its bleached bones and a clump of snow crowning its vacant-eyed skull.

"One is curious to know the reason for that, General Atesca," Sadi said mildly, pointing at the grim display at the roadside.

"Policy, your Excellency." Atesca replied curtly. "His Imperial Majesty seeks to alienate the Murgos from their king. He hopes to make them realize that Urgit is the cause of their misfortunes."

Sadi shook his head dubiously. "I'd question the reasoning behind that particular policy," he disagreed. "Atrocities seldom endear one to the victims. I've always preferred bribery myself."

"Murgos are accustomed to being treated atrociously." Atesca shrugged. "It's all they understand."

"Why haven't you taken them down and buried them?" Durnik demanded, his face pale and his voice thick with outrage.

Atesca gave him a long, steady look. "Economy, Goodman," he replied. "An empty cross really doesn't prove very much. If we took them down, we'd just have to replace them with fresh Murgos. That gets to be tedious after a while, and sooner or later one starts to run out of people to crucify. Leaving the skeletons there proves our point -and it saves time."

Garion did his best to keep his body between Ce'Nedra and the gruesome object lesson at the side of the road, trying to shield her from that hideous sight. She rode on obliviously, however, her face strangely numb and her eyes blank and unseeing. He threw a quick, questioning glance at Polgara and saw a slight frown on her face. He dropped back and pulled his horse in beside hers. "What's wrong with her?" he asked in a tense whisper.

"I'm not entirely sure, Garion," she whispered back.

"Is it the melancholia again?" There was a sick, sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"I don't think so," Her eyes were narrowed in thought, and she absently pulled the hood of her blue robe forward to cover the white lock in the midnight of her hair. "I'll keep an eye on her."

"What can I do?"

"Stay with her. Try to get her to talk. She might say something to give us some clues."

Ce'Nedra, however, made few responses to Garion's efforts to engage her in conversation, and her answers for the remainder of that snowy day quite frequently had little relevance to either his questions or his observations.

As evening began to settle over the war-ravaged countryside of Hagga, General Atesca called a halt, and his soldiers began to erect several scarlet pavilions in the lee of a fire-blackened stone wall, all that remained of a burned-out village. "We should reach Rak Hagga by late tomorrow afternoon," he advised them. "That large pavilion in the center of the encampment will be yours for the night. My men will bring you your evening meal in a little while. Now, if you'll all excuse me-" He inclined his head briefly, then turned his horse around to supervise his men.

When the soldiers had completed the erection of the pavilions, Garion and his friends dismounted in front of the one Atesca had indicated. Silk looked around at the guard detachment moving into position around the large red tent. "I wish he'd make up his mind," he said irritably.

"I don't quite follow you, Prince Kheldar," Velvet said to him. "Just who should make up his mind?"

"Atesca. He's the very soul of courtesy, but he surrounds us with armed guards."

"The troops might just be there to protect us, Kheldar," she pointed out. "This is a war zone, after all."

"Of course," he said dryly, "and cows might fly, too -if they had wings."

"What a fascinating observation," she marveled.

"I wish you wouldn't do that all the time."

"Do what?" Her brown eyes were wide and innocent.

"Forget it."

The supper Atesca's cooks prepared for them was plain, consisting of soldiers' rations and served on tin plates, but

it was hot and filling. The interior of the pavilion was heated by charcoal braziers and filled with the golden glow of hanging oil lamps. The furnishings were of a military nature, the kinds of tables and beds and chairs that could be assembled and disassembled rapidly, and the floors and walls were covered with Mallolean carpets' dyed a solid red color.

Eriond looked around curiously after he had pushed his plate back. "They seem awfully partial to red, don't they?" he noted.

"I think it reminds them of blood," Durnik declared bleakly. "They like blood." He turned to look coldly at the mute Toth. "If you've finished eating, I think we'd prefer it if you left the table," he said in a flat tone.

"That's hardly polite, Durnik," Polgara said reprovingly.

"I wasn't trying to be polite, Pol. I don't see why he has to be with us in the first place. He's a traitor. Why doesn't he go stay with his friends?"

The giant mute rose from the table, his face melancholy. He lifted one hand as if he were about to make one of those obscure gestures with which he and the smith communicated, but Durnik deliberately turned his back on him. Toth sighed and went over to sit unobtrusively in one corner.

"Garion," Ce'Nedra said suddenly, looking around with a worried little frown, "where's my baby?"

He stared at her.

"Where's Geran?" she demanded, her voice shrill.

"Ce'Nedra-" he started.

"I hear him crying. What have you done with him?" She suddenly sprang to her feet and began to dash about the tent, flinging back the curtains that partitioned off the sleeping quarters and yanking back the blankets on each bed. "Help me!" she cried to them. "Help me find my baby!"

Garion crossed the tent quickly to take her by the arm. "Ce'Nedra-"

"No!" she shouted at him. "You've hidden him somewhere! Let me go!" She wrenched herself free of his grasp and began overturning the furniture in her desperate search, sobbing and moaning unintelligibly.

Again Garion tried to restrain her, but she suddenly hissed at him and extended her fingers like talons to claw at his eyes.

"Ce'Nedra! Stop that!"

But she darted around him and bolted out of the pavilion into the snowy night.

As Garion burst through the tent flap in pursuit, he found his way barred by a red-cloaked Mallolean soldier.

"You! Get back inside!" the man barked, blocking Garion with the shaft of his spear. Over the guard's shoulder, Garion saw Ce'Nedra struggling with another soldier; without even thinking, he smashed his fist into the face in front of him. The guard reeled backward and fell.

Garion leaped over him, but found himself suddenly seized from behind by a half-dozen more men. "Leave her alone!" he shouted at the guard who was cruelly holding one of the little queen's arms behind her.

"Get back inside the tent!" a rough voice barked, and Garion found himself being dragged backward step by step toward the tent flap. The soldier holding Ce'Nedra was half

lifting, half pushing her back toward the same place. With a tremendous effort, Garion got control of himself and coldly began to draw in his will.

"That will be enough!" Polgara's voice cracked from the doorway to the tent.

The soldiers stopped, looking uncertainly at each other and somewhat fearfully at the commanding presence in the doorway.

"Durnik!" she said then. "Help Garion bring Ce'Nedra back inside."

Garion shook himself free of the restraining hands and he and Durnik took the violently struggling little Queen from the soldier and pulled her back toward the pavilion.

"Sadi," Polgara said as Durnik and Garion entered the tent with Ce'Nedra between them, "do you have any oret in that case of yours?"

"Certainly, Lady Polgara," the eunuch replied, "but are you sure that oret is appropriate here? I'd be more inclined toward naladium, personally."

"I think we've got more than a case of simple hysteria on our hands, Sadi. I want something strong enough to insure that she doesn't wake up the minute my back's turned"

"Whatever you think best, Lady Polgara." He crossed the carpeted floor, opened his red leather case, and took out a vial of dark blue liquid. Then he went to the table and picked up a cup of water. He looked at her inquiringly.

She frowned. "Make it three drops," she decided.

He gave her a slightly startled look, then gravely measured out the dosage. It took several moments of combined effort to get Ce'Nedra to drink the contents of the cup. She continued to sob and struggle for several moments, but then her struggles grew gradually weaker, and her sobbing lessened. Finally she closed her eyes with a deep sigh, and her breathing became regular.

"Let's get her to bed," Polgara said, leading the way, to one of the curtained-off sleeping chambers.

Garion picked up the tiny form of his sleeping wife and followed. "What's wrong with her, Aunt Pol?" he demanded as he laid her gently on the bed.

"I'm not positive," Polgara replied, covering Ce'Nedra with a rough soldier's blanket. "I'll need more time to pin it down."

"What can we do?"

"Not very much while we're on the road," she admitted candidly, "We'll keep her asleep until we get to Rak Hagga. Once I get her into a more stable situation, I'll be able to work on it. Stay with her. I want to talk with Sadi for a few moments."

Garion sat worriedly by the bed, gently holding his wife's limp little hand while Polgara went back out to consult with the eunuch concerning the various drugs in his case. Then she returned, drawing the drape shut behind her. "He has most of what I need," she reported quietly. "I'll be able to improvise the rest." She touched Garion's shoulder and bent forward. "General Atesca just came in," she whispered to him. "He wants to see you. I wouldn't be too specific about the cause of Ce'Nedra's attack. We can't be sure just how much Zakath knows about our reasons for being here, and Atesca's certain to

report everything that happens, so watch what you say."

He started to protest.

"You can't do anything here, Garion, and they need you out there. I'll watch her."

"Is she subject to these seizures often?" Atesca was asking as Garion came through the draped doorway.

"She's very high-strung," Silk replied. "Sometimes circumstances get the best of her. Polgara knows what to do." Atesca turned to face Garion. "Your Majesty," he said in a chilly tone, "I don't appreciate your attacking my soldiers."

"He got in my way, General," Garion replied. "I don't think I hurt him all that much."

"There's a principle involved, your Majesty."

"Yes," Garion agreed, "there is. Give the man my apologies, but advise him not to interfere with me again -particularly when it concerns my wife. I don't really like hurting people, but I can make exceptions when I have to."

Atesca's look grew steely, and the gaze Garion returned was just as bleak. They stared at each other for a long moment. "With all due respect, your Majesty," Atesca said finally, "don't abuse my hospitality again."

"Only if the situation requires it, General."

"I'll instruct my men to prepare a litter for your wife," Atesca said then, "and let's plan to get an early start tomorrow. If the Queen is ill, we want to get her to Rak Hagga as soon as possible."

"Thank you, General," Garion replied.

Atesca bowed coldly, then turned and left.

"Wouldn't you say that was a trifle blunt, Belgarion?" Sadi murmured. "We are in Atesca's power at the moment."

Garion grunted. "I didn't like his attitude." He looked at Belgarath, whose expression was faintly disapproving.

"Well?" he asked.

"I didn't say anything."

"You didn't have to. I could hear you thinking all the way over here."

"Then I don't have to say it, do I?"

The next day dawned cold and raw, but the snow had stopped. Garion rode at the side of Ce'Nedra's horse-borne litter with his face mirroring his concern. The road they followed ran northwesterly past more burned-out villages and shattered towns. The ruins were covered with a thick coating of the clinging wet snow that had fallen the previous day, and each of them was encircled by a ring of those grim, occupied crosses and stakes.

It was about midafternoon when they crested a hill and saw the lead-gray expanse of Lake Hagga stretching far in the north and east; on the near shore was a large, walled city.

"Rak Hagga," Atesca said with a certain relief.

They rode on down the hill toward the city. A brisk wind was blowing in off the lake, whipping their cloaks about them and tossing the manes of their horses.

"All right, gentlemen," Atesca said over his shoulder to his troops, "let's form up and try to look like soldiers." The red-cloaked Malloreans pulled their horses into a double file and straightened in their saddles.

The walls of Rak Hagga had been breached in several places, and the tops of the battlements were chipped and

pitted from the storms of steel-tipped arrows that had swept over them. The heavy gates had been burst asunder during the final assault on the city and hung in splinters from their rusty iron hinges.

The guards at the gate drew themselves up and saluted smartly as Atesca led the way into the city. The battered condition of the stone houses within the walls attested to the savagery of the fighting which had ensued when Rak Hagga had fallen. Many of them stood unroofed to the sky, their gaping, soot-blackened windows staring out at the rubble-choked streets. A work gang of sullen Murgos, dragging clanking chains behind them, labored to clear the fallen building stones out of the slushy streets under the watchful eyes of a detachment of Mallorean soldiers.

"You know," Silk said, "that's the first time I've ever seen a Murgo actually work. I didn't think they even knew how."

The headquarters of the Mallorean army in Cthol Murgos was in a large, imposing yellow-brick house near the center of the city. It faced a broad, snowy square, and a marble staircase led up to the main door with a file of red-cloaked Mallorean soldiers lining each side.

"The former residence of the Murgo Military Governor of Hagga," Sadi noted as they drew near the house.

"You've been here before, then?" Silk asked.

"In my youth," Sadi replied. "Rak Hagga has always been the center of the slave trade."

Atesca dismounted and turned to one of his officers.

"Captain," he said, "have your men bring the Queen's litter. Tell them to be very careful."

As the rest of them swung down from their mounts, the captain's men unfastened the litter from the saddles of the two horses that had carried it and started up the marble stairs in General Atesca's wake.

Just inside the broad doors stood a polished table, and seated behind it was an arrogant-looking man with angular eyes and an expensive-looking scarlet uniform.

Against the far wall stood a row of chairs occupied by bored-looking officials.

"State your business," the officer behind the table said brusquely.

Atesca's face did not change expression as he silently stared at the officer.

"I said to state your business."

"Have the rules changed, Colonel?" Atesca asked in a deceptively mild voice. "Do we no longer rise in the presence of a superior?"

"I'm too busy to jump to my feet for every petty Melcene official from the outlying districts," the colonel declared.

"Captain," Atesca said flatly to his officer, "if the colonel is not on his feet in the space of two heartbeats, would you be so good as to cut his head off for me?"

"Yes, sir," the captain replied, drawing his sword even as the startled colonel jumped to his feet.

"Much better," Atesca told him. "Now, let's begin over again. Do you by chance remember how to salute?"

The colonel saluted smartly, though his face was pale.

"Splendid. We'll make a soldier of you yet. Now, one of

the people I was escorting -a lady of high station- fell ill during our journey. I want a warm, comfortable room prepared for her immediately."

"Sir," the colonel protested, "I'm not authorized to do that."

"Don't put your sword away just yet, Captain."

"But, General, the members of his Majesty's household staff make all those decisions. They'll be infuriated if I overstep my bounds."

"I'll explain it to his Majesty, Colonel," Atesca told him. "The circumstances are a trifle unusual, but I'm sure he'll approve."

The colonel faltered, his eyes filled with indecision.

"Do it, Colonel! Now!"

"I'll see to it at once, General," the colonel replied, snapping to attention. "You men," he said to the soldiers holding Ce'Nedra's litter, "follow me."

Garion automatically started to follow the litter, but Polgara took his arm firmly. "No, Garion. I'll go with her. There's nothing you can do right now, and I think Zakath's going to want to talk to you. Just be careful of what you say." And she went off down the hallway behind the litter.

"I see that Mallorean society still has its little frictions," Silk said blandly to General Atesca.

"Angaraks," Atesca grunted. "Sometimes they have a little difficulty coping with the modern world. Excuse me, Prince Kheldar. I want to let his Majesty know that we're here." He went to a polished door at the other end of the room and spoke briefly with one of the guards. Then he came back. "The Emperor is being advised of our arrival," he said to them. "I expect that he'll see us in a few moments."

A rather chubby, bald-headed man in a plain, though obviously costly, brown robe and with a heavy gold chain about his neck approached them. "Atesca, my dear fellow," he greeted the general, "they told me that you were stationed at Rak Verkat."

"I have some business with the Emperor, Brador. What are you doing in Cthol Murgos?"

"Cooling my heels," the chubby man replied. "I've been waiting for two days to see Kal Zakath."

"Who's minding the shop at home?"

"I've arranged it so that it more or less runs itself," Brador replied. "The report I have for his Majesty is so vital that I decided to carry it myself."

"What could be so earthshaking that it would drag the Chief of the Bureau of Internal Affairs away from the comforts of Mal Zeth?"

"I believe that it's time for his Imperial Exaltedness to tear himself away from his amusements here in Cthol Murgos and come back to the capital."

"Careful, Brador," Atesca said with a brief smile. "Your fine-tuned Melcene prejudices are showing."

"Things are getting grim at home, Atesca," Brador said seriously. "I've got to talk with the Emperor. Can you help me to get in to see him?"

"I'll see what I can do."

"Thank you, my friend," Brador said, clasping the general's arm. "The whole fate of the empire may depend on my

persuading Kal Zakath to come back to Mal Zeth."

"General Atesca," one of the spear-armed guards at the polished door said in a loud voice, "his Imperial Majesty will see you and your prisoners now."

"Very good," Atesca replied, ignoring the ominous word "prisoners." He looked at Garion. "The Emperor must be very eager to see you, your Majesty," he noted.

"It often takes weeks to gain an audience with him. Shall we go inside?"

CHAPTER TWO

Kal Zakath, the Emperor of boundless Mallorea, lounged in a red-cushioned chair at the far end of a large plain room. The Emperor wore a simple white linen robe, severe and unadorned. Though Garion knew that he was at least in his forties, his hair was untouched by gray and his face was unlined. His eyes, however, betrayed a kind of dead weariness, devoid of any joy or even any interest in life. Curled in his lap lay a common mackerel-striped alley cat, her eyes closed and her forepaws alternately kneading his thigh. Although the Emperor himself wore the simplest of clothes, the guards lining the walls all wore steel breastplates deeply inlaid with gold.

"My Emperor," General Atesca said with a deep bow, "I have the honor to present his Royal Majesty, King Belgarion of Riva."

Garion nodded briefly, and Zakath inclined his head in response. "Our meeting is long overdue, Belgarion," he said in a voice as dead as his eyes. "Your exploits have shaken the world."

"Yours have also made a certain impression, Zakath." Garion had decided even before he had left Rak Verkat -that he would not perpetuate the absurdity of the Mallorea's self-bestowed "Kal."

A faint smile touched Zakath's lips. "Ah," he said in a tone which indicated that he saw through Garion's attempt to be subtle. He nodded briefly to the others, and his attention finally fixed itself upon the rumpled untidy form of Garion's grandfather.

"And of course you, sir, would be Belgarath," he noted. "I'm a bit surprised to find you so ordinary looking. The Grolims of Mallorea all agree that you're a hundred feet tall -possible two hundred- and that you have horns and a forked tail."

"I'm in disguise," Belgarath replied with aplomb.

Zakath chuckled, though there was little amusement in that almost mechanical sound. Then he looked around with a faint frown. "I seem to note some absences," he said.

"Queen Ce'Nedra fell ill during our journey, your Majesty." Atesca advised him. "Lady Polgara is attending her."

"Ill? Is it serious?"

"It's difficult to say at this point, your Imperial Majesty," Sadi replied unctuously, "but we have given her certain medications, and I have every confidence in Lady Polgara's skill."

Zakath looked at Garion. "You should have sent word on

ahead, Belgarion. I have a healer on my personal staff -a Dalasian woman with remarkable gifts. I'll send her to the Queen's chambers at once. Our first concern must be your wife's health."

"Thank you," Garion replied with genuine gratitude.

Zakath touched a bellpull and spoke briefly with the servant who responded immediately to his summons.

"Please," the Emperor said then, "seat yourselves. I have no particular interest in ceremony."

As the guards hastily brought chairs for them, the cat sleeping in Zakath's lap half opened her golden eyes and looked around at them. She rose to her paws, arched her back, and yawned. Then she jumped heavily to the floor with an audible grunt and waddled over to sniff at Eriond's fingers. With a faintly amused look, Zakath watched his obviously pregnant cat make her matronly way across the carpet. "You'll note that my cat has been unfaithful to me -again." He sighed in mock resignation. "It happens fairly frequently, I'm afraid, and she never seems to feel the slightest guilt about it."

The cat jumped up into Eriond's lap, nestled down, and began to purr contentedly.

"You've grown, boy," Zakath said to the young man. "Have they taught you how to talk as yet?" .

"I've picked up a few words, Zakath," Eriond said in his clear voice.

"I know the rest of you -by reputation at least," Zakath said then. "Goodman Durnik and I met on the plains of Mishrak ac Thull, and of course I've heard of the Margravine Liselle of Drasnian Intelligence and of Prince Kheldar, who strives to become the richest man in the world."

Velvet's graceful curtsy of acknowledgment was not quite so florid as Silk's grandiose bow. .

"And here, of course," the Emperor continued, "is Sadi, Chief Eunuch in the palace of Queen Salmissra."

Sadi bowed with fluid grace. "I must say that your Majesty is remarkably well informed," he said in his contralto voice. "You have read us all like an open book."

"My chief of intelligence tries to keep me informed, Sadi. He may not be as gifted as the inestimable Javelin of Boktor, but he knows about most of what's going on in this part of the world. He's mentioned that huge fellow over in the corner, but so far he hasn't been able to discover his name."

"He's called Toth," Eriond supplied. "He's a mute, so we have to do his talking for him."

"And a Dalasian besides," Zakath noted. "A very curious circumstance."

Garion had been closely watching this man. Beneath the polished, urbane exterior, he sensed a kind of subtle probing. The idle greetings, which seemed to be no more than a polite means of putting them at their ease, had a deeper motive behind them. In some obscure way he sensed that Zakath was somehow testing each of them.

The emperor straightened then. "You have an oddly assorted company with you, Belgarion," he said, "and you're a long way from home. I'm curious about your reasons for being here in Cthol Murgos."

"I'm afraid that's a private matter, Zakath."

One of the Emperor's eyebrows rose slightly. " Under the circumstances, that's hardly a satisfactory answer, Belgarion. I can't really take the chance that you're allied with Urgit."

"Would you accept my word that I'm not?"

"Not until I know a bit more about your visit to Rak Urga. Urgit left there quite suddenly -apparently in your company- and reappeared just as suddenly on the plains of Morcth, where he and a young woman led his troops out of an ambush I'd gone to a great deal of trouble to arrange. You'll have to admit that's a peculiar set of circumstances."

"Not when you look at it from a practical standpoint, " Belgarath said. "The decision to take Urgit with us was mine. He'd found out who we are, and I didn't want an army of Murgos on our heels. Murgos aren't too bright, but they can be an inconvenience at times."

Zakath looked surprised. "He was your prisoner?"

Belgarath shrugged. "In a manner of speaking."

The Emperor laughed rather wryly. "You could have wrung almost any concession from me if you had just delivered him into my hands, you know. Why did you let him go?"

"We didn't need him anymore," Garion replied. "We'd reached the shores of Lake Cthaka, so he really wasn't any kind of threat to us."

Zakath's expression narrowed slightly. " A few other things happened as well, I think," he observed. "Urgit has always been a notorious coward, wholly under the domination of the Grolim Agachak and of his father's generals. But he didn't seem very timid while he was extricating his troops from the trap I'd laid for them, and all the reports filtering out of Rak Urga seem to suggest that he's actually behaving like a king. Did you by any chance have anything to do with that?"

"It's possible, I suppose," Garion answered. "Urgit and I talked a few times, and I told him what he was doing wrong."

Zakath tapped one forefinger against his chin, and his eyes were shrewd. "You may not have made a lion of him, Belgarion," he said, "but at least he's no longer a rabbit." A chill smile touched the Mallorean's lips. "In a way, I'm rather glad about that. I've never taken much satisfaction in hunting rabbits." He shaded his eyes with one hand, although the light in the room was not particularly bright. "But what I can't understand is how you managed to spirit him out of the Drojim Palace and away from the city. He has whole regiments of bodyguards."

"You're overlooking something, Zakath," Belgarath said to him. "We have certain advantages that aren't available to others."

"Sorcery, you mean? Is it really all that reliable?"

"I've had some luck with it from time to time."

Zakath's eyes had become suddenly intent. " They tell me that you're five thousand years old, Belgarath. Is that true?"

"Seven, actually -or a little more. Why do you ask?"

"In all those years, hasn't it ever occurred to you simply to seize power? You could have made yourself king of the world, you know."

Belgarath looked amused. "Why would I want to?" he asked.

"All men want power. It's human nature."

"Has all your power really made you happy?"

"It has certain satisfactions."

"Enough to make up for all the petty distractions that go with it?"

"I can endure those. At least I'm in a position where no one tells me what to do."

"No one tells me what to do either, and I'm not saddled with all those tedious responsibilities." Belgarath straightened. "All right, Zakath, shall we get to the point? What are your intentions concerning us?"

"I haven't really decided that yet." The Emperor looked around at them. "I presume that we can all be civilized about the present situation?"

"How do you mean, civilized?" Garion asked him.

"I'll accept your word that none of you will try to escape or do anything rash. I'm aware that you and a number of your friends have certain specialized talents. I don't want to be forced to take steps to counteract them."

"We have some rather pressing business," Garion replied carefully, "so we can only delay for just so long.

For the time being, however, I think we can agree to be reasonable about things."

"Good. We'll have to talk later, you and I, and come to know one another. I've had comfortable quarters prepared for you and your friends, and I know that you're anxious about your wife. Now, I hope you'll excuse me, but I have some of those tedious responsibilities Belgarath mentioned to attend to."

Although the house was very large, it was not, strictly speaking, a palace. It appeared that the Murgo governors-general of Haggia who had ordered it built had not shared the grandiose delusions which afflicted the rulers of Urga, and so the building was more functional than ornate.

"I hope you'll excuse me," General Atesca said to them when they had emerged from the audience chamber. "I'm obliged to deliver a full report to his Majesty -about various matters- and then I must return immediately to Rak Verkat." He looked at Garion. "The circumstances under which we met were not the happiest, your Majesty." he said, "but I hope you won't think too unkindly of me." He bowed rather stiffly and then left them in the care of a member of the Emperor's staff. The man who led them down a long, dark-paneled hallway toward the center of the house was obviously not an Angarak. He had not the angular eyes nor the stiff, bleak-faced arrogance that marked the men of that race.

His cheerful, round face seemed to hint at a Melcene heritage, and Garion remembered that the bureaucracy which controlled most aspects of Mallorean life was made up almost exclusively of Melcenes. "His Majesty asked me to assure you that your quarters are not intended to be a prison," the official told them as they approached a heavily barred iron door blocking off one portion of the hallway. "This was a Murgo house before we took the city, and it has certain structural peculiarities. Your rooms are in what once were the women's quarters, and Murgos are fanatically protective of their women. It has to do with their concept of racial purity, I think."

At the moment, Garion had little interest in sleeping arrangements. All his concern was for Ce'Nedra. "Do you happen

to know where I might find my wife?" he asked the moon-faced bureaucrat.

"There at the end of this corridor, your Majesty," the Melcene replied, pointing toward a blue-painted door at the far end of the hall.

"Thank you." Garion glanced at the others. "I'll be back in a little while," he told them and strode on ahead.

The room he entered was warm and the lighting subdued. Deep, ornately woven Mallorean carpets covered the floor and soft green velvet drapes covered the tall, narrow windows. Ce'Nedra lay in a high-posted bed, against the wall opposite the door, and Polgara was seated at the bedside, her expression grave.

"Has there been any change?" Garion asked her, softly closing the door behind him.

"Nothing as yet," she replied.

Ce'Nedra's face was pale as she slept with her crimson curls tumbled on her pillow.

"She is going to be all right, isn't she?" Garion asked.

"I'm sure of it, Garion."

Another woman sat near the bed. She wore a light green, cowled robe; despite the fact that she was indoors, she had the hood pulled up, partially concealing her face.

Ce'Nedra muttered something in a strangely harsh tone and tossed her head restlessly on her pillow. The cowled woman frowned. "Is this her customary voice, Lady Polgara?" she asked.

Polgara looked at her sharply. "No," she replied. "As a matter of fact, it's not."

"Would the drug you gave her in some way affect the sound of her speech?"

"No, it wouldn't. Actually, she shouldn't be making any sounds at all."

"Ah," the woman said. "I think perhaps I understand now." She leaned forward and very gently laid the fingertips of one hand on Ce'Nedra's lips. She nodded then and withdrew her hand. "As I suspected," she murmured.

Polgara also reached out to touch Ce'Nedra's face. Garion heard the faint whisper of her will, and the candle at the bedside flared up slightly, then sank back until its flame was scarcely more than a pinpoint. "I should have guessed," Polgara accused herself.

"What is it?" Garion asked in alarm.

"Another mind is seeking to dominate your wife and to subdue her will, your Majesty," the cowled woman told him. "It's an art sometimes practiced by the Grolims. They discovered it quite by accident during the third age."

"This is Andel, Garion," Polgara told him. "Zakath sent her here to help care for Ce'Nedra."

Garion nodded briefly to the hooded woman. "Exactly what do we mean by the word 'dominate'?" he asked.

"You should be more familiar with that than most people, Garion," Polgara said. "I'm sure you remember Asharak the Murgo." Garion felt a sudden chill, remembering the force of the mind that had from his earliest childhood sought that same control over his awareness. "Drive it out," he pleaded. "Get whomever it is out of her mind."

"Perhaps not quite yet, Garion," Polgara said coldly. "We

have an opportunity here. Let's not waste it."

"I don't understand."

"You will, dear," she told him. Then she rose, sat on the edge of the bed and lightly laid one hand on each of Ce'Nedra's temples. The faint whisper came again, stronger this time, and once again the candles all flared and then sank back as if suffocating. "I know you're in there," she said then. "You might as well speak."

Ce'Nedra's expression grew contorted, and she tossed her head back and forth as if trying to escape the hands touching her temples. Polgara's face grew stern, and she implacably kept her hands in place. The pale lock in her hair began to glow, and a strange chill came into the room, seeming to emanate from the bed itself.

Ce'Nedra suddenly screamed.

"Speak!" Polgara commanded. "You cannot flee until I release you, and I will not release you until you speak."

Ce'Nedra's eyes suddenly opened. They were filled with hate. "I do not fear thee, Polgara," she said in a harsh, rasping voice delivered in a peculiar accent.

"And I fear you even less. Now, who are you?"

"Thou knowest me, Polgara."

"Perhaps, but I will have your name from you."

There was a long pause, and the surge of Polgara's will grew stronger.

Ce'Nedra screamed again -a scream filled with an agony that made Garion flinch. "Stop!" the harsh voice cried. "I will speak!"

"Say your name," Polgara insisted implacably.

"I am Zandramas."

"So. What do you hope to gain by this?"

An evil chuckle escaped Ce'Nedra's pale lips. "I have already stolen her heart, Polgara -her child. Now I will steal her mind as well. I could easily kill her if I chose, but a dead Queen may be buried and her grave left behind. A mad one, on the other hand, will give thee much to distract thee from thy search for the Sardion."

"I can banish you with a snap of my fingers, Zandramas."

"And I can return just as quickly."

A frosty smile touched Polgara's lips. "You're not nearly as clever as I thought," she said. "Did you actually believe that I twisted your name out of you for my own amusement? Were you ignorant of the power over you that you gave me when you spoke your own name. The power of the name is the most elementary of all. I can keep you out of Ce'Nedra's mind now. There's much more, though. For example, I know now that you're at Ashaba, haunting the bat-infested ruins of the House of Torak like a poor ragged ghost."

A startled gasp echoed through the room.

"I could tell you more, Zandramas, but this is all beginning to bore me." She straightened, her hands still locked to the sides of Ce'Nedra's head. The white lock at her brow flared into incandescence, and the faint whisper became a deafening roar. "Now, begone!" she commanded.

Ce'Nedra moaned, and her face suddenly contorted into an expression of agony. An icy, stinking wind seemed to howl through the room, and the candles and glowing braziers sank even lower until the room was scarcely lit "Begone!" Polgara

repeated.

An agonized wail escaped Ce'Nedra's lips, and then that wail became disembodied, coming it seemed from the empty air above the bed. The candles went out, and all light ceased to glow out of the braziers. The wailing voice began to fade, moving swiftly until it came to them as no more than a murmur echoing from an unimaginable distance.

"Is Zandramas gone?" Garion asked in a shaking voice.

"Yes," Polgara replied calmly out of the sudden darkness.

"What are we going to say to Ce'Nedra? When she wakes up, I mean."

"She won't remember any of this. Just tell her something vague. Make some light, dear."

Garion fumbled for one of the candles, brushed his sleeve against it, and then deftly caught it before it hit the floor. He was sort of proud of that.

"Don't play with it, Garion. Just light it." Her tone was so familiar and so commonplace that he began to laugh, and the little surge of his will that he directed at the candle was a stuttering sort of thing. The flame that appeared bobbled and hiccuped at the end of the wick in a soundless golden chortle.

Polgara looked steadily at the giggling candle, then closed her eyes. "Oh, Garion," she sighed in resignation.

He moved about the room relighting the other candles and fanning the braziers back into life. The flames were all quite sedate -except for the original one, which continued to dance and laugh in blithe glee.

Polgara turned to the hooded Dalasian healer. "You're most perceptive, Andel," she said. "That sort of thing is difficult to recognize unless you know precisely what you're looking for."

"The perception was not mine, Lady Polgara," Andel replied. "I was advised by another of the cause of her Majesty's illness."

"Cyradis?"

Andel nodded. "The minds of all our race are joined with hers, for we are but the instruments of the task which lies upon her. Her concern for the Queen's well-being prompted her to intervene." The hooded woman hesitated. "The Holy Seeress also asked me to beg you to intercede with your husband in the matter of Toth. The Goodman's anger is causing that gentle guide extreme anguish, and his pain is also hers. What happened at Verkat had to happen -otherwise the meeting between the Child of Light and the Child of Dark could not come to pass for ages hence."

Polgara nodded gravely. "I thought it might have been something like that. Tell her that I'll speak with Durnik in Toth's behalf."

Andel inclined her head gratefully.

"Garion," Ce'Nedra murmured drowsily, "where are we?"

He turned to her quickly. "Are you all right?" he asked, taking her hand in his.

"Mmmmm," she said. "I'm just so very sleepy. What happened -and where are we?"

"We're at Rak Hagga." He threw a quick glance at Polgara, then turned back to the bed. "You just had a little fainting spell is all," he said with a slightly exaggerated casualness. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine, dear, but I think I'd like to sleep now." And her eyes went closed. Then she opened them again with a sleepy little frown. "Garion," she murmured, "why is that candle acting like that?"

He kissed her lightly on the cheek. "Don't worry about it, dear," he told her, but she had already fallen fast asleep.

It was well past midnight when Garion was awakened by a light tapping on the door of the room in which he slept. "Who is it?" he asked, half rising in his bed.

"A messenger from the Emperor, your Majesty," A voice replied from the other side of the door. "He instructed me to ask if you would be so good as to join him in his private study."

"Now? In the middle of the night?"

"Such was the Emperor's instruction, your Majesty."

"All right," Garion said, throwing off his blankets, and swinging around to put his feet on the cold floor.

"Give me a minute or so to get dressed."

"Of course, your Majesty."

Muttering to himself, Garion began to pull on his clothes by the faint light coming from the brazier in the corner. When he was dressed, he splashed cold water on his face and raked his fingers through his sandy hair, trying to push it into some semblance of order. Almost as an afterthought he ducked his head and arm through the strap attached to the sheath of Iron-grip's sword and shrugged it into place across his back. Then he opened the door. "All right," he said to the messenger, "let's go."

Kal Zakath's study was a book-lined room with several leather-upholstered chairs, a large polished table and a crackling fire on the hearth. The Emperor, still clad in plain white linen, sat in a chair at the table, shuffling through a stack of parchment sheets by the light of a single oil lamp.

"You wanted to see me, Zakath?" Garion asked as he entered the room.

"Ah, yes, Belgarion," Zakath said, pushing aside the parchments. "So good of you to come. I understand that your wife is recovering."

Garion nodded. "Thank you again for sending Aniel. Her aid was very helpful."

"My pleasure, Belgarion." Zakath reached out and lowered the wick in the lamp until the corners of the room filled with shadows. "I thought we might talk a little," he said.

"Isn't it sort of late?"

"I don't sleep very much, Belgarion. A man can lose a third of his life in sleep. The day is filled with bright lights and distractions; the night is dim and quiet and allows much greater concentration. Please, sit down."

Garion unbuckled his sword and leaned it against a bookcase.

"I'm not really all that dangerous, you know," the Emperor said, looking pointedly at the great weapon.

Garion smiled slightly, settling into a chair by the fire. "I didn't bring it because of you, Zakath. It's just a habit. It's not the kind of sword you want to leave lying around."

"I don't think anyone would steal it, Belgarion."

"It can't be stolen. I just don't want anybody getting hurt by accidentally touching it."

"Do you mean to say that it's that sword?"

Garion nodded. "I'm sort of obliged to take care of it. It's a nuisance most of the time, but there've been a few occasions when I was glad I had it with me."

"What really happened at Cthol Mishrak?" Zakath asked suddenly. "I've heard all sorts of stories."

Garion nodded wryly. "So have I. Most of them get the names right, but not very much else. Neither Torak nor I had very much control over what happened. We fought, and I stuck that sword into his chest."

"And he died?" Zakath's face was intent.

"Eventually, yes."

"Eventually?"

"He vomited fire first and wept flames. Then he cried out."

"What did he say?"

" 'Mother,' " Garion replied shortly. He didn't really want to talk about it.

"What an extraordinary thing for him to do. Whatever happened to his body? I had the entire ruin of Cthol Mishrak searched for him."

"The other Gods came and took it. Do you suppose we could talk about something else? Those particular memories are painful."

"He was your enemy."

Garion sighed. "He was also a God, Zakath -and killing a God is a terrible thing to have to do."

"You're a strangely gentle man, Belgarion. I think I respect you more for that than I do for your invincible courage."

"I'd hardly say invincible. I was terrified the whole time -and so was Torak, I think. Was there something you really wanted to talk about?"

Zakath leaned back in his chair, tapping thoughtfully at his pursed lips. "You know that eventually you and I will have to confront each other, don't you?"

"No," Garion disagreed. "That's not absolutely certain."

"There can only be one King of the World."

Garion's look grew pained. "I've got enough trouble trying to rule one small island. I've never wanted to be King of the World."

"But I have -and do."

Garion sighed. "Then we probably will fight at that sooner or later. I don't think the world was intended to be ruled by one man. If you try to do that, I'll have to stop you."

"I am unstoppable, Belgarion."

"So was Torak -or at least he thought so."

"That's blunt enough."

"It helps to avoid a lot of misunderstandings later on. I'd say that you've got enough trouble at home without trying to invade my kingdom -or those of my friends. That's not to mention the stalemate here in Cthol Murgos."

"You're well informed."

"Queen Porenn is a close personal friend. She keeps information me advised, and Silk picks up a great deal of

information during the course of his business dealings."

"Silk?"

"Excuse me. Prince Kheldar, I mean. Silk's a nickname of sorts."

Zakath looked at him steadily. "In some ways we're very much alike, Belgarion, and in other ways very different, but we still do what necessity compels us to do. Frequently, we're at the mercy of events over which we have no control."

"I suppose you're talking about the two Prophecies?"

Zakath laughed shortly. "I don't believe in prophecy. I only believe in power. It's curious, though, that we've both been faced with similar problems of late. You recently had to put down an uprising in Aloria -a group of religious fanatics, I believe. I have something of much the same nature going on in Darshiva. Religion is a constant thorn in the side of any ruler, wouldn't you say?"

"I've been able to work around it-most of the time."

"You've been very lucky then. Torak was neither a good nor kindly God, and his Grolim priesthood is vile."

If I weren't busy here in Cthol Murgos, I think I might endear myself to the next thousand or so generations by obliterating every Grolim on the face of the earth."

Garion grinned at him. "What would you say to an alliance with that in mind?" he suggested.

Zakath laughed briefly, and then his face grew somber again. "Does the name Zandramas mean anything to you?" he asked.

Garion edged around that cautiously, not knowing how much information Zakath had about their real reason for being in Cthol Murgos. "I've heard some rumors," he said.

"How about Cthrag Sardius?"

"I've heard of it."

"You're being evasive, Belgarion." Zakath gave him a steady look, then passed his hand wearily across his eyes.

"I think you need some sleep," Garion told him.

"Time for that soon enough -when my work is done."

"That's up to you, I guess."

"How much do you know about Mallorea, Belgarion?"

"I get reports -a little disjointed sometimes, but fairly current."

"No. I mean our past."

"Not too much, I'm afraid. Western historians tried very hard to ignore the fact that Mallorea was even there."

Zakath smiled wryly. "The University of Melcene has the same shortsightedness regarding the West," he noted. "Anyway, over the past several centuries -since the disaster at Vo Mimbrel- Mallorean society has become almost completely secular. Torak was bound in sleep, Ctuchik was practicing his perversions here in Cthol Murgos, and Zedar was wandering around the world like a rootless vagabond -what ever happened to him, by the way? I thought he was at Cthol Mishrak."

"He was."

"We didn't find his body."

"He isn't dead."

"He's not?" Zakath looked stunned. "Where is he, then?"

"Beneath the city. Belgarath opened the earth and sealed him up in solid rock under the ruin."

"Alive?" Zakath's exclamation came out in a choked gasp .

"There was a certain amount of justification for it.

Go on with your story." Zakath shuddered and then recovered. "With the rest of them out of the way, the only religious figure left in Mallorea was Urvon, and he devoted himself almost exclusively to trying to make his palace at Mal Yaska more opulent than the imperial one at Mal Zeth. Every so often he'd preach a sermon filled with mumbo jumbo and nonsense, but most of the time he seemed to have forgotten Torak entirely. With the Dragon God and his disciples no longer around, the real power of the Grolim Church was gone -oh, the priests babbled about the return of Torak and they all paid lip service to the notion that one day the sleeping God would awaken, but the memory of him grew dimmer and dimmer. The power of the Church grew less and less, while that of the army -which is to say the imperial throne- grew more and more."

"Mallorean politics seem to be very murky," Garion observed.

Zakath nodded. "It's part of our nature, I suppose. At any rate, our society was functioning and moving out of the dark ages -slowly, perhaps, but moving. Then you appeared out of nowhere and awakened Torak -and just as suddenly put him permanently back to sleep again. That's when all our problems started."

"Shouldn't it have ended them? That's sort of what I had in mind."

"I don't think you grasp the nature of the religious mind, Belgarion. So long as Torak was there -even though he slept- the Grolims and the other hysterics in the empire were fairly placid, secure and comfortable in the belief that one day he would awaken, punish all their enemies, and reassert the absolute authority of the unwashed and stinking priesthood. But when you killed Torak, you destroyed their comfortable sense of security. They were forced to face the fact that without Torak they were nothing. Some of them were so chagrined that they went mad. Others fell into absolute despair. A few, however, began to hammer together a new mythology -something to replace what you had destroyed with a single stroke of that sword over there."

"It wasn't entirely my idea," Garion told him.

"It's results that matter, Belgarion, not intentions. Anyway, Urvon was forced to tear himself away from his quest for opulence and his wallowing in the adoration of the sycophants who surrounded him and get back to business. For a time he was in an absolute frenzy of activity. He resurrected all the moth-eaten old prophecies and twisted and wrenched at them until they seemed to say what he wanted them to say."

"And what was that?"

"He's trying to convince people that a new God will come to rule over Angarak -either a resurrection of Torak himself or some new deity infused with Torak's spirit. He's even got a candidate in mind for this new God of Angarak."

"Oh? Who's that?"

Zakath's expression became amused. "He sees his new God every time he looks in a mirror."

"You're not serious!"

"Oh, yes. Urvon's been trying to convince himself that he's at least a demigod for several centuries now. He'd

probably have himself paraded all over Malloreia in a golden chariot -except that he's afraid to leave Mal Yaska. As I understand it, there's a very nasty hunchback who's been hungering to kill him for eons -one of Aldur's disciples, I believe."

Garion nodded. "Beldin," he said. "I've met him."

"Is he really as bad as the stories make him out to be?"

"Probably even worse. I don't think you'd want to be around to watch what he does, if he ever catches up with Urvon."

"I wish him good hunting, but Urvon's not my only problem, I'm afraid. Not long after the death of Torak, certain rumors started coming out of Darshiva. A Grolim priestess -Zandramas by name- also began to predict the coming of a new God."

"I didn't know that she was a Grolim," Garion said with some surprise.

Zakath nodded gravely. "She formerly had a very unsavory reputation in Darshiva. Then the so-called ecstasy of prophecy fell on her, and she was suddenly transformed by it. Now when she speaks, no one can resist her words. She preaches to multitudes and fires them with invincible zeal. Her message of the coming of a new God ran through Darshiva like wildfire and spread into Regel, Voresebo, and Zamad as well. Virtually the entire northeast coast of Malloreia is hers."

"What's the Sardion got to do with all this?" Garion asked.

"I think it's the key to the whole business," Zakath replied. "Both Zandramas and Urvon seem to believe that whoever finds and possesses it is going to win out."

"Agachak -the Hierarch of Rak Urga- believes the same thing," Garion told him.

Zakath nodded moodily. "I suppose I should have realized that. A Grolim is a Grolim -whether he comes from Malloreia or Cthol Murgos."

"It seems to me that maybe you should go back to Malloreia and put things in order."

"No, Belgarion, I won't abandon my campaign here in Cthol Murgos."

"Is personal revenge worth it?"

Zakath looked startled.

"I know why you hated Taur Urgas, but he's dead, and Urgit's not at all like him. I can't really believe that you'd sacrifice your whole empire just for the sake of revenging yourself on a man who can't feel it."

"You know?" Zakath's face looked stricken. "Who told you?"

"Urgit did. He told me the whole story."

"With pride, I expect." Zakath's teeth were clenched, and his face pale.

"No, not really. It was with regret -and with contempt for Taur Urgas. He hated him even more than you do."

"That's hardly possible, Belgarion. To answer your question, yes, I will sacrifice my empire -the whole world if need be- to spill out the last drop of the blood of Taur Urgas. I will neither sleep nor rest nor be turned aside from my vengeance, and I will crush whomever stands in my path."

"Tell him," the dry voice in Garion's mind said suddenly.

"What?"

"Tell him the truth about Urgit. "

"But- "

"Do it, Garion. He needs to know. There are things he has to do, and he won't do them until he puts this obsession behind him. "

Zakath was looking at him curiously.

"Sorry, just receiving instructions," Garion explained lamely.

"Instructions? From whom?"

"You wouldn't believe it. I was told to give you some information." He drew in a deep breath. "Urgit isn't a Murgo," he said flatly.

"What are you talking about?"

"I said that Urgit isn't a Murgo -at least not entirely.

His mother was, of course, but his father was not Taur Urgas."

"You're lying!"

"No, I'm not. We found out about it while we were at the Drojim Palace in Rak Urga. Urgit didn't know about it either."

"I don't believe you, Belgarion!" Zakath's face was livid, and he was nearly shouting.

"Taur Urgas is dead," Garion said wearily. "Urgit made sure of that by cutting his throat and burying him head down in his grave. He also claims that he had every one of his brothers -the real sons of Taur Urgas- killed to make himself secure on the throne. I don't think there's one drop of Urga blood left in the world."

Zakath's eyes narrowed. "It's a trick. You've allied yourself with Urgit and brought me this absurd lie to save his life."

"Use the Orb, Garion," the voice instructed.

"How?"

"Take it off the pommel of the sword and hold it in your right hand. It'll show Zakath the truths that he needs to know."

Garion rose to his feet. "If I can show you the truth, will you look?" he asked the agitated Mallorean Emperor.

"Look? Look at what?"

Garion walked over to his sword and peeled off the soft leather sleeve covering the hilt. He put his hand on the Orb, and it came free with an audible click. Then he turned back to the man at the table. "I'm not exactly sure how this works," he said. "I'm told that Aldur was able to do it, but I've never tried it for myself. I think you're supposed to look into this." He extended his right arm until the Orb was in front of Zakath's face.

"What is that?"

"You people call it Cthrag Yaska," Garion replied.

Zakath recoiled, his face blanching.

"It won't hurt you -as long as you don't touch it."

The Orb, which for the past months had rather sullenly obeyed Garion's continued instruction to restrain itself, slowly began to pulsate and glow in his hand, bathing Zakath's face in its blue radiance. The Emperor half lifted his hand as if to push the glowing stone aside.

"Don't touch it," Garion warned again. "Just look."

But Zakath's eyes were already locked on the stone as its blue light grew stronger and stronger. His hands gripped the edge of the table in front of him so tightly that his knuckles

grew white. For a long moment he stared into that blue incandescence. Then, slowly, his fingers lost their grip on the table edge and fell back onto the arms of his chair. An expression of agony crossed his face. "They have escaped me," he groaned with tears welling out of his closed eyes, "and I have slaughtered tens of thousands for nothing." The tears began to stream down his contorted face.

"I'm sorry, Zakath," Garion said quietly, lowering his hand. "I can't change what's already happened, but you had to know the truth."

"I cannot thank you for this truth," Zakath said, his shoulders shaking in the storm of his weeping. "Leave me, Belgarion. Take that accursed stone from my sight." Garion nodded with a great feeling of compassion and shared sorrow. Then he replaced the Orb on the pommel of his sword, re-covered the hilt, and picked up the great weapon. "I'm very sorry, Zakath," he said again, and then he quietly went out of the room, leaving the Emperor of boundless Mallorea alone with his grief.

CHAPTER THREE

"Really, Garion, I'm perfectly fine," Ce'Nedra objected again.

"I'm glad to hear that."

"Then you'll let me get out of bed?"

"No."

"That's not fair," she pouted.

"Would you like a little more tea?" he asked, going to the fireplace, taking up a poker, and swinging out the iron arm from which a kettle was suspended.

"No, I don't," she replied in a sulky little voice. "It smells, and it tastes awful."

"Aunt Pol says that it's very good for you. Maybe if you drink some more of it, she'll let you get out of bed and sit in a chair for a while." He spooned some of the dried, aromatic leaves from an earthenware pot into a cup, tipped the kettle carefully with the poker, and filled the cup with steaming water.

Ce'Nedra's eyes had momentarily come alight, but narrowed again almost immediately. "Oh, very clever, Garion," she said in a voice heavy with sarcasm. "Don't patronize me."

"Of course not," he agreed blandly, setting the cup on the stand beside the bed. "You probably ought to let that steep for a while," he suggested.

"It can steep all year if it wants to. I'm not going to drink it."

He sighed with resignation. "I'm sorry, Ce'Nedra," he said with genuine regret, "but you're wrong. Aunt Pol says that you're supposed to drink a cup of this every other hour. Until she tells me otherwise, that's exactly what you're going to do."

"What if I refuse?" Her tone was belligerent.

"I'm bigger than you are," he reminded her.

Her eyes went wide with shock. "You wouldn't actually force me to drink it, would you?"

His expression grew mournful. "I'd really hate to do something like that," he told her.

"But you'd do it, wouldn't you?" she accused.

He thought about it a moment, then nodded. "Probably," he admitted, "if Aunt Pol told me to."

She glared at him. "All right," she said finally. "Give me the stinking tea."

"It doesn't smell all that bad, Ce'Nedra."

"Why don't you drink it, then?"

"I'm not the one who's been sick."

She proceeded then to tell him -at some length- exactly what she thought of the tea and him and her bed and the room and of the whole world in general. Many of the terms she used were very colorful -even lurid- and some of them were in languages that he didn't recognize.

"What on earth is all the shouting about?" Polgara asked, coming into the room.

"I absolutely hate this stuff!" Ce'Nedra declared at the top of her lungs, waving the cup about and spilling most of the contents.

"I wouldn't drink it then." Aunt Pol advised calmly.

"Garion says that if I don't drink it, he'll pour it down my throat."

"Oh. Those were yesterday's instructions." Polgara looked at Garion. "Didn't I tell you that they change today?"

"No," he replied. "As a matter of fact, you didn't." He said it in a very level tone. He was fairly proud of that.

"I'm sorry, dear. I must have forgotten."

"When can I get out of bed?" Ce'Nedra demanded.

Polgara gave her a surprised look. "Any time you want, dear," she said. "As a matter of fact, I just came by to ask if you planned to join us for breakfast."

Ce'Nedra sat up in bed, her eyes like hard little stones. She slowly turned an icy gaze upon Garion and then quite deliberately stuck her tongue out at him.

Garion turned to Polgara. "Thanks awfully," he said to her.

"Don't be snide, dear," she murmured. She looked at the fuming little Queen. "Ce'Nedra, weren't you told as a child that sticking out one's tongue is the worst possible form of bad manners?"

Ce'Nedra smiled sweetly. "Why, yes, Lady Polgara, as a matter of fact I was. That's why I only do it on special occasions."

"I think I'll take a walk," Garion said to no one in particular. He went to the door, opened it, and left.

Some days later he lounged in one of the sitting rooms that had been built in the former women's quarters where he and the others were lodged. The room was peculiarly feminine. The furniture was softly cushioned in mauve, and the broad windows had filmy curtains of pale lavender. Beyond the windows lay a snowy garden, totally embraced by the tall wings of this bleak Murgo house. A cheery fire crackled in the half-moon arch of a broad fireplace, and at the far corner of the room an artfully contrived grotto, thick with green fern and moss, flourished about a trickling fountain. Garion sat brooding out at a sunless noon -at an ash-colored sky spitting

white pellets that were neither snow nor hail, but something in between- and realized all of a sudden that he was homesick for Riva. It was a peculiar thing to come to grips with here on the opposite end of the world. Always before, the word "homesick" had been associated with Faldor's farm -the kitchen, the broad central courtyard, Durnik's smithy, and all the other dear, treasured memories. Now, suddenly, he missed that storm-lashed coast, the security of that grim fortress hovering above the bleak city lying below, and the mountains, heavy with snow, rising stark white against a black and stormy sky.

There was a faint knock at the door.

"Yes?" Garion said absently, not looking around.

The door opened almost timidly. "Your Majesty?" a vaguely familiar voice said.

Garion turned, looking back over his shoulder. The man was chubby and bald and he wore brown, a plain serviceable color, though his robe was obviously costly, and the heavy gold chain about his neck loudly proclaimed that this was no minor official. Garion frowned slightly. "Haven't we met before?" he asked. "Aren't you General Atesca's friend-uh-"

"Brador, your Majesty," the brown-robed man supplied. "Chief of the Bureau of Internal Affairs."

"Oh, yes. Now I remember. Come in, your Excellency, come in."

"Thank you, your Majesty." Brador came into the room and moved toward the fireplace, extending his hands to its warmth. "Miserable climate." He shuddered.

"You should try a winter in Riva," Garion said, "although it's summer there right now."

Brador looked out the window at the snowy garden. "Strange place, Cthol Murgos," he said. "One's tempted to believe that all of Murgodom is deliberately ugly, and then one comes across a room like this."

"I suspect that the ugliness was to satisfy Ctuchik -and Taur Urgas," Garion replied. "Underneath, Murgos probably aren't much different from the rest of us."

Brador laughed. "That sort of thinking is considered heresy in Mal Zeth," he said.

"The people in Val Alorn feel much the same way." Garion looked at the bureaucrat. "I expect that this isn't just a social call, Brador," he said. "What's on your mind?"

"Your Majesty," Brador said soberly, "I absolutely have to speak with the Emperor. Atesca tried to arrange it before he went back to Rak Verkat, but-" He spread his hands helplessly. "Could you possibly speak to him about it? The matter is of the utmost urgency."

"I really don't think there's very much I can do for you, Brador," Garion told him. "Right now I'm probably the last person he'd want to talk to."

"Oh?"

"I told him something that he didn't want to hear."

Brador's shoulders slumped in defeat. "You were my last hope, your Majesty," he said.

"What's the problem?"

Brador hesitated, looking around nervously as if to assure himself that they were alone. "Belgarion," he said then in a very quiet voice, "have you ever seen a demon?"

"A couple of times, yes. It's not the sort of experience I'd care to repeat."

"How much do you know about the Karands?"

"Not a great deal. I've heard that they're related to the Morindim in northern Gar og Nadrak."

"You know more about them than most people, then. Do you know very much about the religious practices of the Morindim?"

Garion nodded. "They're demon worshippers. It's not a particularly safe form of religion, I've noticed."

Brador's face was bleak. "The Karands share the beliefs and practices of their cousins on the arctic plains of the West," he said. "After they were converted to the worship of Torak, the Grolims tried to stamp out those practices, but they persisted in the mountains and forests." He stopped and looked fearfully around again.

"Belgarion," he said, almost in a whisper, "does the name Mengha mean anything to you?"

"No. I don't think so. Who's Mengha?"

"We don't know -at least not for certain. He seems to have come out of the forest to the north of Lake Karanda about six months ago."

"And?"

"He marched -alone- to the gates of Calida in Jenno and called for the surrender of the city. They laughed at him, of course, but then he marked some symbols on the ground. They didn't laugh any more after that." The Melcene bureaucrat's face was gray. "Belgarion, he unloosed a horror on Calida such as man has never seen before. Those symbols he drew on the ground summoned up a host of demons -not one, or a dozen, but a whole army of them. I've talked with survivors of that attack. They're mostly mad -mercifully so, I think- and what happened at Calida was utterly unspeakable."

"An army of them?" Garion exclaimed.

Brador nodded. "That's what makes Mengha so dreadfully dangerous. As I'm sure you know, usually when someone summons a demon, sooner or later it gets away from him and kills him, but Mengha appears to have absolute control of all the fiends he raises and he can call them up by the hundreds. Urvon is terrified and he's even begun to experiment with magic himself, hoping to defend Mal Yaska against Mengha. We don't know where Zandramas is, but her apostate Grolim cohorts are desperately striving also to summon up these fiends. Great Gods, Belgarion, help me! This unholy infection will spread out of Mallorea and sweep the world. We'll all be engulfed by howling fiends, and no place, no matter how remote, will provide a haven for the pitiful remnants of mankind. Help me to persuade Kal Zakath that his petty little war here in Cthol Murgos has no real meaning in the face of the horror that's emerging in Mallorea."

Garion gave him a long, steady look, then rose to his feet. "You'd better come with me, Brador," he said quietly. "I think we need to talk with Belgarath."

They found the old sorcerer in the book-lined library of the house, poring over an ancient volume bound in green leather. He set his book aside and listened as Brador repeated what he had told Garion. "Urvon and Zandramas are also engaging in this insanity?" he asked when the Melcene had finished.

Brador nodded. "According to our best information, Ancient One," he replied.

Belgarath slammed his fist down and began to swear. "What are they thinking of?" he burst out, pacing up and down. "Don't they know that UL himself had forbidden this?"

"They're afraid of Mengha," Brador said helplessly. "They feel that they must have some way to protect themselves from his horde of fiends."

"You don't protect yourself from demons by raising more demons," the old man fumed. "If even one of them breaks free, they'll all get loose. Urvon or Zandramas might be able to handle them, but sooner or later some underling is going to make a mistake. Let's go see Zakath."

"I don't think we can get in to see him just now, Grandfather," Garion said dubiously. "He didn't like what I told him about Urgit."

"That's too bad. This is something that won't wait for him to regain his composure. Let's go."

The three of them went quickly through the corridors of the house to the large antechamber they had entered with General Atesca upon their arrival from Rak Verkat.

"Absolutely impossible," the colonel at the desk beside the main door declared when Belgarath demanded to see the Emperor immediately.

"As you grow older, Colonel," the old man said ominously, "you'll discover just how meaningless the word 'impossible' really is." He raised one hand, gestured somewhat theatrically, and Garion heard and felt the surge of his will.

A number of battle flags mounted on stout poles projected out from the opposite wall perhaps fifteen feet from the floor. The officious colonel vanished from his chair and reappeared precariously astride one of those poles with his eyes bulging and his hands desperately clinging to his slippery perch.

"Where would you like to go next, Colonel?" Belgarath asked him. "As I recall, there's a very tall flagpole out front. I could set you on top of it if you wish."

The colonel stared at him in horror.

"Now, as soon as I bring you down from there, you're going to persuade your Emperor to see us at once. You're going to be very convincing, Colonel -that's unless you want to be a permanent flagpole ornament, of course."

The colonel's face was still pasty white when he emerged from the guarded door leading to the audience chamber, and he flinched violently every time Belgarath moved his hand. "His Majesty consents to see you," he stammered.

Belgarath grunted. "I was almost sure that he would."

Kal Zakath had undergone a noticeable transformation since Garion had last seen him. His white linen robe was wrinkled and stained, and there were dark circles under his eyes. His face was deathly pale, his hair was unkempt, and he was unshaven. Spasm-like tremors ran through his body, and he looked almost too weak to stand. "What do you want?" he demanded in a barely audible voice.

"Are you sick?" Belgarath asked him.

"A touch of fever, I think." Zakath shrugged. "What's so important that you felt you had to force your way in here to tell me about it?"

"Your empire's collapsing, Zakath," Belgarath told him flatly. "It's time you went home to mend your fences."

Zakath smiled faintly. "Wouldn't that be so very convenient for you?" he said.

"What's going on in Malloreia isn't convenient for anybody. Tell him, Brador."

Nervously, the Melcene bureaucrat delivered his report.

"Demons?" Zakath retorted skeptically. "Oh, come now, Belgarath. Surely you don't expect me to believe that, do you? Do you honestly think that I'll run back to Malloreia to chase shadows and leave you behind to raise an army here in the West to confront me when I return?"

The palsy-like shaking Garion had noted when they had entered the room seemed to be growing more severe. Zakath's head bobbed and jerked on his neck, and a stream of spittle ran unnoticed from one corner of his mouth.

"You won't be leaving us behind, Zakath," Belgarath replied. "We're going with you. If even a tenth of what Brador says is true, I'm going to have to go to Karanda and stop this Mengha. If he's raising demons, we're all going to have to put everything else aside to stop him."

"Absurd!" Zakath declared agitatedly. His eyes were unfocused now, and his weaving and trembling had become so severe that he was unable to control his limbs.

"I'm not going to be tricked by a clever old man into-" He suddenly started up from his chair with an animal-like cry, clutching at the sides of his head. Then he toppled forward to the floor, twitching and jerking.

Belgarath jumped forward and took hold of the convulsing man's arms. "Quick!" he snapped. "Get something between his teeth before he bites off his tongue!"

Brador grabbed up a sheaf of reports from a nearby table, wadded them up, and jammed them into the frothing Emperor's mouth.

"Garion!" Belgarath barked. "Get Pol -fast!"

Garion started toward the door at a run.

"Wait!" Belgarath said, sniffing suspiciously at the air above the face of the man he was holding down. "Bring Sadi, too. There's a peculiar smell here. Hurry!"

Garion bolted. He ran through the hallways past startled officials and servants and finally burst into the room where Polgara was quietly talking with Ce'Nedra and Velvet. "Aunt Pol!" he shouted, "Come quickly! Zakath just collapsed!" Then he spun, ran a few more steps down the hall, and shouldered open the door to Sadi's room. "We need you," he barked at the startled eunuch. "Come with me."

It took only a few moments for the three of them to return to the polished door in the anteroom.

"What's going on?" the Angarak colonel demanded in a frightened voice, barring their way.

"Your Emperor is sick," Garion told him. "Get out of the way." Roughly he pushed the protesting officer to one side and yanked the door open.

Zakath's convulsions had at least partially subsided, but Belgarath still held him down.

"What is it, father" Polgara asked, kneeling beside the stricken man.

"He threw a fit."

"The falling sickness?"

"I don't think so. It wasn't quite the same. Sadi, come over here and smell his breath. I'm getting a peculiar odor from him."

Sadi approached cautiously, leaned forward, and sniffed several times. Then he straightened, his face pale.

"Thalot," he announced.

"A poison?" Polgara asked him.

Sadi nodded. "It's quite rare."

"Do you have an antidote?"

"No, my lady," he replied. "There isn't an antidote for thalot. It's always been universally fatal. It's seldom used because it acts very slowly, but no one ever recovers from it."

"Then he's dying?" Garion asked with a sick feeling.

"In a manner of speaking, yes. The convulsions will subside, but they'll recur with increasing frequency. Finally" Sadi shrugged. . . .

"There's no hope at all?" Polgara asked.

"None whatsoever, my lady. About all we can do is make his last few days more comfortable."

Belgarath started to swear. "Quiet him down, Pol," he said. "We need to get him into bed and we can't move him while he's jerking around that way."

She nodded and put one hand on Zakath's forehead.

Garion felt the faint surge, and the struggling Emperor grew quiet.

Brador, his face very pale, looked at them. "I don't think we should announce this just yet," he cautioned. "Let's just call it a slight illness for the moment until we can decide what to do. I'll send for a litter."

The room to which the unconscious Zakath was taken was plain to the point of severity. The Emperor's bed was a narrow cot. The only other furniture was a single plain chair and a low chest. The walls were white and unadorned, and a charcoal brazier glowed in one corner.

Sadi went back to their chambers and returned with his red case and the canvas sack in which Polgara kept her collection of herbs and remedies: The two of them consulted in low tones while Garion and Brador pushed the litter bearers and curious soldiers from the room. Then they mixed a steaming cup of a pungent-smelling liquid.

Sadi raised Zakath's head and held it while Polgara spooned the medicine into his slack-lipped mouth.

The door opened quietly, and the green-robed Dalasian healer, Andel, entered. "I came as soon as I heard," she said. "Is the Emperor's illness serious?"

Polgara looked at her gravely. "Close the door, Andel," she said quietly.

The healer gave her a strange look, then pushed the door shut. "Is it that grave, my lady?"

Polgara nodded. "He's been poisoned," she said. "We don't want word of it to get out just yet."

Andel gasped. "What can I do to help?" she asked, coming quickly to the bed.

"Not very much, I'm afraid," Sadi told her.

"Have you given him the antidote yet?"

"There is no antidote."

"There must be. Lady Polgara-"

Polgara sadly shook her head.

"I have failed, then," the hooded woman said in a voice filled with tears. She turned from the bed, her head bowed, and Garion heard a faint murmur that somehow seemed to come from the air above her-a murmur that curiously was not that of a single voice. There was a long silence; and then a shimmering appeared at the foot of the bed. When it cleared, the blindfolded form of Cyradis stood there, one hand slightly extended. "This must not be," she said in her clear, ringing voice. "Use thine art, Lady Polgara. Restore him. Should he die, all our tasks will fail. Bring thy power to bear."

"It won't work, Cyradis," Polgara replied, setting the cup down. "If a poison affects only the blood, I can usually manage to purge it, and Sadi has a whole case full of antidotes. This poison, however, sinks into every particle of the body. It's killing his bones and organs as well as his blood, and there's no way to leech it out."

The shimmering form at the foot of the bed wrung its hands in anguish. "It cannot be so," Cyradis wailed. "Hast thou even applied the sovereign specific?"

Polgara looked up quickly. "Sovereign specific? A universal remedy? I know of no such agent."

"But it doth exist, Lady Polgara. I know not its origins nor its composition, but I have felt its gentle power abroad in the world for some years now."

Polgara looked at Andel, but the healer shook her head helplessly. "I do not know of such a potion, my lady."

"Think, Cyradis," Polgara said urgently. "Anything you can tell us might give us a clue."

The blindfolded Seeress touched the fingertips of one hand lightly to her temple. "Its origins are recent," she said, half to herself. "It came into being less than a score of years ago -some obscure flower, or so it seemeth to me."

"It's hopeless, then," Sadi said. "There are millions of kinds of flowers." He rose and crossed the room to Belgarath. "I think we might want to leave here -almost immediately," he murmured. "At the first suggestion of the word 'poison,' people start looking for the nearest Nyissan -and those associated with him. I think we're in a great deal of danger right now."

"Can you think of anything else, Cyradis?" Polgara passed. "No matter how remote?"

The Seeress struggled with it, her face strained as she reached deeper into her strange vision. Her shoulders finally sagged in defeat. "Nothing," she said. "Only a woman's face."

"Describe it."

"She is tall," the Seeress replied. "Her hair is very dark, but her skin is like marble. Her husband is much involved with horses."

"Adara!" Garion exclaimed, the beautiful face of his cousin suddenly coming before his eyes.

Polgara snapped her fingers. "And Adara's rose!" Then she frowned. "I examined that flower very closely some years back, Cyradis," she said. "Are you absolutely sure? There are some unusual substances in it, but I didn't find any particular medicinal qualities in any of them -either in any distillation or powder."

Cyradis concentrated. "Can healing be accomplished by means of a fragrance, Lady Polgara?"

Polgara's eyes narrowed in thought. "There are some minor remedies that are inhaled," she said doubtfully, "but--"

"There are poisons that can be administered in that fashion, Lady Polgara," Sadi supplied. "The fumes are drawn into the lungs and from there into the heart. Then the blood carries them to every part of the body. It could very well be the only way to neutralize the effects of thalot."

Belgarath's expression had grown intent. "Well, Pol?" he asked.

"It's worth a try, father," she replied. "I've got a few of the flowers. They're dried, but they might work."

"Any seeds?"

"A few, yes."

"Seeds?" Andel exclaimed. "Kal Zakath would be months in his grave before any bush could grow and bloom."

The old man chuckled slyly. "Not quite," he said, winking at Polgara. "I have quite a way with plants sometimes. I'm going to need some dirt --and some boxes or tubs to put it in."

Sadi went to the door and spoke briefly with the guards outside. They looked baffled, but a short command from Andel sent them scurrying.

"What is the origin of this strange flower, Lady Polgara?" Cyradis asked curiously, "How is it that thou art so well acquainted with it?"

"Garion made it." Polgara shrugged, looking thoughtfully at Zakath's narrow cot. "I think we'll want the bed out from the wall, father," she said. "I want it surrounded by flowers."

"Made?" the Seeress exclaimed.

Polgara nodded. "Created, actually," she said absently. "Do you think it's warm enough in here, father? We're going to want big, healthy blooms, and even at best the flower's a bit puny."

"I did my best," Garion protested.

"Created?" Cyradis' voice was awed. Then she bowed to Garion with profound respect.

When the tubs of half-frozen dirt had been placed about the stricken Emperor's bed, smoothed, and dampened with water, Polgara took a small leather pouch from her canvas sack, removed a pinch of minuscule seeds, and carefully sowed them in the soil.

"All right," Belgarath said, rolling up his sleeves in a workmanlike fashion, "stand back." He bent and touched the dirt in one of the tubs. "You were right, Pol," he muttered. "Just a little too cold." He frowned slightly, and Garion saw his lips move. The surge was not a large one, and the sound of it was little more than a whisper. The damp earth in the tubs began to steam. "That's better," he said. Then he extended his hands out over the narrow cot and the steaming tubs. Again Garion felt the surge and the whisper.

At first nothing seemed to happen, but then tiny specks of green appeared on the top of the dampened dirt. Even as Garion watched those little leaves grow and expand, he remembered where he had seen Belgarath perform this same feat before. As clearly as if he were there, he saw the courtyard before King Korodullin's palace at Vo Mimbire and he saw the apple twig the

old man had thrust down between two flagstones expand and reach up toward the old sorcerer's hand as proof to the skeptical Sir Andorig that he was indeed who he said he was.

The pale green leaves had grown darker, and the spindly twigs and tendrils that had at first appeared had already expanded into low bushes.

"Make them vine up across the bed, father," Polgara said critically. "Vines produce more blossoms, and I want a lot of blossoms."

He let out his breath explosively and gave her a look that spoke volumes. "All right," he said finally. "You want vines? Vines it is."

"Is it too much for you, father?" she asked solicitously.

He set his jaw, but did not answer. He did, however, start to sweat. Longer tendrils began to writhe upward like green snakes winding up around the legs of the Emperor's cot and reaching upward to catch the bedframe. Once they had gained that foothold, they seemed to pause while Belgarath caught his breath. "This is harder than it looks," he puffed. Then he concentrated again, and the vines quickly overspread the cot and Kal Zakath's inert body until only his ashen face remained uncovered by them.

"All right," Belgarath said to the plants, "that's far enough. You can bloom now."

There was another surge and a peculiar ringing sound.

The tips of all the myriad twiglets swelled, and then those buds began to split, revealing their pale lavender interiors. Almost shyly the lopsided little flowers opened, filling the room with a gentle-seeming fragrance. Garion straightened as he breathed in that delicate odor. For some reason, he suddenly felt very good, and the cares and worries which had beset him for the past several months seemed to fall away.

The slack-faced Zakath stirred slightly, took a breath, and sighed deeply. Polgara laid her fingertips to the side of his neck. "I think it's working, father," she said. "His heart's not laboring so hard now, and his breathing's easier."

"Good," Belgarath replied. "I hate to go through something like that for nothing."

Then the Emperor opened his eyes. The shimmering form of Cyradis hovered anxiously at the foot of his bed. Strangely, he smiled when he saw her, and her shy, answering smile lighted her pale face. Then Zakath sighed once more and closed his eyes again. Garion leaned forward to make sure that the sick man was still breathing.

When he looked back toward the foot of the bed, the Seeress of Kell was gone.

CHAPTER FOUR

A warm wind came in off the lake that night, and the wet snow that had blanketed Rak Haggga and the surrounding countryside turned to a dreary slush that sagged and fell from the limbs of the trees in the little garden at the center of the house and slid in sodden clumps from the gray slate roof. Garion and Silk sat near the fire in the mauve-cushioned room, looking out at the garden and talking quietly.

"We'd know a great deal more, if I could get in touch with Yarblek," Silk was saying. The little man was dressed again in the pearl-gray doublet and black hose which he had favored during those years before they had begun this search, although he wore only a few of the costly rings and ornaments which had made him appear so ostentatiously wealthy at that time.

"Isn't he in Gar og Nadrak?" Garion asked. Garion had also discarded his serviceable travel clothing and reverted to his customary silver-trimmed blue.

"It's hard to say exactly where Yarblek is at any given time, Garion. He moves around a great deal; but no matter where he goes, the reports from our people in Mal Zeth, Melcene, and Maga Renn are all forwarded to him. Whatever this Mengha is up to is almost certain to have disrupted trade. I'm sure that our agents have gathered everything they could find out about him and sent it along to Yarblek. Right now my scruffy-looking partner probably knows more about Mengha than Brador's secret police do."

"I don't want to get sidetracked, Silk. Our business is with Zandramas, not Mengha."

"Demons are everybody's business," Silk replied soberly, "but no matter what we decide to do, we have to get to Mallorea first -and that means persuading Zakath that this is serious. Was he listening at all when you told him about Mengha?"

Garion shook his head. "I'm not sure if he even understood what we were telling him. He wasn't altogether rational."

Silk grunted. "When he wakes up, we'll have to try again." A sly grin crossed the little man's face. "I've had a certain amount of luck negotiating with sick people," he said.

"Isn't that sort of contemptible?"

"Of course it is -but it gets results."

Later that morning, Garion and his rat-faced friend stopped by the Emperor's room, ostensibly to inquire about his health. Polgara and Sadi were seated on either side of the bed, and Andel sat quietly in the corner. The vines that had enveloped the narrow cot had been pulled aside, but the air in the room was still heavy with the fragrance of the small, lavender flowers. The sick man was propped into a half-sitting position by pillows, but his eyes were closed as Silk and Garion entered. His cat lay contentedly purring at the foot of the bed.

"How is he?" Garion asked quietly.

"He's been awake a few times," Sadi replied. "There are still some traces of thalot in his extremities, but they seem to be dissipating." The eunuch was picking curiously at one of the small flowers. "I wonder if these would work if they were distilled down to an essence," he mused, "or perhaps an attar. It might be very interesting to wear a perfume that would ward off any poison." He frowned slightly. "And I wonder if they'd be effective against snake venom."

"Have Zith bite someone," Silk suggested. "Then you can test it."

"Would you like to volunteer, Prince Kheldar?"

"Ah, no, Sadi," Silk declined. "Thanks all the same." He looked at the red case lying open on the floor in the corner. "Is she confined, by the way?" he asked nervously.

"She's sleeping," Sadi replied. "She always takes a little

nap after breakfast."

Garion looked at the dozing Emperor. "Is he coherent at all -when he's awake, I mean?"

"His mind seems to be clearing," Polgara told him.

"Hysteria and delirium are some of the symptoms brought on by thalot," Sadi said. "Growing rationality is an almost certain sign of recovery."

"Is that you, Belgarion?" Zakath asked almost in a whisper and without opening his eyes.

"Yes," Garion replied. "How are you feeling?"

"Weak. Light-headed -and every muscle in my body screams like an abscessed tooth. Aside from that, I'm fine." He opened his eyes with a wry smile. "What happened? I seem to have lost track of things."

Garion glanced briefly at Polgara, and she nodded.

"You were poisoned," he told the sick man.

Zakath looked a bit surprised. "It must not have been a very good one then," he said.

"Actually, it's one of the very best, your Imperial Majesty," Sadi disagreed mildly. "It's always been universally lethal."

"I'm dying then?" Zakath said it with a peculiar kind of satisfaction, almost as if he welcomed the idea. "Ah, well," he sighed. "That should solve many problems."

"I'm very sorry, your Majesty," Silk said with mock regret, "but I think you'll live. Belgarath tampers with the normal course of events from time to time. It's a bad habit he picked up in his youth, but a man needs some vices, I suppose."

Zakath smiled weakly. "You're a droll little fellow, Prince Kheldar."

"If you're really keen on dying, though," Silk added outrageously, "we could always wake Zith. One nip from her almost guarantees perpetual slumber."

"Zith?"

"Sadi's pet -a little green snake. She could even curl up at your ear after she bites you and purr you into eternity."

Zakath sighed, and his eyes drooped shut again.

"I think we should let him sleep," Polgara said quietly.

"Not just yet, Lady Polgara," the Emperor said. "I've shunned sleep and the dreams which infest it for so long that it comes unnaturally now."

"You must sleep, Kal Zakath," Andel told him.

"There are ways to banish evil dreams, and sleep is the greatest healer."

Zakath sighed and shook his head. "I'm afraid you won't be able to banish these dreams, Andel." Then he frowned slightly. "Sadi, is hallucination one of the symptoms of the poison I was given?"

"It's possible," the eunuch admitted. "What horrors have you seen?"

"Not a horror," Zakath replied. "I seem to see the face of a young woman. Her eyes are bound with a strip of cloth. A peculiar peace comes over me when I see her face."

"Then it was not an hallucination, Kal Zakath," Andel told him.

"Who is this strange blind child, then?"

"My mistress," Andel said proudly. "The face which came

to you in your direst hour was the face of Cyradis, the Seeress of Kell, upon whose decision rests the fate of all the world -and of all other worlds as well."

"So great a responsibility to lie upon such slender shoulders," Zakath said.

"It is her task," Andel said simply.

The sick man seemed to fall again into a doze, his lips lightly touched with a peculiar smile. Then his eyes opened again, seemingly more alert now. "Am I healed, Sadi?" he asked the shaved-headed eunuch. "Has your excellent Nyissan poison quite run its course?"

"Oh," Sadi replied speculatively, "I wouldn't say that you're entirely well yet, your Majesty, but I'd guess that you're out of any immediate danger."

"Good," Zakath said crisply, trying to shoulder his way up into a sitting position. Garion reached out to help him. "And has the knave who poisoned me been apprehended yet?"

Sadi shook his head. "Not as far as I know," he answered.

"I think that might be the first order of business, then.

I'm starting to feel a little hungry and I'd rather not go through this again. Is the poison common in Cthol Murgos?"

Sadi frowned. "Murgo law forbids poisons and drugs, your Majesty," he replied. "They're a backward sort of people. The Dagashi assassins probably have access to thalot, though."

"You think my poisoner might have been a Dagashi, then?"

Sadi shrugged. "Most assassinations in Cthol Murgos are carried out by the Dagashi. They're efficient and discreet."

Zakath's eyes narrowed in thought. "That would seem to point a finger directly at Urgit, then. The Dagashi are expensive, and Urgit has access to the royal treasury." Silk grimaced. "No," he declared. "Urgit wouldn't do that. A knife between your shoulder blades maybe, but not poison."

"How can you be so sure, Kheldar?"

"I know him," Silk replied a bit lamely. "He's weak and a little timid, but he wouldn't be a party to a poisoning. It's a contemptible way to resolve political differences."

"Prince Kheldar!" Sadi protested.

"Except in Nyissa, of-course," Silk conceded. "One always needs to take quaint local customs into account." He pulled at his long, pointed nose. "I'll admit that Urgit wouldn't grieve too much if you woke up dead some morning," he said to the Malloreaan Emperor, "but it's all just a little too pat. If your generals believed that it was Urgit who arranged to have you killed, they'd stay here for the next ten generations trying to obliterate all of Murgodom, wouldn't they?"

"I'd assume so," Zakath said.

"Who would benefit the most by disposing of you and rather effectively making sure that the bulk of your army doesn't return to Mallorea in the foreseeable future? Not Urgit, certainly. More likely it would be somebody in Mallorea who wants a free hand there." Silk squared his shoulders. "Why don't you let Liselle and me do a little snooping around before you lock your mind in stone on this? Obvious things always make me suspicious."

"That's all very well, Kheldar," Zakath said rather testily, "but how can I be sure that my next meal won't have another dose of exotic spices in it?"

"You have at your bedside the finest cook in the world,"

the rat-faced man said, pointing grandly at Polgara, "and I can absolutely guarantee that she won't poison you. She might turn you into a radish if you offend her, but she'd never poison you."

"All right, Silk, that will do," Polgara told him,

"I'm only paying tribute to your extraordinary gifts, Polgara."

Her eyes grew hard.

"I think that perhaps it might be time for me to be on my way," Silk said to Garion.

"Wise decision," Garion murmured.

The little man turned and quickly left the room.

"Is he really as good as he pretends to be?" Zakath asked curiously.

Polgara nodded. "Between them, Kheldar and Liselle can probably ferret out any secret in the world. Silk doesn't always like it, but they're almost a perfect team. And now, your Majesty, what would you like for breakfast?"

A curious exchange was taking place in the corner.

Throughout the previous conversation, Garion had heard a faint, drowsy purr coming from Zith's earthenware bottle. Either the little snake was expressing a general sense of contentment, or it may have been one of the peculiarities of her species to purr while sleeping. Zakath's pregnant, mackerel-striped cat, attracted by that sound, jumped down from the bed and curiously waddled toward Zith's little home. Absently, probably without even thinking about it, she responded to the purr coming from the bottle with one of her own. She sniffed at the bottle, then tentatively touched it with one soft paw. The peculiar duet of purring continued.

Then, perhaps because Sadi had not stoppered the bottle tightly enough or because she had long since devised this simple means of opening her front door, the little snake nudged the cork out of the bottle with her blunt nose. Both creatures continued to purr, although the cat was now obviously afire with curiosity. For a time Zith did not reveal herself, but lurked shyly in her bottle, still purring. Then, cautiously, she poked out her head, her forked tongue flickering as she tested the air.

The cat jumped straight up to a height of about three feet, giving vent to a startled yowl. Zith retreated immediately back into the safety of her house, though she continued to purr.

Warily, but still burning with curiosity, the cat approached the bottle again, moving one foot at a time.

"Sadi," Zakath said, his voice filled with concern.

"There's no immediate danger, your Majesty," the eunuch assured him. "Zith never bites while she's purring."

Again the little green snake slid her head out of the bottle. This time the cat recoiled only slightly. Then, curiosity overcoming her natural aversion to reptiles, she continued her slow advance, her nose reaching out toward this remarkable creature. Zith, still purring, also extended her blunt nose. Their noses touched, and both flinched back slightly. Then they cautiously sniffed at each other, the cat with her nose, the snake with her tongue. Both were purring loudly now.

"Astonishing," Sadi murmured. "I think they actually like

each other."

"Sadi, please," Zakath said plaintively. "I don't know how you feel about your snake, but I'm rather fond of my cat, and she is about to become a mother."

"I'll speak with them, your Majesty," Sadi assured him. "I'm not sure that they'll listen, but I'll definitely speak with them."

Belgarath had once again retired to the library, and Garion found him later that day poring over a large map of northern Mallorea. "Ah," he said, looking up as Garion entered, "there you are. I was just about to send for you. Come over here and look at this." Garion went to the table.

"The appearance of this Mengha fellow might just work to our advantage, you know."

"I don't quite follow that, Grandfather."

"Zandramas is here at Ashaba, right?" Belgarath stabbed his finger at a spot in the representation of the Karandese mountains.

"Yes," Garion said.

"And Mengha's moving west and south out of Calida, over here." The old man poked at the map again.

"That's what Brador says."

"He's got her blocked off from most of the continent, Garion. She's been very careful here in Cthol Murgos to avoid populated areas. There's no reason to believe that she's going to change once she gets to Mallorea. Urvon's going to be to the south of her at Mal Yaska, and the wastes to the north are virtually impassable -even though it's nearly summer."

"Summer?"

"In the northern half of the world it is."

"Oh. I keep forgetting." Garion peered at the map.

"Grandfather, we don't have any idea of where 'the place which is no more' might be. When Zandramas leaves Ashaba, she could go in any direction."

Belgarath squinted at the map. "I don't think so, Garion. In the light of all that's happened in Mallorea -coupled with the fact that by now she knows that we're on her trail- I think she almost has to be trying to get back to her power base in Darshiva. Everybody in the world is after her, and she needs help."

"We certainly aren't threatening her all that much," Garion said moodily. "We can't even get out of Cthol Murgos."

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about. You've got to persuade Zakath that it's vital for us to leave here and get to Mallorea as quickly as possible."

"Persuade?"

"Just do whatever you have to, Garion. There's a great deal at stake."

"Why me?" Garion said it without thinking.

Belgarath gave him a long, steady look.

"Sorry," Garion muttered. "Forget that I said it."

"All right. I'll do that."

Late that evening, Zakath's cat gave birth to seven healthy kittens while Zith hovered in anxious attendance, warning off all other observers with ominous hisses. Peculiarly, the only person the protective little reptile would allow near the newborn kittens was Velvet.

Garion had little success during the next couple of days in his efforts to steer his conversations with the convalescing Zakath around to the subject of the necessity for returning to Malloreia. The Emperor usually pleaded a lingering weakness as a result of his poisoning, though Garion privately suspected subterfuge on that score, since the man appeared to have more than enough energy for his usual activities and only protested exhaustion when Garion wanted to talk about a voyage.

On the evening of the fourth day, however, he decided to try negotiation one last time before turning to more direct alternatives. He found Zakath seated in the chair near his bed with a book in his hands. The dark circles beneath his eyes had vanished, the trembling had disappeared entirely, and he seemed totally alert. "Ah, Belgarion," he said almost cheerfully, "so good of you to stop by."

"I thought I'd come in and put you to sleep again," Garion replied with slightly exaggerated sarcasm.

"Have I been that obvious?" Zakath asked.

"Yes, as a matter of fact you have. Every time I mention the words 'ship' and 'Malloreia' in the same sentence, your eyes snap shut. Zakath, we've got to talk about this, and time is starting to run out."

Zakath passed one hand across his eyes with some show of weariness.

"Let me put it this way," Garion pressed on. "Belgarath's starting to get impatient. I'm trying to keep our discussions civil, but if he steps in, I can almost guarantee that they're going to turn unpleasant -very quickly."

Zakath lowered his hand, and his eyes narrowed. "That sounds vaguely like a threat, Belgarion."

"No," Garion disagreed. "As a matter of fact, it's in the nature of friendly advice. If you want to stay here in Cthol Murgos, that's up to you, but we have to get to Malloreia -and soon."

"And if I choose not to permit you to go?"

"Permit?" Garion laughed. "Zakath, did you grow up in the same world with the rest of us? Have you got even the remotest idea of what you're talking about?"

"I think that concludes this interview, Belgarion," the Emperor said coldly. He rose stiffly to his feet and turned to his bed. As usual, his cat had deposited her mewling little brood in the center of his coverlet and then gone off to nap alone in her wool-lined box in the corner. The irritated Emperor looked with some exasperation at the furry little puddle on his bed. "You have my permission to withdraw, Belgarion," he said over his shoulder. Then he reached down with both hands to scoop up the cluster of kittens.

Zith reared up out of the very center of the furry heap, fixed him with a cold eye, and hissed warningly.

"Torak's teeth!" Zakath swore, jerking his hands away. "This is going too far! Go tell Sadi that I want his accursed snake out of my room immediately!"

"He's taken her out four times already, Zakath," Garion said mildly. "She just keeps crawling back." He suppressed a grin. "Maybe she likes you."

"Are you trying to be funny.?"

"Me?"

"Get the snake out of here."

Garion put his hands behind his back. "Not me, Zakath. I'll go get Sadi."

In the hallway outside, however, he encountered Velvet, who was coming toward the Emperor's room with a mysterious smile on her face.

"Do you think you could move Zith?" Garion asked her. "She's in the middle of Zakath's bed with those kittens."

"You can move her, Belgarion," the blond girl said, smiling the dimples into her cheeks. "She trusts you."

"I think I'd rather not try that."

The two of them went back into the Emperor's bedchamber.

"Margravine," Zakath greeted her courteously, inclining his head.

She curtsied. "Your Majesty."

"Can you deal with this?" he asked, pointing at the furry pile on his bed with the snake still half-reared out of the center, her eyes alert.

"Of course, your Majesty." She approached the bed, and the snake flickered her tongue nervously. "Oh, do stop that, Zith," the blond girl chided. Then she lifted the front of her skirt to form a kind of pouch and began picking up kittens and depositing them in her improvised basket. Last of all she lifted Zith and laid her in the middle. She crossed the room and casually put them all into the box with the mother cat, who opened one golden eye, made room for her kittens and their bright green nursemaid, and promptly went back to sleep.

"Isn't that sweet?" Velvet murmured softly. Then she turned back to Zakath. "Oh, by the way, your Majesty, Kheldar and I managed to find out who it was who poisoned you."

"What?"

She nodded, frowning slightly. "It came as something of a surprise, actually."

The Emperor's eyes had become intent. "You're sure?"

"As sure as one can be in these cases. You seldom find an eyewitness to a poisoning; but he was in the kitchen at the right time, he left right after you fell ill, and we know him by reputation." She smiled at Garion. "Have you noticed how people always tend to remember a man with white eyes?"

"Naradas?" Garion exclaimed.

"Surprising, isn't it?"

"Who's Naradas?" Zakath demanded.

"He works for Zandramas," Garion replied. He frowned.

"That doesn't make any sense, Velvet. Why would Zandramas want to kill him? Wouldn't she want to keep him alive?"

She spread her hands. "I don't know, Belgarion -not yet, anyway."

"Velvet?" Zakath asked in puzzlement.

She smiled the dimples into her cheeks again. "Isn't it silly?" She laughed. "I suppose these little nicknames are a form of affection, though. Belgarion's question is to the point, however. Can you think of any reason why Zandramas might want to kill you?"

"Not immediately, but we can wring that answer out of her when I catch her -and I'll make a point of doing that, even if I have to take Cthol Murgos apart stone by stone."

"She isn't here," Garion said absently, still struggling with the whole idea. "She's at Ashaba -in the House of Torak."

Zakath's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Isn't this convenient, Belgarion?" he said. " I happen to get poisoned right after your arrival. Belgarath happens to cure me. Kheldar and Liselle happen to discover the identity of the poisoner, who happens to work for Zandramas, who happens to be at Ashaba, which happens to be in Mallorea -a place which just happens to be where you so desperately want to go. The coincidence staggers the imagination, wouldn't you say?"

"Zakath, you're starting to make me tired," Garion said irritably. "If I decide that I need a boat to get to

Mallorea, I'll take one. All that's kept me from doing that so far are the manners Lady Polgara drilled into me when I was a boy."

"And how do you propose to leave this house?" Zakath snapped, his temper also starting to rise.

That did it. The rage that came over Garion was totally irrational. It was the result of a hundred delays and stumbling blocks and petty interruptions that had dogged him for almost a year now. He reached over his shoulder, ripped Iron-grip's sword from its sheath, and peeled the concealing leather sleeve from its hilt. He held the great blade before him and literally threw his will at the Orb. The sword exploded into blue flame. " How do I propose to leave this house?" he half shouted at the stunned Emperor. "I'll use this for a key. It works sort of like this." He straightened his arm, leveling the blazing sword at the door. "Burst!" he commanded.

Garion's anger was not only irrational, it was also somewhat excessive. He had intended no more than the door -and possibly a part of the doorframe- simply to illustrate to Zakath the intensity of his feeling about the matter. The Orb, however, startled into wakefulness by the sudden jolt of his angry will, had overreacted. The door, certainly, disappeared, dissolving into splinters that blasted out into the hallway. The doorframe also vanished. What Garion had not intended, however, was what happened to the wall.

White-faced and shaking, Zakath stumbled back, staring at the hallway outside that had suddenly been revealed and at the rubble that filled it -rubble that had a moment before been the solid, two-foot-thick stone wall of his bedroom.

"My goodness," Velvet murmured mildly.

Knowing that it was silly and melodramatic, but still caught up in that towering, irrational anger, Garion caught the stunned Zakath by the arm with his left hand and gestured with the sword he held in his right. "Now, we're going to go talk with Belgarath," he announced.

"We'll go through the hallways if you'll give me your word not to call soldiers every time we go around a corner. Otherwise, we'll just cut straight through the house. The library's sort of in that direction, isn't it?" he pointed at one of the still-standing walls with his sword.

"Belgarion," Velvet chided him gently, "now really, that's no way to behave. Kal Zakath has been a very courteous host. I'm sure that now that he understands the situation, he'll be more than happy to cooperate, won't you, your Imperial Majesty?" She smiled winsomely at the Emperor. "We wouldn't want the Rivan King to get really angry, now would we? There are so many breakable things about -windows, walls, houses,

the city of Rak Hagga- that sort of thing."

They found Belgarath in the library again. He was reading a small scroll, and there was a large tankard at his elbow.

"Something's come up," Garion said shortly as he entered.

"Oh?"

"Velvet tells us that she and Silk found out that it was Naradas who poisoned Zakath."

"Naradas?" the old man blinked. "That's a surprise, isn't it?"

"What's she up to, Grandfather? Zandramas, I mean."

"I'm not sure." Belgarath looked at Zakath. "Who's likely to succeed you if somebody manages to put you to sleep?"

Zakath shrugged. "There are a few distant cousins scattered about -mostly in the Melcene Islands and Celanta. The line of the succession is a little murky."

"Perhaps that's what she has in mind, Belgarath," Velvet said seriously. "If there's any truth in that Grolim Prophecy you found in Rak Hagga, she's got to have an Angarak king with her at the time of the final meeting."

A tame king would suit her purposes much better than someone like his Majesty here -some third or fourth cousin she could crown and annoint and proclaim king. Then she could have her Grolims keep an eye on him and deliver him to her at the proper time."

"It's possible, I suppose," he agreed. "I think there may be a bit more to it than that, though. Zandramas has never been that straightforward about anything before."

"I hope you all realize that I haven't the faintest notion of what you're talking about," Zakath said irritably.

"Just how much does he know?" Belgarath asked Garion.

"Not very much, Grandfather."

"All right. Maybe if he does know what's going on, he won't be quite so difficult." He turned to the Mallolean Emperor. "Have you ever heard of the Mrin Codex?" he asked.

"I've heard that it was written by a madman -like most of the other so-called prophecies."

"How about the Child of Light and the Child of Dark?"

"That's part of the standard gibberish used by religious hysterics."

"Zakath, you're going to have to believe in something."

This is going to be very difficult for you to grasp if you don't."

"Would you settle for a temporary suspension of skepticism?" the Emperor countered.

"Fair enough, I suppose. All right, now, this gets complicated, so you're going to have to pay attention, listen carefully, and stop me if there's anything you don't understand."

The old man then proceeded to sketch in the ancient story of the "accident" that had occurred before the world had begun and the divergence of the two possible courses of the future and of the two consciousnesses which had somehow infused those courses.

"All right," Zakath said. "That's fairly standard theology so far. I've had Grolims preaching to the same nonsense since I was a boy."

Belgarath nodded. "I just wanted to start us off from common ground." He went on then, telling Zakath of the events

spanning the eons between the cracking of the world and the Battle of Vo Mimbire.

"Our point of view is somewhat different," Zakath murmured.

"It would be," Belgarath agreed. "All right, there were five hundred years between Vo Mimbire and the theft of the Orb by Zedar the Apostate."

"Recovery." Zakath corrected. "The Orb was stolen from Cthol Mishrak by Iron-grip the thief and by-" he stopped, and his eyes suddenly widened as he stared at the seedy-looking old man.

"Yes," Belgarath said, "I really was there, Zakath -and I was there two thousand years before, when Torak originally stole the Orb from my Master."

"I've been sick, Belgarath," the Emperor said weakly, sinking into a chair. "My nerves aren't really up for too many of these shocks."

Belgarath looked at him, puzzled.

"Their Majesties were having a little discussion," Velvet explained brightly. "King Belgarion gave the Emperor a little demonstration of some of the more flamboyant capabilities of the Sword of the Rivan King. The Emperor was quite impressed. So was most everybody else who happened to be in that part of the house."

Belgarath gave Garion a chill look. "Playing again?" he asked.

Garion tried to reply, but there was nothing he could really say.

"All right, let's get on with this," Belgarath continued briskly. "What happened after the emergence of Garion here is all recent history, so I'm sure you're familiar with it."

"Garion?" Zakath asked.

"A more common -and familiar- form. 'Belgarion' is a bit ostentatious, wouldn't you say?"

"No more so than 'Belgarath.' "

"I've worn 'Belgarath' for almost seven thousand years, Zakath, and I've sort of rubbed off the rough edges and corners. Garion's only been wearing his 'Bel' for a dozen years, and it still squeaks when he turns around too quickly "

Garion felt slightly offended by that.

"Anyway," the old man continued, "after Torak was dead, Garion and Ce'Nedra got married. About a year or so ago, she gave birth to a son. Garion's attention at that time was on the Bear-cult. Someone had tried to kill Ce'Nedra and had succeeded in killing the Rivan Warder."

"I'd heard about that," Zakath said.

"Anyway, he was in the process of stamping out the cult -he stamps quite well once he puts his mind to it- when someone crept into the Citadel at Riva and abducted his infant son- my great-grandson."

"No!" Zakath exclaimed.

"Oh, yes," Belgarath continued grimly. "We thought it was the cult and marched to Rheon in Drasnia, their headquarters, but it was all a clever ruse. Zandramas had abducted prince Geran and misdirected us to Rheon. The leader of the cult turned out to be Harakan, one of the henchmen of Urvon -is this coming too fast for you?"

Zakath's face was startled, and his eyes had gone wide

again. "No," he said, swallowing hard. "I think I can keep up."

"There isn't too much more. After we discovered our mistakes, we took up the abductor's trail. We know that she's going to Mallorea -to a 'place which is no more.' That's where the Sardion is. We have to stop her, or at least arrive there at the same time. Cyradis believes that when we all arrive at this 'place which is no more,' there's going to be one of those confrontations between the Child of Light and the Child of Dark which have been happening since before the beginning of time -except that this is going to be the last one. She'll choose between them, and that's supposed to be the end of it."

"I'm afraid that it's at that point that my skepticism reasserts itself, Belgarath," Zakath said. "You don't acutally expect me to believe that these two shadowy figures that predate the world are going to arrive at this mysterious place to grapple once more, do you?"

"What makes you think they're shadowy? The spirits that are at the core of the two possible destinies infuse real people to act as their instruments during these meetings. Right now, for example, Zandramas is the Child of Dark. It used to be Torak -until Garion killed him."

"And who's the Child of Light?"

"I thought that would be obvious."

Zakath turned to stare incredulously into Garion's blue eyes. "You?" he gasped.

"That's what they tell me," Garion replied.

CHAPTER FIVE

Kal Zakath, dread Emperor of boundless Mallorea, looked first at Belgarath, then again at Garion, and finally at Velvet. "Why do I feel that I'm losing control of things here?" he asked. "When you people came here, you were more or less my prisoners. Now somehow I'm yours."

"We told you some things you didn't know before, that's all," Belgarath told him.

"Or some things that you've cleverly made up."

"Why would we do that?"

"I can think of any number of reasons. For the sake of argument I'll accept your story about the abduction of Belgarion's son, but don't you see how that makes all your motives completely obvious? You need my aid in your search. All this mystical nonsense, and your wild story about Urgit's parentage, could have been designed to divert me from my campaign here in Cthol Murgos and to trick me into returning with you to Mallorea. Everything you've done or said since you've come here could have been directed toward that end."

"Do you really think we'd do that?" Garion asked him.

"Belgarion, if I had a son and someone had abducted him, I'd do anything to get him back. I sympathize with your situation, but I have my own concerns, and they're here, not in Mallorea. I'm sorry, but the more I think about this, the less of it I believe. I could not have misjudged the world so much. Demons? Prophecies? Magic? Immortal old men? It's all been very entertaining, but I don't believe one word of it."

"Not even what the Orb showed you about Urgit?" Garion

asked.

"Please, Belgarion, don't treat me like a child." Zakath's lips were twisted into an ironic smile. "Isn't it altogether possible that the poison had already crept into my mind? And isn't it also possible that you, like any other of the charlatans who infest village fairs, used a show of mysterious lights and suggestions to make me see what you wanted me to see?"

"What do you believe, Kal Zakath?" Velvet asked him.

"What I can see and touch -and precious little else."

"So great a skepticism," she murmured. "Then you do not accept one single out-of-the-ordinary thing?"

"Not that I can think of, no."

"Not even the peculiar gift of the Seers at Kell? It's been fairly well documented, you know."

He frowned slightly. "Yes," he admitted, "as a matter of fact, it has."

"How can you document a vision?" Garion asked curiously.

"The Grolims were seeking to discredit the Seers," Zakath replied. "They felt that the easiest way to do that was to have these pronouncements about the future written down and then wait to see what happened. The bureaucracy was instructed to keep records. So far, not one of the predictions of the Seers has proven false."

"Then you do believe that the Seers have the ability to know things about the past and the present and the future in ways that the rest of us might not completely understand?" Velvet pressed.

Zakath pursed his lips. "All right, Margravine," he said reluctantly, "I'll concede that the Seers have certain abilities that haven't been explained as yet."

"Do you believe that a Seer could lie to you?"

"Good girl," Belgarath murmured approvingly.

"No," Zakath replied after a moment's thought. "A Seer is incapable of lying. Their truthfulness is proverbial."

"Well, then," she said with a dimpled smile, "all you need to do to find out if what we've told you is the truth is to send for a Seer, isn't it?"

"Liselle," Garion protested, "that could take weeks. We don't have that much time."

"Oh," she said, "I don't think it would take all that long. If I remember correctly, Lady Polgara said that Andel summoned Cyradis when his Majesty here lay dying. I'm fairly sure we could persuade her to do it for us again."

"Well, Zakath," Belgarath said. "Will you agree to accept what Cyradis tells you as the truth?"

The Emperor squinted at him suspiciously, searching for some kind of subterfuge. "You've manipulated me into a corner," he accused. He thought about it. "All right, Belgarath," he said finally. "I'll accept whatever Cyradis says as the truth -if you'll agree to do the same." "Done then," Belgarath said. "Let's send for Andel and get on with this."

As Velvet stepped out into the hall to speak with one of the guards who trailed along behind the Emperor wherever he went, Zakath leaned back in his chair. "I can't believe that I'm even considering all the wild impossibilities you've been telling me," he said.

Garion exchanged a quick look with his grandfather, and then they both laughed.

"Something funny, gentlemen?"

"Just a family joke, Zakath," Belgarath told him. "Garion and I have been discussing the possible and the impossible since he was about nine years old. He was even more stubborn about it than you are."

"It gets easier to accept after the first shock wears off," Garion added. "It's sort of like swimming in very cold water. Once you get numb, it doesn't hurt quite so much."

It was not long until Velvet reentered the room with the hooded Andel at her side.

"I believe you said that the Seeress of Kell is your mistress, Andel," Zakath said to her.

"Yes, she is, your Majesty."

"Can you summon her?"

"Her semblance, your Majesty, if there is need and if she will consent to come."

"I believe there's a need, Andel. Belgarath has told me certain things that I have to have confirmed. I know that Cyradis speaks only the truth. Belgarath, on the other hand, has a more dubious reputation." He threw a rather sly, sidelong glance at the old man.

Belgarath grinned at him and winked.

"I will speak with my mistress, your Majesty," Andel said, "and entreat her to send her semblance here. Should she consent, I beg of you to ask your questions quickly. The effort of reaching half around the world exhausts her, and she is not robust." Then the Dalasian woman knelt reverently and lowered her head, and Garion once again heard that peculiar murmur as of many voices, followed by a long moment of silence. Again there was that same shimmer in the air; when it had cleared, the hooded and blindfolded form of Cyradis stood there.

"We thank you for coming, Holy Seeress," Zakath said to her in an oddly respectful tone of voice. "My guests here have told me certain things that I am loath to believe, but I have agreed to accept whatever you can confirm."

"I will tell thee what I can, Zakath," she replied. "Some things are hidden from me, and some others may not yet be revealed."

"I understand the limitations, Cyradis. Belgarion tells me that Urgit, the King of the Murgos, is not of the blood of Taur Urgas. Is this true?"

"It is," she replied simply. "King Urgit's father was an Alorn."

"Are any of the sons of Taur Urgas still alive?"

"Nay, Zakath. The line of Taur Urgas became extinct some twelve years ago when his last son was strangled in a cellar in Rak Goska upon the command of Oskatat, King Urgit's Seneschal."

Zakath sighed and shook his head sadly. "And so it has ended," he said. "My enemy's line passed unnoticed from this world in a dark cellar -passed so quietly that I could not even rejoice that they were gone, nor curse the ones who stole them from my grasp."

"Revenge is a hollow thing, Zakath."

"It's the only thing I've had for almost thirty years

now." He sighed again, then straightened his shoulders. "Did Zandramas really steal Belgarion's son?"

"She did, and now she carries him to the Place Which Is No More."

"And where's that?"

Her face grew very still. "I may not reveal that," she replied finally, "but the Sardion is there."

"Can you tell me what the Sardion is?"

"It is one half of the stone which was divided."

"Is it really all that important?"

"In all of Angarak there is no thing of greater worth. The Grolims all know this. Urvon would give all his wealth for it. Zandramas would abandon the adoration of multitudes for it. Mengha would give his soul for it -indeed, he hath done so already in his enlistment of demons to aid him. Even Agachak, Hierarch of Rak Urga, would abandon his ascendancy in Cthol Murgos to possess it."

"How is it that a thing of such value has escaped my notice?"

"Thine eyes are on worldly matters, Zakath. The Sardion is not of this world -no more than the other half of the divided stone is of this world."

"The other half?"

"That which the Angaraks call Cthrag Yaska and the men of the West call the Orb of Aldur. Cthrag Sardius and Cthrag Yaska were sundered in the moment which saw the birth of the opposing necessities."

Zakath's face had grown quite pale, and he clasped his hands tightly in front of him to control their trembling.

"It's all true, then?" he asked in a hoarse voice.

"All, Kal Zakath. All."

"Even that Belgarion and Zandramas are the Child of Light and the Child of Dark?"

"Yes, they are."

He started to ask her another question, but she raised her hand. "My time is short, Zakath, and I must now reveal something of greater import unto thee, Know that thy life doth approach a momentous crossroads. Put aside thy lust for power and thy hunger for revenge, as they are but childish toys. Return thou even to Mal Zeth to prepare thyself for thy part in the meeting which is to come."

"My part?" He sounded startled.

"Thy name and thy task are written in the stars."

"And what is this task?"

"I will instruct thee when thou art ready to understand what it is that thou must do. First thou must cleanse thy heart of that grief and remorse which hath haunted thee."

His face grew still, and he sighed. "I'm afraid not, Cyradis," he said. "What you ask is quite impossible."

"Then thou wilt surely die before the seasons turn again. Consider what I have told thee, and consider it well, Emperor of Mallorea. I will speak with thee anon." And then she shimmered and vanished.

Zakath stared at the empty spot where she had stood.

His face was pale, and his jaws were set.

"Well, Zakath?" Belgarath said. "Are you convinced?"

The Emperor rose from his chair and began to pace up and down. "This is an absolute absurdity!" he burst out suddenly

in an agitated voice.

"I know," Belgarath replied calmly, "but a willingness to believe the absurd is an indication of faith. It might just be that faith is the first step in the preparation Cyradis mentioned."

"It's not that I don't want to believe, Belgarath," Zakath said, in a strangely humble tone. "It's just--"

"Nobody said that it was going to be easy," the old man told him. "But you've done things before that weren't easy, haven't you?"

Zakath dropped into his chair again, his eyes lost in thought. "Why me?" he said plaintively. "Why do I have to get involved in this?"

Garion suddenly laughed.

Zakath gave him a cold stare.

"Sorry," Garion apologized, "but I've been saying 'why me?' since I was about fourteen. Nobody's ever given me a satisfactory answer, but you get used to the injustice of it after a while."

"It's not that I'm trying to avoid any kind of responsibility, Belgarion. It's just that I can't see what possible help I could be. You people are going to track down Zandramas, retrieve your son, and destroy the Sardion. Isn't that about it?"

"It's a little more complicated than that," Belgarath told him. "Destroying the Sardion is going to involve something rather cataclysmic."

"I don't quite follow that. Can't you just wave your hand and make it cease to exist? You are a sorcerer, after all -or so they say."

"That's forbidden," Garion said automatically. "You can't unmake things. That's what Ctuchik tried to do, and he destroyed himself."

Zakath frowned and looked at Belgarath. "I thought you killed him."

"Most people do." The old man shrugged. "It adds to my reputation, so I don't argue with them." He tugged at one earlobe. "No," he said, "I think we're going to have to see this all the way through to the end. I'm fairly sure that the only way the Sardion can be destroyed is as a result of the final confrontation between the Child of Light and the Child of Dark." He paused, then sat up suddenly, his face intent. "I think Cyradis slipped and gave us something she hadn't intended, though. She said that the Grolim priesthood all desperately wanted the Sardion, and she included Mengha in her list. Wouldn't that seem to indicate that Mengha's also a Grolim?" He looked at Andel. "Is your young mistress subject to these little lapses?"

"Cyradis cannot misspeak herself, Holy Belgarath," the healer replied. "A Seeress does not speak in her own voice, but in the voice of her vision."

"Then she wanted us to know that Mengha is -or was- a Grolim, and that the reason he's raising demons is to help him in his search for the Sardion." He thought about it. "There's another rather bleak possibility, too," he added. "It might just be that his demons are using him to get the Sardion for themselves. Maybe that's why they're so docile where he's concerned. Demons by themselves are bad enough, but if the

Sardion has the same power as the Orb, we definitely don't want it to fall into their hands." He turned to Zakath.

"Well?" he said.

"Well what?"

"Are you with us or against us?"

"Isn't that a little blunt?"

"Yes, it is -but it saves time, and time's starting to be a factor."

Zakath sank lower in his chair, his expression unreadable. "I find very little benefit for me in this proposed arrangement," he said.

"You get to keep living," Garion reminded him. "Cyradis said that you'll die before spring if you don't take up the task she's going to lay in front of you."

Zakath's faint smile was melancholy, and the dead indifference returned to his eyes. "My life hasn't really been so enjoyable that I'd consider going out of my way to prolong it, Belgarion," he replied.

"Don't you think you're being just a little childish, Zakath?" Garion snapped, his temper starting to heat up again. "You're not accomplishing a single thing here in Cthol Murgos. There's not one solitary drop of Urga blood left for you to spill, and you've got a situation at home that verges on disaster. Are you a King -or an Emperor, or whatever you want to call it- or are you a spoiled child? You refuse to go back to Mal Zeth just because somebody told you that you ought to. You even dig in your heels when someone assures you that you'll die if you don't go back. That's not only childish, it's irrational, and I don't have the time to try to reason with somebody whose wits have deserted him. Well, you can huddle here in Rak Hagga and nurse all your tired old griefs and disappointments until Cyradis' predictions catch up with you, for all I care, but Geran is my son, and I'm going to Mallorea. I've got work to do, and I don't have time to coddle you." He had saved something up for last. "Besides," he added in an insulting, offhand tone, "I don't need you anyway."

Zakath came to his feet, his eyes ablaze. "You go too far!" he roared, slamming his fist down on the table.

"Amazing," Garion said sarcastically. "You are alive after all. I thought I might have to step on your foot to get any kind of response of you. All right, now that you're awake, let's fight."

"What do you mean, fight?" Zakath demanded, his face still flushed with anger. "Fight about what?"

"About whether or not you're going with us to Mallorea."

"Don't be stupid. Of course I'm going with you. What we are going to fight about is your incredible lack of common courtesy."

Garion stared at him for a moment and then suddenly doubled over in a gale of helpless laughter.

Zakath's face was still red, and his fists were clenching and unclenching. Then a slightly sheepish expression came over his face, and he, too, began to laugh.

Belgarath let out an explosive breath. "Garion," he said irritably, "let me know when you're going to do something like that. My veins aren't what they used to be."

Zakath wiped at his eyes, though he was still laughing. "How long do you think it might take for you and your friends

to get packed?" he asked them.

"Not too long," Garion replied. "Why?"

"I'm suddenly homesick for Mal Zeth. It's spring there now, and the cherry trees are in bloom. You and Ce'Nedra will love Mal Zeth, Garion."

Garion was not entirely sure if the omission of the "Bel" was inadvertent or an overture of friendship. He was, however, quite sure that the Emperor of Mallorea was a man of even greater complexity than he had imagined.

"I hope you'll all excuse me now," Zakath said, "but I want to talk with Brador and get a few more details about what's been going on in Karanda. This Mengha he told me about seems to be mounting an open insurrection against the crown, and I've always had a violent prejudice against that sort of thing."

"I can relate to that," Garion agreed blandly.

For the next few days the road between Rak Hagga and the port city of Rak Cthan was thick with imperial messengers. Finally, on a frosty morning when the sun was bright and the sky dark blue and when misty steam rose from the dark waters of Lake Hagga, they set out, riding across a winter-browned plain toward the coast. Garion, his gray Rivan cloak drawn about him, rode at the head of the column with Zakath, who seemed for some reason to be in better spirits than he had been at any time since the two had met. The column which followed them stretched back for miles.

"Vulgar, isn't it?" the Malloreaan said wryly, looking back over his shoulder. "I'm absolutely surrounded by parasites and toadies, and they proliferate like maggots in rotten meat."

"If they bother you so much, then why not dismiss them?" Garion suggested.

"I can't. They all have powerful relatives. I have to balance them very carefully -one from this tribe to match the one from that clan. As long as no one family has too many high offices, they spend all their time plotting against each other. That way they don't have the time to plot against me."

"I suppose that's one way to keep things under control."

As the sun moved up through the bright blue winter sky at this nether end of the world, the frost gently dissolved from the long stems of dead grass or fell lightly from the fern and bracken to leave ghostly white imprints of those drooping brown fronds on the short green moss spread beneath.

They paused for a noon meal that was every bit as sumptuous as one that might have been prepared back in Rak Hagga and was served on snowy damask beneath a wide-spread canvas roof. "Adequate, I suppose," Zakath said critically after they had eaten.

"You're overpampered, my lord," Polgara told him. "A hard ride in wet weather and a day or so on short rations would probably do wonders for your appetite."

Zakath gave Garion an amused look. "I thought it was just you," he said, "but this blunt outspokenness seems to be a characteristic of your whole family".

Garion shrugged. "It saves time."

"Forgive my saying this, Belgarion," Sadi interjected, "but what possible interest can an immortal have in time?" He sighed rather mournfully. "Immortality must give one a great deal of satisfaction -watching all one's enemies grow old and

die."

"It's much overrated," Belgarath said, leaning back in his chair with a brimming silver tankard. "Sometimes whole centuries go by when one doesn't have any enemies and there's nothing to do but watch the years roll by."

Zakath suddenly smiled broadly. "Do you know something?" he said to them all. "I feel better right now than I've felt in over twenty-five years. It's as if a great weight has been lifted from me."

"Probably an aftereffect of the poison," Velvet suggested archly. "Get plenty of rest, and it should pass in a month or so."

"Is the Margravine always like this?" Zakath asked.

"Sometimes she's even worse," Silk replied morosely.

As they emerged from beneath the wide-spread canvas, Garion looked around for his horse, a serviceable roan with a long, hooked nose, but he could not seem to see the animal. Then he suddenly noticed that his saddle and packs were on a different horse, a very large dark gray stallion. Puzzled, he looked at Zakath, who was watching him intently. "What's this?" he asked.

"Just a little token of my unbounded respect, Garion," Zakath said, his eyes alight. "Your roan was an adequate mount, I suppose, but he was hardly a regal animal. A King needs a kingly horse, and I think you'll find that Chretienne can lend himself to any occasion that requires ceremony."

"Chretienne?"

"That's his name. He's been the pride of my stable here in Cthol Murgos. Don't you have a stable at Riva?"

Garion laughed. "My kingdom's an island, Zakath. We're more interested in boats than in horses." He looked at the proud gray standing with his neck arched and with one hoof lightly pawing the earth and was suddenly overcome with gratitude. He clasped the Mallorean Emperor's hand warmly. "This is a magnificent gift, Zakath," he said.

"Of course it is. I'm a magnificent fellow -or hadn't you noticed? Ride him, Garion. Feel the wind in your face and let the thunder of his hooves fill your blood."

"Well," Garion said, trying to control his eagerness, "maybe he and I really ought to get to know each other."

Zakath laughed with delight. "Of course," he said.

Garion approached the big gray horse, who watched him quite calmly. "I guess we'll be sharing a saddle for a while," he said to the animal. Chretienne nickered and nudged at Garion with his nose.

"He wants to run," Eriond said. "I'll ride with you, if you don't mind. Horse wants to run, too."

"All right," Garion agreed. "Let's go then." He gathered the reins, set his foot in the stirrup, and swung up into the saddle. The gray was running almost before Garion was in place.

It was a new experience. Garion had spent many hours riding -sometimes for weeks on end. He had always taken care of his mounts, as any good Sendar would, but there had never really been any personal attachment before. For him, a horse had simply been a means of conveyance, a way to get from one place to another, and riding had never been a particular source of pleasure.

With this great stallion, Chretienne, however, it was altogether different. There was a kind of electric thrill to the feel of the big horse's muscles bunching and flowing beneath him as they ran out across the winter-blown grass toward a rounded hill a mile or so distant, with Eriond and his chestnut stallion racing alongside.

When they reached the hilltop, Garion was breathless and laughing with sheer delight. He reined in, and Chretienne reared, pawing at the air with his hooves, wanting to be off again.

"Now you know, don't you?" Eriond asked with a broad smile.

"Yes," Garion admitted, still laughing, "I guess I do.

"I wonder how I missed it all these years."

"You have to have the right horse," Eriond told him wisely. He gave Garion a sidelong glance. "You know that you'll never be the same again, don't you?"

"That's all right," Garion replied. "I was getting tired of the old way anyhow." He pointed at a low string of hills outlined against the crisp blue sky a league or so on ahead. "Why don't we go over there and see what's on the other side?" he suggested.

"Why not?" Eriond laughed.

And so they did.

The Emperor's household staff was well organized, and a goodly number of them rode on ahead to prepare their night's encampment at a spot almost precisely halfway to the coast. The column started early the following morning, riding again along a frosty track beneath a deep blue sky. It was late afternoon when they crested a hill to look out over the expanse of the Sea of the East, rolling a dark blue under the winter sun and with smoky-looking cloud banks the color of rust blurring the far horizon. Two dozen ships with their red sails furled stood at anchor in the indented curve of a shallow bay far below, and Garion looked with some puzzlement at Zakath.

"Another symptom of the vulgar ostentation I mentioned." The Emperor shrugged. "I ordered this fleet down here from the port at Cthan. A dozen or so of those ships are here to transport all my hangers-on and toadies -as well as the humbler people who actually do the work. The other dozen are here to escort our royal personages with suitable pomp. You have to have pomp, Garion. Otherwise people might mistake a King or an Emperor for an honest man."

"You're in a whimsical humor this afternoon."

"Maybe it's another of those lingering symptoms Liselle mentioned. We'll sleep on board ship tonight and sail at first light tomorrow."

Garion nodded, touching Chretienne's bowed neck with an odd kind of regret as he handed his reins to a waiting groom.

The vessel to which they were ferried from the sandy beach was opulent. Unlike the cramped cabins on most of the other ships Garion had sailed aboard, the chambers on this one were nearly as large as the rooms in a fair-sized house. It took him a little while to pin down the reason for the difference. The other ships had devoted so little room to cabins because the bulk of the space on board had been devoted to cargo. The only cargo this ship customarily carried, however, was the

Emperor of Mallorea.

They dined that evening on lobster, served in the low-beamed dining room aboard Zakath's floating palace. So much of Garion's attention for the past week or more had been fixed on the unpredictable Emperor that he had not had much opportunity to talk with his friends. Thus, when they took their places at the table, he rather deliberately sat at the opposite end from the Mallorean. It was with a great deal of relief that he took his seat between Polgara and Durnik, while Ce'Nedra and Velvet diverted the Emperor with sparkling feminine chatter.

"You look tired, Garion," Polgara noted.

"I've been under a certain strain," he replied. "I wish that man wouldn't keep changing every other minute. Every time I think I've got him figured out, he turns into somebody else."

"It's not a good idea to categorize people, dear," she advised placidly, touching his arm. "That's the first sign of fuzzy thinking."

"Are we actually supposed to eat these things?" Durnik asked in a disgusted sort of voice, pointing his knife at the bright red lobster staring up at him from his plate with its claws seemingly at the ready.

"That's what the pliers are for, Durnik," Polgara explained in a peculiarly mild tone. "You have to crack it out of its shell."

He pushed his plate away. "I'm not going to eat something that looks like a big red bug," he declared with uncharacteristic heat. "I draw the line at some things."

"Lobster is a delicacy, Durnik," she said.

He grunted. "Some people eat snails, too."

Her eyes flashed, but then she gained control of her anger and continued to speak to him in that same mild tone. "I'm sure we can have them take it away and bring you something else," she said.

He glared at her.

Garion looked back and forth between the two of them. Then he decided that they had all known each other for far too long to step delicately around any problems.

"What's the matter, Durnik?" he asked bluntly. "You're as cross as a badger with a sore nose."

"Nothing," Durnik almost snapped at him.

Garion began to put a few things together. He remembered the plea Andel had made to Aunt Pol concerning Toth. He looked down the table to where the big mute, his eyes lowered to his plate, seemed almost to be trying to make himself invisible. Then he looked back at Durnik, who kept his face stiffly turned away from his former friend. "Oh," he said, "now I think I understand. Aunt Pol told you something you didn't want to hear. Someone you liked very much did something that made you angry. You said some things to him that you wish now you hadn't said. Then you found out that he didn't really have any choice in the matter and that what he did was really right after all. Now you'd like to make friends with him again, but you don't know how. Is that sort of why you're behaving this way -and being so impolite to Aunt Pol?"

Durnik's look was at first stricken. Then his face grew red -then pale. "I don't have to listen to this," he burst

out, coming to his feet.

"Oh, sit down, Durnik," Garion told him. "We all love each other too much to behave this way. Instead of being embarrassed and bad-tempered about it, why don't we see what we can do to fix it?"

Durnik tried to meet Garion's eyes, but finally lowered his head, his face flaming. "I treated him badly, Garion," he mumbled, sinking back into his chair again.

"Yes," Garion agreed, "you did. But it was because you didn't understand what he was doing -and why. I didn't understand myself until the day before yesterday -when Zakath finally changed his mind and decided to take us all to Mal Zeth. Cyradis knew that he was going to do that, and that's why she made Toth turn us over to Atesca's men. She wants us to get to the Sardion and meet Zandramas, and so she's going to arrange it. Toth will be the one who does what she thinks has to be done to accomplish that. Under the present circumstances, we couldn't find a better friend."

"How can I possibly -I mean, after the way I treated him?"

"Be honest. Admit that you were wrong and apologize."

Durnik's face grew stiff.

"It doesn't have to be in words, Durnik," Garion told his friend patiently. "You and Toth have been talking together without words for months." He looked speculatively up at the low-beamed ceiling. "This is a ship," he noted, "and we're going out onto an ocean. Do you imagine that there might be a few fish out there in all that water?"

Durnik's smile was immediate.

Polgara's sigh, however, was pensive.

The smith looked almost shyly across the table. "How did you say that I'm supposed to get this bug out of its shell, Pol?" he asked, pointing at the angry-looking lobster on his plate.

They sailed northeasterly from the coast of Hagga and soon left winter behind. At some point during the voyage they crossed that imaginary line equidistant from the poles and once again entered the northern half of the world. Durnik and Toth, shyly at first, but then with growing confidence, resumed their friendship and spent their days at the ship's stern, probing the sea with lines, bright-colored lures, and various baits gleaned from the galley.

Zakath's humor continued to remain uncharacteristically sunny, though his discussions with Belgarath and Polgara centered on the nature of demons, a subject about which there was very little to smile. Finally, one day when they had been at sea for about a week, a servant came up to Garion, who stood at the portside rail watching the dance of the wind atop the sparkling waves, and advised him that the Emperor would like to see him.

Garion nodded and made his way aft to the cabin where Zakath customarily held audience. Like most of the cabins aboard the floating palace, this one was quite large and ostentatiously decorated. Owing to the broad windows stretching across the ship's stern, the room was bright and airy. The drapes at the sides of the windows were of crimson velvet, and the fine Mallolean carpet was a deep blue. Zakath, dressed as always in plain white linen, sat on a low, leather-upholstered divan at the far end of the cabin, looking

out at the whitecaps and the flock of snowy gulls trailing the ship. His cat lay purring in his lap as he absently stroked her ears.

"You wanted to see me, Zakath?" Garion asked as he entered.

"Yes. Come in, Garion," the Malloorean replied. "I haven't seen much of you for the past few days. Are you cross with me?"

"No," Garion said. "You've been busy learning about demons. I don't know that much about them, so I couldn't have added all that much to the discussions." He crossed the cabin, pausing at one point to stoop and unwrap a ferociously playful kitten from around his left ankle.

"They love to pounce." Zakath smiled.

A thought came to Garion, and he looked around warily. "Zith isn't in here, is she?"

Zakath laughed. "No. Sadi's devised a means of keeping her at home." He looked whimsically at Garion. "Is she really as deadly as he says?"

Garion nodded. "She bit a Grolim at Rak Urga," he said. "He was dead in about a half a minute."

Zakath shuddered. "You don't have to tell Sadi about this," he said, "but snakes make my flesh creep."

"Talk to Silk. He could give you a whole dissertation about how much he dislikes them."

"He's a complicated little fellow, isn't he?"

Garion smiled. "Oh, yes. His life is filled with danger and excitement, and so his nerves are as tightly wound as lute strings. He's erratic sometimes, but you get used to that after a while." He looked at the other man critically. "You're looking particularly fit," he noted, sitting down on the other end of the leather couch. "Sea air must agree with you."

"I don't think it's really the air, Garion. I think it has to do with the fact that I've been sleeping eight to ten hours a night."

"Sleep? You?"

"Astonishing, isn't it?" Zakath's face went suddenly quite somber. "I'd rather that this didn't go any further, Garion," he said.

"Of course."

"Urgit told you what happened when I was young?"

Garion nodded. "Yes."

"My habit of not sleeping very much dates from then.

A face that had been particularly dear to me haunted my dreams, and sleep became an agony to me."

"That didn't diminish? Not even after some thirty years?"

"Not one bit. I lived in continual grief and guilt and remorse. I lived only to revenge myself on Taur Urgas.

Cho-Hag's saber robbed me of that. I had planned a dozen different deaths for the madman -each more horrible than the one before- but he cheated me by dying cleanly in battle."

"No," Garion disagreed. "His death was worse than anything you could possibly have devised. I've talked with Cho-Hag about it. Taur Urgas went totally mad before Cho-Hag killed him, but he lived long enough to realize that he had finally been beaten. He died biting and clawing at the earth in frustration. Being beaten was more than he could bear."

Zakath thought about it. "Yes," he said finally. "That

would have been quite dreadful for him, wouldn't it? I think that maybe I'm less disappointed now."

"And was it your discovery that the Urga line is now extinct that finally laid the ghost that's haunted your sleep all these years?"

"No, Garion. I don't think that had anything to do with it. It's just that instead of the face that had always been there before, now I see a different face."

"Oh?"

"A blindfolded face."

"Cyradis? I don't know that I'd recommend thinking about her in that fashion."

"You misunderstand, Garion. She's hardly more than a child, but somehow she's touched my life with more peace and comfort than I've ever known. I sleep like a baby and I walk around all day with this silly euphoria bubbling up in me." He shook his head. "Frankly, I can't stand myself like this, but I can't help it for some reason."

Garion stared out the window, not even seeing the play of sunlight on the waves nor the hovering gulls. Then it came to him so clearly that he knew that it was undeniably true. "It's because you've come to that crossroads in your life that Cyradis mentioned," he said. "You're being rewarded because you've chosen the right fork."

"Rewarded? By whom?"

Garion looked at him and suddenly laughed. "I don't think you're quite ready to accept that information yet," he said. "Could you bring yourself to believe that it's Cyradis who's making you feel good right now?"

"In some vague way, yes."

"It goes a little deeper, but that's a start." Garion looked at the slightly perplexed man before him. "You and I are caught up together in something over which we have absolutely no control," he said seriously. "I've been through it before, so I'll try to cushion the shocks that are in store for you as much as I can. Just try to keep an open mind about a peculiar way of looking at the world." He thought about it some more. "I think that we're going to be working together -at least up to a point- so we might as well be friends." He held out his right hand.

Zakath laughed. "Why not?" he said, taking Garion's hand in a firm grip. "I think we're both as crazy as Taur Urgas, but why not? We're the two most powerful men in the world. We should be deadly enemies, and you propose friendship. Well, why not?" He laughed again delightedly.

"We have much more deadly enemies, Zakath," Garion said gravely, "and all of your armies -and all of mine- won't mean a thing when we get to where we're going."

"And where's that, my young friend?"

"I think it's called 'the place which is no more.' "

"I've been meaning to ask you about that. The whole phrase, is a contradiction in terms. How can you go someplace which doesn't exist any more?"

"I don't really know," Garion told him. "I'll tell you when we get there."

Two days later, they arrived at Mal Gemila, a port in southern Mallorea Antiqua, and took to horse. They rode eastward at a canter on a well-maintained highway that crossed

a pleasant plain, green with spring. A regiment of red-tunicked cavalymen cleared the road ahead of them, and their pace left the entourage which usually accompanied the Emperor far behind. There were way-stations along the highway -not unlike the Tolnedran hostels dotting the roads in the west -and the imperial guard rather brusquely ejected other guests at these roadside stops to make way for the Emperor and his party.

As they pressed onward, day after day, Garion began slowly to comprehend the true significance of the word "boundless" as it was applied to Mallorea. The plains of Algaria, which had always before seemed incredibly vast, shrank into insignificance. The snowy peaks of the Dalasian mountains, lying to the south of the road they traveled, raked their white talons at the sky. Garion drew in on himself, feeling smaller and smaller the deeper they rode into this vast domain.

Peculiarly, Ce'Nedra seemed to be suffering a similar shrinkage, and she quite obviously did not like it very much. Her comments became increasingly waspish; her observations more acid. She found the loose-fitting garments of the peasantry uncouth. She found fault with the construction of the gangplows that opened whole acres at a time behind patiently plodding herds of oxen. She didn't like the food. Even the water -as clear as crystal, and as cold and sweet as might have sprung from any crevice in the Tolnedran mountains -offended her taste.

Silk, his eyes alight with mischief, rode at her side on the sunny midmorning of the last day of their journey from Mal Gemila. "Beware, your Majesty," he warned her slyly as they neared the crest of a hillside sheathed in pale spring grass so verdant that it almost looked like a filmy green mist. "The first sight of Mal Zeth has sometimes struck the unwary traveler blind. To be safe, why don't you cover one eye with your hand? That way you can preserve at least partial sight."

Her face grew frosty, and she drew herself to her full height in her saddle -a move that might have come off better had she been only slightly taller -and said to him in her most imperious tone, "We are not amused, Prince Kheldar, and we do not expect to find a barbarian city at the far end of the world a rival to the splendors of Tol Honeth, the only truly imperial city in the-"

And then she stopped -as they all did.

The valley beyond the crest stretched not for miles, but for leagues, and it was filled to overflowing with the city of Mal Zeth. The streets were as straight as tautly stretched strings, and the buildings gleamed -not with marble, for there was not marble enough in all the world to sheath the buildings of this enormous city -but rather with an intensely gleaming, thick white mortar that seemed somehow to shoot light at the eye. It was stupendous.

"It's not much," Zakath said in an exaggeratedly deprecating tone. "Just a friendly little place we like to call home." He looked at Ce'Nedra's stiff, pale little face with an artful expression. "We really should press on, your Majesty," he told her. "It's a half-day's ride to the imperial palace from here."

PART TWO - MAL ZETH

CHAPTER SLX

The gates of Mal Zeth, like those of Tol Honeth, were of bronze, broad and burnished. The city lying within those gates, however, was significantly different from the capital of the Tolnedran Empire. There was a peculiar sameness about the structures, and they were built so tightly against each other that the broad avenues of the city were lined on either side by solid, mortar-covered walls, pierced only by deeply inset, arched doorways with narrow white stairways leading up to the flat rooftops. Here and there, the mortar had crumbled away, revealing the fact that the buildings beneath that coating were constructed of squared-off timbers. Durnik, who believed that all buildings should be made of stone, noted that fact with a look of disapproval.

As they moved deeper into the city, Garion noticed the almost total lack of windows. "I don't want to seem critical," he said to Zakath, "but isn't your city just a little monotonous?"

Zakath looked at him curiously.

"All the houses are the same, and there aren't very many windows."

"Oh," Zakath smiled, "that's one of the drawbacks of leaving architecture up to the military. They're great believers in uniformity, and windows have no place in military fortifications. Each house has its own little garden, though, and the windows face that. In the summertime, the people spend most of their time in the gardens -or on the rooftops."

"Is the whole city like this?" Durnik asked, looking at the cramped little houses all packed together.

"No, Goodman," the Emperor replied. "This quarter of the city was built for corporals. The streets reserved for officers are a bit more ornate, and those where the privates and workmen live are much shabbier. Military people tend to be very conscious of rank and the appearances that go with it."

A few doors down a side street branching off from the one they followed, a stout, red-faced woman was shrilly berating a scrawny-looking fellow with a hangdog expression as a group of soldiers removed furniture from a house and piled it in a rickety cart. "You had to go and do it, didn't you, Actas?" she demanded. "You had to get drunk and insult your captain. Now what's to become of us? I spent all those years living in those pigsty privates' quarters waiting for you to get promoted, and just when I think things are taking a turn for the better, you have to destroy it all by getting drunk and being reduced to private again." He mumbled something.

"What was that?"

"Nothing, dear."

"I'm not going to let you forget this, Actas, let me tell you."

"Life does have its little ups and downs, doesn't it?" Sadi murmured as they rode on out of earshot.

"I don't think it's anything to laugh about," Ce'Nedra said with surprising heat. "They're being thrown out of their home over a moment's foolishness. Can't someone do something?"

Zakath gave her an appraising look, then beckoned to one of the red-cloaked officers riding respectfully along behind them. "Find out which unit that man's in," he instructed. "Then go to his captain and tell him that I'd take it as a personal favor if Actas were reinstated in his former rank -on the condition that he stays sober."

"At once, your Majesty." The officer saluted and rode off.

"Why, thank you, Zakath," Ce'Nedra said, sounding a little startled.

"My pleasure, Ce'Nedra." He bowed to her from his saddle. Then he laughed shortly. "I suspect that Actas' wife will see to it that he suffers sufficiently for his misdeeds anyway."

"Aren't you afraid that such acts of compassion might damage your reputation, your Majesty?" Sadi asked him.

"No," Zakath replied. "A ruler must always strive to be unpredictable, Sadi. It keeps the underlings off balance. Besides, an occasional act of charity toward the lower ranks helps to strengthen their loyalty "

"Don't you ever do anything that isn't motivated by politics?" Garion asked him. For some reason, Zakath's flippant explanation of his act irritated him.

"Not that I can think of," Zakath said. "Politics is the greatest game in the world, Garion, but you have to play it all the time to keep your edge."

Silk laughed. "I've said the exact same thing about commerce," he said. "About the only difference I can see is that in commerce you have money as a way of keeping score. How do you keep score in politics?"

Zakath's expression was peculiarly mixed -half amused and half deadly serious. "It's very simple, Kheldar," he said. "If you're still on the throne at the end of the day, you've won. If you're dead, you've lost -and each day is a complete new game."

Silk gave him a long, speculative look, then looked over at Garion, his fingers moving slightly. -I need to talk to you -at once-

Garion nodded briefly, then leaned over in his saddle, He winced in.

"Something wrong?" Zakath asked him.

"I think my cinch is loose," Garion replied, dismounting. "Go on ahead. I'll catch up."

"Here, -I'll help you, Garion," Silk offered, also swinging down from his saddle.

"What's this all about?" Garion asked when the Emperor, chatting with Ce'Nedra and Velvet, had ridden out of earshot.

"Be very careful with him, Garion," the little man replied quietly, pretending to check the straps on Garion's saddle. "He let something slip there. He's all smiles and courtesy on the surface, but underneath it all he hasn't really changed all that much."

"Wasn't he just joking?"

"Not even a little. He was deadly serious. He's brought us all to Mal Zeth for reasons that have nothing to do with Mengha or our search for Zandramas. Be on your guard with him. That friendly smile of his can fall off his face without any warning at all." He spoke a little more loudly then. "There," he said, tugging at a strap, "that ought to hold it. Let's catch up with the others."

They rode into a broad square surrounded on all sides by canvas booths dyed in various hues of red, green, blue, and yellow. The square teemed with merchants and citizens, all dressed in varicolored, loose-fitting robes that hung to their heels.

"Where do the common citizens live if the whole city's divided up into sections based on military rank?" Durnik asked.

Brador, the bald, chubby Chief of the Bureau of Internal Affairs, who happened to be riding beside the smith, looked around with a smile. "They all have their ranks, Goodman," he replied, "each according to his individual accomplishments. It's all very rigidly controlled by the Bureau of Promotions. Housing, places of business, suitable marriages -they're all determined by rank."

"Isn't that sort of over-regimented?" Durnik asked pointedly.

"Malloreans love to be regimented, Goodman Durnik." Brador laughed. "Angaraks bow automatically to authority; Melcenes have a deep inner need to compartmentalize things; Karands are too stupid to take control of their own destinies; and the Dals -well, nobody knows what the Dals want."

"We aren't really all that different from the people in the West, Durnik," Zakath said back over his shoulder. "In Tolnedra and Sendaria, such matters are determined by economics. People gravitate to the houses and shops and marriages they can afford. We've just formalized it, that's all."

"Tell me, your Majesty." Sadi said, "how is it that your people are so undemonstrative?"

"I don't quite follow you."

"Shouldn't they at least salute as you ride by? You are the Emperor, after all."

"They don't recognize me." Zakath shrugged. "The Emperor is a man in crimson robes who rides in a golden carriage, wears a terribly heavy jeweled crown, and is accompanied by at least a regiment of imperial guards all blowing trumpets. I'm just a man in white linen riding through town with a few friends."

Garion thought about that, still mindful of Silk's half-whispered warning. The almost total lack of any kind of self-aggrandizement implicit in Zakath's statement revealed yet another facet of the man's complex personality. He was quite sure that not even King Fulrach of Sendaria, the most modest of all the monarchs of the West, could be quite so self-effacing.

The streets beyond the square were lined with somewhat larger houses than those they had passed near the city gates, and there had been some attempt at ornamentation here. It appeared, however, that Mallorean sculptors had limited talent, and the mortar-cast filigree surmounting the front of each house was heavy and graceless.

"The sergeant's district," Zakath said laconically.

The city seemed to go on forever. At regular intervals there were squares and marketplaces and bazaars, all filled with people wearing the bright, loose-fitting robes that appeared to be the standard Mallorean garb. When they passed the last of the rigidly similar houses of the sergeants and of

those civilians of equal rank, they entered a broad belt of trees and lawns where fountains splashed and sparkled in the sunlight and where broad promenades were lined with carefully sculptured green hedges interspersed with cherry trees laden with pink blossoms shimmering in the light breeze.

"How lovely," Ce'Nedra exclaimed.

"We do have some beauty here in Mal Zeth," Zakath told her. "No one -not even an army architect- could make a city this big uniformly ugly."

"The officers' districts aren't quite so severe," Silk told the little Queen.

"You're familiar with Mal Zeth, then, your Highness?" Brador asked.

Silk nodded. "My partner and I have a facility here," he replied. "It's more in the nature of a centralized collection point than an actual business. It's cumbersome doing business in Mal Zeth -too many regulations."

"Might one inquire as to the rank you were assigned?" the moon-faced bureaucrat asked delicately.

"We're generals," Silk said in a rather grandly off-hand manner. "Yarblek wanted to be a field marshal, but I didn't think the expense of buying that much rank was really justified."

"Is rank for sale?" Sadi asked.

"In Mal Zeth, everything's for sale," Silk replied. "In most respects it's almost exactly like Tol Honeth."

"Not entirely, Silk," Ce'Nedra said primly.

"Only in the broadest terms, your Imperial Highness," he agreed quickly. "Mal Zeth has never been graced by the presence of a divinely beautiful Imperial Princess, glowing like a precious jewel and shooting beams of her fire back at the sun."

She gave him a hard look, then turned her back on him.

"What did I say?" the little man asked Garion in an injured tone.

"People always suspect you, Silk," Garion told him. "They can never quite be sure that you're not making fun of them. I thought you knew that."

Silk sighed tragically. "Nobody understands me," he complained.

"Oh, I think they do."

The plazas and boulevards beyond the belt of parks and gardens were more grand, and the houses larger and set apart from each other. There was still, however, a stiff similarity about them, a kind of stern sameness that insured that men of equal rank would be assigned to rigidly equal quarters.

Another broad strip of lawns and trees lay beyond the mansions of the generals and their mercantile equivalents, and within that encircling green there arose a fair-sized marble city with its own walls and burnished gates.

"The imperial palace," Zakath said indifferently. He frowned. "What have you done over there?" he asked Brador, pointing at a long row of tall buildings rising near the south wall of the enclosed compound.

Brador coughed delicately. "Those are the bureaucratic offices, your Majesty," he replied in a neutral tone. "You'll recall that you authorized their construction just before the battle of Thull Mardu."

Zakath pursed his lips. "I hadn't expected something on quite such a grand scale," he said.

"There are quite a lot of us, your Majesty," Brador explained, "and we felt that things might be more harmonious if each bureau had its own building." He looked a bit apologetic. "We really did need the space," he explained defensively to Sadi. "We were all jumbled together with the military, and very often men from different bureaus had to share the same office. It's really much more efficient this way, wouldn't you say?"

"I think I'd prefer it if you didn't involve me in this discussion, your Excellency," Sadi answered.

"I was merely attempting to draw upon your Excellency's expertise in managing affairs of state."

"Salmissra's palace is somewhat unique," Sadi told him. "We like being jumbled together. It gives us greater opportunities for spying and murder and intrigue and the other normal functions of government."

As they approached the gates to the imperial complex, Garion noticed with some surprise that the thick bronze gates had been overlaid with beaten gold, and his thrifty Sendarian heritage recoiled from the thought of such wanton lavishness. Ce'Nedra, however, looked at the priceless gates with undisguised acquisitiveness.

"You wouldn't be able to move them," Silk advised her.

"What?" she said inattentively.

"The gates. They're much too heavy to steal."

"Shut up, Silk," she said absently, her eyes still appraising the gates.

He began to laugh uproariously, and she looked at him, her green eyes narrowing dangerously.

"I think I'll ride back to see what's keeping Belgarath," the little man said.

"Do," she said. Then she looked at Garion, who was trying to conceal a broad grin. "Something funny?" she asked him.

"No, dear," he replied quickly. "Just enjoying the scenery is all."

The detachment of guards at the gates was neither as burnished nor plumed as the ceremonial guards at the gates of Tol Honeth. They wore polished shirts of chain mail over the customary red tunic, baggy breeches tucked into the tops of knee-high boots, red cloaks, and pointed conical helmets. They nonetheless looked very much like soldiers. They greeted Kal Zakath with crisp military salutes, and, as the Emperor passed through the gilded gates, trumpeteers announced his entrance into the imperial compound with a brazen fanfare.

"I've always hated that," the Malloreal ruler said confidentially to Garion. "The sound grates on my ears."

"What irritated me were the people who used to follow me around hoping that I might need something," Garion told him.

"That's convenient sometimes."

Garion nodded. "Sometimes," he agreed, "but it stopped being convenient when one of them threw a knife at my back."

"Really? I thought your people universally adored you."

"It was a misunderstanding. The young man and I had a talk about it, and he promised not to do it any more."

"That's all?" Zakath exclaimed in astonishment. "You didn't have him executed?"

"Of course not. Once he and I understood each other, he turned out to be extraordinarily loyal." Garion sighed sadly. "He was killed at Thull Mardu."

"I'm sorry, Garion," Zakath said. "We all lost friends at Thull Mardu."

The marble-clad buildings inside the imperial complex were a jumble of conflicting architectural styles, ranging from the severely utilitarian to the elaborately ornate. For some reason Garion was reminded of the vast rabbit warren of King Anheg's palace at Val Alorn. Although Zakath's palace did not consist of one single building, the structures were all linked to each other by column-lined promenades and galleries which passed through park-like grounds studded with statues and marble pavilions.

Zakath led them through the confusing maze toward the middle of the complex, where a single palace stood in splendid isolation, announcing by its expanse and height that it was the center of all power in boundless Mallorea. "The residence of Kallath the Unifier," the Emperor announced with grand irony, "my revered ancestor."

"Isn't it just a bit overdone?" Ce'Nedra asked tartly, still obviously unwilling to concede the fact that Mal Zeth far outstripped her girlhood home.

"Of course it is," the Mallorean replied, "but the ostentation was necessary. Kallath had to demonstrate to the other generals that he outranked them, and in Mal Zeth one's rank is reflected by the size of one's residence. Kallath was an undisguised knave, a usurper and a man of little personal charm, so he had to assert himself in other ways."

"Don't you just love politics?" Velvet said to Ce'Nedra. "It's the only field where the ego is allowed unrestricted play -as long as the treasury holds out."

Zakath laughed. "I should offer you a position in the government, Margravine Liselle," he said. "I think we need an imperial deflator -someone to puncture all our puffed-up self-importance."

"Why, thank you, your Majesty," she said with a dimpled smile. "If it weren't for my commitments to the family business, I might even consider accepting such a post. It sounds like so much fun."

He sighed with mock regret. "Where were you when I needed a wife?"

"Probably in my cradle, your Majesty," she replied innocently.

He winced. "That was unkind," he accused.

"Yes," she agreed. "True, though," she added clinically.

He laughed again and looked at Polgara. "I'm going to steal her from you, my lady," he declared.

"To be your court jester, Kal Zakath?" Liselle asked, her face no longer lightly amused. "To entertain you with clever insults and banter? Ah, no. I don't think so. There's another side to me that I don't think you'd like very much. They call me 'Velvet' and think of me as a soft-winged butterfly, but this particular butterfly has a poisoned sting -as several people have discovered after it was too late."

"Behave, dear," Polgara murmured to her. "And don't give away trade secrets in a moment of pique." Velvet lowered her eyes. "Yes, Lady Polgara," she replied meekly.

Zakath looked at her, but did not say anything. He swung down from his saddle, and three grooms dashed to his side to take the reins from his hand. "Come along, then," he said to Garion and the others. "I'd like to show you around." He threw a sly glance at Velvet. "I hope that the Margravine will forgive me if I share every home owner's simple pride in his domicile -no matter how modest."

She laughed a golden little laugh.

Garion dismounted and laid an affectionate hand on Chretienne's proud neck. It was with a pang of almost tangible regret that he handed the reins to a waiting groom.

They entered the palace through broad, gilded doors and found themselves in a vaulted rotunda, quite similar in design to the one in the Emperor's palace in Tol Honeth, though this one lacked the marble busts that made Varana's entryway appear vaguely like a mausoleum. A crowd of officials, military and civilian, awaited their Emperor, each with a sheaf of important-looking documents in his hand.

Zakath sighed as he looked at them. "I'm afraid we'll have to postpone the grand tour," he said. "I'm certain that you'll all want to bathe and change anyway -and perhaps rest a bit before we start the customary formalities. Brador, would you be good enough to show our guests to their rooms and arrange to have a light lunch prepared for them?"

"Of course, your Majesty."

"I think the east wing might be pleasant. It's away from all the scurrying through the halls in this part of the palace."

"My very thought, your Majesty."

Zakath smiled at them all. "We'll dine together this evening," he promised. Then he smiled ironically. "An intimate little supper with no more than two or three hundred guests." He looked at the nervous officials clustered nearby and made a wry face. "Until this evening, then."

Brador led them through the echoing marble corridors teeming with servants and minor functionaries.

"Big place," Belgarath observed after they had been walking for perhaps ten minutes. The old man had said very little since they had entered the city, but had ridden in his customary half doze, although Garion was quite sure that very little escaped his grandfather's half-closed eyes.

"Yes," Brador agreed with him. "The first Emperor, Kallath, had grandiose notions at times."

Belgarath grunted. "It's a common affliction among rulers. I think it has something to do with insecurity."

"Tell me, Brador," Silk said, "didn't I hear somewhere that the state secret police are under the jurisdiction of your bureau?"

Brador nodded with a deprecating little smile. "It's one of my many responsibilities, Prince Kheldar," he replied. "I need to know what's going on in the empire in order to stay on top of things, so I had to organize a modest little intelligence service -nothing on nearly the scale of Queen Porenn's, however."

"It will grow with time," Velvet assured him. "Those things always do, for some reason."

The east wing of the palace was set somewhat apart from the rest of the buildings in the complex and it embraced a

kind of enclosed courtyard or atrium that was green with exotic flowering plants growing about a mirror-like pool at its center. Jewel-like hummingbirds darted from blossom to blossom, adding splashes of vibrant, moving color.

Polgara's eyes came alight when Brador opened the door to the suite of rooms she was to share with Durnik. Just beyond an arched doorway leading from the main sitting room was a large marble tub sunk into the floor with little tendrils of steam rising from it. "Oh, my," she sighed. "Civilization -at last."

"Just try not to get waterlogged, Pol," Belgarath said.

"Of course not, Other," she agreed absently, still eyeing the steaming tub with undisguised longing.

"Is it really all that important, Pol?" he asked her.

"Yes, father," she replied. "It really is."

"It's an irrational prejudice against dirt." He grinned at the rest of them. "I've always been sort of fond of dirt myself"

"Quite obviously," she said. Then she stopped.

"Incidentally, Old Wolf," she said critically as they all began to file out, "if your room happens to be similarly equipped, you should make use of the facilities yourself."

"Me?"

"You smell, father."

"No, Pol," he corrected. "I stink. You smell."

"Whatever. Go wash, father." She was already absently removing her shoes.

"I've gone as much as ten years at a time without a bath," he declared.

"Yes, father," she said. "I know -only the Gods know how well I know. Now," she said in a very businesslike tone, "if you'll all excuse me . . ." She very deliberately began to unbutton the front of her dress.

The suite of rooms to which Garion and Ce'Nedra were led was, if anything, even more opulent than that shared by Durnik and Polgara. As Garion moved about the several large chambers, examining the furnishings, Ce'Nedra went directly toward the bath, her eyes dreamy and her clothes falling to the floor behind her as she went. His wife's tendency toward casual nudity had occasionally shocked Garion in the past. He did not personally object to Ce'Nedra's skin. What disturbed him had been that she had seemed oblivious to the fact that sometimes her unclad state was highly inappropriate. He recalled with a shudder the time when he and the Sendarian ambassador had entered the royal apartment at Riva just as Ce'Nedra was in the process of trying on several new undergarments she had received from her dressmaker that very morning. Quite calmly, she had asked the ambassador's opinion of various of the frilly little things, modeling each in turn for him. The ambassador, a staid and proper Sendarian gentleman in his seventies, received more shocks in that ten minutes than he had encountered in the previous half century, and his next dispatch to King Fulrach had plaintively requested that he be relieved of his post.

"Ce'Nedra, aren't you at least going to close the door?" Garion asked her as she tested the water's temperature with a tentative toe.

"That makes it very hard for us to talk, Garion," she

replied reasonably as she stepped down into the tub. "I hate to have to shout."

"Oh?" he said. "I hadn't noticed that."

"Be nice," she told him, sinking into the water with a contented sigh. Curiously she began to unstopper and sniff the crystal decanters lined along one side of the tub which contained, Garion assumed, the assorted condiments with which ladies seasoned their bath water. Some of these she restoppered disapprovingly. Others she liberally sprinkled into her bath. One or two of them she rubbed on herself in various places.

"What if somebody comes in?" Garion asked her pointedly. "Some official or messenger or servant or something?"

"Well, what if they do?"

He stared at her.

"Garion, darling," she said in that same infuriatingly reasonable tone, "if they hadn't intended for the bath to be used, they wouldn't have prepared it, would they?"

Try as he might, he could not find an answer to that question.

She laid her head back in the water, letting her hair fan out around her face. Then she sat up. "Would you like to wash my back for me?" she asked him.

An hour or so later, after an excellent lunch served by efficient servants, Silk stopped by. The little thief had also bathed and changed clothes once again. His pearl-gray doublet was formally elegant, and he once again dripped jewels. His short, scraggly beard had been neatly trimmed, and there was a faint air of exotic perfume lingering about him. "Appearances," he responded to Garion's quizzical look. "One always wants to put one's best foot forward in a new situation."

"Of course," Garion said dryly.

"Belgarath asked me to stop by," the little man continued. "There's a large room upstairs. We're gathering there for a council of war."

"War?"

"Metaphorically speaking, of course."

"Oh. Of course."

The room at the top of a flight of marble stairs to which Silk led Garion and Ce'Nedra was quite large, and there was a throne-like chair on a dais against the back wall.

Garion looked about at the lush furnishings and heavy crimson drapes. "This isn't the throne room, is it?" he asked.

"No," Silk replied. "At least not Kal Zakath's official one. It's here to make visiting royalty feel at home. Some kings get nervous when they don't have official-looking surroundings to play in."

"Oh."

Belgarath sat with his mismatched boots up on a polished table. His hair and beard were slightly damp, evidence that, despite his pretended indifference to bathing, he had in fact followed Polgara's instructions. Polgara and Durnik were talking quietly at one side, and Eriond and Toth were nearby. Velvet and Sadi stood looking out the window at the formal garden lying to the east of Zakath's sprawling palace.

"All right," the old sorcerer said, "I guess we're all here now. I think we need to talk."

-I wouldn't say anything too specific- Silk's fingers said in the gestures of the Drasnian secret language. -It's almost certain that there are a few spies about-

Belgarath looked at the far wall, his eyes narrowed as he searched it inch by inch for hidden peepholes. He grunted and looked at Polgara.

"I'll look into it, father," she murmured. Her eyes grew distant, and Garion felt the familiar surge. After a moment she nodded and held up three fingers. She concentrated for a moment, and the quality of the surge changed, seeming somehow languorous. Then she straightened and relaxed her will. "It's all right now," she told them calmly. "They fell asleep."

"That was very smooth, Pol," Durnik said admiringly.

"Why, thank you, dear," she smiled, laying her hand on his.

Belgarath put his feet on the floor and leaned forward. "That's one more thing for us all to keep in mind," he said seriously. "We're likely to be watched all the time that we're here in Mal Zeth, so be careful. Zakath's a skeptic, so we can't really be sure just how much of what we've told him he believes. It's altogether possible that he has other things in mind for us. Right now he needs our help in dealing with Mengha, but he still hasn't entirely abandoned his campaign in Cthol Murgos, and he might want to use us to bring the Alorns and the others into that war on his side. He's also got problems with Urvon and Zandramas. We don't have the time to get caught up in internal Mallorean politics. At the moment, though, we're more or less in his power, so let's be careful."

"We can leave any time we need to, Belgarath," Durnik said confidently.

"I'd rather not do it that way unless we have absolutely no other choice," the old man replied. "Zakath's the kind of man who's very likely to grow testy if he's thwarted, and I don't want to have to creep around dodging his soldiers. It takes too much time and it's dangerous. I'll be a lot happier if we can leave Mal Zeth with his blessing -or at least with his consent."

"I want to get to Ashaba before Zandramas has time to escape again," Garion insisted.

"So do I, Garion," his grandfather said, "but we don't know what she's doing there, so we don't know how long she's likely to stay."

"She's been looking for something, father," Polgara told the old man. "I saw that in her mind when I trapped her back in Rak Hagga."

He looked at her thoughtfully. "Could you get any idea of what it was, Pol?"

She shook her head. "Not specifically," she replied. "I think it's information of some kind. She can't go any further until she finds it. I was able to pick that much out of her thoughts."

"Whatever it is, has to be well hidden," he said. "Beldin and I took Ashaba apart after the Battle of Vo Mimbire and we didn't find anything out of the ordinary -if you can accept the idea that Torak's house was in any way ordinary."

"Can we be sure that she's still there with my baby?" Ce'Nedra asked intently.

"No, dear," Polgara told her. "She's taken steps to hide

her mind from me. She's rather good, actually."

"Even if she's left Ashaba, the Orb can pick up her trail again," Belgarath said. "The chances are pretty good that she hasn't found what she's looking for, and that effectively nails her down at Ashaba. If she has found it, she won't be hard to follow."

"We're going on to Ashaba, then?" Sadi asked. "What I'm getting at is that our concern about Mengha was just a ruse to get us to Malloreia, wasn't it?"

"I think I'm going to need more information before I make any decisions about that. The situation in northern Karanda is serious, certainly, but let's not lose sight of the fact that our primary goal is Zandramas, and she's at Ashaba. Before I can decide anything, though, I need to know more about what's going on here in Malloreia."

"My department," Silk volunteered.

"And mine," Velvet added.

"I might be able to help a bit as well," Sadi noted with a faint smile. He frowned then. "Seriously though, Belgarath," he continued, "you and your family here represent power. I don't think we're going to have much luck at persuading Kal Zakath to let you go willingly -no matter how cordial he may appear on the surface."

The old man nodded glumly. "It might turn out that way after all," he agreed. Then he looked at Silk, Velvet, and Sadi. "Be careful," he cautioned them, "Don't let your instincts run away with you. I need information, but don't stir up any hornets' nests getting it for me." He looked pointedly at Silk. "I hope I've made myself clear about this," he said. "Don't complicate things just for the fun of it."

"Trust me, Belgarath," Silk replied with a bland smile.

"Of course he trusts you, Kheldar," Velvet assured the little man.

Belgarath looked at his impromptu spy network and shook his head. "Why do I get the feeling that I'm going to regret this?" he muttered.

"I'll keep an eye on them, Belgarath," Sadi promised.

"Of course, but who's going to keep an eye on you?"

CHAPTER SEVEN

That evening they were escorted with some ceremony through the echoing halls of Zakath's palace to a banquet hall that appeared to be only slightly smaller than a parade ground. The hall was approached by way of a broad, curved stairway lined on either side with branched candelabra and liveried trumpeteers. The stairway was obviously designed to facilitate grand entrances. Each new arrival was announced by a stirring fanfare and the booming voice of a gray-haired herald so thin that it almost appeared that a lifetime of shouting had worn him down to a shadow.

Garion and his friends waited in a small antechamber while the last of the local dignitaries were announced.

The fussy chief of protocol, a small Melcene with an elaborately trimmed brown beard, wanted them to line up in ascending order of rank, but the difficulties involved in assigning precise rank to the members of this strange group

baffled him. He struggled with it, manfully trying to decide if Sorcerer outranked King or Imperial Princess until Garion solved his problem for him by leading Ce'Nedra out onto the landing at the top of the stairs.

"Their Royal Majesties, King Belgarion and Queen Ce'Nedra of Riva," the herald declaimed grandly, and the trumpets blared.

Garion, dressed all in blue and with his ivory-gowned Queen on his arm, paused on the marble landing at the top of the stairs to allow the brightly clad throng below the time to gawk at him. The somewhat dramatic pause was not entirely his idea. Ce'Nedra had dug her fingernails into his arm with a grip of steel and hissed, "Stand still! "

It appeared that Zakath also had some leaning toward the theatrical, since the stunned silence which followed the herald's announcement clearly indicated that the Emperor had given orders that the identity of his guests remain strictly confidential until this very moment. Garion was honest enough with himself to admit that the startled buzz which ran through the crowd below was moderately gratifying.

He began down the stairway, but found himself reined in like a restive horse. "Don't run!" Ce'Nedra commanded under her breath.

"Run?" he objected. "I'm barely moving."

"Do it slower, Garion."

He discovered then that his wife had a truly amazing talent. She could speak without moving her lips! Her smile was gracious, though somewhat lofty, but a steady stream of low-voiced commands issued from that smile.

The buzzing murmur that had filled the banquet hall when they had been announced died into a respectful silence when they reached the foot of the stair, and a vast wave of bows and curtsies rippled through the crowd as they moved along the carpeted promenade leading to the slightly elevated platform upon which sat the table reserved for the Emperor and his special guests, domestic and foreign.

Zakath himself, still in his customary white, but wearing a gold circlet artfully hammered into the form of a wreath woven of leaves as a concession to the formality of the occasion, rose from his seat and came to meet them, thereby avoiding that awkward moment when two men of equal rank meet in public. "So good of you to come, my dear," he said, taking Ce'Nedra's hand and kissing it. He sounded for all the world like a country squire or minor nobleman greeting friends from the neighborhood.

"So good of you to invite us," she replied with a whimsical smile.

"You're looking well, Garion," the Mallorean said, extending his hand and still speaking in that offhand and informal manner.

"Tolerable, Zakath," Garion responded, taking his cue from his host. If Zakath wanted to play, Garion felt that he should show him that he could play, too.

"Would you care to join me at the table?" Zakath asked. "We can chat while we wait for the others to arrive."

"Of course," Garion agreed in a deliberately commonplace tone of voice.

When they reached their chairs, however, his curiosity

finally got the better of him. "Why are we playing 'just plain folks'?" he asked Zakath as he held Ce'Nedra's chair for her. "This affair's a trifle formal for talking about the weather and asking after each other's health, wouldn't you say?"

"It's baffling the nobility," Zakath replied with aplomb. "Never do the expected, Garion. The hint that we're old, old friends will set them afire with curiosity and make people who thought that they knew everything just a little less sure of themselves." He smiled at Ce'Nedra. "You're positively ravishing tonight, my dear," he told her.

Ce'Nedra glowed then looked archly at Garion. "Why don't you take a few notes, dear?" she suggested. "You could learn a great deal from his Majesty here." She turned back to Zakath. "You're so very kind to say it," she told him, "but my hair is an absolute disaster." Her expression was faintly tragic as she lightly touched her curls with her fingertips. Actually, her hair was stupendous, with a coronet of braids interwoven with strings of pearls and with a cascade of coppery ringlets spilling down across the front of her left shoulder.

During this polite exchange, the others in their party were being introduced. Silk and Velvet caused quite a stir, he in his jewel-encrusted doublet and she in a gown of lavender brocade.

Ce'Nedra sighed enviously. "I wish I could wear that color," she murmured.

"You can wear any color you want to, Ce'Nedra," Garion told her.

"Are you color-blind, Garion?" she retorted. "A girl with red hair can not wear lavender."

"If that's all that's bothering you, I can change the color of your hair anytime you want."

"Don't you dare!" she gasped, her hands going protectively to the cascade of auburn curls at her shoulder.

"Just a suggestion, dear."

The herald at the top of the stairs announced Sadi, Eriond, and Toth as a group, obviously having some difficulty with the fact that the boy and the giant had no rank that he could discern. The next presentation, however, filled his voice with awe and his bony limbs with trembling. "Her Grace, the Duchess of Erat," he declaimed, "Lady Polgara the Sorceress." The silence following that announcement was stunned. "And Goodman Durnik of Sendaria," the herald added, "the man with two lives."

Polgara and the smith descended the stairs to the accompaniment of a profound silence.

The bows and curtsies which acknowledged the legendary couple were so deep as to resemble genuflections before an altar. Polgara, dressed in her customary silver-trimmed blue, swept through the hall with all the regal bearing of an Empress. She wore a mysterious smile, and the fabled white lock at her brow glowed in the candlelight as she and Durnik approached the platform.

Meanwhile, at the top of the stairs, the herald had shrunk back from the next guest, his eyes wide and his face gone quite pale.

"Just say it," Garion heard his grandfather tell the frightened man. "I'm fairly sure that they'll all recognize

the name."

The herald stepped to the marble railing at the front of the landing. "Your Majesty," he said falteringly, "My lords and ladies, I have the unexpected honor to present Belgarath the Sorcerer."

A gasp ran through the hall as the old man, dressed in a cowed robe of soft gray wool, stumped down the stairs with no attempt at grace or dignity. The assembled Malloreal notables pulled back from him as he walked toward the table where the others had already joined Zakath.

About halfway to the imperial platform, however, a blond Melcene girl in a low-cut gown caught his eye. She stood stricken with awe, unable to curtsy or even to move as the most famous man in all the world approached her.

Belgarath stopped and looked her up and down quite slowly and deliberately, noting with appreciation just how revealing her gown was. A slow, insinuating smile crept across his face, and his blue eyes twinkled outrageously.

"Nice dress," he told her.

She blushed furiously.

He laughed, reached out, and patted her cheek.

"There's a good girl," he said.

"Father," Polgara said firmly.

"Coming, Pol." He chuckled and moved along the carpet toward the table. The pretty Melcene girl looked after him, her eyes wide and her hand pressed to the cheek he had touched.

"Isn't he disgusting?" Ce'Nedra muttered.

"It's just the way he is, dear," Garion disagreed. "He doesn't pretend to be anything else. He doesn't have to."

The banquet featured a number of exotic dishes that Garion could not put a name to and several which he did not even know how to eat. A deceptively innocent-looking rice dish was laced with such fiery seasonings it brought tears to his eyes and sent his hand clutching for his water goblet.

"Belar, Mara, and Nedra!" Durnik choked as he also groped about in search of water. So far as he could remember, it was the first time Garion had ever heard Durnik swear. He did it surprisingly well.

"Piquant," Sadi commented as he calmly continued to eat the dreadful concoction.

"How can you eat that?" Garion demanded in amazement.

Sadi smiled. "You forget that I'm used to being poisoned, Belgarion. Poison tends to toughen the tongue and fireproof the throat."

Zakath had watched their reactions with some amusement. "I should have warned you," he apologized. "The dish comes from Gandahar, and the natives of that region entertain themselves during the rainy season by trying to build bonfires in each other's stomachs. They're elephant trappers, for the most part, and they pride themselves on their courage." .

After the extended banquet, the brown-robed Brador approached Garion. "If your Majesty wouldn't mind," he said, leaning forward so that Garion could hear him over the sounds of laughter and sprightly conversation from nearby tables, "there are a number of people who are most eager to meet you."

Garion nodded politely even though he inwardly winced. He had been through this sort of thing before and knew how

tedious it usually became. The Chief of the Bureau of Internal Affairs led him down from the platform into the swirl of brightly clad celebrants, pausing occasionally to exchange greetings with various fellow officials and to introduce Garion. Garion braced himself for an hour or two of total boredom. The plump, bald-headed Brador, however, proved to be an entertaining escort. Though he seemed to be engaging Garion in light conversation, he was in fact providing a succinct and often pointed briefing even as they went.

"We'll be talking with the kinglet of Pallia," he murmured as they approached a group of men in tall, conical felt caps who wore leather which had been dyed an unhealthy-looking green color. "He's a fawning bootlicker, a liar, a coward, and absolutely not to be trusted."

"Ah, there you are, Brador," one of the felt-capped men greeted the Melcene with a forced heartiness.

"Your Highness," Brador replied with a florid bow. "I have the honor to present his Royal Majesty, Belgarion of Riva." He turned to Garion. "Your Majesty, this is his Highness, King Warasin of Pallia."

"Your Majesty," Warasin gushed, bowing awkwardly. He was a man with a narrow, pockmarked face, close-set eyes, and a slack-lipped mouth. His hands, Garion noticed, were not particularly clean.

"Your Highness," Garion replied with a slightly distant note.

"I was just telling the members of my court here that I'd have sooner believed that the sun would rise in the north tomorrow than that the Overlord of the West would appear at Mal Zeth."

"The world is full of surprises."

"By the beard of Torak, you're right, Belgarion -you don't mind if I call you Belgarion, do you, your Majesty?"

"Torak didn't have a beard," Garion corrected shortly.

"What?"

"Torak -he didn't have a beard. At least he didn't when I met him."

"When you-" Warasin's eyes suddenly widened.

"Are you telling me that all those stories about what happened at Cthol Mishrak are actually true?" he gasped,

"I'm not sure, your Highness," Garion told him. "I haven't heard all the stories yet. It's been an absolute delight meeting you, old boy," he said, clapping the stunned-looking kinglet on the shoulder with exaggerated camaraderie. "It's a shame that we don't have more time to talk. Coming, Brador?" He nodded to the petty king of Pallia, turned, and led the Melcene away.

"You're very skilled, Belgarion," Brador murmured. "Much more so than I would have imagined, considering-" He hesitated.

"Considering the fact that I look like an unlettered country oaf?" Garion supplied.

"I don't know that I'd put it exactly that way."

"Why not?" Garion shrugged. "It's the truth, isn't it? What was pig-eyes back there trying to maneuver the conversation around to? It was pretty obvious that he was leading up to something."

"It's fairly simple," Brador replied. "He recognizes

current proximity to Kal Zakath. All power in Malloreia derives from the throne, and the man who has the Emperor's ear is in a unique position. Warasin is currently having a border dispute with the Prince Regent of Delchin and he probably wants you to put in a good word for him." Brador gave him an amused look.

"You're in a position right now to make millions, you know."

Garion laughed. "I couldn't carry it, Brador," he said. "I visited the royal treasury at Riva once, and I know how much a million weighs. Who's next?"

"The Chief of the Bureau of Commerce -an unmitigated, unprincipled ass. Like most Bureau Chiefs."

Garion smiled. "And what does he want?"

Brador tugged thoughtfully at one earlobe. "I'm not entirely certain. I've been out of the country. Vasca's a devious one, though, so I'd be careful of him."

"I'm always careful, Brador."

The Baron Vasca, Chief of the Bureau of Commerce, was wrinkled and bald. He wore the brown robe that seemed to be almost the uniform of the bureaucracy, and the gold chain of his office seemed almost too heavy for his thin neck. Though at first glance he appeared to be old and frail, his eyes were as alert and shrewd as those of a vulture. "Ah, your Majesty," he said after they had been introduced, "I'm so pleased to meet you at last."

"My pleasure, Baron Vasca," Garion said politely.

They chatted together for some time, and Garion could not detect anything in the baron's conversation that seemed in the least bit out of the ordinary.

"I note that Prince Kheldar of Drasnia is a member of your party," the baron said finally.

"We're old friends. You're acquainted with Kheldar then, Baron?"

"We've had a few dealings together -the customary permits and gratuities, you understand. For the most part, though, he tends to avoid contact with the authorities."

"I've noticed that from time to time," Garion said.

"I was certain that you would have. I won't keep your Majesty. Many others here are eager to meet you, and I wouldn't want to be accused of monopolizing your time. We must talk again soon."

The baron turned to the Chief of the Bureau of Internal Affairs. "So good of you to introduce us, my dear Brador," he said.

"It's nothing, my dear Baron," Brador replied. He took Garion by the arm, and they moved away from Vasca.

"What was that all about?" Garion asked.

"I'm not altogether sure," Brador replied, "but whatever he wanted, he seems to have gotten."

"We didn't really say anything."

"I know. That's what worries me. I think I'll have my old friend Vasca watched. He's managed to arouse my curiosity."

During the next couple of hours Garion met two more gaudily dressed petty kings, a fair number of more soberly garbed bureaucrats, and a sprinkling of semi-important nobles and their ladies. Many of them, of course, wanted nothing more than to be seen talking to him so that later they could say in a casual, offhand fashion, "I was talking with Belgarion the other day, and he said-" Others made some point of suggesting

that a private conversation might be desirable at some later date, A few even tried to set up specific appointments.

It was rather late when Velvet finally came to his rescue. She approached the place where Garion was trapped by the royal family of Peldane, a stodgy little kinglet in a mustard yellow turban, his simpering, scrawny wife in a pink gown that clashed horribly with her orange hair, and three spoiled royal brats who spent their time whining and hitting each other. "Your Majesty," the blond girl said with a curtsy, "Your wife asks your permission to retire."

"Asks?"

"She's feeling slightly unwell."

Garion gave her a grateful look. "I must go to her at once, then," he said quickly. He turned to the Peldane royalty. "I hope you'll all excuse me," he said to them.

"Of course, Belgarion," the kinglet replied graciously. "And please convey our regards to your lovely wife," the queenlet added.

The royal brood continued to howl and kick each other.

"You looked a bit harried," Velvet murmured as she led Garion away.

"I could kiss you."

"Now that's an interesting suggestion."

Garion glanced sourly back over his shoulder. "They should drown those three little monsters and raise a litter of puppies instead," he muttered.

"Piglets," she corrected.

He looked at her.

"At least they could sell the bacon," she explained. "That way the effort wouldn't be a total loss."

"Is Ce'Nedra really ill?"

"Of course not. She's made as many conquests as she wants to this evening, that's all. She wants to save a few for future occasions. Now it's time for the grand withdrawal, leaving a horde of disappointed admirers, who were all panting to meet her, crushed with despair."

"That's a peculiar way to look at it."

She laughed affectionately, linking her arm in his. "Not if you're a woman, it's not."

The following morning shortly after breakfast, Garion and Belgarath were summoned to meet with Zakath and Brador in the Emperor's private study. The room was large and comfortable, lined with books and maps and with deeply upholstered chairs clustered about low tables. It was a warm day outside, and the windows stood open, allowing a blossom-scented spring breeze to ruffle the curtains.

"Good morning, gentlemen," Zakath greeted them as they were escorted into the room. "I hope you slept well."

"Once I managed to get Ce'Nedra out of the tub." Garion laughed. "It's just a bit too convenient, I think. Would you believe that she bathed three times yesterday?"

"Mal Zeth is very hot and dusty in the summertime," Zakath said. "The baths make it bearable."

"How does the hot water get to them?" Garion asked curiously. "I haven't seen anyone carrying pails up and down the halls."

"It's piped in under the floors," the Emperor replied. "The artisan who devised the system was rewarded with a

baronetcy."

"I hope you don't mind if we steal the idea. Durnik's already making sketches."

"I think it's unhealthy myself," Belgarath said, "Bathing should be done out of doors -in cold water. All this pampering softens people." He looked at Zakath. "I'm sure you didn't ask us here to discuss the philosophical ramifications of bathing, though."

"Not unless you really want to, Belgarath," Zakath replied. He straightened in his chair. "Now that we've all had a chance to rest from our journey, I thought that maybe it was time for us to get to work. Brador's people have made their reports to him, and he's ready to give us his assessment of the current situation in Karanda. Go ahead, Brador."

"Yes, your Majesty." The plump, bald Melcene rose from his chair and crossed to a very large map of the Mallolean continent hanging on the wall. The map was exquisitely colored with blue lakes and rivers, green prairies, darker green forests and brown, white-topped mountains. Instead of simply being dots on the map, the cities were represented by pictures of buildings and fortifications. The Mallolean highway system, Garion noted, was very nearly as extensive as the Tolnedran network in the west.

Brador cleared his throat, fought for a moment with one of Zakath's ferocious kittens for the long pointer he wanted to use, and began. "As I reported to you in Rak Hagga," he said, "a man named Mengha came out of this immense forest to the north of Lake Karanda some six months ago." He tapped the representation of a large belt of trees stretching from the Karandese Range to the Mountains of Zamad. "We know very, very little about his background."

"That's not entirely true, Brador," Belgarath disagreed. "Cyradis told us that he's a Grolim priest -or he used to be. That puts us in a position to deduce quite a bit."

"I'd be interested to hear whatever you can come up with," Zakath said.

Belgarath squinted around the room, and his eyes fixed on several full crystal decanters and some polished glasses sitting on a sideboard across the room. "Do you mind?" he asked, pointing at the decanters. "I think better with a glass in my hand."

"Help yourself," Zakath replied.

The old man rose, crossed to the sideboard, and poured himself a glass of ruby-red wine. "Garion?" he asked, holding out the decanter.

"No, thanks all the same, Grandfather."

Belgarath replaced the crystal stopper with a clink and began to pace up and down on the blue carpet. "All right," he said. "We know that demon worship persists in the back country of Karanda, even though the Grolim priests tried to stamp out the practice when the Karands were converted to the worship of Torak in the second millennium. We also know that Mengha was a priest himself. Now, if the Grolims here in Mallolea reacted in the same way that the ones in Cthol Murgos did when they heard about the death of Torak, then we know that they were thoroughly demoralized. The fact that Urvon spent several years scrambling around trying to find prophecies that would hint at the possibility of a justification for keeping the

Church intact is fairly good evidence that he was faced with almost universal despair in the ranks of the Grolims." He paused to sip at his wine.

"Not bad," he said to Zakath approvingly. "Not bad at all."

"Thank you."

"Now," the old man continued, "there are many possible reactions to religious despair. Some men go mad, some men try to lose themselves in various forms of dissipation, some men refuse to admit the truth and try to keep the old forms alive. A few men, however, go in search of some new kind of religion -usually something the exact opposite of what they believed before. Since the Grolim Church in Karanda had concentrated for eons on eradicating demon worship, it's only logical that a few of the despairing priests would seek out demon-masters in the hope of learning their secrets. Remember, if you can actually control a demon, it gives you a great deal of power, and the hunger for power has always been at the core of the Grolim mentality."

"It does fit together, Ancient One," Brador admitted.

"I thought so myself. All right, Torak is dead, and Mengha suddenly finds that his theological ground has been cut out from under him. He probably goes through a period of doing all the things that he wasn't allowed to do as a priest -drinking, wenching, that sort of thing. But if you do things to excess, eventually they become empty and unsatisfying. Even debauchery can get boring after a while."

"Aunt Pol will be amazed to hear that you said that," Garion said.

"You just keep it to yourself," Belgarath told him. "Our arguments about my bad habits are the cornerstone of our relationship." He took another sip of his wine. "This is really excellent," he said, holding up the glass to admire the color of the wine in the sunlight. "Now then, here we have Mengha waking up some morning with a screaming headache, a mouth that tastes like a chicken coop, and a fire in his stomach that no amount of water will put out. He has no real reason to go on living. He might even take out his sacrificial gutting knife and set the point against his chest."

"Isn't your speculation going a bit far afield?" Zakath asked.

Belgarath laughed. "I used to be a professional storyteller," he apologized. "I can't stand to let a good story slip by without a few artistic touches. All right, maybe he did or maybe he didn't think about killing himself. The point is that he had reached the absolute rock bottom. That's when the idea of demons came to him. Raising demons is almost as dangerous as being the first up the scaling ladder during an assault on a fortified city, but Mengha has nothing to lose. So, he journeys into the forest up there, finds a Karandese magician, and somehow persuades him to teach him the art -if that's what you want to call it. It takes him about a dozen years to learn all the secrets."

"How did you arrive at that number?" Brador asked.

Belgarath shrugged. "It's been fourteen years since the death of Torak -or thereabouts. No normal man can seriously mistreat himself for more than a couple of years before he starts to fall apart, so it was probably about twelve years

ago that Mengha went in search of a magician to give him instruction. Then, once he's learned all the secrets, he kills his teacher, and-

"Wait a minute," Zakath objected. "Why would he do that?"

"His teacher knew too much about him, and he could also raise demons to send after our defrocked Grolim. Then there's the fact that the arrangement between teacher and pupil in these affairs involves lifetime servitude enforced with a curse. Mengha could not leave his master until the old man was dead."

"How do you know so much about this, Belgarath?" Zakath asked.

"I went through it all among the Morindim a few thousand years ago. I wasn't doing anything very important and I was curious about magic."

"Did you kill your master?"

"No -well, not exactly. When I left him, he sent his familiar demon after me. I took control of it and sent it back to him."

"And it killed him?"

"I assume so. They usually do. Anyway, getting back to Mengha. He arrives at the gates of Calida about six months ago and raises a whole army of demons. Nobody in his right mind raises more than one at a time because they're too difficult to control." He frowned, pacing up and down staring at the floor. "The only thing I can think of is that somehow he's managed to raise a Demon Lord and get it under control."

"Demon Lord?" Garion asked.

"They have rank, too- just as humans do. If Mengha has a grip on a Demon Lord, then it's that creature that's calling up the army of lesser demons." He refilled his glass, looking faintly satisfied with himself. "That's probably fairly close to Mengha's life story," he said, sitting down again.

"A virtuoso performance, Belgarath," Zakath congratulated him.

"Thank you," the old man replied. "I thought so myself." He looked at Brador. "Now that we know him, why don't you tell us what he's been up to?"

Brador once again took his place beside the map, fending off the same kitten with his pointer. "After Mengha took Calida, word of his exploits ran all through Karanda," he began. "It appears that the worship of Torak was never really very firmly ingrained in the Karands to begin with, and about the only thing that kept them in line was their fear of the sacrificial knives of the Grolims."

"Like the Thulls?" Garion suggested.

"Very much so, your Majesty. Once Torak was dead, however, and his Church in disarray, the Karands began to revert. The old shrines began to reappear, and the old rituals came back into practice." Brador shuddered.

"Hideous rites," he said. "Obscene."

"Even worse than the Grolim rite of sacrifice?" Garion asked mildly.

"There was some justification for that, Garion," Zakath objected. "It was an honor to be chosen, and the victims went under the knife willingly."

"Not any of them that I ever saw," Garion disagreed.

"We can discuss comparative theology some other time,"

Belgarath told them, "Go on, Brador."

"Once the Karands heard about Mengha," the Melcene official continued, "they began to flock to Calida to support him and to enlist themselves on the side of the demons. There's always been a subterranean independence movement in the seven kingdoms of Karanda, and many hotheads there believe that the demons offer the best hope of throwing off the yoke of Angarak oppression," He looked at the Emperor. "No offense intended, your Majesty," he murmured.

"None taken, Brador," Zakath assured him.

"Naturally, the little kinglets in Karanda tried to keep their people from joining Mengha. The loss of subjects is always painful to a ruler. The army -our army- was also alarmed by the hordes of Karands flocking to Mengha's banner, and they tried to block off borders and the like. But, since a large portion of the army was in Cthol Murgos with his Majesty here, the troops in Karanda just didn't have the numbers. The Karands either slipped around them or simply overwhelmed them. Mengha's army numbers almost a million by now -ill-equipped and poorly trained, perhaps, but a million is a significant number, even if they're armed with sticks. Not only Jenno but also Ganesia are totally under Mengha's domination, and he's on the verge of overwhelming Katakori. Once he succeeds there, he'll inevitably move on Pallia and Delchin. If he isn't stopped, he'll be knocking on the gates of Mal Zeth by Erastide."

"Is he unleashing his demons in these campaigns?" Belgarath asked intently.

"Not really," Brador replied. "After what happened at Calida, there's no real need for that. The sight of them alone is usually enough to spring open the gates of any city he's taken so far. He's succeeded with remarkably little actual fighting."

The old man nodded. "I sort of thought that might have been the case. A demon is very hard to get back under control once it's tasted blood."

"It's not really the demons that are causing the problems," Brador continued. "Mengha's flooded all the rest of Karanda with his agents, and the stories that they're circulating are whipping previously uncommitted people into a frenzy." He looked at the Emperor. "Would you believe that we actually caught one of his missionaries in the Karandese barracks right here in Mal Zeth?" he said.

Zakath looked up sharply. "How did he get in?" he demanded,

"He disguised himself as a corporal returning from convalescent leave at home," Brador replied. "He'd even gone so far as to give himself a wound to make his story look authentic. It was very believable the way he cursed Murgos."

"What did you do to him?"

"Unfortunately, he didn't survive the questioning," Brador said, frowning. He bent to remove the kitten from around his ankle.

"Unfortunately?"

"I had some interesting plans for him. I take it rather personally when someone manages to circumvent my secret police. It's a matter of professional pride."

"What do you advise, then?" Zakath asked.

Brador began to pace. "I'm afraid that you're going to have to bring the army back from Cthol Murgos, your Majesty," he said. "You can't fight a war on two fronts."

"Absolutely out of the question." Zakath's tone was adamant.

"I don't think we have much choice," Brador told him.

"Almost half of the forces left here in Mallorea are of Karandese origin, and it's my considered opinion that to rely upon them in any kind of confrontation with Mengha would be sheer folly."

Zakath's face grew bleak.

"Put it this way, your Majesty," Brador said smoothly. "If you weaken your forces in Cthol Murgos, it's quite possible that you'll lose Rak Cthaka and maybe Rak Gorut, but if you don't bring the army home, you're going to lose Mal Zeth."

Zakath glared at him.

"There's still time to consider the matter, Sire," Brador added in a reasonable tone of voice. "This is only my assessment of the situation. I'm sure you'll want confirmation of what I've said from military intelligence, and you'll need to consult with the High Command."

"No," Zakath said bluntly. "The decision is mine." He scowled at the floor. "All right, Brador, we'll bring the army home. Go tell the High Command that I want to see them all at once."

"Yes, your Majesty."

Garion had risen to his feet. "How long will it take to ship your troops back from Cthol Murgos?" he asked with a sinking feeling.

"About three months," Zakath replied.

"I can't wait that long, Zakath."

"I'm very sorry, Garion, but none of us has any choice. Neither you nor I will leave Mal Zeth until the army gets here."

CHAPTER EIGHT

The following morning, Silk came early to the rooms Garion shared with Ce'Nedra. The little man once again wore his doublet and hose, though he had removed most of his jewelry. Over his arm he carried a pair of Malloreaan robes, the lightweight, varicolored garments worn by most of the citizens of Mal Zeth. "Would you like to go into the city?" he asked Garion.

"I don't think they'll let us out of the palace."

"I've already taken care of that. Brador gave his permission- provided that we don't try to get away from the people who are going to be following us."

"That's a depressing thought. I hate being followed."

"You get used to it."

"Have you got anything specific in mind, or is this just a sight-seeing tour?"

"I want to stop by our offices here and have a talk with our factor."

Garion gave him a puzzled look.

"The agent who handles things for us here in Mal Zeth."

"Oh. I hadn't heard the word before."

"That's because you aren't in business. Our man here is

named Dolmar. He's a Melcene -very efficient, and he doesn't steal too much."

"I'm not sure that I'd enjoy listening to you talk business," Garion said.

Silk looked around furtively. "You might learn all kinds of things, Garion," he said, but his fingers were already moving rapidly. -Dolmar can give us a report on what's really happening in Karanda- he gestured. -I think you'd better come along.

"Well," Garion said with slightly exaggerated acquiescence, "maybe you're right. Besides, the walls here are beginning to close in on me."

"Here," Silk said, holding out one of the robes, "wear this."

"It's not really cold, Silk."

"The robe isn't to keep you warm. People in western clothing attract a lot of attention on the streets of Mal Zeth, and I don't like being stared at." Silk grinned quickly. "It's very hard to pick pockets when everybody in the street watching you. Shall we go?"

The robe Garion put on was open at the front and hung straight from his shoulders to his heels. It was a serviceable outer garment with deep pockets at the sides. The material of which it was made was quite thin, and it flowed out behind him as he moved around. He went to the door of the adjoining room. Ce'Nedra was combing her hair, still damp from her morning bath.

"I'm going into the city with Silk," he told her. "Do you need anything?"

She thought about that. "See if you can find me a comb," she said, holding up the one she had been using. "Mine's starting to look a little toothless."

"All right." He turned to leave.

"As long as you're going anyway," she added, "why don't you pick me up a bolt of silk cloth -teal green, if you can find it. I'm told that there's a dressmaker here in the palace with a great deal of skill."

"I'll see what I can do." He turned again.

"And perhaps a few yards of lace -not too ornate, mind. Tasteful."

"Anything else?"

She smiled at him. "Buy me a surprise of some kind. I love surprises."

"A comb, a bolt of teal green silk, a few yards of tasteful lace, and a surprise." He ticked them off on his fingers.

"Get me one of those robes like you're wearing, too." He waited.

She pursed her lips thoughtfully. "That's all I can think of, Garion, but you and Silk might ask Liselle and Lady Polgara if they need anything."

He sighed.

"It's only polite, Garion."

"Yes, dear. Maybe I'd better make out a list."

Silk's face was blandly expressionless as Garion came back out.

"Well?" Garion asked him.

"I didn't say anything."

"Good."

They started out the door.

"Garion," Ce'Nedra called after him.

"Yes, dear?"

"See if you can find some sweetmeats, too."

Garion went out into the hall behind Silk and firmly closed the door behind him.

"You handle that sort of thing very well," Silk said.

"'Practice."

Velvet added several items to Garion's growing list, and Polgara several more. Silk looked at the list as they walked down the long, echoing hallway toward the main part of the palace. "I wonder if Brador would lend us a pack mule," he murmured.

"Quit trying to be funny."

"Would I do that?"

"Why were we talking with our fingers back there?"

"Spies."

"In our private quarters?" Garion was shocked, remembering Ce'Nedra's sometimes aggressive indifference to the way she was dressed -or not dressed- when they were alone.

"Private places are where the most interesting secrets are to be found. No spy ever passes up the opportunity to peek into a bedroom."

"That's disgusting!" Garion exclaimed, his cheeks burning.

"Of course it is. Fairly common practice, though."

They passed through the vaulted rotunda just inside the gold-plated main door of the palace and walked out into a bright spring morning touched with a fragrant breeze.

"You know," Silk said, "I like Mal Zeth. It always smells so good. Our office here is upstairs over a bakery, and some mornings the smells from downstairs almost make me swoon."

There was only the briefest of pauses at the gates of the imperial complex. A curt gesture from one of the pair of unobtrusive men who were following them advised the gate guards that Silk and Garion were to be allowed to pass into the city.

"Policemen do have their uses sometimes," Silk said as they started down a broad boulevard leading away from the palace.

The streets of Mal Zeth teemed with people from all over the empire and not a few from the West as well.

Garion was a bit surprised to see a sprinkling of Tolnedran mantles among the varicolored robes of the local populace, and here and there were Sendars, Drasnians, and a fair number of Nadraks. There were, however, no Murgos. "Busy place," he noted to Silk.

"Oh, yes. Mal Zeth makes Tol Honeth look like a country fair and Camaar like a village market."

"It's the biggest commercial center in the world, then?"

"No. That's Melcene -of course Melcene concentrates on money instead of goods. You can't even buy a tin pot in Melcene. All you can buy there is money."

"Silk, how can you make any kind of profit buying money with money?"

"It's a little complicated." Silk's eyes narrowed. "Do you know something?" he said. "If you could put your hands on the royal treasury of Riva, I could show you how to double it in

six months on Basa Street in Melcene -with a nice commission for the both of us thrown in for good measure."

"You want me to speculate with the royal treasury? I'd have an open insurrection on my hands if anybody ever found out about it."

"That's the secret, Garion. You don't let anybody find out."

"Have you ever had an honest thought in your entire life?"

The little man thought about it. "Not that I recall, no," he replied candidly. "But then, I've got a well-trained mind."

The offices of the commercial empire of Silk and Yarblek here in Mal Zeth were, as the little man had indicated, rather modest and were situated above a busy bake-shop. Access to that second floor was by way of an outside stairway rising out of a narrow side street. As Silk started up those stairs, a certain tension that Garion had not even been aware of seemed to flow out of his friend. "I hate not being able to talk freely," he said. "There are so many spies in Mal Zeth that every word you say here is delivered to Brador in triplicate before you get your mouth shut."

"There are bound to be spies around your office, too."

"Of course, but they can't hear anything. Yarblek and I had a solid foot of cork built into the floors, ceilings, and walls."

"Cork?"

"It muffles all sounds."

"Didn't that cost a great deal?"

Silk nodded. "But we made it all back during the first week we were here by managing to keep certain negotiations secret." He reached into an inside pocket and took out a large brass key. "Let's see if I can catch Dolmar with his hands in the cash box," he half whispered.

"Why? You already know that he's stealing from you."

"Certainly I do, but if I can catch him, I can reduce his year-end bonus."

"Why not just pick his pocket?"

Silk tapped the brass key against his cheek as he thought about it. "No," he decided finally. "That's not really good business. A relationship like this is founded on trust--"

Garion began to laugh.

"You have to draw the line somewhere, Garion." Silk quietly slipped his brass key into the lock and slowly turned it. Then he abruptly shoved the door open and jumped into the room.

"Good morning, Prince Kheldar," the man seated behind a plain table said quite calmly. "I've been expecting you."

Silk looked a bit crestfallen.

The man sitting at the table was a thin Melcene with crafty, close-set eyes, thin lips, and scraggly, mud-brown hair. He had the kind of face that one instantly distrusts. Silk straightened. "Good morning, Dolmar," he said. "This is Belgarion of Riva."

"Your Majesty." Dolmar rose and bowed.

"Dolmar."

Silk closed the door and pulled a pair of chairs out from the brown, cork-sheathed wall. Although the floor was of ordinary boards, the way that all sounds of walking or moving pieces of furniture were muted testified to the thickness of

the cork lying beneath.

"How's business?" Silk asked, seating himself and pushing the other chair to Garion with his foot.

"We're paying the rent," Dolmar replied cautiously.

"I'm sure that the baker downstairs is overjoyed. Specifics, Dolmar. I've been away from Mal Zeth for quite a while. Stun me with how well my investments here are doing."

"We're up fifteen percent from last year."

"That's all?" Silk sounded disappointed.

"We've just made quite a large investment in inventory. If you take the current value of that into account, the number would be much closer to forty percent."

"That's more like it. Why are we accumulating inventory?"

"Yarblek's instructions. He's at Mal Camat right now arranging for ships to take the goods to the west. I expect that he'll be here in a week or so -he and that foul-mouthed wench of his." Dolmar stood up, carefully gathered the documents from the table, and crossed to an iron stove sitting in the corner. He bent, opened the stove door, and calmly laid the parchment sheets on the small fire inside.

To Garion's amazement, Silk made no objection to his factor's blatant incendiarism. "We've been looking into the wool market," the Melcene reported as he returned to his now-empty table. "With the growing mobilization, the Bureau of Military Procurement is certain to need wool for uniforms, cloaks, and blankets. If we can buy up options from all the major sheep producers, we'll control the market and perhaps break the stranglehold that the Melcene consortium has on military purchases. If we can just get our foot in the door of the Bureau, I'm sure that we can get a chance to bid on all sorts of contracts."

Silk was pulling at his long, pointed nose, his eyes narrowed in thought. "Beans," he said shortly.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Look into the possibility of tying up this year's bean crop. A soldier can live in a worn-out uniform, but he has to eat. If we control the bean crop -and maybe coarse flour as well- the Bureau of Military Procurement won't have any choice. They'll have to come to us."

"Very shrewd, Prince Kheldar."

"I've been around for a while," Silk replied.

"The consortium is meeting this week in Melcene," the factor reported. "They'll be setting the prices of common items. We really want to get our hands on that price list if we can."

"I'm in the palace," Silk said. "Maybe I can pry it out of somebody."

"There's something else you should know, Prince Kheldar. Word has leaked out that the consortium is also going to propose certain regulations to Baron Vasca of the Bureau of Commerce. They'll present them under the guise of protecting the economy, but the fact of the matter is that they're aimed at you and Yarblek. They want to restrict western merchants who gross more than ten million a year to two or three enclaves on the west-coast. That wouldn't inconvenience smaller merchants, but it would probably put us out of business."

"Can we bribe someone to put a stop to it?"

"We're already paying Vasca a fortune to leave us alone, but the consortium is throwing money around like water. It's possible that the baron won't stay bribed."

"Let me nose around inside the palace a bit," Silk said, "before you double Vasca's bribe or anything."

"Bribery's the standard procedure, Prince Kheldar."

"I know, but sometimes blackmail works even better." Silk looked over at Garion, then back at his factor. "What do you know about what's happening in Karanda?" he asked.

"Enough to know that it's disastrous for business. All sorts of perfectly respectable and otherwise sensible merchants are closing up their shops and flocking off to Calida to enlist in Mengha's army. Then they march around in circles singing 'Death to the Angaraks' while they wave rusty swords in the air."

"Any chance of selling them weapons?" Silk asked quickly.

"Probably not. There's not enough real money in northern Karanda make it worthwhile to try to deal with them, and the political unrest has closed down all the mines. The market in gem stones has just about dried up."

Silk nodded glumly. "What's really going on up there, Dolmar?" he asked. "The reports Brador passed on to us were sort of sketchy."

"Mengha arrived at the gates of Calida with demons." The factor shrugged. "The Karands went into hysterics and then fell down in the throes of religious ecstasy."

"Brador told us about certain atrocities," Garion said.

"I expect that the reports he received were a trifle exaggerated, your Majesty," Dolmar replied. "Even the most well trained observer is likely to multiply mutilated corpses lying in the streets by ten. In point of fact, the vast majority of the casualties were either Melcene or Angarak. Mengha's demons rather scrupulously avoided killing Karands -except by accident. The same has held true in every city that he's taken so far." He scratched at his head, his close-set eyes narrowing. "It's really very shrewd, you know. The Karands see Mengha as a liberator and his demons as an invincible spearhead of their army. I can't swear to his real motives, but those barbarians up there believe that he's a savior come to sweep Karanda clean of Angaraks and the Melcene bureaucracy. Give him another six months or so, and he'll accomplish what no one has ever been able to do before."

"What's that?" Silk asked.

"Unify all of Karanda."

"Does he use his demons in the assault on every city he takes?" Garion asked, wanting to confirm what Brador had told them.

Dolmar shook his head. "Not anymore, your Majesty. After what happened at Calida and several other towns he took early in his campaign, he doesn't really have to. All he's been doing lately is marching up to the city. The demons are with him, of course, but they don't have to do anything but stand there looking awful. The Karands butcher all the Angaraks and Melcenes in town, throw open their gates, and welcome him with open arms. Then his demons vanish." He thought a moment. "He always has one particular one of them with him, though -a shadowy sort of creature that doesn't seem to be gigantic the way they're supposed to be. He stands directly behind Mengha's

left shoulder at any public appearance."

A sudden thought occurred to Garion. "Are they desecrating Grolim temples?" he asked.

Dolmar blinked. "No," he replied with some surprise, "as a matter of fact, they're not -and there don't seem to be any Grolims among the dead, either. Of course it's possible that Urvon pulled all his Grolims out of Karanda when the trouble started."

"That's unlikely," Garion disagreed. "Mengha's arrival at Calida came without any kind of warning. The Grolims wouldn't have had time to escape. He stared up at the ceiling, thinking hard.

"What is it, Garion?" Silk asked.

"I just had a chilling sort of notion. We know that Mengha's a Grolim, right?"

"I didn't know that," Dolmar said with some surprise.

"We got a bit of inside information," Silk told him. "Go ahead, Garion."

"Urvon spends all of his time in Mal Yaska, doesn't he?"

Silk nodded. "So I've heard. He doesn't want Beldin to catch him out in the open."

"Wouldn't that make him a fairly ineffective leader? All right, then. Let's suppose that Mengha went through his period of despair after the death of Torak and then found a magician to teach him how to raise demons. When he comes back, he offers his former Grolim brethren an alternative to Urvon -along with access to a kind of power they'd never experienced before. A demon in the hands of an illiterate and fairly stupid Karandese magician is one thing, but a demon controlled by a Grolim sorcerer would be much worse, I think. If Mengha is gathering disaffected Grolims around him and training them in the use of magic, we have a big problem. I don't think I'd care to face a legion of Chabats, would you?"

Silk shuddered. "Not hardly," he replied fervently.

"He has to be uprooted then," Dolmar said, "and soon."

Garion made a sour face. "Zakath won't move until he gets his army back from Cthol Murgos -about three months from now."

"In three months, Mengha's going to be invincible," the f actor told him.

"Then we'll have to move now," Garion said, "with Zakath or without him."

"How do you plan to get out of the city?" Silk asked.

"We'll let Belgarath work that out." Garion looked at Silk's agent. "Can you tell us anything else?" he asked.

Dolmar tugged at his nose in a curious imitation of Silk's habitual gesture. "It's only a rumor," he said.

"Go ahead."

"I've been getting some hints out of Karanda that Mengha's familiar demon is named Nahaz."

"Is that significant?"

"I can't be altogether sure, your Majesty. When the Grolims went into Karanda in the second millennium, they destroyed all traces of Karandese mythology, and no one has ever tried to record what few bits and pieces remained. All that's left is a hazy oral tradition, but the rumors I've heard say that Nahaz was the tribal demon of the original Karands who migrated into the region before the Angaraks came to Mallorea. The Karands follow Mengha not only because he's a

political leader, but also because he's resurrected the closest thing they've ever had to a God of their own."

"A Demon Lord?" Garion asked him.

"That's a very good way to describe him, your Majesty. If the rumors are true, the demon Nahaz has almost unlimited power."

"I was afraid you were going to say that."

Later, when they were back out in the street, Garion looked curiously at Silk. "Why didn't you object when he burned those documents?" he asked.

"It's standard practice." the rat-faced man shrugged. "We never keep anything in writing. Dolmar has everything committed to memory."

"Doesn't that make it fairly easy for him to steal from you?"

"Of course, but he keeps his thievery within reasonable limits. If the Bureau of Taxation got its hands on written records, though, it could be a disaster. Do you want to go back to the palace now?"

Garion took out his list. "No," he said. "We've got to take care of this first." He looked glumly at the sheet.

"I wonder how we're going to carry it all."

Silk glanced back over his shoulder at the two unobtrusive spies trailing along behind them.

"Help is only a few paces away." He laughed. "As I said before, there are many uses for policemen."

During the next several days, Garion discovered that the imperial palace of Mal Zeth was unlike any court in the West. Since all power rested in Zakath's hands, the bureaucrats and palace functionaries contested with each other for the Emperor's favor and strove with oftentimes wildly complicated plots to discredit their enemies. The introduction of Silk, Velvet, and Sadi into this murky environment added whole new dimensions to palace intrigue. The trio rather casually pointed out the friendship between Garion and Zakath and let it be generally known that they had the Rivan King's complete trust. Then they sat back to await developments.

The officials and courtiers in the imperial palace were quick to grasp the significance and the opportunities implicit in this new route to the Emperor's ear. Perhaps even without formally discussing it, the trio of westerners neatly divided up the possible spheres of activity. Silk concentrated his attention on commercial matters, Velvet dabbled in politics, and Sadi delicately dipped his long-fingered hands into the world of high-level crime. Though all of them subtly let it be known that they were susceptible to bribery, they also expressed a willingness to pass along various requests in exchange for information. Thus, almost by accident, Garion found that he had a very efficient espionage apparatus at his disposal. Silk and Velvet manipulated the fears, ambitions, and open greed of those who contacted them with a musician-like skill, delicately playing the increasingly nervous officials like well-tuned instruments. Sadi's methods, derived from his extensive experience in Salmissra's court, were in some instances even more subtle, but in others, painfully direct. The contents of his red leather case brought premium prices, and several high-ranking criminals, men who literally owned whole platoons of bureaucrats and even

generals, quite suddenly died under suspicious circumstances -one of them even toppling over with a blackened face and bulging eyes in the presence of the Emperor himself.

Zakath, who had watched the activities of the three with a certain veiled amusement, drew the line at that point. He spoke quite firmly with Garion about the matter during their customary evening meeting on the following day.

"I don't really mind what they're doing, Garion," he said, idly stroking the head of an orange kitten who lay purring in his lap. "They're confusing all the insects who scurry around in the dark corners of the palace, and a confused bug can't consolidate his position. I like to keep all these petty bootlickers frightened and off balance, since it makes it easier to control them. I really must object to poison, however. It's far too easy for an unskilled poisoner to make mistakes."

"Sadi could poison one specific person at a banquet with a hundred guests," Garion assured him.

"I have every confidence in his ability," Zakath agreed, "but the trouble is that he's not doing the actual poisoning himself. He's selling his concoctions to rank amateurs. There are some people here in the palace that I need. Their identities are general knowledge, and that keeps the daggers out of their entrails. A mistake with some poison, however, could wipe out whole branches of my government. Could you ask him not to sell any more of it here in the palace? I'd speak to him personally, but I don't want it to seem like an official reprimand."

"I'll have a talk with him," Garion promised.

"I'd appreciate it, Garion." The Emperor's eyes grew sly. "Just the poisons, though. I find the effects of some of his other compounds rather amusing. Just yesterday, I saw an eighty-five-year-old general in hot pursuit of a young chambermaid. The old fool hasn't had that kind of thought for a quarter of a century. And the day before that, the Chief of the Bureau of Public Works -a pompous ass who makes me sick just to look at him- tried for a solid half hour in front of dozens of witnesses to walk up the side of a building. I haven't laughed so hard in years."

"Nyissan elixirs do strange things to people." Garion smiled. "I'll ask Sadi to confine his dealings to recreational drugs."

"Recreational drugs," Zakath laughed. "I like that description."

"I've always had a way with words," Garion replied modestly.

The orange kitten rose, yawned, and jumped down from the Emperor's lap. The mackerel-tabby mother cat caught a black and white kitten by the scruff of the neck and deposited it exactly where the orange one had been lying. Then she looked at Zakath's face and meowed questioningly.

"Thank you," Zakath murmured to her.

Satisfied, the cat jumped down, caught the orange kitten, and began to bathe it, holding it down with one paw.

"Does she do that all the time?" Garion asked.

Zakath nodded. "She's busy being a mother, but she doesn't want me to get lonely."

"That's considerate of her."

Zakath looked at the black and white kitten in his lap, who had all four paws wrapped around his hand and was gnawing on one of his knuckles in mock ferocity. "I think I could learn to survive without it," he said, wincing.

CHAPTER NINE

The simplest way to avoid the omnipresent spies infesting the imperial palace was to conduct any significant conversations out in the open, and so Garion frequently found himself strolling around the palace grounds with one or more of his companions. On a beautiful spring morning a few days later he walked with Belgarath and Polgara through the dappled shade of a cherry orchard, listening to Velvet's latest report on the political intrigues which seethed through the corridors of Zakath's palace.

"The surprising thing is that Brador is probably aware of most of what's going on," the blond girl told them. "He doesn't look all that efficient, but his secret police are everywhere." Velvet was holding a spray of cherry blossoms in front of her face, rather ostentatiously inhaling their fragrance.

"At least they can't hear us out here," Garion said.

"No, but they can see us. If I were you, Belgarion, I still wouldn't talk too openly -even out of doors. I happened to come across one industrious fellow yesterday who was busily writing down every word of a conversation being conducted in whispers some fifty yards away."

"That's a neat trick," Belgarath said. "How did he manage it?"

"He's stone-deaf," she replied. "Over the years, he's learned to understand what people are saying by reading the shape of the words from their lips."

"Clever," the old man murmured. "Is that why you're so busily sniffing cherry blossoms?"

She nodded with a dimpled smile. "That and the fact that they have such a lovely fragrance."

He scratched at his beard, his hand covering his mouth. "All right," he said. "What I need is some sort of disruption -to draw Brador's police off so that we can slip out of Mal Zeth without being followed. Zakath is rock hard on the point of not doing anything until his army gets back from Cthol Murgos, so it's obvious that we're going to have to move without him. Is there anything afoot that might distract all the spies around here?"

"Not really, Ancient One. The petty kinglet of Pallia and the Prince Regent of Delchin are scheming against each other, but that's been going on for years. The old King of Voresebo is trying to get imperial aid in wresting his throne back from his son, who deposed him a year or so ago. Baron Vasca, the Chief of the Bureau of Commerce, is trying to assimilate the Bureau of Military Procurement, but the generals have him stalemated. Those are the major things in the air right now. There are a number of minor plots going on as well, but nothing earthshaking enough to divert the spies who are watching us."

"Can you stir anything up?" Polgara asked, her lips

scarcely moving.

"I can try, Lady Polgara," Velvet replied, "but Brador is right on top of everything that's happening here in the palace. I'll talk with Kheldar and Sadi. It's remotely possible that the three of us can engineer something unexpected enough to give us a chance to slip out of the city."

"It's getting fairly urgent, Liselle," Polgara said. "If Zandramas finds what she's looking for at Ashaba, she'll be off again, and we'll wind up trailing along behind her in the same way that we were back in Cthol Murgos."

"I'll see what we can come up with, my lady," Velvet promised.

"Are you going back inside?" Belgarath asked her.

She nodded.

"I'll go with you." He looked around distastefully, "All this fresh air and exercise is a little too wholesome for my taste."

"Walk a bit farther with me, Garion," Polgara said.

"All right."

As Velvet and Belgarath turned back toward the east wing of the palace, Garion and his aunt strolled on along the neatly trimmed green lawn lying beneath the blossom-covered trees. A wren, standing on the topmost twig of a gnarled, ancient tree, sang as if his heart would burst,

"What's he singing about?" Garion asked, suddenly remembering his aunt's unusual affinity for birds.

"He's trying to attract the attention of a female," she replied, smiling gently. "It's that time of year again. He's being very eloquent and making all sorts of promises -most of which he'll break before the summer's over."

He smiled and affectionately put his arm about her shoulders.

She sighed happily. "This is pleasant," she said. "For some reason when we're apart, I still think of you as a little boy. It always sort of surprises me to find that you've grown so tall."

There wasn't too much that he could say to that.

"How's Durnik?" he asked. "I almost never see him these days."

"He and Toth and Eriond managed to find a well-stocked trout pond on the southern end of the imperial grounds," she replied with a slightly comical upward roll of her eyes. "They're catching large numbers of fish, but the kitchen staff is beginning to get a bit surly about the whole thing."

"Trust Durnik to find water." Garion laughed. "Is Eriond actually fishing too? That seems a little out of character for him."

"I don't think he's very serious about it. He goes along mostly for Durnik's company, I think -and because he likes to be outside." She paused and then looked directly at him. As so many times in the past, he was suddenly struck to the heart by her luminous beauty. "How has Ce'Nedra been lately?" she asked him.

"She's managed to locate a number of young ladies to keep her company," he replied. "No matter where we go, she's always able to surround herself with companions."

"Ladies like to have other ladies about them, dear," she

said. "Men are nice enough, I suppose, but a woman needs other women to talk to. There are so many important things that men just don't understand." Her face grew serious. "There hasn't been any recurrence of what happened in Cthol Murgos, then?" she asked.

"Not so far as I can tell. She seems fairly normal to me. About the only unusual thing I've noticed is that she never talks about Geran anymore."

"That could just be her way of protecting herself, Garion. She might not be able to put it into words exactly, but she's aware of the melancholia that came over her at Prolgu, and I'm sure that she realizes that if she gives in to it, she'll be incapacitated. She still thinks about Geran, I'm sure -probably most of the time- but she just won't talk about him." She paused again. "What about the physical side of your marriage?" she asked him directly.

Garion blushed furiously and coughed. "Uh -there really hasn't been much opportunity for that sort of thing, Aunt Pol- and I think she has too many other things on her mind."

She pursed her lips thoughtfully. "It's not a good idea just to ignore that, Garion," she told him. "After a while, people grow apart if they don't periodically renew their intimacy."

He coughed again, still blushing. "She doesn't really seem very interested, Aunt Pol."

"That's your fault, dear. All it takes is a little bit of planning and attention to detail."

"You make it sound awfully calculated and cold-blooded."

"Spontaneity is very nice, dear, but there's a great deal of charm to a well-planned seduction, too."

"Aunt Pol!" he gasped, shocked to the core.

"You're an adult, Garion dear," she reminded him, "and that's one of an adult man's responsibilities. Think about it. You can be quite resourceful at times. I'm sure you'll come up with something." She looked out over the sun-washed lawns. "Shall we go back inside now?" she suggested. "I think it's almost lunch time."

That afternoon, Garion once again found himself strolling about the palace grounds, this time accompanied by Silk and Sadi the eunuch. "Belgarath needs a diversion," he told them seriously. "I think he has a plan to get us out of the city, but we've got to shake off all the spies who are watching us long enough for him to put it into motion." He was busily scratching at his nose as he spoke, his hand covering his mouth.

"Hay fever?" Silk asked him.

"No. Velvet told us that some of Brador's spies are deaf, but that they can tell what you're saying by watching your lips."

"What an extraordinary gift," Sadi murmured. "I wonder if an undeaf man could learn it."

"I can think of some times myself when it might have been useful," Silk agreed, covering his mouth as he feigned a cough. He looked at Sadi. "Can I get an honest answer out of you?" he asked.

"That depends on the question, Kheldar."

"You're aware of the secret language?"

"Of course."

"Do you understand it?"

"I'm afraid not. I've never met a Drasnian who trusted me enough to teach me."

"I wonder why." Sadi flashed him a quick grin.

"I think we can manage if we cover our mouths when we speak," Garion said.

"Won't that become a little obvious after a while?" Sadi objected.

"What are they going to do? Tell us to stop?"

"Probably not, but we might want to pass on some disinformation sometimes, and if they know that we know about this way of listening, we won't be able to do that." The eunuch sighed about the lost opportunity, then shrugged. "Oh, well," he said.

Garion looked at Silk. "Do you know of anything that's going on that we could use to pull the police off our trail?"

"No, not really," the little man replied. "At the moment the Melcene consortium seems to be concentrating on keeping this year's price list a secret and trying to persuade Vasca that Yarblek and I should be restrained to those enclaves on the west coast. We've got Vasca pretty much in our pockets, though -as long as he stays bribed. There's a great deal of secret maneuvering going on, but I don't think anything is close to coming to a head right now. Even if it did, it probably wouldn't cause a big enough stink to make the secret police abandon their assignment to watch us."

"Why not go right to the top?" Sadi suggested. "I could talk to Brador and see if he's susceptible to bribery."

"I don't think so, Garion said. "He's having us watched on specific orders from Zakath. I doubt that any amount of money would make him consider risking his head."

"There are other ways to bribe people, Belgarion." Sadi smiled slyly. "I have some things in my case that make people feel very good. The only trouble with them is that after you've used them a few times, you have to keep on using them. The pain of stopping is really quite unbearable. I could own Brador within the space of a week and make him do anything I told him to do."

Garion felt a sudden surge of profound distaste for the entire notion. "I'd really rather not do that," he said, "or only as a last resort."

"You Alorns have a peculiar notion of morality," the eunuch said, rubbing at his shaved scalp. "You chop people in two without turning a hair, but you get queasy at the idea of poisons or drugs."

"It's a cultural thing, Sadi," Silk told him.

"Have you found anything else that might work to our advantage?" Garion asked.

Sadi considered it. "Not by itself, no," he replied. "A bureaucracy lends itself to endemic corruption, though. There are a number of people in Malloreia who take advantage of that. Caravans have a habit of getting waylaid in the Dalasian Mountains or on the road from Maga Renn. A caravan needs a permit from the Bureau of Commerce, and Vasca has been known on occasion to sell information about departure times and routes to certain robber chiefs. Or, if the price is right, he sells his silence to the merchant barons in Melcene." The eunuch chuckled. "Once he sold information about one single

caravan to three separate robber bands. There was a pitched battle on the plains of Delchin, or so I'm told."

Garion's eyes narrowed in thought. "I'm beginning to get the feeling that we might want to concentrate our attention on this Baron Vasca," he said. "Velvet told us that he's also trying to take the Bureau of Military Procurement away from the army."

"I didn't know that," Silk said with some surprise. "Little Liselle is developing quite rapidly, isn't she?"

"It's the dimples, Prince Kheldar," Sadi said. "I'm almost totally immune to any kind of feminine blandishment, but I have to admit that when she smiles at me, my knees turn to butter. She's absolutely adorable -and totally unscrupulous, of course."

Silk nodded. "Yes," he said. "We're moderately proud of her."

"Why don't you two go look her up?" Garion suggested. "Pool your information about this highly corruptible Baron Vasca. Maybe we can stir something up- something noisy. Open fighting in the halls of the palace might just be the sort of thing we need to cover our escape."

"You have a genuine flair for politics, Belgarion," Sadi said admiringly.

"I'm a quick learner," Garion admitted, "and, of course, I keep company with some very disreputable men."

"Thank you, your Majesty." the eunuch replied with mock appreciation.

Shortly after supper, Garion walked through the halls of the palace for his customary evening conversation with Zakath. As always, a soft-footed secret policeman trailed along some distance behind.

Zakath's mood that evening was pensive -almost approaching the bleak, icy melancholy that had marked him back in Rak Hagga.

"Bad day?" Garion asked him, removing a sleeping kitten footstool in front of his chair. Then he leaned back and set his feet on the stool.

Zakath made a sour face. "I've been whittling away at all the work that piled up while I was in Cthol Murgos," he said. "The problem is that now that I'm back, the pile just keeps getting higher."

"I know the feeling," Garion agreed. "When I get back to Riva, it's probably going to take me a year to clear my desk. Are you open to a suggestion?"

"Suggest away, Garion. Right now, I'll listen to anything." He looked reprovingly at the black and white kitten who was biting his knuckles again. "Not so hard," he murmured, tapping the ferocious little beast on the nose with his forefinger. The kitten laid back its ears and growled a squeaky little growl at him.

"I'm not trying to be offensive or anything," Garion began cautiously, "but I think you're making the same mistake that Urgit made."

"That's an interesting observation. Go on."

"It seems to me that you need to reorganize your government."

Zakath blinked. "Now, that is a major proposal," he said. "I don't get the connection, though. Urgit was a hopeless

incompetent -at least he was before you came along and taught him the fundamentals of ruling. What is this mistake that he and I have in common?"

"Urgit's a coward," Garion said, "and probably always will be. You're not a coward -sometimes a bit crazy, maybe, but never a coward. The problem is that you're both making the same mistake. You're trying to make all the decisions yourselves -even the little ones. Even if you stop sleeping altogether, you won't find enough hours in the day to do that."

"So I've noticed. What's the solution?"

"Delegate responsibility. Your Bureau Chiefs and generals are competent -corrupt, I'll grant you, but they know their jobs. Tell them to take care of things and only bring you the major decisions. And tell them that if anything goes wrong, you'll replace them."

"That's not the Angarak way, Garion. The ruler -or Emperor, in this case -has always made all decisions. It's been that way since before the cracking of the world.

Torak made every decision in antiquity, and the Emperors of Mallorea have followed that example -no matter what we may have felt about him personally."

"Urgit made the exact same mistake," Garion told him. "What you're both forgetting is that Torak was a God, and his mind and will were unlimited. Human beings can't possibly hope to imitate that sort of thing."

"None of my Bureau Chiefs or generals could be trusted with that kind of authority," Zakath said, shaking his head. "They're almost out of control as it is."

"They'll learn the limits," Garion assured him. "After a few of them have been demoted or dismissed, the rest will get the idea."

Zakath smiled bleakly. "That is also not the Angarak way, Garion. When I make an example of someone, it usually involves the headsman's block."

"That's an internal matter, of course," Garion admitted, "You know your people better than I do, but if a man has talent, you can't really call on him again if you've removed his head, can you? Don't waste talent, Zakath. It's too hard to come by."

"You know something?" Zakath said with a slightly amused look. "They call me the man of ice, but in spite of your mild-seeming behavior, you're even more cold-blooded than I am. You're the most practical man I've ever met."

"I was raised in Sendaria, Zakath," Garion reminded him. "Practicality is a religion there. I learned to run a kingdom from a man named Faldor. A kingdom is very much like a farm, really. Seriously, though, the major goal of any ruler is to keep things from flying apart, and gifted subordinates are too valuable a resource to waste. I've had to reprimand a few people, but that's as far as it ever went. That way they were still around in case I needed them. You might want to think about that a little bit."

"I'll consider it." Zakath straightened. "By the way," he said, "speaking of corruption in government-"

"Oh? Were we speaking about that?"

"We're about to. My Bureau Chiefs are all more or less dishonest, but your three friends are adding levels of

sophistication to the petty scheming and deceit here in the palace that we're not really prepared to cope with. "

"Oh?"

"The lovely Margravine Liselle has actually managed to persuade the King of Pallia and the Prince Regent of Delchin that she's going to intercede with you in their behalf. Each of them is absolutely convinced that their long-term squabble is about to come out into the open. I don't want them to declare war on each other. I've got trouble in Karanda already."

"I'll have a word with her," Garion promised.

"And Prince Kheldar virtually owns whole floors of the Bureau of Commerce. He's getting more information out of there than I am. The merchants in Melcene gather every year to set prices for just about everything that's sold in Mallorea. It's the most closely guarded secret in the empire, and Kheldar just bought it. He's deliberately undercutting those prices, and he's disrupting our whole economy."

Garion frowned. "He didn't mention that."

"I don't mind his making a reasonable profit -as long as he pays his taxes- but I can't really have him gaining absolute control over all commerce in Mallorea, can I? He is an Alorn, after all, and his political loyalties are a little obscure."

"I'll suggest that he moderate his practices a bit. You have to understand Silk, though. I don't believe he even cares about the money. All he's interested in is the game."

"It's still Sadi who concerns me the most, though."

"Oh?"

"He's become rather intensely involved in agriculture."

"Sadi?"

"There's a certain plant that grows wild in the marshes of Camat. Sadi's paying a great deal for it, and one of our prominent bandit chiefs has put all of his men to work harvesting it -and protecting the crop, of course. There have already been some pitched battles up there, I understand."

"A bandit who's harvesting crops is too busy to be robbing travelers on the highways, though," Garion pointed out.

"That's not exactly the point, Garion. I didn't mind so much when Sadi was making a few officials feel good and act foolish, but he's importing this plant into the city by the wagon load and spreading it around through the work force -and the army. I don't care for the idea at all."

"I'll see what I can do to get him to suspend operations," Garion agreed. Then he looked at the Malloreaan Emperor through narrowed eyes. "You do realize, though, that if I rein the three of them in, they'll just switch over to something new -and probably just as disruptive. Wouldn't it be better if I just took them out of Mal Zeth entirely?"

Zakath smiled. "Nice try, Garion," he said, "but I don't think so. I think we'll just wait until my army gets back from Cthol Murgos. Then we can all ride out of Mal Zeth together."

"You are the most stubborn man I've ever met," Garion said with some heat. "Can't you get it through your head that time is slipping away from us? This delay could be disastrous -not only for you and me, but for the whole world."

"The fabled meeting between the Child of Light and the Child of Dark again? I'm sorry, Garion, but Zandramas is just

going to have to wait for you. I don't want you and Belgarath roaming at will through my empire. I like you, Garion, but I don't altogether trust you."

Garion's temper began to heat up. He thrust his jaw out pugnaciously as he rose to his feet. "My patience is starting to wear a little thin, Zakath. I've tried to keep things between us more or less civil, but there is a limit, and we're getting rather close to it. I am not going to lie around your palace for three months."

"That's where you're wrong," Zakath snapped, also rising to his feet and unceremoniously dumping the surprised kitten to the floor.

Garion ground his teeth together, trying to get his temper under control. "Up to now, I've been polite, but I'd like to remind you about what happened back at Rak Hagga. We can leave here any time we want to, you know,"

"And the minute you do, you're going to have three of my regiments right on your heels." Zakath was shouting now.

"Not for very long," Garion replied ominously.

"What are you going to do?" Zakath demanded scornfully. "Turn all my troops into toads or something? No, Garion, I know you well enough to know that you wouldn't do that."

Garion straightened. "You're right," he said, "I wouldn't, but I was thinking of something a bit more elemental. Torak used the Orb to crack the world, remember? I know how it was done and I could do it myself if I had to. Your troops are going to have a great deal of trouble following us if they suddenly run into a trench -ten miles deep and fifty miles wide- stretching all the way across the middle of Mallorea."

"You wouldn't!" Zakath gasped.

"Try me," With a tremendous effort, Garion brought his anger under control. "I think perhaps it's time for us to break this off," he said. "We're starting to shout threats at each other like a pair of schoolboys. Why don't we continue this conversation some other time, after we've both had a chance to cool off a bit?" He could see a hot retort hovering on Zakath's lips, but then the Emperor also drew himself up and regained his composure, though his face was still pale with anger.

"I think perhaps you're right," he said.

Garion nodded curtly and started toward the door.

"Garion," Zakath said then.

"Yes?"

"Sleep well."

"You too." Garion left the room.

Her Imperial Highness, the Princess Ce'Nedra, Queen of Riva and beloved of Belgarion, Overlord of the West, was feeling pecky. "Pecky" was not a word that her Imperial Highness would normally have used to describe her mood. "Disconsolate" or "out of sorts" might have had a more aristocratic ring, but Ce'Nedra was honest enough with herself privately to admit that "pecky" probably came closer to the mark. She moved irritably from room to room in the luxurious apartment Zakath had provided for her and Garion with the hem of her favorite teal green dressing gown trailing along behind her bare feet. She suddenly wished that breaking a few dishes wouldn't appear quite so unladylike.

A chair got in her way. She almost kicked it, but remembered at the last instant that she was not wearing shoes. Instead she deliberately took the cushion from the chair and set it on the floor. She plumped it a few times, then straightened. She lifted the hem of her dressing gown to her knees, squinted, swung her leg a few times for practice, and then kicked the cushion completely across the room. "There!" she said. "Take that!" For some reason it made her feel a little better.

Garion was away from their rooms at the moment, engaged in his customary evening conversation with Emperor Zakath. Ce'Nedra wished that he were here so that she could pick a fight with him. A nice little fight right now might modify her mood.

She went through a door and looked at the steaming tub sunk in the floor. Perhaps a bath might help. She even went so far as to dip an exploratory toe in the water, then decided against it. She sighed and moved on. She paused for a few moments at the window of the unlighted sitting room that overlooked the verdant atrium at the center of the east wing of the palace. The full moon had risen early that day and stood high in the sky, filling the atrium with its pale, colorless light, and the pool at the center of the private little court reflected back the perfect white circle of the queen of the night. Ce'Nedra stood for quite some time, looking out the window, lost in thought.

She heard the door open and then slam shut. "Ce'Nedra, where are you?" Garion's voice sounded a trifle testy.

"I'm in here, dear."

"Why are you standing around in the dark?" he asked, coming into the room.

"I was just looking at the moon. Do you realize that it's the same moon that shines down on Tol Honeth -and Riva, too, for that matter?"

"I hadn't really thought about it," he replied shortly.

"Why are you being so grumpy with me?"

"It's not you, Ce'Nedra," he answered apologetically. "I had another fight with Zakath, is all."

"That's getting to be a habit."

"Why is he so unreasonably stubborn?" Garion demanded.

"That's part of the nature of Kings and Emperors, dear."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing."

"Do you want something to drink? I think we've still got some of that wine left."

"I don't think so. Not right now."

"Well I do. After my little chat with his pigheaded imperialness, I need something to calm my nerves." He went back out, and she heard the clink of a decanter against the rim of a goblet.

Out in the moon-bright atrium something moved out from the shadows of the tall, broad-leafed trees. It was Silk. He was wearing only his shirt and hose, he had a bath sheet over his shoulder, and he was whistling. He bent at the edge of the pool and dipped his fingers into the water. Then he stood up and began to unbutton his shirt.

Ce'Nedra smiled, drew back behind the drape, and watched as the little man disrobed. Then he stepped down into the

pool, shattering the reflected moon into a thousand sparkling fragments. Ce'Nedra continued to watch as he lazily swam back and forth in the moon-dappled water.

Then there was another shadow under the trees, and Liselle came out into the moonlight. She wore a loose-fitting robe, and there was a flower in her hair. The flower was undoubtedly red, but the wan light of the full spring moon leached away the color, making it appear black against the blond girl's pale hair. "How's the water?" she asked quite calmly. Her voice seemed very close, almost as if she were in the same room with the watching Ce'Nedra.

Silk gave a startled exclamation, then coughed as his mouth and nose filled with water. He spluttered, then recovered his composure. "Not bad," he replied in an unruffled tone.

"Good," Liselle said. She moved to the edge of the pool. "Kheldar, I think it's time that we had a talk."

"Oh? About what?"

"About this." Quite calmly she unbelted her robe and let it fall to the ground about her feet.

She wasn't wearing anything under the robe.

"You seem to have a little difficulty grasping the idea that things change with the passage of time," she continued, dipping one foot into the water. Quite deliberately, she pointed at herself. "This is one of those things."

"I noticed that," he said admiringly.

"I'm so glad. I was beginning to be afraid that your eyes might be failing." She stepped down into the pool and stood waist-deep in the water. "Well?" she said then.

"Well what?"

"What do you plan to do about it?" She reached up and took the flower from her hair and carefully laid it on the surface of the pool.

Ce'Nedra darted to the door on silent, bare feet.

"Garion!" she called in an urgent whisper. "Come here!"

"Why?"

"Keep your voice down and come here."

He grumbled slightly and came into the darkened room.

"What is it?"

She pointed at the window with a muffled giggle. "Look!" she commanded in a delighted little whisper.

Garion went to the window and looked out. After a single glance, he quickly averted his eyes. "Oh, my," he said in a strangled whisper.

Ce'Nedra giggled again, came to his side, and burrowed her way under his arm. "Isn't that sweet?" she said softly.

"I'm sure it is," he whispered back, "but I don't think we ought to watch."

"Why not?"

The flower Liselle on the water had floated across the intervening and Silk, his expression bemused, picked it up and smelled it. "Yours, I believe," he said, holding it out to the pale-skinned girl sharing the pool with him.

"Why, yes, I believe it is," she replied. "But you haven't answered my question."

"Which question?"

"What are you going to do about this?"

"I'll think of something."

"Good. I'll help you."

Garion firmly reached out and pulled the drape shut.

"Spoilsport," Ce'Nedra pouted.

"Never mind," he told her. "Now come away from the window." He drew her out of the room. "I can't understand what she's up to," he said.

"I thought that was fairly obvious."

"Ce'Nedra!"

"She's seducing him, Garion. She's been in love with him since she was a little girl and she's finally decided to take steps. I'm so happy for her that I could just burst." He shook his head. "I will never understand women," he said. "Just when I think I've got everything worked out, you all get together and change the rules. You wouldn't believe what Aunt Pol said to me just this morning."

"Oh? What was that?"

"She said that I ought to-" He stopped abruptly, his face suddenly going beet red. "Ah -never mind," he added lamely.

"What was it?"

"I'll tell you some other time." He gave her a peculiar look then. It was a look she thought she recognized.

"Have you taken your evening bath yet?" he asked with exaggerated casualness.

"Not yet. Why?"

"I thought I might join you -if you don't mind."

Ce'Nedra artfully lowered her lashes. "If you really want to," she said in a girlish voice.

"I'll light some candles in there," he said. "The lamp's a bit bright, don't you think?"

"Whatever you prefer, dear."

"And I think I'll bring in the wine, too. It might help us to relax."

Ce'Nedra felt an exultant little surge of triumph. For some reason her irritability had entirely disappeared. "I think that would be just lovely, dear."

"Well," he said, extending a slightly trembling hand to her, "shall we go in, then?"

"Why don't we?"

CHAPTER TEN

The following morning when they gathered for breakfast, Silk's expression was faintly abstracted as if he had just realized that someone had somehow outbargained him. The little man steadfastly refused to look at Velvet, who kept her eyes demurely on the bowl of strawberries and cream she was eating.

"You seem a trifle out of sorts this morning, Prince Kheldar," Ce'Nedra said to him in an offhand manner, though her eyes sparkled with suppressed mirth. "Whatever is the matter?"

He threw her a quick, suspicious look.

"There, there," she said, fondly patting his hand. "I'm sure that you'll feel much better after breakfast."

"I'm not very hungry," he replied. His voice was just a little sullen. He stood up abruptly. "I think I'll go for a walk," he said.

"But my dear fellow," she protested, "you haven't eaten

your strawberries. They're absolutely delicious, aren't they, Liselle?"

"Marvelous," the blond girl agreed with only the faintest hint of her dimples showing.

Silk's scowl deepened, and he marched resolutely toward the door.

"May I have yours, Kheldar?" Velvet called after him.

"If you're not going to eat them, that is?"

He slammed the door as he went out, and Ce'Nedra and Velvet exploded into gales of silvery laughter.

"What's this?" Polgara asked them.

"Oh, nothing," Ce'Nedra said, still laughing. "Nothing at all, Lady Polgara. Our Prince Kheldar had a little adventure last night that didn't turn out exactly the way he expected it to."

Velvet gave Ce'Nedra a quick look and flushed slightly. Then she laughed again.

Polgara looked at the giggling pair, and then one of her eyebrows went up. "Oh. I see," she said.

The flush on Velvet's cheeks grew rosier, although she continued to laugh.

"Oh, dear." Polgara sighed.

"Is something wrong, Pol?" Durnik asked her.

She looked at the good, honest man, assessing his strict Sendarian principles. "Just a small complication, Durnik," she replied, "Nothing that can't be managed."

"That's good." He pushed back his bowl. "Do you need me for anything this morning?"

"No, dear," she replied, kissing him.

He returned her kiss and then stood up, looking across the table at Toth and Eriond, who sat waiting expectantly. "Shall we go then?" he asked them.

The three of them trooped out, their faces alight with anticipation.

"I wonder how long it's going to take them to empty all the fish out of that pond," Polgara mused.

"Forever, I'm afraid, Lady Polgara," Sadi told her, popping a strawberry into his mouth. "The grounds keepers restock it every night."

She sighed. "I was afraid of that," she said.

About midmorning, Garion was pacing up and down one of the long, echoing halls. He felt irritable, and a sort of frustrated impatience seemed to weigh him down. The urgent need to get to Ashaba before Zandramas escaped him again was so constantly on his mind now that he could think of almost nothing else. Although they had come up with several possible schemes, Silk, Velvet, and Sadi were still searching for a suitable diversion -something startling enough to draw off Brador's secret policemen so that they could all make good their escape. There was obviously little chance of changing Zakath's mind; and it began to look increasingly as if Garion and his friends were going to have to "do it the other way." as Belgarath sometimes put it. Despite his occasional threats to Zakath, Garion didn't really want to do that. He was quite sure that to do so would permanently end his growing friendship with the strange man who ruled Mallorean. He was honest enough to admit that it was not only the friendship he would regret losing but the political possibilities implicit

in the situation as well.

He was about to return to his rooms when a scarlet-liveried servant came up to him. "Your Majesty," the servant said with a deep bow, "Prince Kheldar asked me to find you for him. He'd like to have a word with you."

"Where is he?" Garion asked.

"In the formal garden near the north wall of the complex, your Majesty. There's a half-drunk Nadrak with him -and a woman with a remarkably foul mouth. You wouldn't believe some of the things she said to me."

"I think I know her," Garion replied with a faint smile. "I'd believe it." He turned then and walked briskly through the hallways and out into the palace grounds.

Yarblek had not changed. Though it was pleasantly warm in the neatly manicured formal garden, he nonetheless still wore his shabby felt overcoat and his shaggy fur hat. He was sprawled on a marble bench under a leafy arbor with a broached ale keg conveniently at hand.

Vella, as lush as ever, wandered idly among the flowerbeds, dressed in her tight-fitting Nadrak vest and leather trousers. Her silver-hilted daggers protruded from the tops of her boots and from her belt, and her walk was still that same challenging, sensual strut, a mannerism she had practiced for so long that it was by now automatic and probably even unconscious. Silk sat on the grass near Yarblek's bench, and he, too, held - an ale cup.

"I was just about to come looking for you," he said as Garion approached.

The rangy Yarblek squinted at Garion. "Well, well," he said, blinking owlishly, "if it isn't the boy-King of Riva. I, see that you're still wearing that big sword of yours."

"It's a habit," Garion shrugged. "You're looking well, Yarblek -aside from being a little drunk, that is."

"I've been cutting down," Yarblek said rather piously. "My stomach isn't what it used to be."

"Did you happen to see Belgarath on your way here?" Silk asked Garion.

"No. Should I have?"

"I sent for him, too. Yarblek's got some information for us, and I want the old man to get it firsthand."

Garion looked at Silk's coarse-faced partner. "How long have you been in Mal Zeth?" he asked.

"We got in last night," Yarblek replied, dipping his cup into the ale keg again. "Dolmar told me that you were all here in the palace, so I came by this morning to look you up."

"How long are you going to stay in town?" Silk asked him.

Yarblek tugged at his scraggly beard and squinted up at the arbor. "That's kind of hard to say," he said. "Dolmar picked up most of what I need, but I want to nose around the markets a bit. There's a Tolnedran in Boktor who said that he's interested in uncut gem stones. I could pick up a quick fortune on that transaction -particularly if I could sneak the stones past Drasnian customs."

"Don't Queen Porenn's customs agents search your packs pretty thoroughly?" Garion asked him.

"From top to bottom," Yarblek laughed, "And they pat me down as well. They don't, however, lay one finger on Vella. They've all learned how quick she is with her daggers. I've

made back what I paid for her a dozen times over by hiding little packages here and there in her clothes." He laughed coarsely. "And of course the hiding is sort of fun, too." He belched thunderously.

"Par'me," he said.

Belgarath came across the lawn. The old man had resisted all of Zakath's tactful offers of less disreputable raiment, and still wore, defiantly, Garion thought, his stained tunic, patched hose, and mismatched boots.

"Well, I see that you finally got here," he said to Yarblek without any preamble.

"I got tied up in Mal Camat," the Nadrak replied. "Kal Zakath is commandeering ships all up and down the west-coast to bring his army back from stinking Cthol Murgos. I had to hire boats and hide them in the marshes north of the ruins of Cthol Mishrak." He pointed at the ale keg. "You want some of this?" he asked.

"Naturally. Have you got another cup?"

Yarblek patted here and there at his voluminous coat, reached into an inside pocket, and drew out a squat, dented tankard.

"I like a man who comes prepared."

"A proper host is always ready. Help yourself. Just try not to spill too much." The Nadrak looked at Garion. "How about you?" he asked. "I think I could find another cup"

"No. Thanks anyway, Yarblek. It's a little early for me."

Then a short, gaudily dressed man came around the arbor. His clothes were a riot of frequently conflicting colors. One sleeve was green, the other red. One leg of his hose was striped in pink and yellow and the other covered with large blue polka dots. He wore a tall, pointed cap with a bell attached to the peak. It was not his outrageous clothing that was so surprising, however. What caught Garion's eye first was the fact that the man was quite casually walking on his hands with both feet extended into the air. "Did I hear somebody offer somebody a little drap of somethin' to drink" he asked in a strange, lilting brogue that Garion did not quite recognize.

Yarblek gave the colorful little fellow a sour look and reached inside his coat again.

The acrobat flexed his shoulders, thrusting himself into the air, flipped over in midair, and landed on his feet. He briskly brushed off his hands and came toward Yarblek with an ingratiating smile. His face was nondescript, the kind of face that would be forgotten almost as soon as it was seen, but for some reason, it seemed to Garion to be naggingly familiar.

"Ah, good master Yarblek," the man said to Silk's partner, "I'm sure that yer the kindest man alive. I was near to perishin' of thirst, don't y' know?" He took the cup, dipped into the ale keg, and drank noisily. Then he let out his breath with a gusty sound of appreciation.

"Tis a good brew ye have there, Master Yarblek," he said, dipping again into the keg.

Belgarath had a peculiar expression on his face, partly puzzled but at the same time partially amused.

"He came tagging along when we left Mal Camat," Yarblek told them. "Vella finds him amusing, so I haven't chased him off yet. She turns a little shrill when she doesn't get her

own wary."

"The name is Feldegast, fine gentlemen," the gaudy little fellow introduced himself with an exaggerated bow. "Feldegast the juggler. I be also an acrobat -as ye've seen fer yerselves- a comedian of no mean ability, and an accomplished magician. I can baffle yer eyes with me unearthly skill at prestidigitation, don't y' know. I kin also play rousin' tunes on a little wooden whistle -or, if yer mood be melancholy, I kin play ye sad songs on the lute to bring a lump to yer throat and fill yer eyes with sweet, gentle tears. Would ye be wantin' to witness some of me unspeakable talent?"

"Maybe a little later," Belgarath told him, his eyes still a little bemused. "Right now we have some business to discuss."

"Take another cup of ale and go entertain Vella, comedian," Yarblek said to him. "Tell her some more off-color stories."

" 'Twill be me eternal delight, good Master Yarblek," the outrageous fellow said grandly. "She's a good strappin' wench with a lusty sense of humor and a fine appreciation fer bawdy stories." He dipped out more ale and then capered across the lawn toward the dark-haired Nadrak girl.

"Disgusting," Yarblek growled, looking after him. "some of the stories he tells her make my ears bum, but the nastier they are, the harder she laughs." He shook his head moodily.

"Let's get down to business," Belgarath said. "We need to know what's going on in Karanda right now." "That's simple," Yarblek told him. "Mengha, that's what's going on. Mengha and his cursed demons."

"Dolmar filled us in," Silk said. "We know about what happened at Calida and about the way that Karands are flocking in to join his army from all over the seven kingdoms. Is he making any moves toward the south yet?"

"Not that I've heard," Yarblek replied. "He seems to be consolidating things through the north right now. He's whipping all of the Karands into hysteria, though. If Zakath doesn't do something quickly, he's going to have a full-scale revolution on his hands. I can tell you, though, that it's not safe to travel in northern Karanda right now. Mengha's shrieking Karands control everything to the coast of Zamad."

"We have to go to Ashaba," Garion told him.

"I wouldn't advise it," Yarblek said bluntly. "The Karands are picking up some very unsavory habits."

"Oh?" Silk said.

"I'm an Angarak," Yarblek said, "and I've been watching Grolims cut out human hearts to offer to Torak since I was a boy, but what's happening in Karanda turns even my stomach. The Karands stake captives out on the ground and then call up their demons. The demons are all getting fat."

"Would you care to be a little more specific?"

"Not really. Use your imagination, Silk. You've been in Morindland. You know what demons eat."

"You're not serious!"

"Oh, yes -and the Karands eat the scraps. As I said -some very unsavory habits. There are also some rumors about the demons breeding with human females."

"That's abominable!" Garion gasped.

"It is indeed," Yarblek agreed with him. "The women

usually don't survive their pregnancies, but I've heard of a few live births."

"We have to put a stop to that," Belgarath said bleakly.

"Good luck," Yarblek said. "Me, I'm going back to Gar og Nadrak just as soon as I can get my caravan put together. I'm not going anywhere near Mengha -or the tame demon he keeps on a leash."

"Nahaz?" Garion asked.

"You've heard the name then?"

"Dolmar told us."

"We should probably start with him, " Belgarath said. "If we can drive Nahaz back to where he came from, it's likely that the rest. of the demons will follow their lord."

"Neat trick," Yarblek grunted.

"I have certain resources," the old man told him. "Once the demons are gone, Mengha won't have anything left but a ragtag army of Karandese fanatics. We'll be able to go on about our business and leave the mopping up to Zakath." He smiled briefly. "That might occupy his mind enough to keep him from breathing down our necks."

Vella was laughing raucously as she and Feldegast the juggler approached the arbor. The little comedian was walking on his hands again -erratically and with his feet waving ludicrously in the air.

"He tells a good story," the lush-bodied Nadrak girl said, still laughing, "but he can't hold his liquor."

"I didn't think he drank all that much," Silk said.

"It wasn't the ale that fuddled him so bad," she replied. She drew a silver flask from under her belt. "I gave him a pull or two at this." Her eyes suddenly sparkled with mischief. "Care to try some, Silk?" she offered, holding out the flask.

"What's in it?" he asked suspiciously.

"Just a little drink we brew in Gar og Nadrak," she said innocently. "It's as mild as mothers' milk." She demonstrated by taking a long drink from the flask.

"'Othlass?"

She nodded.

"No thanks." He shuddered. "The last time I drank that, I lost track of a whole week."

"Don't be so chicken-livered, Silk," she told him scornfully. She took another drink. "See? It doesn't hurt a bit." She looked at Garion. "My lord," she said to him. "How's your pretty little wife?"

"She's well, Vella."

"I'm glad to hear that. Have you got her pregnant again yet?"

Garion flushed. "No," he replied.

"You're wasting time, my lord. Why don't you run back to the palace and chase her around the bedroom a time or two?" Then she turned to Belgarath. "Well?" she said to him.

"Well what?"

She smoothly drew one of her knives from her belt. "Would you like to try again?" she asked, turning deliberately so that her well-rounded posterior was available to him.

"Ah, thanks all the same, Vella," he said with a kind massive dignity, "But it's a bit early "

"That's all right, old man," she said. "I'm ready for you

this time. Any time you're in a patting frame of mind, feel free. I sharpened all my knives before we came -especially for you."

"You're too kind."

The drunken Feldegast lurched, tried to regain his balance, and toppled over in an unceremonious heap. When he stumbled to his feet, his plain face was splotched and distorted, and he stood hunched over with his back bowed to the point where he almost looked deformed.

"I think the girl got the best of you, my friend," Belgarath said jovially as he moved quickly to help the inebriated juggler to right himself. "You really ought to straighten up, though. If you stand around bent over like that, you'll tie your insides in knots."

Garion saw his grandfather's lips moving slightly as he whispered something to the tipsy entertainer. Then, so faint that it was barely discernible, he felt the surge of the old man's will.

Feldegast straightened, his face buried in his hands. "Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear," he said. "Have y' poisoned me, me girl?" he demanded of Vella. "I can't remember ever bein' taken by the drink so fast." He took his hands away. The splotches and distortion were gone from his face, and he looked as he had before.

"Don't ever try to drink with a Nadrak woman," Belgarath advised him, "particularly when she's the one who brewed the liquor."

"It seems that I heard a snatch of conversation whilst I was entertainin' the wench hew. Is it Karanda ye be talkin' about -and the woeful things happenin' there?"

"We were," Belgarath admitted.

"I display me talents betimes in wayside inns and taverns -for pennies and a drink or two, don't y' know- and a great deal of information comes into places like that. Sometimes if ye make a man laugh and be merry, ye kin draw more out of him than ye can with silver or strong drink. As it happened, I was in such a place not long ago -dazzlin' the onlookers with the brilliance of me performance- and happens that whilst I was there, a wayfarer came in from the east. A great brute of a man he was, and he told us the distressful news from Karanda. And after he had eaten and finished more pots of good strong ale than was good for him, I sought him out and questioned him further. A man in me profession can't never know too much about the places where he might be called upon to display his art, don't y' know. This great brute of a man, who should not have feared anythin' that walks, was shakin' and tremblin' like a frightened babe, and he tells me that I should stay out of Karanda as I valued me life. And then he tells me a very strange thing, which I have not yet put the meanin' to, He tells me that the road between Calida and Mal Yaska is thick with messengers goin' to and fro, hither and yon. Isn't that an amazin' thing? How could a man account fer it? But there be strange things goin' on in the world, good masters, and wonders to behold that no man at all could ever begin to imagine."

The juggler's lilting brogue was almost hypnotic in its charm and liquidity, and Garion found himself somehow caught up in the really quite commonplace narrative. He felt a

peculiar disappointment as the gaudy little man broke off his story.

"I hope that me tale has brought ye some small entertainment an' enlightenment, good masters," Feldegast said ingratiatingly, his grass-stained hand held out suggestively.

"I make me way in the world with me wits and me talents, givin' of them as free as the birds, but I'm grateful fer little tokens of appreciation, don't y' know."

"Pay him," Belgarath said shortly to Garion.

"What?"

"Give him some money."

Garion sighed and reached for the leather purse at his belt.

"May the Gods all smile down on ye, young master," Feldegast thanked Garion effusively for the few small coins which changed hands. Then he looked slyly at Vella. "Tell me, me girl," he said, "have ye ever heard the story of the milkmaid and the peddler? I must give ye fair warnin' that it's a naughty little story, and I'd be covered with shame to bring a blush to yer fair cheeks."

"I haven't blushed since I was fourteen," Vella said to him.

"Well then, why don't we go apart a ways, an' I'll see if I can't remedy that? I'm told that blushin' is good fer the complexion."

Vella laughed and followed him back out onto the lawn.

"Silk," Belgarath said brusquely, "I need that diversion -now."

"We don't really have anything put together yet," Silk objected.

"Make something up, then," The old man turned to Yarblek. "And I don't want you to leave Mal Zeth until I give you the word. I might need you here."

"What's the matter, Grandfather?" Garion asked.

"We have to leave here as quickly as possible."

Out on the lawn, Vella stood wide-eyed and with the palms of her hands pressed to her flaming cheeks.

"Ye'll have to admit that I warned ye, me girl," Feldegast chortled triumphantly. "Which is more than I can say about the deceitful way ye slipped yer dreadful brew into me craw." He looked at her admiringly. "I must say, though, that ye bloom like a red, red rose when ye blush like that, and yer a joy to behold in yer maidenlike confusion. Tell me, have ye by chance heard the one about the shepherdess and the knight-errant?"

Vella fled.

That afternoon, Silk, who normally avoided anything remotely resembling physical exertion, spent several hours in the leafy atrium in the center of the east wing, busily piling stones across the mouth of the tiny rivulet of fresh, sparkling water which fed the pool at the center of the little garden. Garion watched curiously from the window of his sitting room until he could stand it no longer. He went out into the atrium to confront the sweating little Drasnian. "Are you taking up landscaping as a hobby?" he asked.

"No," Silk replied, mopping his forehead, "just taking a little precaution, is all."

"Precaution against what?"

Silk held up one finger. "Wait," he said, gauging the

level of the water rising behind his improvised dam. After a moment, the water began to spill over into the pool with a loud gurgling and splashing. "Noisy, isn't it?" he said proudly.

"Won't that make sleep in these surrounding rooms a little hard?" Garion asked.

"It's also going to make listening almost impossible," the little man said smugly. "As soon as it gets dark, why don't you and I and Sadi and Liselle gather here. We need to talk, and my cheerful little waterfall should cover what we say to each other."

"Why after dark?"

Silk slyly laid one finger alongside his long, pointed nose. "So that the night will hide our lips from those police who don't use their ears to listen with."

"That's clever," Garion said.

"Why, yes. I thought so myself." Then Silk made a sour face. "Actually, it was Liselle's idea," he confessed.

Garion smiled. "But she let you do the work."

Silk grunted. "She claimed that she didn't want to break any of her fingernails. I was going to refuse, but she threw her dimples at me, and I gave in."

"She uses those very well, doesn't she? They're more dangerous than your knives."

"Are you trying to be funny, Garion?"

"Would I do that, old friend?"

As the soft spring evening descended over Mal Zeth, Garion joined his three friends in the dim atrium beside Silk's splashing waterfall.

"Very nice work, Kheldar," Velvet complimented the little man.

"Oh, shut up."

"Why, Kheldar!"

"All right," Garion said, by way of calling the meeting to order, "what have we got that we can work with? Belgarath wants us out of Mal Zeth almost immediately."

"I've been following your advice, Belgarion," Sadi murmured, "and I've been concentrating my attention on Baron Vasca. He's a man of eminent corruption and he has his fingers in so many pies that he sometimes loses track of just who's bribing him at any given moment."

"Exactly what's he up to right now?" Garion asked.

"He's still trying to take over the Bureau of Military Procurement," Velvet reported. "That bureau is controlled by the General Staff, however. It's mostly composed of colonels, but there's a General Bregar serving as Bureau Chief. The colonels aren't too greedy, but Bregar has a large payroll. He has to spread quite a bit of money around among his fellow generals to keep Vasca in check."

Garion thought about that. "Aren't you bribing Vasca as well?" he asked Silk.

Silk nodded glumly. "The price is going up, though. The consortium of Melcene merchant barons is laying a lot of money in his path, trying to get him to restrict Yarblek and me to the west-coast."

"Can he raise any sort of force? Fighting men, I mean?"

"He has contacts with a fair number of robber chiefs,"

Sadi replied, "and they have some pretty rough and ready fellows working for them."

"Is there any band operating out of Mal Zeth right now?"

Sadi coughed rather delicately. "I just brought a string of wagons down from Camat," he admitted. "Agricultural products for the most part."

Garion gave him a hard look. "I thought I asked you not to do that anymore."

"The crop had already been harvested, Belgarion," the eunuch protested. "It doesn't make sense to just let it rot in the fields, does it?"

"That's sound business thinking, Garion," Silk interceded.

"Anyway," Sadi hurried on, "the band that's handling the harvesting and transport for me is one of the largest in this part of Mallorean -two or three hundred anyway, and I have a goodly number of stout fellows involved in local distribution."

"You did all this in just a few weeks?" Garion was incredulous.

"One makes very little profit by allowing the grass to grow under one's feet," Sadi stated piously.

"Well put," Silk approved.

"Thank you, Prince Kheldar."

Garion shook his head in defeat. "Is there any way you can get your bandits into the palace grounds?"

"Bandits?" Sadi sounded injured.

"Isn't that what they are?"

"I prefer to think of them as entrepreneurs."

"Whatever. Can you get them in?"

"I sort of doubt it, Belgarion. What did you have in mind?"

"I thought we might offer their services to Baron Vasca to help in his forthcoming confrontation with the General Staff."

"Is there going to be a confrontation?" Sadi looked surprised. "I hadn't heard about that."

"That's because we haven't arranged it yet. Vasca's going to find out -probably tomorrow- that his activities have irritated the General Staff, and that they're going to send troops into his offices to arrest him and to dig through his records to find enough incriminating evidence to take to the Emperor."

"That's brilliant," Silk said.

"I liked it -but it won't work unless Vasca's got enough men to hold off a fair number of troops."

"It can still work," Sadi said. "At about the same time that Vasca finds out about his impending arrest, I'll offer him the use of my men. He can bring them into the palace complex under the guise of workmen. All the Bureau Chiefs are continually renovating their offices. It has to do with status, I think."

"What's the plan here, Garion?" Silk asked.

"I want open fighting right here in the halls of the palace. That should attract the attention of Brador's policemen"

"He was born to be a King, wasn't he?" Velvet approved. "Only royalty has the ability to devise a deception of that scale."

"Thanks," Garion said dryly. "It's not going to work,

though, if Vasca just takes up defensive positions in his bureau offices. We also have to persuade him to strike first. The soldiers won't really be coming after him, so we're going to have to make him start the fight himself. What kind of man is Vasca?"

"Deceitful, greedy, and not really all that bright," Silk replied.

"Can he be pressured into any kind of rashness?"

"Probably not. Bureaucrats tend to be cowardly. I don't think he'd make a move until he sees the soldiers coming"

"I believe I can make him bolder," Sadi said. "I have something very nice in a green vial that would make a mouse attack a lion."

Garion made a face. "I don't much care for that way," he said.

"It's the results that count, Belgarion," Sadi pointed out. "If things are that urgent right now, delicate feelings might be a luxury we can't afford."

"All right," Garion decided. "Do whatever you have to."

"Once things are in motion, I might be able to throw in just a bit of additional confusion," Velvet said. "The King of Pallia and the Prince Regent of Delchin both have sizable retinues, and they're on the verge of open war anyway. There's also the King of Veresebo, who's so senile that he distrusts everybody. I could probably persuade each of them that any turmoil in the halls is directed at them personally. They'd put their men-at-arms into the corridors at the first sound of fighting."

"Now that's got some interesting possibilities," Silk said, rubbing his hands together gleefully. "A five-way brawl in the palace ought to give us all the opportunity we need to leave town."

"And it wouldn't necessarily have to be confined to the palace," Sadi added thoughtfully. "A bit of judicious misdirection could probably spread it out into the city itself. A general riot in the streets would attract quite a bit of attention, wouldn't you say?"

"How long would it take to set it up?" Garion asked.

Silk looked at his partners in crime. "Three days?" he asked them, "Maybe four?" They both considered it, then nodded.

"That's it then, Garion," Silk said. "Three or four days."

"All right. Do it."

They all turned and started back toward the entrance to the atrium. "Margravine Liselle," Sadi said firmly.

"Yes, Sadi?"

"I'll take my snake back now, if you don't mind."

"Oh, of course, Sadi." She reached into her bodice for Zith.

Silk's face blanched, and he stepped back quickly.

"Something wrong, Kheldar?" she asked innocently.

"Never mind." The little man turned on his heel and went on through the green-smelling evening gesticulating and talking to himself.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

His name was Balsca. He was a rheumy-eyed seafaring man with bad habits and mediocre skills who hailed from Kaduz, a fish-reeking town on one of the northern Melcene Islands. He had signed on as a common deck hand for the past six years aboard a leaky merchantman grandiosely named The Star of Jarot, commanded by an irascible peg-leg captain from Celanta who called himself "Woodfoot," a colorful name which Balsca privately suspected was designed to conceal the captain's true identity from the maritime authorities.

Balsca did not like Captain Woodfoot. Balsca had not liked any ships' officers since he had been summarily

flogged ten years back for pilfering grog from ship's stores aboard a ship of the line in the Mallolean navy.

Balsca had nursed his grievance from that incident until he had found an opportunity to jump ship, and then he had gone in search of kindlier masters and more understanding officers in the merchant marine.

He had not found them aboard The Star of Jarot.

His most recent disillusionment had come about as the result of a difference of views with the ship's bosun, a heavy-fisted rascal from Pannor in Rengel. That altercation had left Balsca without his front teeth, and his vigorous protest to the captain had evoked jeering laughter followed by his being unceremoniously kicked off the quarterdeck by a nail-studded leg constructed of solid oak. The humiliation and the bruises were bad enough, but the splinters which festered for weeks in Balsca's behind made it almost impossible for him to sit down, and sitting down was Balsca's favorite position.

He brooded about it, leaning on the starboard rail well out of Captain Woodfoot's view and staring out at the lead-gray swells surging through the straits of Perivor as The Star of Jarot beat her way northwesterly past the swampy coast of the southwestern Dalasian Protectorates and on around the savage breakers engulfing the Turrin Reef. By the time they had cleared the reef and turned due north along the desolate coast of Finda, Balsca had concluded that life was going out of its way to treat him unfairly, and that he might be far better off seeking his fortune ashore.

He spent several nights prowling through the cargo hold with a well-shielded lantern until he found the concealed compartment where Woodfoot had hidden a number of small, valuable items that he didn't want to trouble the customs people with. Balsca's patched canvas sea bag picked up a fair amount of weight rather quickly that night.

When The Star of Jarot dropped anchor in the harbor of Mal Gemila, Balsca feigned illness and refused his shipmates' suggestion that he go ashore with them for the customary end-of-voyage carouse. He lay instead in his hammock, moaning theatrically. Late during the dog watch, he pulled on his tarred canvas sea coat, the only thing of any value that he owned, picked up his sea bag and went on silent feet up on deck. The solitary watch, as Balsca had anticipated, lay snoring in the scuppers, snuggled up to an earthenware jug; there were no lights in the aft cabins, where Woodfoot and his officers lived in idle luxury; and the moon had already set. A small ship's boat swung on a painter on the starboard side, and Balsca deftly dropped his sea bag into it, swung over the

rail, and silently left The Star of Jarot forever. He felt no particular regret about that. He did not even pause to mutter a curse at the vessel which had been his home for the past six years. Balsca was a philosophical sort of fellow. Once he had escaped from an unpleasant situation, he no longer held any grudges.

When he reached the docks, he sold the small ship's boat to a beady-eyed man with a missing right hand.

Balsca feigned drunkenness during the transaction, and the maimed man -who had undoubtedly had his hand chopped off as punishment for theft- paid him quite a bit more for the boat than would have been the case had the sale taken place in broad daylight. Balsca immediately knew what that meant. He shouldered his sea bag, staggered up the wharf, and began to climb the steep cobblestone street from the harbor. At the first corner, he made a sudden turn to the left and ran like a deer, leaving the surprised press gang the beady-eyed man had sent after him floundering far behind. Balsca was stupid, certainly, but he was no fool.

He ran until he was out of breath and quite some distance from the harbor with all its dangers. He passed a number of alehouses along the way, regretfully perhaps, but there was still business to attend to, and he needed his wits about him.

In a dim little establishment, well hidden up a dank, smelly alleyway, he sold Captain Woodfoot's smuggled treasures, bargaining down to the last copper with the grossly fat woman who ran the place. He even traded his sea coat for a landsman's tunic, and emerged from the alley with all trace of the sea removed from him, except for the rolling gait of a man whose feet have not touched dry land for several months.

He avoided the harbor with its press gangs and cheap grog shops and chose instead a quiet street that meandered past boarded-up warehouses. He followed that until he found a sedate workman's alehouse where a buxom barmaid rather sullenly served him. Her mood, he surmised, was the result of the fact that he was her only customer, and that she had quite obviously intended to close the doors and seek her bed -or someone else's, for all he knew. He jollied her into some semblance of good humor for an hour or so, left a few pennies on the table, and squeezed her ample bottom by way of farewell. Then he lurched into the empty street in search of further adventure.

He found true love under a smoky torch on the corner.

Her name, she said, was Elowanda. Balsca suspected that she was not being entirely honest about that, but it was not her name he was interested in. She was quite young and quite obviously sick. She had a racking cough, a hoarse, croaking voice, and her reddened nose ran constantly. She was not particularly clean and she exuded the rank smell of a week or more of dried sweat. Balsca, however, had a sailor's strong stomach and an appetite whetted by six months' enforced abstinence at sea. Elowanda was not very pretty, but she was cheap. After a brief haggle, she led him to a rickety crib in an alley that reeked of moldy sewage. Although he was quite drunk, Balsca grappled with her on a lumpy pallet until dawn was staining the eastern sky.

It was noon when he awoke with a throbbing head. He might have slept longer, but the cry of a baby coming from a wooden

box in the corner drove into his ears like a sharp knife. He nudged the pale woman lying beside him, hoping that she would rise and quiet her squalling brat. She moved limply under his hand, her limbs flaccid.

He nudged her again, harder this time. Then he rose up and looked at her. Her stiff face was locked in a dreadful rictus -a hideous grin that made his blood run cold. He suddenly realized that her skin was like clammy ice. He jerked his hand away, swearing under his breath. He reached out gingerly and peeled back one of her eyelids. He swore again.

The woman who had called herself Elowanda was as dead as last week's mackerel.

Balsca rose and quickly pulled on his clothes. He searched the room thoroughly, but found nothing worth stealing except for the few coins he had given the dead woman the previous night. He took those, then glared at the naked corpse lying on the pallet. "Rotten whore!" he said and kicked her once in the side. She rolled limply off the pallet and lay face down on the floor.

Balsca slammed out into the stinking alley, ignoring the wailing baby he had left behind him.

He had a few moments' concern about the possibility of certain social diseases. Something had killed Elowanda, and he had not really been all that rough with her. As a precaution, he muttered an old sailors' incantation which was said to be particularly efficacious in warding off the pox; reassured, he went looking for something to drink.

By midafternoon, he was pleasantly drunk and he lurched out of a congenial little wine shop and stopped, swaying slightly, to consider his options. By now Woodfoot would certainly have discovered that his hidden cabinet was empty and that Balsca had jumped ship. Since Woodfoot was a man of limited imagination, he and his officers would certainly be concentrating their search along the waterfront. It would take them some time to realize that their quarry had moved somewhat beyond the sight, if not the smell, of salt water. Balsca prudently decided that if he were to maintain his lead on his vengeful former captain, it was probably time for him to head inland. It occurred to him, moreover, that someone might have seen him with Elowanda, and that her body probably had been found by now. Balsca felt no particular responsibility for her death, but he was by nature slightly shy about talking with policemen. All in all, he decided, it might just be time to leave Mal Gemila.

He started out confidently, striding toward the east gate of the city; but after several blocks, his feet began to hurt. He loitered outside a warehouse where several workmen were loading a large wagon. He carefully stayed out of sight until the work was nearly done, then heartily offered to lend a hand. He put two boxes on the wagon, then sought out the teamster, a shaggy-bearded man smelling strongly of mules.

"Where be ye bound, friend?" Balsca asked him as if out of idle curiosity.

"Mal Zeth," the teamster replied shortly.

"What an amazing coincidence," Balsca exclaimed.

"I have business there myself." In point of fact, Balsca had cared very little where the teamster and his wagon had been bound. All he wanted to do was to go inland to avoid Woodfoot

or the police. "What say I ride along, with you -for company?"

"I don't get all that lonesome," the teamster said churlishly.

Balsca sighed. It was going to be one of those days.

"I'd be willing to pay," he offered sadly.

"How much?"

"I don't really have very much."

"Ten coppers," the teamster said flatly.

"Ten? I haven't got that much."

"You'd better start walking then. It's that way."

Balsca sighed and gave in. "All right," he said. "Ten."

"In advance."

"Half now and half when we get to Mal Zeth."

"In advance."

"That's hard."

"So's walking. "

Balsca stepped around a corner, reached into an inside pocket, and carefully counted out the ten copper coins. The horde he had accumulated as a result of his pilferage aboard The Star of Jarot had dwindled alarmingly. A number of possibilities occurred to him. He shifted his sheath knife around until it was at his back. If the teamster slept soundly enough and if they stopped for the night in some secluded place, Balsca was quite certain that he could ride into Mal Zeth the proud owner of a wagon and a team of mules -not to mention whatever was in the boxes. Balsca had killed a few men in his time -when it had been safe to do so- and he was not particularly squeamish about cutting throats, if it was worth his while.

The wagon clattered and creaked as it rumbled along the cobbled street in the slanting afternoon sunlight.

"Let's get a few things clear before we start," the teamster said. "I don't like to talk and I don't like having people jabber at me."

"All right."

The teamster reached back and picked up a wicked-looking hatchet out of the wagon bed. "Now," he said, "give me your knife."

"I don't have a knife."

The teamster reined in his mules. "Get out," he said curtly.

"But I paid you?"

"Not enough for me to take any chances with you. Come up with a knife or get out of my wagon."

Balsca glared at him, then at the hatchet. Slowly he drew out his dagger and handed it over.

"Good. I'll give it back to you when we get to Mal Zeth. Oh, by the way, I sleep with one eye open and with this in my fist." He held the hatchet in front of Balsca's face. "If you even come near me while we're on the road, I'll brain you."

Balsca shrank back.

"I'm glad that we understand each other." The teamster shook his reins, and they rumbled out of Mal Gemila.

Balsca was not feeling too well when they reached Mal Zeth. He assumed at first that it was a result of the peculiar swaying motion of the wagon. Though he had never been seasick in all his years as a sailor, he was frequently land-sick. This time, however, was somewhat different. His stomach, to be

sure, churned and heaved, but, unlike his previous bouts of malaise, this time he also found that he was sweating profusely, and his throat was so sore that he could barely swallow. He had alternating bouts of chills and fever, and a foul taste in his mouth.

The surly teamster dropped him off at the main gates of Mal Zeth, idly tossed his dagger at his feet and then squinted at his former passenger. "You don't look so good," he observed. "You ought to go see a physician or something."

Balsca made an indelicate sound. "People die in the hands of physicians," he said, "or if they do manage to get well, they go away with empty purses."

"Suit yourself." The teamster shrugged and drove his wagon into the city without looking back.

Balsca directed a number of muttered curses after him, bent, picked up his knife, and walked into Mal Zeth. He wandered about for a time, trying to get his bearings, then finally accosted a man in a sea coat.

"Excuse me, mate," he said, his voice raspy as a result of his sore throat, "but where's a place where a man can get a good cup of grog at a reasonable price?"

"Try the Red Dog Tavern," the sailor replied. "It's two streets over on the corner."

"Thanks, mate," Balsca said.

"You don't look like you're feeling too good."

"A little touch of a cold, I think." Balsca flashed him a toothless grin. "Nothing that a few cups of grog won't fix."

"That's the honest truth." The sailor laughed his agreement. "It's the finest medicine in the world." The Red Dog Tavern was a dark grogshop that faintly resembled the forecabin of a ship. It had a low, beamed ceiling of dark wood and portholes instead of windows.

The proprietor was a bluff, red-faced man with tattoos on both arms and an exaggerated touch of salt water in his speech. His "Ahoys" and "Mateys" began to get on Balsca's nerves after a while, but after three cups of grog, he didn't mind so much. His sore throat eased, his stomach settled down, and the trembling in his hands ceased. He still, however, had a splitting headache. He had two more cups of grog and then fell asleep with his head cradled on his crossed arms.

"Ahoy, mate. Closing time," the Red Dog's proprietor said some time later, shaking his shoulder.

Balsca sat up, blinking. "Must have dropped off for a few minutes," he mumbled hoarsely.

"More like a few hours, matey." The man frowned, then laid his hand on Balsca's forehead. "You're burning up, matey," he said. "You'd better get you to bed."

"Where's a good place to get a cheap room?" Balsca asked, rising unsteadily. His throat hurt worse now than it had before, and his stomach was in knots again.

"Try the third door up the street. Tell them that I sent you."

Balsca nodded, bought a bottle to take with him and surreptitiously filched a rope-scarred marlinespike from the rack beside the door on his way out. "Good tavern," he croaked to the proprietor as he left. "I like the way you've got it fixed up."

The tattooed man nodded proudly. "My own idea," he said.

"I thought to myself that a seafaring man might like a homelike sort of place to do his drinking in -even when he's this far from deep water. Come back again."

"I'll do that," Balsca promised.

It took him about a half an hour to find a solitary passerby hurrying home with his head down and his hands jammed into his tunic pockets. Balsca stalked him for a block or so, his rope-soled shoes making no sound on the cobblestones. Then, as the passerby went by the dark mouth of an alleyway, Balsca stepped up behind him and rapped him smartly across the base of the skull with his marlinespike. The man dropped like a pole-axed ox. Balsca had been in enough shipboard fights and tavern brawls to know exactly where and how hard to hit his man. He rolled the fellow over, hit him alongside the head once again just to be on the safe side, and then methodically began to go through the unconscious man's pockets. He found several coins and a stout knife. He put the coins in his pocket, tucked the knife under his broad leather belt, and pulled his victim into the alley out of the light. Then he went on down the street, whistling an old sea song.

He felt much worse the following day. His head throbbed, and his throat was so swollen that he could barely talk. His fever, he was sure, was higher, and his nose ran constantly. It took three pulls on his bottle to quiet his stomach. He knew that he should go out and get something to eat, but the thought of food sickened him. He took another long drink from his bottle, lay back on the dirty bed in the room he had rented, and fell back into a fitful doze.

When he awoke again, it was dark outside, and he was shivering violently. He finished his bottle without gaining any particular relief, then shakily pulled on his clothing, which he absently noted exuded a rank odor, and stumbled down to the street and three doors up to the inviting entrance to the Red Dog.

"By the Gods, matey," the tattooed man said, "ye look positively awful."

"Grog," Balsca croaked. "Grog."

It took nine cups of grog to stem the terrible shaking which had seized him.

Balsca was not counting.

When his money ran out, he staggered into the street and beat a man to death with his marlinespike for six pennies. He lurched on, encountered a fat merchant, and knifed him for his purse. The purse even had some gold in it. He reeled back to the Red Dog and drank until closing time.

"Have a care, matey." the proprietor cautioned him as he thrust him out the door. "There be murdering footpads about, or so I've been told -and the police are as thick as fleas on a mangy dog in the streets and alleys in the neighborhood."

Balsca took the jug of grog he had bought back to his shabby room and drank himself into unconsciousness.

He was delirious the following morning and he raved for hours, alternating between drinking from his jug of grog and vomiting on his bed.

It took him until sunset to die. His last words were, "Mother, help me."

When they found him, some days later, he was arched rigidly backward, and his face was fixed in a hideous grin.

* * *

Three days later, a pair of wayfarers found the body of a bearded teamster lying in a ditch beside his wagon on the road to Mal Gemila. His body was arched stiffly backward, and his face was locked in a grotesque semblance of a grin. The wayfarers concluded that he had no further need of his team and wagon, and so they stole it. As an afterthought, they also stole his clothes and covered the body with dead leaves. Then they turned the wagon around and rode on back to Mal Zeth.

Perhaps a week after Balsca's largely unnoticed death, a man in a tarred sea coat came staggering into a rundown street in broad daylight. He was raving and clutching at his throat. He lurched along the cobblestone street for perhaps a hundred feet before he collapsed and died.

The dreadful grin fixed on his foam-flecked lips gave several onlookers nightmares that night.

The tattooed proprietor of the Red Dog Tavern was found dead in his establishment the following morning.

He lay amidst the wreckage of the several tables and chairs he had smashed during his final delirium. His face was twisted into a stiff, hideous grin.

During the course of that day, a dozen more men in that part of the city, all regular patrons of the Red Dog Tavern, also died.

The next day, three dozen more succumbed. The authorities began to take note of the matter.

But by then it was too late. The curious intermingling of classes characteristic of a great city made the confining of the infection to any one district impossible. Servants who lived in that shabby part of town carried the disease into the houses of the rich and powerful. Workmen carried it to construction sites, and their fellow workmen carried it home to other parts of the city. Customers gave it to merchants, who in turn gave it to other customers. The most casual contact was usually sufficient to cause infection.

The dead had at first been numbered in the dozens, but by the end of the week hundreds had fallen ill. The houses of the sick were boarded up despite the weak cries of the inhabitants from within. Grim carts rumbled through the streets, and workmen with camphor-soaked cloths about their lower faces picked up the dead with long hooks.

The bodies were stacked in the carts like logs of wood, conveyed to cemeteries, and buried without rites in vast common graves. The streets of Mal Zeth became deserted as the frightened citizens barricaded themselves inside their houses.

There was some concern inside the palace, naturally, but the palace, walled as it was, was remote from the rest of the city. As a further precaution, however, the Emperor ordered that no one be allowed in or out of the compound. Among those locked inside were several hundred workmen who had been hired by Baron Vasca, the Chief of the Bureau of Commerce, to begin the renovations of the bureau offices.

It was about noon on the day after the locking of the palace gates that Garion, Polgara, and Belgarath were summoned to an audience with Zakath. They entered his study to find him

gaunt and hollow-eyed, poring over a map of the imperial city. "Come in. Come in," he said when they arrived. They entered and sat down in the chairs he indicated with an absent wave of his hand.

"You look tired," Polgara noted.

"I haven't slept for the past four days," Zakath admitted. He looked wearily at Belgarath. "You say that you're seven thousand years old?"

"Approximately, yes."

"You've lived through pestilence before?"

"Several times."

"How long does it usually last?"

"It depends on which disease it is. Some of them run their course in a few months. Others persist until everybody in the region is dead. Pol would know more about that than I would. She's the one with all the medical experience."

"Lady Polgara?" the Emperor appealed to her.

"I'll need to know the symptoms before I can identify the disease," she replied.

Zakath burrowed through the litter of documents on the table in front of him. "Here it is." He picked up a scrap of parchment and read from it. "High fever, nausea, vomiting. Chills, profuse sweating, sore throat, and headache. Finally delirium, followed shortly by death."

She looked at him gravely. "That doesn't sound too good," she said. "Is there anything peculiar about the bodies after they've died?"

"They all have an awful grin on their faces," he told her, consulting his parchment.

She shook her head. "I was afraid of that."

"What is it?"

"A form of plague."

"Plague?" His face had gone suddenly pale. "I thought there were swellings on the body with that. This doesn't mention that." He held up the scrap of parchment.

"There are several different varieties of the disease, Zakath. The most common involves the swellings you mentioned. Another attacks the lungs. The one you have here is quite rare, and dreadfully virulent."

"Can it be cured?"

"Not cured, no. Some people manage to survive it, but that's probably the result of mild cases of their body's natural resistance to disease. Some people seem to be immune. They don't catch it no matter how many times they've been exposed."

"What can I do?"

She gave him a steady look. "You won't like this," she told him.

"I like the plague even less."

"Seal up Mal Zeth. Seal the city in the same way that you've sealed the palace."

"You can't be serious!"

"Deadly serious. You have to keep the infection confined to Mal Zeth, and the only way to do that is to prevent people from carrying the disease out of the city to other places." Her face was bleak. "And when I say to seal the city, Zakath, I mean totally. Nobody leaves."

"I've got an empire to run, Polgara. I can't seal myself

up here and just let it run itself. I have to get messengers in and send orders out."

"Then, inevitably, you will rule an empire of the dead. The symptoms of the disease don't begin to show up until a week or two after the initial infection, but during the last several days of that period, the carrier is already dreadfully contagious. You can catch it from somebody who looks and feels perfectly healthy. If you send out messengers, sooner or later one of them will be infected, and the disease will spread throughout all of Mallorea."

His shoulders slumped in defeat as the full horror of what she was describing struck him. "How many?" he asked quietly.

"I don't quite understand the question."

"How many will die here in Mal Zeth, Polgara?"

She considered it. "Half," she replied, "if you're lucky."

"Half?" he gasped. "Polgara, this is the largest city in the world. You're talking about the greatest disaster in the history of mankind."

"I know -and that's only if you're lucky. The death rate could go as high as four-fifths of the population."

He sank his face into his trembling hands. "Is there anything at all that can be done?" he asked in a muted voice.

"You must burn the dead," she told him. "The best way is just to burn their houses without removing them. That reduces the spread of the disease."

"You'd better have the streets patrolled, too," Belgarath added grimly. "There's bound to be looting, and the looters are going to catch the disease. Send out archers with orders to shoot looters on sight. Then their bodies should be pushed back into the infected houses with long poles and burned along with the bodies already in the houses."

"You're talking about the destruction of Mal Zeth!" Zakath protested violently, starting to his feet.

"No," Polgara disagreed. "We're talking about saving as many of your citizens as possible. You have to steel your heart about this, Zakath. You may eventually have to drive all the healthy citizens out into the fields, surround them with guards to keep them from getting away, and then burn Mal Zeth to the ground."

"That's unthinkable!"

"Perhaps you ought to start thinking about it," she told him. "The alternative could be much, much worse."

CHAPTER TWELVE

"Silk," Garion said urgently, "you've got to stop it."

"I'm sorry, Garion," the little man replied, looking cautiously around the moonlit atrium for hidden spies, "but it's already in motion. Sadi's bandits are inside the palace grounds and they're taking their orders from Vasca. Vasca's so brave now that he's almost ready to confront Zakath himself. General Bregar of the Bureau of Military Procurement knows that something's afoot, so he's surrounded himself with troops. The King of Pallia, the Prince Regent of Delchin, and the old King of Voresebo have armed every one of their retainers. The palace is sealed, and nobody can bring in any

outside help -not even Zakath himself. The way things stand right now, one word could set it off."

Garion started to swear, walking around the shadowy atrium and kicking at the short-cropped turf.

"You did tell us to go ahead," Silk reminded him.

"Silk, we can't even get out of the palace right now -much less the city. We've stirred up a fight, and now we're going to be caught right in the middle of it."

Silk nodded glumly. "I know," he said.

"I'll have to go to Zakath," Garion said. "Tell him the whole story. He can have his imperial guards disarm everybody."

"If you thought it was hard to come up with a way to get out of the palace, start thinking about how we're going to get out of the imperial dungeon. Zakath's been polite so far, but I don't think his patience -or his hospitality- would extend to this." Garion grunted.

"I'm afraid that we've outsmarted ourselves," Silk said. He scratched at his head. "I do that sometimes," he added.

"Can you think of any way to head it off?"

"I'm afraid not. The whole situation is just too inflammable. Maybe we'd better tell Belgarath."

Garion winced. "He won't be happy."

"He'll be a lot less happy if we don't tell him."

Garion sighed. "I suppose you're right. All right, let's go get it over with."

It took quite some time to locate Belgarath. They finally found him standing at a window in a room high up in the east wing. The window looked out over the palace wall. Beyond that wall fires raged unchecked in the stricken city. Sheets of sooty flame belched from whole blocks of houses, and a pall of thick smoke blotted out the starry sky. "It's getting out of hand," the old man said. "They should be pulling down houses to make firebreaks, but I think the soldiers are afraid to leave their barracks." He swore. "I hate fires," he said.

"Something's sort of come up," Silk said cautiously, looking around to see if he could locate the spy holes in the walls of the room.

"What is it?"

"Oh, nothing all that much," Silk replied with exaggerated casualness. "We just thought that we'd bring it to your attention, is all." His fingers, however, were twitching and flickering. Even as he spoke quite calmly, improvising some minor problem with the horses for the edification of the spies they all knew were watching and listening, his dancing fingers laid out the entire situation for the old man.

"You what!" Belgarath exclaimed, then covered the outburst with a cough.

- You told us to devise a diversion, Grandfather-Garion's hands said as Silk continued to ramble on about the horses.

-A diversion, yes- Belgarath's fingers replied, -but not pitched battles inside the palace. What were you thinking of-

-It was the best we could come up with- Garion replied lamely.

"Let me think about this for a minute," the old man said aloud. He paced back and forth for a while, his hands clasped behind his back and his face furrowed with concentration.

"Let's go talk with Durnik," he said finally. "He's more or

less in charge of the horses, so we'll need his advice." Just before he turned to lead them from the room, however, his fingers flickered one last time. -Try not to walk too softly on the way downstairs- he told them. -I need to give you some instructions, and wiggling our fingers takes too long-

As they left the room, Garion and Silk scuffed their feet and brought the heels of their boots down hard on the marble floor to cover Belgarath's whispering voice.

"All right," the old man breathed, scarcely moving his lips as they moved along the corridor toward the stairs leading down. "The situation isn't really irretrievable. Since we can't stop this little brawl you've arranged anyway, let it go ahead and happen. We will need the horses, though, so, Garion, I want you to go to Zakath and tell him that we'd like to isolate our mounts from the rest of the stables. Tell him that it's to avoid having them catch the plague."

"Can horses catch the plague?" Garion whispered in some surprise.

"How should I know? But if I don't, you can be sure that Zakath won't either. Silk, you sort of ease around and let everybody know -quietly- that we're just about to leave and to get ready without being too obvious about it."

"Leave?" Garion's whisper was startled. "Grandfather, do you know a way to get out of the palace -and the city?"

"No, but I know someone who does. Get to Zakath with your request about the horses as quickly as you can. He's got his mind on so many other things right now that he probably won't give you any argument about it." He looked at Silk. "Can you give me any kind of idea as to when your little explosion is going to take place?"

"Not really," Silk whispered back, still scuffing his feet on the stairs as they went down. "It could happen at any minute, I suppose."

Belgarath shook his head in disgust. "I think you need to go back to school," he breathed irritably. "How to do something is important, yes, but when is sometimes even more important."

"I'll try to remember that."

"Do. We'd all better hurry, then. We want to be ready when this unscheduled little eruption takes place."

There were a dozen high-ranking officers with Zakath when Garion was admitted to the large, red-draped room where the Emperor was conferring with his men. "I'll be with you in a bit, Garion," the haggard-looking man said. Then he turned back to his generals. "We have to get orders to the troops," he told them. "I need a volunteer to go out into the city." The generals looked at each other, scuffing their feet on the thick blue carpet.

"Am I going to have to order someone to go?" Zakath demanded in exasperation.

"Uh -excuse me," Garion interjected mildly, "but why does anybody have to go at all?"

"Because the troops are all sitting on their hands in their barracks while Mal Zeth burns," Zakath snapped.

"They have to start tearing down houses to make fire breaks, or we'll lose the whole city. Someone has to order them out."

"Have you got troops posted outside the palace walls?"

Garion asked.

"Yes. They have orders to keep the populace away."

"Why not just shout at them from the top of the wall?"

Garion suggested. "Tell one of them to go get a colonel or somebody, then yell your orders down to him. Tell him to put the troops to work. Nobody can catch the plague from a hundred yards away -I don't think."

Zakath stared at him and then suddenly began to laugh ruefully. "Why didn't I think of that?" he asked.

"Probably because you weren't raised on a farm," Garion replied. "If you're plowing a different field from the man you want to talk to, you shout back and forth.

Otherwise, you do an awful lot of unnecessary walking."

"All right," Zakath said briskly, looking at his generals, "which one of you has the biggest mouth?"

A red-faced officer with a big paunch and snowy white hair grinned suddenly. "In my youth, I could be heard all the way across a parade ground, your Majesty," he said.

"Good. Go see if you can still do it. Get hold of some colonel with a glimmer of intelligence. Tell him to abandon any district that's already burning and to tear down enough houses around the perimeter to keep the fire from spreading. Tell him that there's a generalcy in it for him if he saves at least half of Mal Zeth."

"Provided that he doesn't get the plague and die," one of the other generals muttered.

"That's what soldiers get paid for, gentlemen -taking risks. When the trumpet blows, you're supposed to attack, and I'm blowing the trumpet -right now."

"Yes, your Majesty," they all replied in unison, turned smartly, and marched out.

"That was a clever idea, Garion," Zakath said gratefully. "Thank you." He sprawled wearily in a chair.

"Just common sense." Garion shrugged, also sitting down.

"Kings and Emperors aren't supposed to have common sense. It's too common."

"You're going to have to get some sleep, Zakath," Garion told him seriously. "You look like a man on his last legs."

"Gods," Zakath replied, "I'd give half of Karanda right now for a few hours' sleep -of course, I don't have half of Karanda anymore."

"Go to bed, then."

"I can't. There's too much to do."

"How much can you do if you collapse from exhaustion? Your generals can take care of things until you wake up. That's what generals are for, isn't it?"

"Maybe." Zakath slumped lower in his chair. He looked across at Garion. "Was there something on your mind?" he asked. "I'm sure this isn't just a social visit."

"Well," Garion said, trying to make it sound only incidental, "Durnik's worried about our horses," he said.

"We've talked with Aunt PoI -Lady Polgara- and she's not really sure whether horses can catch plague or not. Durnik wanted me to ask you if it would be all right if we took our animals out of the main stables and picketed them someplace near the east wing where he can keep an eye on them."

"Horses?" Zakath said incredulously. "He's worried about

horses at a time like this?"

"You sort of have to understand Durnik," Garion replied. "He's a man who takes his responsibilities very seriously. He looks on it as a duty, and I think we can both appreciate that."

Zakath laughed a tried laugh. "The legendary Sendarian virtues," he said, "duty, rectitude and practicality." He shrugged. "Why not?" he said. "If it makes Goodman Durnik happy, he can stable your horses in the corridors of the east wing if he wants."

"Oh, I don't think he'd want to do that," Garion replied after a moment's thought. "One of the Sendarian virtues you neglected to mention was propriety. Horses don't belong inside the house. Besides," he added, "the marble floors might bruise their hooves."

Zakath smiled weakly. "You're a delight, Garion," he said. "Sometimes you're so serious about the littlest things."

"Big things are made up of little things, Zakath," Garion replied sententiously. He looked at the exhausted man across the table, feeling a peculiar regret at being forced to deceive somebody he genuinely liked. "Are you going to be all right?" he asked.

"I'll survive, I expect," Zakath said. "You see, Garion, one of the big secrets about this world is that the people who desperately cling to life are usually the ones who die. Since I don't really care one way or the other, I'll probably live to be a hundred."

"I wouldn't base any plans on that kind of superstition," Garion told him. Then a thought came to him. "Would it upset you if we locked the doors of the east wing from the inside until this all blows over?" he asked. "I'm not particularly timid about getting sick myself, but I'm sort of concerned about Ce'Nedra and Liselle and Eriond. None of them are really terribly robust, and Aunt Pol said that stamina was one of the things that help people survive the plague."

Zakath nodded. "That's a reasonable request," he agreed, "and really a very good idea. Let's protect the ladies and the boy, if at all possible."

Garion stood up. "You've got to get some sleep," he said.

"I don't think I can sleep. There are so many things on my mind just now."

"I'll have someone send Andel to you," Garion suggested. "If she's half as good as Aunt Pol thinks she is, she should be able to give you something that would put a regiment to sleep." He looked at the exhausted man he cautiously considered to be his friend. "I won't be seeing you for a while," he said. "Good luck, and try to take care of yourself, all right?"

"I'll try, Garion. I'll try."

Gravely they shook hands, and Garion turned and quietly left the room.

They were busy for the next several hours. Despite Garion's subterfuges, Brador's secret police dogged their every step. Durnik and Toth and Eriond went to the stables and came back with the horses, trailed closely by the ubiquitous policemen.

"What's holding things up?" Belgarath demanded when they had all gathered once again in the large room at the top of

the stairs with its dais and the throne-like chair at one end.

"I'm not sure," Silk replied carefully, looking around.
"It's just a matter of time, though."

Then, out on the palace grounds beyond the bolted doors of the east wing, there was the sound of shouting and the thud of running feet, followed by the ring of steel on steel.

"Something seems to be happening," Velvet said clinically.

"It's about time," Belgarath grunted.

"Be nice, Ancient One."

Within their locked-off building there also came the rapid staccato sound of running. The doors leading out into the rest of the palace and to the grounds began to bang open and then slam shut.

"Are they all leaving, Pol?" Belgarath asked.

Her eyes grew distant for a moment. "Yes, father," she said.

The running and slamming continued for several minutes.

"My," Sadi said mildly, "weren't there a lot of them?"

"Will you three stop congratulating yourselves and go bolt those doors again?" Belgarath said.

Silk grinned and slipped out the door. He came back a few minutes later, frowning. "We've got a bit of a problem," he said. "The guards at the main door seem to have a strong sense of duty. They haven't left their posts. "

"Great diversion, Silk," Belgarath said sarcastically.

"Toth and I can deal with them," Durnik said confidently. He went to the box beside the fireplace and picked up a stout chunk of oak firewood.

"That might be just a bit direct, dear," Polgara murmured. "I'm sure you don't want to kill them, and sooner or later they'll wake up and run straight to Zakath. I think we'll need to come up with something a little more sneaky."

"I don't care much for that word, Pol," he said stiffly.

"Would 'diplomatic' put a better light on it?"

He thought about it. "No," he said, "not really. It means the same thing, doesn't it?"

"Well," she conceded, "yes, probably. But it sounds nicer, doesn't it?"

"Polgara," the smith said firmly. It was the first time Garion had ever heard him use her full name. "I'm not trying to be unreasonable, but how can we face the world if we lie and cheat and sneak every time we go around a corner? I mean -really, Pol."

She looked at him. "Oh, my Durnik," she said, "I love you." She threw her arms about her husband's neck with a sort of girlish exuberance. "You're too good for this world, do you know that?"

"Well," he said, slightly abashed by a show of affection that he obviously believed should be kept very private, "it's a matter of decency, isn't it?"

"Of course, Durnik," she agreed in an oddly submissive tone. "Whatever you say."

"What are we going to do about the guards?" Garion asked.

"I can manage them, dear." Polgara smiled. "I can arrange it so that they won't see or hear a thing. We'll be able to leave with no one the wiser -assuming that father knows what he's talking about."

Belgarath looked at her, then suddenly winked. "Trust me,"

he said. "Durnik, bring the horses inside."

"Inside?" the smith looked startled.

Belgarath nodded. "We have to take them down into the cellar."

"I didn't know that this wing had a cellar," Silk said.

"Neither does Zakath," Belgarath smirked, "Or Brador."

"Garion," Ce'Nedra said sharply.

Garion turned to see a shimmering in the center of the room. Then the blindfolded form of Cyradis appeared.

"Make haste," she urged them. "Ye must reach Ashaba 'ere the week is out."

"Ashaba?" Silk exclaimed. "We have to go to Calida. A man named Mengha is raising demons there."

"That is of no moment, Prince Kheldar. The demons are thy least concern. Know, however, that the one called Mengha also journeys toward Ashaba. He will be caught up in one of the tasks which must be completed 'ere the meeting of the Child of Light and the Child of Dark can come to pass in the Place Which Is No More." She turned her blindfolded face toward Garion. "The time to complete this task is at hand, Belgarion of Riva, and shouldst those of thy companions upon whom the task hath been laid fail in its accomplishment, the world is lost. I pray thee, therefore, go to Ashaba." And then she vanished.

There was a long silence as they all stared at the spot where she had stood.

"That's it, then," Belgarath said flatly. "We go to Ashaba."

"If we can get out of the palace," Sadi murmured.

"We'll get out. Leave that to me."

"Of course, Ancient One."

The old man led them out into the hallway, down the stairs, and along the main corridor toward the stout door leading to the rest of the palace.

"Just a moment, father," Polgara said. She concentrated for a moment, the white lock at her brow glowing.

Then Garion felt the surge of her will.

"All right," she said. "The guards are asleep now."

The old man continued on down the corridor. "Here we are," he said, stopping before a large tapestry hanging on the marble wall. He reached behind the tapestry, took hold of an age-blackened iron ring, and pulled. There was a squeal of protesting metal and then a solid-sounding clank. "Push on that side," he said, gesturing toward the far end of the tapestry.

Garion went on down a few steps and set his shoulder to the tapestry. There was a metallic shriek as the covered marble slab turned slowly on rusty iron pivots set top and bottom in its precise center.

"Clever," Silk said, peering into the dark cobweb-choked opening beyond the slab. "Who put it here?"

"A long time ago one of the Emperors of Mallorea was a bit nervous about his position," the old man replied, "He wanted to have a quick way out of the palace in case things started to go wrong. The passageway's been forgotten, so nobody's likely to follow us. Let's go bring out our packs and other belongings. We won't be coming back."

It took about five minutes for them to pile their things

in front of the tapestry-covered panel, and by then Durnik, Toth, and Eriond were leading the horses along the marble corridor with a great clatter of hooves.

Garion stepped to the corner and peered around it at the main door. The two guards were standing rigidly, their faces blank and their eyes glassy and staring. Then he walked back to join the others. "Someday you'll have to show me how to do that," he said to Polgara, jerking his thumb back over his shoulder toward the two comatose soldiers.

"It's very simple, Garion," she told him.

"For you, maybe," he said. Then a thought suddenly came to him. "Grandfather," he said with a worried frown, "if this passage of yours comes out in the city, won't we be worse off than we were here in the palace? There's plague out there, you know, and all the gates are locked."

"It doesn't come out inside Mal Zeth," the old man replied. "Or so I've been told."

Out on the palace grounds the sounds of fighting intensified.

"They seem very enthusiastic, don't they?" Sadi murmured in a self-congratulatory way.

"Well, now," a familiar lilting voice came up out of the cellar beyond the panel. "Will ye stand there for hours pattin' yerselves on the backs an' allowin' the night to fly by with nothin' more accomplished at all? We've miles and miles to go, don't y' know? An' we won't get out of Mal Zeth this month unless we make a start, now will we?"

"Let's go," Belgarath said shortly.

The horses were reluctant to enter the dark, musty place behind the marble panel, but Eriond and Horse confidently went through with Garion's big gray, Chretienne, close behind; and the other animals somewhat skittishly followed.

It was not really a cellar, Garion realized. A flight of shallow stairs led down to what could be more properly described as a rough stone passageway. The horses had some difficulty negotiating the stairs, but eventually, following Eriond, Horse, and Chretienne, they reached the bottom.

At the top of the stairs the giant Toth pushed the hidden panel shut again, and the latch made an ominously heavy clank as it closed.

"One moment, father," Polgara said. In the close and musty-smelling darkness, Garion felt the faint surge of her will. "There," she said. "The soldiers are awake again, and they don't even know that we've been here."

At the bottom of the stairs the comic juggler, Feldegast, stood holding a well-shielded lantern. "'Tis a fine night fer a little stroll," he observed. "Shall we be off, then?"

"I hope you know what you're doing," Belgarath said to him.

"How could ye possibly doubt me, old man?" the comedian said, with an exaggerated expression of injury. "I'm the very soul of circumspection, don't y' know." He made a faint grimace. "There's only one teensy-weensy little problem. It seems that a certain portion of this passageway collapsed in on itself a while back, so we'll be forced to go through the streets up above for a triflin' bit of a way."

"Just how triflin' -trifling?" Belgarath demanded. He glared at the impudent comedian. "I wish you'd stop that," he

said irritably. "What possessed you to resurrect a dialect that died out two thousand years ago?"

" 'Tis a part of me charm, Ancient Belgarath. Any man at all kin throw balls in the air an' catch 'em again, but it's the way a performer talks that sets the tone of his act."

"You two have met before, I take it?" Polgara said with one raised eyebrow.

"Yer honored father an' me are old, old friends, me dear Lady Polgara," Feldegast said with a sweeping bow.

"I know ye all by his description. I must admit, however, that I'm overcome altogether by yer unearthly beauty."

"This is a rare rogue you've found, father," she said with a peculiar smile on her face. "I think I could grow to like him."

"I don't really advise it, Pol. He's a liar and a sneak and he has uncleanly habits. You're evading the question, Feldegast -if that's what you want to call yourself. How far do we have to go through the streets?"

"Not far at all, me decrepit old friend -a half a mile perhaps until the roof of the passage is stout enough again to keep the pavin' stones where they belong instead of on the top of our heads. Let's press on, then. 'Tis a long, long way to the north wall of Mal Zeth, an' the night is wearin' on."

"Decrepit?" Belgarath objected mildly.

"Merely me way of puttin' things, Ancient One," Feldegast apologized. "Be sure that I meant no offense." He turned to Polgara. "Will ye walk with me, me girl? Ye've got an absolutely ravishin' fragrance about ye that quite takes me breath away. I'll walk along beside ye, inhalin' and perishin' with sheer delight."

Polgara laughed helplessly and linked her arm with that of the outrageous little man.

"I like him," Ce'Nedra murmured as Garion as they followed along through the cobwebby passageway.

"Yer supposed to, me girl," Garion said in a not altogether perfect imitation of the juggler's brogue. " 'Tis a part of his charm, don't y' know?"

"Oh, Garion,.." she laughed, "I love you."

"Yes," he said. "I know."

She gave him an exasperated look and then punched him in the shoulder with her little fist.

"Ouch."

"Did I hurt you?" she asked, taking his arm in sudden concern.

"I think I can stand it, dear," he replied. "We noble heroes can bear all sorts of things." They followed Feldegast's lantern for a mile or more with the horses clattering along behind them through the cobweb-draped passageway. Occasionally they heard the rumble of the dead-carts bearing their mournful freight through the streets above. Here in the musty darkness, however, there was only the sound of the furtive skittering of an occasional errant mouse and the whisperlike tread of watchful spiders moving cautiously across the vaulted ceiling.

"I hate this," Silk said to no one in particular. "I absolutely hate it."

"That's all right, Kheldar," Velvet replied, taking the little man's hand. "I won't let anything hurt you."

"Thanks awfully." he said, though he did not remove his hand from hers.

"Who's there?" The voice came from somewhere ahead.

" 'Tis only me, good Master Yarblek," Feldegast replied. "Me an' a few lost, strayed souls tryin' to find their way on this dark, dark night."

"Do you really enjoy him all that much?" Yarblek said sourly to someone else.

"He's the delight of my life," Vella's voice came through the darkness. "At least with him I don't have to look to my daggers every minute to defend my virtue." Yarblek sighed gustily. "I had a feeling that you were going to say something like that," he said.

"My lady," Vella said, making an infinitely graceful curtsy to Polgara as the sorceress and the juggler, arm in arm, moved up to the place where a moss-grown rockfall blocked the passageway. .

"Vella," Polgara responded in an oddly Nadrak accent. "May your knives always be bright and keen."

There was a strange formality in her greeting, and Garion knew that he was hearing an ancient ritual form of address.

"And may you always have the means at hand to defend your person from unwanted attentions," the Nadrak dancing girl responded automatically, completing the ritual.

"What's happening up above?" Belgarath asked the felt-coated Yarblek.

"They're dying," Yarblek answered shortly, "whole streets at a time."

"Have you been avoiding the city?" Silk asked his partner.

Yarblek nodded. "We're camped outside the gates," he said. "We got out just before they chained them shut. Dolmar died, though. When he realized that he had the plague, he got out an old sword and fell on it."

Silk sighed. "He was a good man -a little dishonest, maybe, but a good man all the same."

Yarblek nodded sadly. "At least he died clean," he said. Then he shook his head. "The stairs up to the street are over here," he said, pointing off into the darkness. "It's late enough so that there's nobody much abroad -except for the dead-carts and the few delirious ones stumbling about and looking for a warm gutter to die in." He squared his shoulders. "Let's go," he said. "The quicker we can get through those streets up there, the quicker we can get back underground where it's safe."

"Does the passage go all the way to the city wall?" Garion asked him.

Yarblek nodded. "And a mile or so beyond," he said. "It comes out in an old stone quarry." He looked at Feldegast. "You never did tell me how you found out about it," he said.

" 'Tis one of me secrets, good Master Yarblek," the juggler replied. "No matter how honest a man might be, it's always good to know a quick way out of town, don't y' know."

"Makes sense," Silk said.

"You ought to know," Yarblek replied. "Let's get out of here." They led the horses to a flight of stone stairs reaching up into the darkness beyond the circle of light from Feldegast's lantern and then laboriously hauled the reluctant animals up the stairway, one step at a time. The stairway

emerged in a rickety shed with a straw-littered floor. After the last horse had been hauled up, Feldegast carefully lowered the long trap door again and scuffed enough straw over it to conceal it. " 'Tis a useful sort of thing," he said, pointing downward toward the hidden passage, "but a secret's no good at all if just anybody kin stumble over it."

Yarblek stood at the door peering out into the narrow alleyway outside.

"Anybody out there?" Silk asked him.

"A few bodies," the Nadrak replied laconically. "For some reason they always seem to want to die in alleys." He drew in a deep breath. "All right, let's go, then."

They moved out into the alley, and Garion kept his eyes averted from the contorted bodies of the plague victims huddled in corners or sprawled in the gutters.

The night air was filled with smoke from the burning city, the reek of burning flesh, and the dreadful smell of decay.

Yarblek also sniffed, then grimaced. "From the odor, I'd say that the dead-carts have missed a few." he said. He led the way to the mouth of the alley and peered out into the street. "It's clear enough," he grunted. "Just a few looters picking over the dead. Come on."

They went out of the alley and moved along a street illuminated by a burning house. Garion saw a furtive movement beside the wall of another house and then made out the shape of a raggedly dressed man crouched over a sprawled body. The man was roughly rifling through the plague victim's clothes. "Won't he catch it?" he asked Yarblek, pointing at the looter.

"Probably." Yarblek shrugged. "I don't think the world's going to miss him very much if he does, though."

They rounded a corner and entered a street where fully half the houses were on fire. A dead-cart had stopped before one of the burning houses, and two rough-looking men were tossing bodies into the fire with casual brutality.

"Stay back!" one of the men shouted to them. "There's plague here!"

"There's plague everywhere in this mournful city, don't y' know," Feldegast replied. "But we thank ye fer yer warnin' anyway. We'll just go on by on the other side of the street, if ye don't mind." He looked curiously at the pair. "How is it that yer not afraid of the contagion yerselves?" he asked.

"We've already had it," one replied with a short laugh.

"I've never been so sick in my life, but at least I didn't die from it -and they say you can only catch it once."

" 'Tis a fortunate man y' are, then," Feldegast congratulated him.

They moved on past the rough pair and on down to the next corner.

"We go this way." Feldegast told them.

"How much farther is it?" Belgarath asked him.

"Not far, an' then we'll be back underground where it's safe."

" You might feel safe underground," Silk said sourly, "but I certainly don't."

Halfway along the street Garion saw a sudden movement in one of the deeply inset doorways, and then he heard a feeble wail. He peered at the doorway. Then, one street over, a burning house fell in on itself, shooting flame and sparks

high into the air. By that fitful light he was able to see what was in the shadows. The crumpled figure of a woman lay huddled in the doorway, and seated beside the body was a crying child, not much more than a year old. His stomach twisted as he started at the horror before his eyes.

Then, with slow cry, Ce'Nedra darted toward the child with her arms extended.

"Ce'Nedra!" he shouted, trying to shake his hand free of Chretienne's reins. "No!"

But before he could move in pursuit, Vella was already there. She caught Ce'Nedra by the shoulder and spun her around roughly. "Ce'Nedra!" she snapped. "Stay away!"

"Let me go!" Ce'Nedra almost screamed. "Can't you see that it's a baby?" She struggled to free herself.

Very coolly, Vella measured the little Queen, then slapped her sharply across the face. So far as Garion knew, it was the first time anyone had ever hit Ce'Nedra.

"The baby's dead, Ce'Nedra," Vella told her with brutal directness, "and if you go near it, you'll die, too." She began to drag her captive back toward the others.

Ce'Nedra stared back over her shoulder at the sickly wailing child, her hand outstretched toward it.

Then Velvet moved to her side, put an arm about her shoulders, and gently turned her so that she could no longer see the child. "Ce'Nedra," she said, "you must think first of your own baby. Would you want to carry this dreadful disease to him?"

Ce'Nedra stared at her.

"Or do you want to die before you ever see him again?"

With a sudden wail, Ce'Nedra fell into Velvet's arms, sobbing bitterly.

"I hope she won't hold any grudges," Vella murmured.

"You're very quick, Vella," Polgara said, "and you think very fast when you have to."

Vella shrugged. "I've found that a smart slap across the mouth is the best cure for hysterics."

Polgara nodded. "It usually works," she agreed approvingly.

They went on down the street until Feldegast led them into another smelly alley. He fumbled with the latch to the wide door of a boarded-up warehouse, then swung it open. "Here we are, then," he said, and they all followed him inside. A long ramp led down into a cavernous cellar, where Yarblek and the little juggler moved aside a stack of crates to reveal the opening of another passageway.

They led their horses into the dark opening, and Feldegast remained outside to hide the passage again. When he was satisfied that the opening was no longer visible, he wormed his way through the loosely stacked crates to rejoin them. "An' there we are," he said, brushing his hands together in a self-congratulatory way. "No man at all kin possibly know that we've come this way, don't y' know, so let's be off."

Garion's thoughts were dark as he trudged along the passageway, following Feldegast's winking lantern. He had slipped away from a man for whom he had begun to develop a careful friendship and had left him behind in a plague-stricken and burning city. There was probably very little that he could have done to aid Zakath, but his

desertion of the man did not make him feel very proud.

He knew, however, that he had no real choice. Cyradis had been too adamant in her instructions. Compelled by necessity, he turned his back on Mal Zeth and resolutely set his face toward Ashaba.

PART THREE

ASHABA

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The road leading north from Mal Zeth passed through a fair, fertile plain where new-sprouted grain covered the damp soil like a low, bright green mist and the warm spring air was filled with the urgent scent of growth. In many ways, the landscape resembled the verdant plains of Arendia or the tidy fields of Sendaria. There were villages, of course, with white buildings, thatched roofs, and dogs that came out to stand at the roadside and bark. The spring sky was an intense blue dotted with puffy white clouds grazing like sheep in their azure pastures.

The road was a dusty brown ribbon laid straight where the surrounding green fields were flat, and folded and curved where the land rose in gentle, rounded hills.

They rode out that morning in glistening sunshine with the sound of the bells fastened about the necks of Yarblek's mules providing a tinkling accompaniment to the morning song of flights of birds caroling to greet the sun.

Behind them there rose a great column of dense black smoke, marking the huge valley where Mal Zeth lay burning.

Garion could not bring himself to look back as they rode away.

There were others on the road as well, for Garion and his friends were not the only ones fleeing the plague-stricken city. Singly or in small groups, wary travelers moved north, fearfully avoiding any contact with each other, leaving the road and angling far out into the fields whenever they overtook other refugees, and returning to the brown, dusty ribbon only when they were safely past.

Each solitary traveler or each group thus rode in cautious isolation, putting as much empty air about itself as possible.

The lanes branching off from the road and leading across the bright green fields were all blocked with barricades of fresh-cut brush, and bleak-faced peasants stood guard at those barricades, awkwardly handling staffs and heavy, graceless crossbows and shouting warnings at any and all who passed to stay away.

"Peasants," Yarblek said sourly as the caravan plodded past one such barricade. "They're the same the world over. They're glad to see you when you've got something they want, but they spend all the rest of their time trying to chase you away. Do you think they actually believe that anybody would really want to go into their stinking little villages?" Irritably he crammed his fur cap down lower over his ears.

"They're afraid," Polgara told him. "They know that their village isn't very luxurious, but it's all they have, and they want to keep it safe."

"Do those barricades and threats really do any good?" he asked. "To keep out the plague, I mean?"

"Some, she said, "if they put them up early enough."

Yarblek grunted, then looked over at Silk. "Are you open to a suggestion?" he asked.

"Depends," Silk replied. The little man had returned to his customary travel clothing-dark, unadorned, and nondescript.

"Between the plague and the demons, the climate here is starting to turn unpleasant. What say we liquidate all our holdings here in Mallorea and sit tight until things settle down?"

"You're not thinking, Yarblek," Silk told him. "Turmoil and war are good for business."

Yarblek scowled at him. "Somehow I thought you might look at it that way."

About a half mile ahead, there was another barricade, this one across the main road itself.

"What's this?" Yarblek demanded angrily, reining in.

"I'll go find out," Silk said, thumping his heels against his horse's flanks. On an impulse, Garion followed his friend.

When they were about fifty yards from the barricade, a dozen mud-spattered peasants dressed in smocks made of brown sackcloth rose from behind it with leveled crossbows. "Stop right there!" one of them commanded threateningly. He was a burly fellow with a coarse beard and eyes that looked off in different directions.

"We're just passing through, friend," Silk told him.

"Not without paying toll, you're not."

"Toll?" Silk exclaimed. "This is an imperial highway. There's no toll."

"There is now. You city people have cheated and swindled us for generations and now you want to bring your diseases to us. Well, from now on, you're going to pay. How much gold have you got?"

"Keep him talking," Garion muttered, looking around.

"Well," Silk said to the walleyed peasant in the tone of voice he usually saved for serious negotiations, "why don't we talk about that?"

The village stood about a quarter of a mile away, rising dirty and cluttered-looking atop a grassy knoll. Garion concentrated, drawing in his will, then he made a slight gesture in the direction of the village. "Smoke," he muttered, half under his breath.

Silk was still haggling with the armed peasants, taking up as much time as he could.

"Uh -excuse me," Garion interrupted mildly, "but is that something burning over there?" He pointed.

The peasants turned to stare in horror at the column of dense smoke rising from their village. With startled cries, most of them threw down their crossbows and ran out across the fields in the direction of the apparent catastrophe. The walleyed man ran after them, shouting at them to return to their posts. Then he ran back, waving his crossbow threateningly. A look of anguish crossed his face as he hopped about in an agony of indecision, torn between his desire for money that could be extorted from these travelers and the horrid vision of a fire raging unchecked through his house and

outbuildings. Finally, no longer able to stand it, he also threw down his weapon and ran after his neighbors.

"Did you really set their village on fire?" Silk sounded a little shocked.

"Of course not," Garion said.

"Where's the smoke coming from then?"

"Lots of places." Garion winked. "Out of the thatch on their roofs, up from between the stones in the streets, boiling up out of their cellars and granaries -lots of places. But it's only smoke." He swung down from Chretienne's back and gathered up the discarded crossbows. He lined them up, nose down, in a neat row along the brushy barricade. "How long does it take to restring a crossbow?" he asked.

"Hours." Silk suddenly grinned., "Two men to bend the limbs with a windlass and another two to hook the cable in place."

"That's what I thought," Garion agreed. He drew his old belt knife and went down the line of weapons, cutting each twisted rope cable. Each bow responded with a heavy twang. "Shall we go, then?" he asked.

"What about this?" Silk pointed at the brushy barricade.

Garion shrugged. "I think we can ride around it."

"What were they trying to do?" Durnik asked when they returned.

"An enterprising group of local peasants decided that the highway needed a tollgate about there." Silk shrugged. "They didn't really have the temperament for business affairs, though. At the first little distraction, they ran off and left the shop untended."

They rode on past the now-deserted barricade with Yarblek's laden mules plodding along behind them, their bells clanging mournfully.

"I think we're going to have to leave you soon," Belgarath said to the fur-capped Nadrak. "We have to get to Ashaba within the week, and your mules are holding us back."

Yarblek nodded. "Nobody ever accused a pack mule of being fast on his feet," he agreed. "I'll be turning toward the west before long anyway. You can go into Karanda if you want to, but I want to get to the coast as quickly as possible."

"Garion," Polgara said. She looked meaningfully at the column of smoke rising from the village behind them.

"Oh," he replied. "I guess I forgot." He raised his hand, trying to make it look impressive. "Enough," he said, releasing his will. The smoke thinned at its base, and the column continued to rise as a cloud, cut off from its source.

"Don't overdramatize, dear," Polgara advised. "It's ostentatious."

"You do it all the time," he accused.

"Yes, dear, but I know how."

It was perhaps noon when they rode up a long hill, crested it in the bright sunshine, and found themselves suddenly surrounded by mailed, red-tunicked Mallorean soldiers, who rose up out of ditches and shallow gullies with evil-looking javelins in their hands.

"You! Halt!" the officer in charge of the detachment of soldiers commanded brusquely. He was a short man, shorter even than Silk, though he strutted about as if he were ten feet tall.

"Of course, Captain," Yarblek replied, reining in his horse.

"What do we do?" Garion hissed to Silk.

"Let Yarblek handle it," Silk murmured. "He knows what he's doing."

"Where are you bound?" the officer asked when the rangy Nadrak had dismounted.

"Mal Dariya," Yarblek answered, "or Mal Camat -wherever I can hire ships to get my goods to Yar Marak."

The captain grunted as if trying to find something wrong with that. "What's more to the point is where you come from." His eyes were narrowed.

"Maga Renn." Yarblek shrugged.

"Not Mal Zeth?" The little captain's eyes grew even harder and more suspicious.

"I don't do business in Mal Zeth very often, Captain. It costs too much -all those bribes and fees and permits, you know."

"I assume that you can prove what you say?" The captain's tone was belligerent.

"I suppose I could- if there's a need for it."

"There's a need, Nadrak, because, unless you can prove that you haven't come from Mal Zeth, I'm going to turn you back." He sounded smug about that.

"Turn back? That's impossible. I have to be in Boktor by midsummer."

"That's your problem, merchant." The little soldier seemed rather pleased at having upset the larger man.

"There's plague in Mal Zeth, and I'm here to make sure that it doesn't spread." He tapped himself importantly on the chest.

"Plague!" Yarblek's eyes went wide, and his face actually paled. "Torak's teeth! And I almost stopped there!" He suddenly snapped his fingers. "So that's why all the villages hereabouts are barricaded."

"Can you prove that you came from Maga Renn?" the captain insisted.

"Well-" Yarblek unbuckled a well-worn saddlebag hanging under his right stirrup and began to rummage around in it. "I've got a permit here issued by the Bureau of Commerce," he said rather dubiously. "It authorizes me to move my goods from Maga Renn to Mal Dariya."

"If I can't find ships there, I'll have to get another permit to go on to Mal Camat, I guess. Would that satisfy you?"

"Let's see it." The captain held out his hand, snapping his fingers impatiently.

Yarblek handed it over.

"It's a little smeared," the captain accused suspiciously.

"I spilled some beer on it in a tavern in Penn Daka." Yarblek shrugged. "Weak, watery stuff it was. Take my advice, Captain. Don't ever plan to do any serious drinking in Penn Daka. It's a waste of time and money."

"Is drinking all you Nadraks ever think about?"

"It's the climate. There's nothing else to do in Gar og Nadrak in the wintertime."

"Have you got anything else?"

Yarblek pawed through his saddlebag some more. "Here's a bill of sale from a carpet merchant on Yorba Street in Maga

Renn -pockmarked fellow with bad teeth. Do you by any chance know him?"

"Why would I know a carpet merchant in Maga Renn? I'm an officer in the imperial army. I don't associate with riffraff. Is the date on this accurate?"

"How should I know? We use a different calendar in Gar og Nadrak. It was about two weeks ago, if that's any help."

The captain thought it over, obviously trying very hard to find some excuse to exert his authority. Finally his expression became faintly disappointed. "All right," he said grudgingly, handing back the documents. "Be on your way. But don't make any side trips, and make sure that none of your people leave your caravan."

"They'd better not leave -not if they want to get paid."

"Thank you, Captain." Yarblek swung back up into his saddle.

The officer grunted and waved them on.

"Little people should never be given any kind of authority," the Nadrak said sourly when they were out of earshot. "It lies too heavily on their brains."

"Yarblek!" Silk objected.

"Present company excepted, of course."

"Oh. That's different, then."

"Ye lie like ye were born to it, good Master Yarblek," Feldegast the juggler said admiringly.

"I've been associating with a certain Drasnian for too long."

"How did you come by the permit and the bill of sale?" Silk asked him.

Yarblek winked and tapped his forehead slyly. "Official types are always overwhelmed by official-looking documents -and the more petty the official, the more he's impressed. I could have proved to that obnoxious little captain back there that we came from any place at all -Melcene, Aduma in the Mountains of Zamad, even Crol Tibu on the coast of Gandahar- except that all you can buy in Crol Tibu are elephants, and I don't have any of those with me, so that might have made even him a little suspicious."

Silk looked around with a broad grin. "Now you see why I went into partnership with him," he said to them all.

"You seem well suited to each other," Velvet agreed.

Belgarath was tugging at one ear. "I think we'll leave you after dark tonight," he said to Yarblek. "I don't want some other officious soldier to stop us and count noses -or decide that we need a military escort."

Yarblek nodded. "Are you going to need anything?"

"Just some food is all." Belgarath glanced back at their laden packhorses plodding along beside the mules. "We've been on the road for quite some time now and we've managed to gather up what we really need and discard what we don't."

"I'll see to it that you've got enough food," Vella promised from where she was riding between Ce'Nedra and Velvet. "Yarblek sometimes forgets that full ale kegs are not the only things you need on a journey."

"An' will ye be ridin' north, then?" Feldegast asked Belgarath. The little comic had changed out of his brightcolored clothes and was now dressed in plain brown.

"Unless they've moved it, that's where Ashaba is,"

Belgarath replied.

"If it be all the same to ye, I'll ride along with ye fer a bit of a ways."

"Oh?"

"There was a little difficulty with the authorities the last time I was in Mal Dariya, an' I'd like to give 'em time t' regain their composure befure I go back fer me triumphant return engagement. Authorities tend t' be a stodgy an' unfergivin' lot, don't y' know -always tredgin' up old pranks an' bits of mischief perpetrated in the spirit of fun an' throwin' 'em in yer face."

Belgarath gave him along, steady look, then shrugged. "Why not?" he said.

Garion looked sharply at the old man. His sudden acquiescence seemed wildly out of character, given his angry protests at the additions of Velvet and Sadi to their party. Garion then looked over at Polgara, but she showed no signs of concern either. A peculiar suspicion began to creep over him.

As evening settled over the plains of Mallorean, they drew off the road to set up their night's encampment in a park-like grove of beech trees. Yarblek's muleteers sat about one campfire, passing an earthenware jug around and becoming increasingly rowdy. At the upper end of the grove, Garion and his friends sat around another fire, eating supper and talking quietly with Yarblek and Vella.

"Be careful when you cross into Venna," Yarblek cautioned his rat-faced partner. "Some of the stories coming out of there are more ominous than the ones coming out of Karanda."

"Oh?"

"It's as if a kind of madness has seized them all. Of course, Grolims were never very sane to begin with."

"Grolims?" Sadi looked up sharply.

"Venna's a Church-controlled state," Silk explained. "All authority there derives from Urvon and his court at Mal Yaska."

"It used to," Yarblek corrected. "Nobody seems to know who's got the authority now. The Grolims gather in groups to talk. The talk keeps getting louder until they're screaming at each other, and then they all reach for their knives. I haven't been able to get the straight of it. Even the Temple Guardsmen are taking sides."

"The idea of Grolims cutting each other to pieces is one I can live with," Silk said.

"Truly," Yarblek agreed. "Just try not to get caught in the middle."

Feldegast had been softly strumming his lute and he struck a note so sour that even Garion noticed it.

"That string's out of tune," Durnik advised him.

"I know," the juggler replied. "The peg keeps slippin' "

"Let me see it," Durnik offered. "Maybe I can fix it."

" 'Tis too worn, I fear, friend Durnik. 'Tis a grand instrument, but it's old."

"Those are the ones that are worth saving." Durnik took the lute and twisted the loose peg, tentatively testing the pitch of the string with his thumb. Then he took his knife and cut several small slivers of wood. He carefully inserted them around the peg, tapping them into place with the hilt of his knife. Then he twisted the peg, retuning the string. "That

should do it," he said. He took up the lute and strummed it a few times. Then, to a slow measure, he picked out an ancient air, the single notes quivering resonantly. He played the air through once, his fingers seeming to grow more confident as he went along.

Then he returned to the beginning again, but this time, to Garion's amazement, he accompanied the simple melody with a rippling counterpoint so complex that it seemed impossible that it could come from a single instrument. "It has a nice tone," he observed to Feldegast.

" 'Tis a marvel that ye are, master smith. First ye repair me lute, an' then ye turn around an' put me t' shame by playin' it far better than I could ever hope to."

Polgara's eyes were very wide and luminous. "Why haven't you told me about this, Durnik?" she asked.

"Actually, it's been so long that I almost forgot about it." He smiled, his fingers still dancing on the strings and bringing forth that rich-toned cascade of sound.

"When I was young, I worked for a time with a lute maker. He was old, and his fingers were stiff, but he needed to hear the tone of the instruments he made, so he taught me how to play them for him."

He looked across the fire at his giant friend, and something seemed to pass between them. Toth nodded, reached inside the rough blanket he wore across one shoulder, and produced a curious-looking set of pipes, a series of hollow reeds, each longer than the one preceding it, all bound tightly together. Quietly, the mute lifted the pipes to his lips as Durnik returned again to the beginning of the air. The sound he produced from his simple pipes had an aching poignancy about it that pierced Garion to the heart, soaring through the intricate complexity of the lute song.

"I'm beginnin' t' feel altogether unnecessary," Feldegast said in wonder. "Me own playin' of lute or pipe be good enough fer taverns an' the like, but I be no virtuoso like these two." He looked at the huge Toth. "How is it possible fer a man so big t' produce so delicate a sound?"

"He's very good," Eriond told him. "He plays for Durnik and me sometimes -when the fish aren't biting."

"Ah, 'tis a grand sound," Feldegast said, "an' far too good t' be wasted." He looked across the fire at Vella. "Would ye be willin' t' give us a bit of a dance, me girl, t' sort of round out the evenin'?"

"Why not?" She laughed with a toss of her head. She rose to her feet and moved to the opposite side of the fire.

"Follow this beat," she instructed, raising her rounded arms above her head and snapping her fingers to set the tempo. Feldegast picked up the beat, clapping his hands rhythmically.

Garion had seen Vella dance before -long ago in a forest tavern in Gar og Nadrak- so he knew more or less what to expect. He was sure, however, that Eriond certainly -and Ce'Nedra probably- should not watch a performance of such blatant sensuality. Vella's dance began innocuously enough, though, and he began to think that perhaps he had been unduly sensitive the last time he had watched her.

When the sharp staccato of her snapping fingers and Feldegast's clapping increased the tempo, however, and she began to dance with greater abandon, he realized that his

first assessment had been correct. Eriond should really not be watching this dance, and Ce'Nedra should be sent away almost immediately. For the life of him, however, he could not think of any way to do it.

When the tempo slowed again and Durnik and Toth returned to a simple restatement of the original air, the Nadrak girl concluded her dance with that proud, aggressive strut that challenged every man about the fire.

To Garion's absolute astonishment, Eriond warmly applauded with no trace of embarrassment showing on his young face. He knew that his own neck was burning and that his breath was coming faster.

Ce'Nedra's reaction was about what he had expected. Her cheeks were flaming and her eyes were wide. Then she suddenly laughed with delight. "Wonderful!" she exclaimed, and her eyes were full of mischief as she cast a sidelong glance at Garion. He coughed nervously.

Feldegast wiped a tear from his eye and blew his nose gustily. Then he rose to his feet. "Ah, me fine, lusty wench," he said fulsomely to Vella, hanging a regretful embrace about her neck and -endangering life and limb just a little in view of her ever-ready daggers- bussing her noisily on the lips, "it's destroyed altogether I am that we must part. I'll miss ye, me girl, an' make no mistake about that. But I make ye me promise that we'll meet again, an' I'll delight ye with a few of me naughty little stories, an' ye'll fuddle me brains with yer wicked brew, an' we'll laugh an' sing together an' enjoy spring after spring in the sheer delight of each others' company. " Then he slapped her rather familiarly on the bottom and moved quickly out of range before she could find the hilt of one of her daggers.

"Does she dance for you often, Yarblek?" Silk asked his partner, his eyes very bright.

"Too often," Yarblek replied mournfully, "and every time she does, I find myself starting to think that her daggers aren't really all that sharp and that a little cut or two wouldn't really hurt too much."

"Feel free to try at any time, Yarblek," Vella offered, her hand suggestively on the hilt of one of her daggers.

Then she looked at Ce'Nedra with a broad wink.

"Why do you dance like that?" Ce'Nedra asked, still blushing slightly. "You know what it does to every man who watches."

"That's part of the fun, Ce'Nedra. First you drive them crazy, and then you hold them off with your daggers. It makes them absolutely wild. Next time we meet, I'll show you how it's done." She looked at Garion and laughed a wicked laugh.

Belgarath returned to the fire. He had left at some time during Vella's dance, though Garion's eyes had been too busy to notice. "It's dark enough," he told them all. "I think we can leave now without attracting any notice." They all rose from where they had been sitting.

"You know what to do?" Silk asked his partner.

Yarblek nodded.

"All right. Do whatever you have to to keep me out of the soup."

"Why do you persist in playing around in politics, Silk?"

"Because it gives me access to greater opportunities to

steal."

"Oh," Yarblek said. "That's all right then." He extended his hand. "Take care, Silk," he said.

"You, too, Yarblek. Try to keep us solvent if you can, and I'll see you in a year or so."

"If you live."

"There's that, too."

"I enjoyed your dance, Vella," Polgara said, embracing the Nadrak girl.

"I'm honored, Lady," Vella replied a bit shyly. " And we'll meet again, I'm sure."

"I'm certain that we will."

" Are ye sure that ye won't reconsider yer outrageous askin' price, Master Yarblek?" Feldegast asked.

"Talk to her about it," Yarblek replied, jerking his head in Vella's direction. "She's the one who set it."

" 'Tis a hardhearted woman ye are, me girl," the juggler accused her.

She shrugged. "If you buy something cheap, you don't value it."

"Now that's the truth, surely. I'll see what I kin do t' put me hands on some money, fer make no mistake, me fine wench, I mean t' own ye."

"We'll see," she replied with a slight smile.

They went out of the circle of firelight to their picketed horses -and the juggler's mule- and mounted quietly. The moon had set, and the stars lay like bright jewels across the warm, velvet throat of night as they rode out of Yarblek's camp and moved at a cautious walk toward the north. When the sun rose several hours later, they were miles away, moving northward along, a well-maintained highway toward Mal Rukuth, the Angarak city lying on the south bank of the Raku River, the stream that marked the southern border of Venna. The morning was warm, the sky was clear, and they made good time. Once again there were refugees on the road, but unlike yesterday, significant numbers of them were fleeing toward the south.

"Is it possible that the plague has broken out in the north as well?" Sadi asked.

Polgara frowned. "It's possible, I suppose," she told him.

"I think it's more likely that those people are fleeing from Mengha," Belgarath disagreed.

"It's going to get a bit chaotic hereabouts," Silk noted.

"If you've got people fleeing in one direction from the plague and people fleeing in the other from the demons, about all they'll be able to do is mill around out here on these plains."

"That could work to our advantage, Kheldar," Velvet pointed out. "Sooner or later, Zakath is going to discover that we left Mal Zeth without saying good-bye and he's likely to send troops out looking for us. A bit of chaos in this region should help to confuse their search, wouldn't you say?"

"You've got a point there," he admitted.

Garion rode on in a half doze, a trick he had learned from Belgarath. Though he had occasionally missed a night's sleep in the past, he had never really gotten used to it. He rode along with his head down, only faintly aware of what was happening around him.

He heard a persistent sound that seemed to nag at the edge

of his consciousness. He frowned, his eyes still closed, trying to identify the sound. And then he remembered. It was a faint, despairing wail, and the full horror of the sight of the dying child in the shabby street in Mal Zeth struck him. Try though he might, he could not wrench himself back into wakefulness, and the continuing cry tore at his heart.

Then he felt a large hand on his shoulder, shaking him gently. Struggling, he raised his head to look full into the sad face of the giant Toth.

"Did you hear it, too?" he asked.

Toth nodded, his face filled with sympathy.

"It was only a dream, wasn't it?"

Toth spread his hands, and his look was uncertain.

Garion squared his shoulders and sat up in his saddle, determined not to drift off again.

They rode some distance away from the road and took a cold lunch of bread, cheese, and smoked sausage in the shade of a large elm tree standing quite alone in the middle of a field of oats. There was a small spring surrounded by a mossy rock wall not far away, where they were able to water the horses and fill their water bags.

Belgarath stood looking out over the fields toward a distant village and the barricaded lane which approached it. "How much food do we have with us, Pol?" he asked.

"If every village we come to is closed up the way the ones we've passed so far have been, it's going to be difficult to replenish our stores."

"I think we'll be all right, father," she replied. "Vella was very generous."

"I like her." Ce'Nedra smiled. "Even though she does swear all the time."

Polgara returned the smile. "It's the Nadrak way, dear," she said. "When I was in Gar og Nadrak, I had to draw on my memories of the more colorful parts of my father's vocabulary to get by."

"Halloooo!" someone hailed them.

"He's over there." Silk pointed toward the road.

A man who was wearing one of the brown robes that identified him as a Melcene bureaucrat sat looking at them longingly from the back of a bay horse.

"What do you want?" Durnik called to him.

"Can you spare a bit of food?" the Melcene shouted.

"I can't get near any of these villages and I haven't eaten in three days. I can pay."

Durnik looked questioningly at Polgara.

She nodded. "We have enough," she said.

"Which way was he coming?" Belgarath asked.

"South, I think," Silk replied.

"Tell him that it's all right, Durnik," the old man said.

"He can probably give us some recent news from the north."

"Come on in," Durnik shouted to the hungry man.

The bureaucrat rode up until he was about twenty yards away. Then he stopped warily. "Are you from Mal Zeth?" he demanded.

"We left before the plague broke out," Silk lied.

The official hesitated. "I'll put the money on this rock here," he offered, pointing at a white boulder. "Then I'll move back a ways. You can take the money and leave some food."

That way neither one of us will endanger the other."

"Makes sense," Silk replied pleasantly.

Polgara took a loaf of brown bread and a generous slab of cheese from her stores and gave them to the sharp-faced Drasnian.

The Melcene dismounted, laid a few coins on the rock, and then led his horse back some distance.

"Where have you come from, friend?" Silk asked as he approached the rock.

"I was in Akkad in Katakori," the hungry man answered, eyeing the loaf and the cheese. "I was senior administrator there for the Bureau of Public Works -you know, walls, aqueducts, streets, that sort of thing. The bribes weren't spectacular, but I managed to get by. Anyway, I got out just a few hours before Mengha and his demons got there."

Silk laid the food on the rock and picked up the money. Then he backed away. "We heard that Akkad fell quite some time ago."

The Melcene almost ran to the rock and snatched up the bread and cheese. He took a large bite of cheese and tore a chunk off the loaf. "I hid out in the mountains," he replied around the mouthful.

"Isn't that where Ashaba is?" Silk asked, sounding very casual.

The Melcene swallowed hard and nodded. "That's why I finally left," he said, stuffing bread in his mouth. "The area's infested with huge wild dogs -ugly brutes as big as horses- and there are roving bands of Karands killing everyone they come across. I could have avoided all that, but there's something terrible going on at Ashaba. There are dreadful sounds coming from the castle and strange lights in the sky over it at night. I don't hold with the supernatural, my friend, so I bolted." He sighed happily, tearing off another chunk of bread. "A month ago I'd have turned my nose up at brown bread and cheese. Now it tastes like a banquet."

"Hunger's the best sauce," Silk quoted the old adage.

"That's the honest truth."

"Why didn't you stay up in Venna? Didn't you know that there's plague in Mal Zeth?"

The Melcene shuddered. "What's going on in Venna's even worse than what's going on in Katakori or Mal Zeth," he replied. "My nerves are absolutely destroyed by all this. I'm an engineer. What do I know about demons and new Gods and magic? Give me paving stones and timbers and mortar and a few modest bribes and don't even mention any of that other nonsense to me."

"New Gods?" Silk asked. "Who's been talking about new Gods?"

"The Chandim. You've heard of them?"

"Don't they belong to Urvon the Disciple?"

"I don't think they belong to anybody right now. They've gone on a rampage in Venna. Nobody's seen Urvon for more than a month now -not even the people in Mal Yaska. The Chandim are completely out of control. They're erecting altars out in the fields and holding double sacrifices -the first heart to Torak and the second to this new God of Angarak- and anybody up there that doesn't bow to both altars gets his heart cut out right on the spot."

"That seems like a very good reason to stay out of Venna," Silk said wryly. "Have they put a name to this new God of theirs?"

"Not that I ever heard. They just call him 'The new God of Angarak, come to replace Torak and to take dreadful vengeance on the Godslayer.' "

"That's you," Velvet murmured to Garion.

"Do you mind?"

"I just thought you ought to know, that's all."

"There's an open war going on in Venna, my friend," the Melcene continued, "and I'd advise you to give the place a wide berth."

"War?"

"Within the Church itself. The Chandim are slaughtering all the old Grolims -the ones who are still faithful to Torak. The Temple Guardsmen are taking sides and they're having pitched battles on the plains up there -that's when they're not marauding through the countryside, burning farmsteads, and massacring whole villages. You'd think that the whole of Venna's gone crazy. It's as much as a man's life is worth to go through there just now. They stop you and ask you which God you worship, and a wrong answer is fatal." He paused, still eating. "Have you heard about any place that's quiet -and safe?" he asked plaintively.

"Try the coast," Silk suggested. "Mal Abad, maybe -or Mal Camat."

"Which way are you going?"

"We're going north to the river and see if we can find a boat to take us down to Lake Penn Daka."

"It won't be safe there for very long, friend. If the plague doesn't get there first, Mengha's demons will -or the crazed Grolims and their Guardsmen out of Venna."

"We don't plan to stop," Silk told him. "We're going to cut on across Delchin to Maga Renn and then on down the Magan."

"That's a long journey."

"Friend, I'll go to Gandahar if necessary to get away from demons and plague and mad Grolims. If worse comes to worst, we'll hide out among the elephant herders. Elephants aren't all that bad."

The Melcene smiled briefly. "Thanks for the food," he said, tucking his loaf and his cheese inside his robe and looking around for his grazing horse. "Good luck when you get to Gandahar."

"The same to you on the coast," Silk replied.

They watched the Melcene ride off.

"Why did you take his money, Kheldar?" Eriond asked curiously. "I thought we were just going to give him the food."

"Unexpected and unexplained acts of charity linger in people's minds, Eriond, and curiosity overcomes gratitude. I took his money to make sure that by tomorrow he won't be able to describe us to any curious soldiers."

"Oh," the boy said a bit sadly. "It's too bad that things are like that, isn't it?"

"As Sadi says, I didn't make the world; I only try to live in it."

"Well, what do you think?" Belgarath said to the juggler.

Feldegast squinted off toward the horizon. "Yer dead set on goin' right straight up through the middle of Venna -past Mal Yaska an' all?"

"We don't have any choice. We've got just so much time to get to Ashaba."

"Somehow I thought y' might feel that way about it."

"Do you know a way to get us through?"

Feldegast scratched his head. " 'Twill be dangerous, Ancient One," he said dubiously, "what with Grolims and Chandim and Temple Guardsmen an' all."

"It won't be nearly as dangerous as missing our appointment at Ashaba would be."

"Well, if yer dead set on it, I suppose I kin get ye through."

" All right," Belgarath said. "Let's get started then."

The peculiar suspicion which had come over Garion the day before grew stronger. Why would his grandfather ask these questions of a man they scarcely knew? The more he thought about it, the more he became convinced that there was a great deal more going on here than met the eye.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

It was late afternoon when they reached Mal Rakuth, a grim fortress city crouched on the banks of a muddy river. The walls were high, and black towers rose within those walls. A large crowd of people was gathered outside, imploring the citizens to let them enter, but the city gates were locked, and archers with half-drawn bows lined the battlements, threatening the refugees below.

"That sort of answers that question, doesn't it?" Garion said as he and his companions reined in on a hilltop some distance from the tightened city.

Belgarath grunted. "It's more or less what I expected," he said. "There's nothing we really need in Mal Rakuth anyway, so there's not much point in pressing the issue."

"How are we going to get across the river, though?"

"If I remember correctly, there be a ferry crossin' but a few miles upstream, Feldegast told him.

"Won't the ferryman be just as frightened of the plague as the people in that city are?" Durnik asked him.

" 'Tis an ox-drawn ferry, Goodman -with teams on each side an' cables an' pulleys an' all. The ferryman kin take our money an' put us on the far bank an' never come within fifty yards of us. I fear the crossin' will be dreadful expensive, though."

The ferry proved to be a leaky old barge attached to a heavy cable stretched across the yellow-brown river.

"Stay back!" the mud-covered man holding the rope hitched about the neck of the lead ox on the near side commanded as they approached. "I don't want any of your filthy diseases."

"How much to go across?" Silk called to him.

The muddy fellow squinted greedily at them, assessing their clothing and horses. "One gold piece," he said flatly.

"That's outrageous!"

"Try swimming."

"Pay him," Belgarath said.

"Not likely," Silk replied. "I refuse to be cheated -even here. Let me think a minute." His narrow face became intent as he stared hard at the rapacious ferryman.

"Durnik," he said thoughtfully, "do you have your axe handy?"

The smith nodded, patting the axe which hung from a loop at the back of his saddle.

"Do you suppose you could reconsider just a bit, friend?" the little Drasnian called plaintively to the ferryman.

"One gold piece," the ferryman repeated stubbornly.

Silk sighed. "Do you mind if we look at your boat first? It doesn't look all that safe to me."

"Help yourself -but I won't move it until I get paid."

Silk looked at Durnik. "Bring the axe," he said.

Durnik dismounted and lifted his broad-bladed axe from its loop. Then the two of them climbed down the slippery bank to the barge. They went up the sloping ramp and onto the deck. Silk stamped his feet tentatively on the planking. "Nice boat," he said to the ferryman, who stood cautiously some distance away. "Are you sure you won't reconsider the price?"

"One gold piece. Take it or leave it."

Silk sighed. "I was afraid you might take that position." He scuffed one foot at the muddy deck. "You know more about boats than I do, friend," he observed. "How long do you think it would take this tub to sink if my friend here chopped a hole in the bottom?"

The ferryman gaped at him.

"Pull up the decking in the bow, Durnik," Silk suggested pleasantly. "Give yourself plenty of room for a good swing."

The desperate ferryman grabbed up a club and ran down the bank.

"Careful, friend," Silk said to him. "We left Mal Zeth only yesterday, and I'm already starting to feel a little feverish -something I ate, no doubt."

The ferryman froze in his tracks.

Durnik was grinning as he began to pry up the decking at the front of the barge.

"My friend here is an expert woodsman," Silk continued in a conversational tone, "and his axe is terribly sharp. I'll wager that he can have this scow lying on the bottom inside of ten minutes."

"I can see into the hold now," Durnik reported, suggestively testing the edge of his axe with his thumb. "Just how big a hole would you like?"

"Oh," Silk replied, "I don't know, Durnik -a yard or so square, maybe. Would that sink it?"

"I'm not sure. Why don't we try it and find out?" Durnik pushed up the sleeves of his short jacket and hefted his axe a couple of times.

The ferryman was making strangled noises and hopping up and down.

"What's your feeling about negotiation at this point, friend?" Silk asked him. "I'm almost positive that we can reach an accommodation -now that you fully understand the situation."

When they were partway across the river and the barge was wallowing heavily in the current, Durnik walked forward to the bow and stood looking into the opening he had made by prying

up the deck. "I wonder how big a hole it would take to sink this thing," he mused.

"What was that, dear?" Polgara asked him.

"Just thinking out loud, Pol," he said. "But do you know something? I just realized that I've never sunk a boat before."

She rolled her eyes heavenward. "Men," she sighed.

"I suppose I'd better put the planks back so that we can lead the horses off on the other side," Durnik said almost regretfully.

They erected their tents in the shelter of a grove of cedar trees near the river that evening. The sky, which had been serene and blue since they had arrived in Mallorean, had turned threatening as the sun sank, and there were rumbles of thunder and brief flickers of lightning among the clouds off to the west.

After supper, Durnik and Toth went out of the grove for a look around and returned with sober faces. "I'm afraid that we're in for a spell of bad weather," the smith reported. "You can smell it coming."

"I hate riding in the rain," Silk complained.

"Most people do, Prince Kheldar," Feldegast told him. "But bad weather usually keeps others in as well, don't y' know; an' if what that hungry traveler told us this afternoon be true, we'll not be wantin' t' meet the sort of folk that be abroad in Venna when the weather's fine."

"He mentioned the Chandim," Sadi said, frowning. "Just exactly who are they?"

"The Chandim are an order within the Grolim Church," Belgarath told him. "When Torak built Cthol Mishrak, he converted certain Grolims into Hounds to patrol the region. After Vo Mimbire, when Torak was bound in sleep, Urvon converted about half of them back. The ones who reassumed human form are all sorcerers of greater or lesser talent, and they can communicate with the ones who are still Hounds. They're very close-knit -like a pack of wild dogs- and they're all fanatically loyal to Urvon."

"An' that be much of the source of Urvon's power," Feldegast added. "Ordinary Grolims be always schemin' against each other an' against their superiors, but Urvon's Chandim have kept the Mallolean Grolims in line fer five hundred years now."

"And the Temple Guardsmen?" Sadi added. "Are they Chandim, or Grolims, too?"

"Not usually," Belgarath replied. "There are Grolims among them, of course, but most of them are Mallolean Angaraks. They were recruited before Vo Mimbire to serve as Torak's personal bodyguard."

"Why would a God need a bodyguard?"

"I never entirely understood that myself," the old man admitted. "Anyway, after Vo Mimbire, there are still a few of them left -new recruits, veterans who'd been wounded in earlier battles and sent home, that sort of thing. Urvon persuaded them that he spoke for Torak, and now their allegiance is to him. After that, they recruited more young Angaraks to fill up the holes in their ranks. They do more than just guard the Temple now, though. When Urvon started having difficulties with the Emperors at Mal Zeth, he decided

that he needed a fighting force, so he expanded them into an army."

" 'Tis a practical arrangement," Feldegast pointed out. "The Chandim provide Urvon with the sorcery he needs t' keep the other Grolims toein' the mark, an' the simple Guardsmen provide the muscle t' keep the ordinary folk from protestin' their lot."

"These Guardsmen, they're just ordinary soldiers, then?" Durnik asked.

"Not really. They're closer to being knights," Belgarath replied.

"Like Mandorallen, you mean -all dressed in steel plate and with shields and lances and war horses and all that?"

"No, Goodman," Feldegast answered. "They're not nearly so grand. Lances an' helmets and shields they have, certainly, but fer the rest, they rely on chain mail. They be most nearly as stupid as Arends, however. Somethin' about wearin' all that steel empties the mind of every knight the world around."

Belgarath was looking speculatively at Garion. "How muscular are you feeling?" he asked.

"Not very -why?"

"We've got a bit of a problem here. We're far more likely to encounter Guardsmen than we are Chandim -but if we start unhorsing all these tin men with our minds, the noise is going to attract the Chandim like a beacon."

Garion stared at him. "You're not serious! I'm not Mandorallen, Grandfather."

"No. You've got better sense than he has."

"I will not stand by and hear my knight insulted!" Ce'Nedra declared hotly.

"Ce'Nedra," Belgarath said almost absently, "hush."

"Hush?"

"You heard me." He scowled at her so blackly that she faltered and drew back behind Polgara for protection.

"The point, Garion," the old man continued, "is that you've received a certain amount of training from Mandorallen in this sort of thing and you've had a bit of experience. None of the rest of us have."

"I don't have any armor."

"You've got a mail shirt."

"I don't have a helmet -or a shield."

"I could probably manage those, Garion," Durnik offered.

Garion looked at his old friend. "I'm terribly disappointed in you, Durnik," he said.

"You aren't afraid, are you, Garion?" Ce'Nedra asked in a small voice.

"Well, no. Not really. It's just that it's so stupid -and it looks so ridiculous."

"Have you got an old pot I could borrow, Pol?" Durnik asked.

"How big a pot?"

"Big enough to fit Garion's head."

"Now that's going too far!" Garion exclaimed. "I'm not going to wear a kitchen pot on my head for a helmet. I haven't done that since I was a boy."

"I'll modify it a bit," Durnik assured him. "And then I'll take the lid and make you a shield." Garion walked away

swearing to himself.

Velvet's eyes had narrowed. She looked at Feldegast with no hint of her dimples showing. "Tell me, master juggler," she said, "how is it that an itinerant entertainer, who plays for pennies in wayside taverns, knows so very much about the inner working of Grolim society here in Mallorea?"

"I be not nearly so foolish as I look, me lady," he replied, "an' I do have eyes an' ears, an' know how t' use 'em."

"You avoided that question rather well," Belgarath complimented him.

The juggler smirked. "I thought so meself. Now," he continued seriously, "as me ancient friend here says, 'tis not too likely that we'll be encounterin' the Chandim if it rains, fer a dog has usually the good sense t' take t' his kennel when the weather be foul -unless there be pressin' need fer him t' be out an' about. 'Tis far more probable fer us t' meet Temple Guardsmen, fer a knight, be he Arendish or Mallolean, seems deaf t' the gentle patter of rain on his armor. I shouldn't wonder that our young warrior King over there be of sufficient might t' be a match fer any Guardsman we might meet alone, but there always be the possibility of comin' across 'em in groups. Should there be such encounters, keep yer wits about ye an' remember that once a knight has started his charge, 'tis very hard fer him t' swerve or change direction very much at all. A sidestep an' a smart rap across the back of the head be usually enough t' roll 'em out of the saddle, an' a man in armor -once he's off his horse- be like a turtle on his back, don't y' know."

"You've done it a few times yourself, I take it?" Sadi murmured.

"I've had me share of misunderstandin's with Temple Guardsmen," Feldegast admitted, "an' ye'll note that I still be here t' talk about 'em."

Durnik took the cast iron pot Polgara had given him and set it in the center of their fire. After a time, he pulled it glowing out of the coals with a stout stick, placed the blade of a broken knife on a rounded rock, and then set the pot over it. He took up his axe, reversed it, and held the blunt end over the pot.

"You'll break it," Silk predicted. "Cast iron's too brittle to take any pounding."

"Trust me, Silk," the smith said with a wink. He took a deep breath and began to tap lightly on the pot. The sound of his hammering was not the dull clack of cast iron, but the clear ring of steel, a sound that Garion remembered from his earliest boyhood. Deftly the smith reshaped the pot into a flat-topped helmet with a fierce nose guard and heavy cheek pieces. Garion knew that his old friend was cheating just a bit by the faint whisper and surge he was directing at the emerging helmet.

Then Durnik dropped the helmet into a pail of water, and it hissed savagely, sending off a cloud of steam. The pot lid that the smith intended to convert into a shield, however, challenged even his ingenuity. It became quite obvious that, should he hammer it out to give it sufficient size to offer protection, it would be so thin that it would not even fend off a dagger stroke, much less a blow from a lance or sword.

He considered that, even as he pounded on the ringing lid. He shifted his axe and made an obscure gesture at Toth. The giant nodded, went to the riverbank, returned with a pail full of clay, and dumped the bucket out in the center of the glowing shield. It gave off an evil hiss, and Durnik continued to pound.

"Uh- Durnik," Garion said, trying not to be impolite, "a ceramic shield was not exactly what I had in mind, you know."

Durnik gave him a grin filled with suppressed mirth.

"Look at it, Garion," he suggested, not changing the tempo of his hammering.

Garion stared at the shield, his eyes suddenly wide. The glowing circle upon which Durnik was pounding was solid, cherry-red steel. "How did you do that?"

"Transmutation!" Polgara gasped. "Changing one thing into something else! Durnik, where on earth did you ever learn to do that?"

"It's just something I picked up, Pol." He laughed. "As long as you've got a bit of steel to begin with -like old knife blade- you can make as much more as you want, out of anything that's handy: cast iron, clay, just about anything."

Ce'Nedra's eyes had suddenly gone very wide. "Durnik," she said in an almost reverent whisper, "could you have made it out of gold?"

Durnik thought about it, still hammering. "I suppose I could have," he admitted, "but gold's too heavy and soft to make a good shield, wouldn't you say?"

"Could you make another one?" she wheedled. "For me? It wouldn't have to be so big -at least not quite. Please, Durnik."

Durnik finished the rim of the shield with a shower of crimson sparks and the musical ring of steel on steel. "I don't think that would be a good idea, Ce'Nedra," he told her. "Gold is valuable because it's so scarce. If I started making it out of clay, it wouldn't be long before it wasn't worth anything at all. I'm sure you can see that."

"But-"

"No, Ce'Nedra," he said firmly.

"Garion-" she appealed, her voice anguished.

"He's right, dear."

"But-"

"Never mind, Ce'Nedra,"

The fire had burned down to a bed of glowing coals.

Garion awoke with a start, sitting up suddenly. He was covered with sweat and trembling violently. Once again he had heard the wailing cry that he had heard the previous day, and the sound of it wrenched at his heart. He sat for a long time staring at the fire. In time, the sweat dried and his trembling subsided.

Ce'Nedra's breathing was regular as she lay beside him, and there was no other sound in their well-shielded encampment. He rolled carefully out of his blankets and walked to the edge of the grove of cedars to stare bleakly out across the fields lying dark and empty under an inky sky. Then, because there was nothing he could do about it, he returned to his bed and slept fitfully until dawn.

It was drizzling rain when he awoke. He got up quietly

and went out of the tent to join Durnik, who was up the fire. "Can I borrow your axe?" he asked his friend.

Durnik looked up at him.

"I guess I'm going to need a lance to go with all that." He looked rather distastefully at the helmet and shield lying atop his mail shirt near the packs and saddles.

"Oh," the smith said. "I almost forgot about that. Is one going to be enough? They break sometimes, you know -at least Mandorallen's always did."

"I'm certainly not going to carry more than one." Garion jabbed his thumb back over his shoulder at the hilt of his sword. "Anyway, I've always got this big knife to fall back on."

The chill drizzle that had begun shortly before dawn was the kind of rain that made the nearby fields hazy and indistinct. After breakfast, they took heavy cloaks out of their packs and prepared to face a fairly unpleasant day. Garion had already put on his mail shirt, and he padded the inside of his helmet with an old tunic and jammed it down on his head. He felt very foolish as he clinked over to saddle Chretienne. The mail already smelled bad and it seemed, for some reason, to attract the chill of the soggy morning. He looked at his new-cut lance and his round shield. "This is going to be awkward," he said.

"Hang the shield from the saddle bow, Garion," Durnik suggested, "and set the butt of your lance in the stirrup beside your foot. That's the way Mandorallen does it."

"I'll try it," Garion said. He hauled himself up into his saddle, already sweating under the weight of his mail.

Durnik handed him the shield, and he hooked the strap of it over the saddle bow. Then he took his lance and jammed its butt into his stirrup, pinching his toes in the process.

"You'll have to hold it," the smith told him. "It won't stay upright by itself."

Garion grunted and took the shaft of his lance in his right hand.

"You look very impressive, dear," Ce'Nedra assured him.

"Wonderful," he replied dryly.

They rode out of the cedar grove into the wet, miserable morning with Garion in the lead, feeling more than a little absurd in his warlike garb. The lance, he discovered almost immediately, had a stubborn tendency to dip its point toward the ground. He shifted his grip on it, sliding his hand up until he found its center of balance. The rain collected on the shaft of the lance, ran down across his clammy hand, and trickled into his sleeve. After a short while, a steady stream of water dribbled from his elbow. "I feel like a downspout," he grumbled.

"Let's pick up the pace," Belgarath said to him. "It's a long way to Ashaba, and we don't have too much time."

Garion nudged Chretienne with his heels, and the big gray moved out, at first at a trot and then in a rolling canter. For some reason that made Garion feel a bit less foolish.

The road which Feldegast had pointed out to them the previous evening was little traveled and this morning it was deserted. It ran past abandoned farmsteads, sad, bramble-choked shells with the moldy remains of their thatched roofs all tumbled in. A few of the farmsteads had been burned,

some only recently.

The road began to turn muddy as the earth soaked up the steady rain. The cantering hooves of their horses splashed the mud up to coat their legs and bellies and to spatter the boots and cloaks of the riders.

Silk rode beside Garion, his sharp face alert, and just before they reached the crest of each hill, he galloped on ahead to have a quick look at the shallow valley lying beyond.

By midmorning, Garion was soaked through, and he rode on bleakly, enduring the discomfort and the smell of new rust, wishing fervently that the rain would stop.

Silk came back down the next hill after scouting on ahead. His face was tight with a sudden excitement, and he motioned them all to stop.

"There are some Grolims up ahead," he reported tersely.

"How many?" Belgarath asked.

"About two dozen. They're holding some kind of religious ceremony."

The old man grunted. "Let's take a look." He looked at Garion. "Leave your lance with Durnik," he said. "It sticks up too high into the air, and I'd rather not attract attention."

Garion nodded and passed his lance over to the smith, then followed Silk, Belgarath, and Feldegast up the hill.

They dismounted just before they reached the crest and moved carefully to the top, where a brushy thicket offered some concealment.

The black-robed Grolims were kneeling on the wet grass before a pair of grim altars some distance down the hill. A limp, unmoving form lay sprawled across each of them, and there was a great deal of blood. Sputtering braziers stood at the end of each altar, sending twin columns of black smoke up into the drizzle. The Grolims were chanting in the rumbling groan Garion had heard too many times before. He could not make out what they were saying.

"Chandim?" Belgarath softly asked the juggler.

"'Tis hard t' say fer certain, Ancient One," Feldegast replied. "The twin altars would suggest it, but the practice might have spread. Grolims be very quick t' pick up changes in Church policy. But Chandim or not, 'twould be wise of us t' avoid 'em. There be not much point in engagin' ourselves in casual skirmishes with Grolims."

"There are trees over on the east-side of the valley," Silk said, pointing. "If we stay in among them, we'll be out of sight."

Belgarath nodded.

"How much longer are they likely to be praying?" Garion asked.

"Another half hour at least," Feldegast replied.

Garion looked at the pair of altars, feeling an icy rage building up in him. "I'd like to cap their ceremony with a little personal visit," he said.

"Forget it," Belgarath told him. "You're not here to ride around the countryside righting wrongs. Let's go back and get the others. I'd like to get around those Grolims before they finish with their prayers."

They picked their way carefully through the belt of dripping trees that wound along the eastern rim of the shallow valley where the Grolims were conducting their rites and

returned to the muddy road about a mile beyond. Again they set out at the same distance-eating canter, with Garion once more in the lead.

Some miles past the valley where the Grolims had sacrificed the two unfortunates, they passed a burning village that was spewing out a cloud of black smoke. There seemed to be no one about, though there were some signs of fighting near the burning houses.

They rode on without stopping.

The rain let up by midafternoon, though the sky remained overcast. Then, as they crested yet another hilltop in the rolling countryside, they saw another rider on the far side of the valley. The distance was too great to make out details, but Garion could see that the rider was armed with a lance.

"What do we do?" he called back over his shoulder at the rest of them.

"That's why you're wearing armor and carrying a lance, Garion," Belgarath replied.

"Shouldn't I at least give him the chance to stand aside?"

"To what purpose?" Feldegast asked. "He'll not do it. Yer very presence here with yer lance an' yer shield be a challenge, an' he'll not be refusin' it. Ride him down, young Master. The day wears on, don't y' know."

"All right," Garion said unhappily. He buckled his shield to his left arm, settled his helmet more firmly in place, and lifted the butt of his lance out of his stirrup.

Chretienne was already pawing at the earth and snorting defiantly.

"Enthusiast," Garion muttered to him. "All right, let's go, then."

The big gray's charge was thunderous. It was not a gallop, exactly, nor a dead run, but rather was a deliberately implacable gait that could only be called a charge.

The armored man across the valley seemed a bit startled by the unprovoked attack, there having been none of the customary challenges, threats, or insults. After a bit of fumbling with his equipment, he managed to get his shield in place and his lance properly advanced. He seemed to be quite bulky, though that might have been his armor. He wore a sort of chain-mail coat reaching to his knees. His helmet was round and fitted with a visor, and he had a large sword sheathed at his waist. He clanged down his visor, then sank his spurs into his horse's flanks and also charged.

The wet fields at the side of the road seemed to blur as Garion crouched behind his shield with his lance lowered and aimed directly at his opponent. He had seen Mandorallen do this often enough to understand the basics. The distance between him and the stranger was narrowing rapidly, and Garion could clearly see the mud spraying out from beneath the hooves of his opponent's horse. At the last moment, just before they came together, Garion raised up in his stirrups as Mandorallen had instructed him, leaned forward so that his entire body was braced for the shock, and took careful aim with his lance at the exact center of the other man's shield.

There was a dreadful crashing impact, and he was suddenly surrounded by flying splinters as his opponent's lance shattered. His own lance, however, though it was as stout as that of the Guardsman, was a freshly cut cedar pole and it was

quite springy. It bent into a tight arch like a drawn bow, then snapped straight again. The startled stranger was suddenly lifted out of his saddle. His body described a high, graceful arc through the air, which ended abruptly as he came down on his head in the middle of the road.

Garion thundered on past and finally managed to rein in his big gray horse. He wheeled and stopped. The other man lay on his back in the mud of the road. He was not moving. Carefully, his lance at the ready, Garion walked Chretienne back to the splinter-littered place where the impact had occurred.

"Are you all right?" he asked the Temple Guardsman lying in the mud.

There was no answer.

Cautiously, Garion dismounted, dropped his lance, and drew Iron-grip's sword. "I say, man, are you all right?" he asked again. He reached out with his foot and nudged the fellow.

The Guardsman's visor was closed, and Garion put the tip of his sword under the bottom of it and lifted. The eyes were rolled back in his head until only the whites showed, and there was blood gushing freely from his nose.

The others came galloping up, and Ce'Nedra flung herself out of the saddle almost before her horse and stopped and hurled herself into her husband's arms. "You were magnificent, Garion! Absolutely magnificent!"

"It did go rather well, didn't it?" he replied modestly, trying to juggle sword, shield, and wife all at the same time. He looked at Polgara, who was also dismounting.

"Do you think he's going to be all right, Aunt Pol?" he asked. "I hope I didn't hurt him too much."

She checked the limp man lying in the road. "He'll be fine, dear," she assured him. "He's just been knocked senseless, is all."

"Nice job," Silk said.

Garion suddenly grinned broadly. "You know something," he said. "I think I'm starting to understand why Mandorallen enjoys this so much. It is sort of exhilarating."

"I think it has t' do with the weight of the armor," Feldegast observed sadly to Belgarath. "It bears down on 'em so much that it pulls all the juice out of their brains, or some such."

"Let's move on," Belgarath suggested.

By midmorning the following day, they had moved into the broad valley which was the location of Mal Yaska, the ecclesiastical capital of Mallorean and the site of the Disciple Urvon's palace. Though the sky remained overcast, the rain had blown on through, and a stiff breeze had begun to dry the grass and the mud which had clogged the roads. There were encampments dotting the valley, little clusters of people who had fled from the demons to the north and the plague to the south. Each group was fearfully isolated from its neighbors, and all of them kept their weapons close at hand.

Unlike those of Mal Rakuth, the gates of Mal Yaska stood open, though they were patrolled by detachments of mail-armored Temple Guardsmen.

"Why don't they go into the city?" Durnik asked, looking at the clusters of refugees.

"Mal Yaska's not the sort of place ye visit willin'ly,

Goodman," Feldegast replied. "When the Grolims be lookin' fer people t' sacrifice on their altars, 'tis unwise t' make yerself too handy." He looked at Belgarath. "Would ye be willin' t' accept a suggestion, me ancient friend?" he asked.

"Suggest away."

"We'll be needin' information about what's happenin' up there." He pointed at the snow-capped mountains looming across the northern horizon. "Since I know me way about Mal Yaska an' know how t' avoid the Grolims, wouldn't ye say that it might be worth the investment of an hour or so t' have me nose about the central marketplace an' see what news I kin pick up?"

"He's got a point, Belgarath," Silk agreed seriously, "I don't like ridin' into a situation blind."

Belgarath considered it. "All right," he said to the juggler, "but be careful -and stay out of the alehouses."

Feldegast sighed. "There be no such havens in Mal Yaska, Belgarath. The Grolims there be fearful strict in their disapproval of simple pleasures." He shook the reins of his mule and rode on across the plain toward the black walls of Urvon's capital.

"Isn't he contradicting himself?" Sadi asked. "First he says it's too dangerous to go into the city and then he rides on in anyway."

"He knows what he's doing," Belgarath said. "He's in no danger."

"We might as well have some lunch while we're waiting, father," Polgara suggested.

He nodded, and they rode some distance into an open field and dismounted.

Garion laid aside his lance, pulled his helmet from his sweaty head, and stood looking across the intervening open space at the center of Church power in Mallorea.

The city was large, certainly, though not nearly so large as Mal Zeth. The walls were high and thick, surmounted by heavy battlements, and the towers rising inside were square and blocky. There was a kind of unrelieved ugliness about it, and it seemed to exude a brooding menace as if the eons of cruelty and blood lust had sunk into its very stones. From somewhere near the center of the city, the telltale black column of smoke rose into the air, and faintly, echoing across the plain with its huddled encampments of tightened refugees, he thought he could hear the sullen iron clang of the gong coming from the Temple of Torak. Finally, he sighed and turned his head away.

"It will not last forever," Eriond, who had come up beside him, said firmly. "We're almost to the end of it now. All the altars will be torn down, and the Grolims will put their knives away to rust."

"Are you sure, Eriond?"

"Yes, Belgarion. I'm very sure."

They ate a cold lunch, and, not long after, Feldegast returned, his face somber. " 'Tis perhaps a bit more serious than we had expected, Ancient One," he reported, swinging down from his mule. "The Chandim be in total control of the city, an' the Temple Guardsmen be takin' their orders directly from them. The Grolims who hold t' the old ways have all gone into hidin', but packs of Torak's Hounds be sniffin' out the places

where they've hidden an' they be tearin' 'em t' pieces wherever they find 'em."

"I find it very hard to sympathize with Grolims," Sadi murmured.

"I kin bear their discomfort meself," Feldegast agreed, "but 'tis rumored about the marketplace that the Chandim an' their dogs an' their Guardsmen also be movin' about across the border in Katakori."

"In spite of the Karands and Mengha's demons?" Silk asked with some surprise.

"Now that's somethin' I could not get the straight of," the juggler replied. "No one could tell me why or how, but the Chandim an' the Guardsmen seem not t' be concerned about Mengha nor his army nor his demons."

"That begins to smell of some kind of accommodation," Silk said.

"There were hints of that previously," Feldegast reminded him.

"An alliance?" Belgarath frowned.

" 'Tis hard t' say fer sure, Ancient One, but Urvon be a schemer, an' he's always had this dispute with the imperial throne at Mal Zeth. If he's managed t' put Mengha in his pocket, Kal Zakath had better look t' his defenses"

"Is Urvon in the city?" Belgarath asked.

"No. No one knows where he's gone fer sure, but he's not in his palace there."

"That's very strange," Belgarath said.

"Indeed," the juggler replied, "but whatever he's doin' or plannin' t' do, I think we'd better be walkin' softly once we cross the border into Katakori. When ye add the Hounds an' the Temple Guardsmen t' the demons an' Karands already there, 'tis goin' t' be fearful perilous t' approach the House of Torak at Ashaba."

"That's a chance we'll have to take," the old man said grimly. "We're going to Ashaba, and if anything -Hound, human, or demon- gets in our way, we'll just have to deal with it as it comes."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The sky continued to lower as they rode past the brooding city of the Grolim Church under the suspicious gaze of the armored Guardsmen at the gate and the hooded Grolims on the walls.

"Is it likely that they'll follow us?" Durnik asked.

"It's not very probable, Goodman," Sadi replied. "Look around you. There are thousands encamped here, and I doubt that either Guardsmen or Grolims would take the trouble to follow them all when they leave."

"I suppose you're right," the smith agreed.

By late afternoon they were well past Mal Yaska, and the snow -topped peaks in Katakori loomed higher ahead of them, starkly outlined against the dirty gray clouds scudding in from the west.

"Will ye be wantin' t' stop fer the night before we cross the border?" Feldegast asked Belgarath.

"How far is it to there from here?"

"Not far at all, Ancient One."

"Is it guarded?"

"Usually, yes."

"Silk," the old man said, "ride on ahead and have a look."

The little man nodded and nudged his horse into a gallop.

"All right," Belgarath said, signaling for a halt so that they could all hear him. "Everybody we've seen this afternoon was going south. Nobody's fleeing toward Katakori. Now, a man who's running away from someplace doesn't stop when the border's in sight. He keeps on going. That means that there's a fair chance that there's not going to be anybody within miles of the border on the Katakori side. If the border's not guarded, we can just go on across and take shelter for the night on the other side."

"And if the border is guarded?" Sadi asked.

Belgarath's eyes grew flat. "We're still going to go through," he replied.

"That's likely to involve fighting."

"That's right. Let's move along, shall we?" About fifteen minutes later, Silk returned. "There are about ten Guardsmen at the crossing," he reported.

"Any chance of taking them by surprise?" Belgarath asked him.

"A little, but the road leading to the border is straight and flat for a half mile on either side of the guard post."

The old man muttered a curse under his breath. "All right then," he said. "They'll at least have time to get to their horses. We don't want to give them the leisure to get themselves set. Remember what Feldegast said about keeping your wits. Don't take any chances, but I want all of those Guardsmen on their backs after our first charge. Pol, you stay back with the ladies -and Eriond."

"But-" Velvet began to protest.

"Don't argue with me, Liselle -just this once."

"Couldn't Lady Polgara just put them to sleep?" Sadi asked. "The way she did with the spies back in Mal Zeth?"

Belgarath shook his head. "There are a few Grolims among the Guardsmen, and that particular technique doesn't work on Grolims. This time we're going to have to do it by main strength -just to be on the safe side."

Sadi nodded glumly, dismounted, and picked up a stout tree limb from the side of the road. He thumped it experimentally on the turf. "I want you all to know that this is not my preferred way of doing things," he said.

The rest of them also dismounted and armed themselves with cudgels and staffs. Then they moved on.

The border was marked by a stone shed painted white and by a gate consisting of a single white pole resting on posts on either side of the road. A dozen horses were tethered just outside the shed, and lances leaned against the wall. A single, mail-coated Guardsman paced back and forth across the road on the near side of the gate, his sword leaning back over his shoulder.

"All right," Belgarath said. "Let's move as fast as we can. Wait here, Pol."

Garion sighed. "I guess I'd better go first."

"We were hoping that you'd volunteer." Silk's grin was

tight.

Garion ignored that. He buckled on his shield, settled his helmet in place, and once again lifted the butt of his lance out of his stirrup. "Is everybody ready?" he asked, looking around. Then he advanced his lance and spurred his horse into a charge with the others close on his heels.

The Guardsman at the gate took one startled look at the warlike party bearing down on him, ran to the door of the shed, and shouted at his comrades inside. Then he struggled into the saddle of his tethered horse, leaned over to pick up his lance, and moved out into the road.

Other Guardsmen came boiling out of the shed, struggling with their equipment and stumbling over each other.

Garion had covered half the distance to the gate before more than two or three of the armored men were in their saddles. And so it was that the man who had been standing watch was forced to meet his charge alone.

The results were relatively predictable.

As Garion thundered past his unhorsed opponent, another Guardsman came out into the road at a half gallop, but Garion gave him no time to set himself or to turn his horse. The crashing impact against the unprepared man's shield hurled his horse from its feet. The Guardsman came down before the horse did, and the animal rolled over him, squealing and kicking in fright.

Garion tried to rein in, but Chretienne had the bit in his teeth. He cleared the pole gate in a long, graceful leap and charged on. Garion swore and gave up on the reins. He leaned forward and seized the big gray by one ear and hauled back. Startled, Chretienne stopped so quickly that his rump skidded on the road.

"The fight's back that way." Garion told his horse, "or did you forget already?"

Chretienne gave him a reproachful look, turned, and charged back toward the gate again.

Because of the speed of their attack, Garion's friends were on top of the Guardsmen before the armored men could bring their lances into play, and the fight had quickly turned ugly. Using the blunt side of his axe, Durnik smashed in one Guardsman's visor, denting it so severely that the man could no longer see. He rode in circles helplessly, both hands clutching at his helmet until he rode under a low-hanging limb, which smoothly knocked him off his horse.

Silk ducked under a wide, backhand sword stroke, reached down with his dagger, and neatly cut his attacker's girth strap. The fellow's horse leaped forward, jumping out from under his rider. Saddle and all, the Guardsman tumbled into the road. He struggled to his feet, sword in hand, but Feldegast came up behind him and methodically clubbed him to earth again with an ugly lead mace.

It was Toth, however, who was the hardest pressed, Three Guardsmen closed in on the giant. Even as Chretienne leaped the gate again, Garion saw the huge man awkwardly flailing with his staff for all the world like someone who had never held one in his hands before.

When the three men came within range however, Toth's skill miraculously reemerged. His heavy staff whirled in a blurring circle. One Guardsman fell wheezing to earth, clutching at his

broken ribs. Another doubled over sharply as Toth deftly poked him in the pit of the stomach with the butt of his staff. The third desperately raised his sword, but the giant casually swiped it out of his hand, then reached out and took the surprised man by the front of his mail coat. Garion clearly heard the crunch of crushed steel as Toth's fist closed. Then the giant looked about and almost casually threw the armored man against a roadside tree so hard that it shook the spring leaves from the highest twig.

The three remaining Guardsmen began to fall back, trying to give themselves room to use their lances, but they seemed unaware that Garion was returning to the fray -from behind them.

As Chretienne thundered toward the unsuspecting trio, a sudden idea came to Garion. quickly he turned his lance sideways so that its center rested just in front of his saddlebow and crashed into the backs of the Guardsmen.

The springy cedar pole swept all three of them out of their saddles and over the heads of their horses. Before they could stumble to their feet, Sadi, Feldegast, and Durnik were on them, and the fight ended as quickly as it had begun.

"I don't think I've ever seen anybody use a lance that way before," Silk said gaily to Garion.

"I just made it up," Garion replied with an excited grin. "I'm sure that there are at least a half-dozen rules against it."

"We probably shouldn't mention it, then."

"I won't tell anybody if you don't."

Durnik was looking around critically. The ground was littered with Guardsmen who were either unconscious or groaning over assorted broken bones. Only the man Toth had poked in the stomach was still in his saddle, though he was doubled over, gasping for breath. Durnik rode up to him. "Excuse me," he said politely, removed the poor fellow's helmet, and then rapped him smartly on top of the head with the butt of his axe. The Guardsman's eyes glazed, and he toppled limply out of the saddle.

Belgarath suddenly doubled over, howling with laughter. "Excuse me?" he demanded of the smith.

"There's no need to be uncivil to people, Belgarath," Durnik replied stiffly.

Polgara came riding sedately down the hill, followed by Ce'Nedra, Velvet, and Eriond. "Very nice, gentlemen," she complimented them all, looking around at the fallen Guardsmen. Then she rode up to the pole gate.

"Garion, dear," she said pleasantly, reining in her mount, "would you mind?"

He laughed, rode Chretienne over to the gate, and kicked it out of her way.

"Why on earth were you jumping fences in the very middle of the fight?" she asked him curiously.

"It wasn't altogether my idea," he replied.

"Oh," she said, looking critically at the big horse. "I think I understand."

Chretienne managed somehow to look slightly ashamed of himself.

They rode on past the border as evening began imperceptibly to darken an already gloomy sky. Feldegast

pulled in beside Belgarath. "Would yer morals be at all offended if I was t' suggest shelterin' fer the night in a snug little smugglers' cave I know of a few miles or so farther on?" he asked.

Belgarath grinned and shook his head. "Not in the slightest," he replied. "When I need a cave, I never concern myself about the previous occupants." Then he laughed. "I shared quarters for a week once with a sleeping bear -nice enough bear, actually, once I got used to his snoring."

" 'Tis a fascinatin' story, I'm sure, an' I'd be delighted t' hear it -but the night's comin' on, an' ye kin tell me about it over supper. Shall we be off, then?" The juggler thumped his heels into his mule's flanks and led them on up the rutted road in the rapidly descending twilight at a jolting gallop.

As they moved into the first of the foothills, they found the poorly maintained road lined on either side by mournful-looking evergreens. The road, however, was empty, though it showed signs of recent heavy traffic -all headed south.

"How much farther to this cave of yours?" Belgarath called to the juggler.

" 'Tis not far, Ancient One," Feldegast assured him. "There be a dry ravine that crosses the road up ahead, an' we go up that a bit of a ways, an' there we are."

"I hope you know what you're doing."

"Trust me."

Somewhat surprisingly, Belgarath let that pass.

They pounded on up the road as a sullen dusk settled into the surrounding foothills and deep shadows began to gather about the trunks of the evergreens.

"Ah, an' there it is," Feldegast said, pointing at the rocky bed of a dried-up stream. "The footin' be treacherous here, so we'd best lead the mounts." He swung down from his mule and cautiously began to lead the way up the ravine. It grew steadily darker, the light fading quickly from the overcast sky. As the ravine narrowed and rounded a sharp bend, the juggler rummaged through the canvas pack strapped to the back of his mule. He lifted out the stub of a candle and looked at Durnik. "Kin ye be makin' me a bit of a flame, Goodman?" he asked. "I'd do it meself, but I seem t' have misplaced me tinder."

Durnik opened his pouch, took out his flint and steel and his wad of tinder, and, after several tries, blew a lighted spark into a tiny finger of fire. He held it out, shielded between his hands, and Feldegast lit his bit of candle.

"An' here we are now," the juggler said grandly, holding up his candle to illuminate the steep banks of the ravine.

"Where?" Silk asked, looking about in puzzlement.

"Well now, Prince Kheldar, it wouldn't be much of a hidden cave if the openin' was out in plain sight fer just anybody t' stumble across, now would it?" Feldegast went over to the steep side of the ravine to where a huge slab of water-scoured granite leaned against the bank. He lowered his candle, shielding it with his hand, ducked slightly, and disappeared behind it with his mule trailing along behind him.

The interior of the cave was floored with clean white sand, and the walls had been worn smooth by centuries of

swirling water. Feldegast stood in the center of the cave holding his candle aloft. There were crude log bunks along the walls, a table and some benches in the center of the cave, and a rough fireplace near the far wall with a fire already laid. Feldegast crossed to the fireplace, bent, and lit the kindling lying under the split logs resting on a rough stone grate with his candle. "Well now, that's better," he said, holding his hands out to the crackling flames. "Isn't this a cozy little haven?"

Just beyond the fireplace was an archway, in part natural and in part the work of human hands. The front of the archway was closed off with several horizontal poles.

Feldegast pointed at it. "There be the stable fer the horses, an' also a small spring at the back of it. 'Tis altogether the finest smugglers' cave in this part of Mallorea."

"A cunning sort of place," Belgarath agreed, looking around.

"What do they smuggle through here?" Silk asked with a certain professional curiosity.

"Gem stones fer the most part. There be rich deposits in the cliffs of Katakora, an' quite often whole gravel bars of the shiny little darlin's lyin' in the streams t' be had fer the trouble it takes t' pick 'em up. The local taxes be notorious cruel, though, so the bold lads in this part of these mountains have come up with various ways t' take their goods across the border without disturbin' the sleep of the hardworkin' tax collectors."

Polgara was inspecting the fireplace. There were several iron pothooks protruding from its inside walls and a large iron grill sitting on stout legs to one side. "Very nice," she murmured approvingly. "Is there adequate firewood?" "

More than enough, me dear lady," the juggler replied. "Tis stacked in the stable, along with fodder fer the horses."

"Well, then," she said, removing her blue cloak and laying it across one of the bunks, "I think I might be able to expand the menu I'd planned for this evening's meal. As long as we have such complete facilities here, it seems a shame to waste them. I'll need more firewood stacked here -and water, of course." She went to the packhorse that carried her cooking utensils and her stores, humming softly to herself.

Durnik, Toth, and Eriond led the horses into the stable and began to unsaddle them. Garion, who had left his lance outside, went to one of the bunks, removed his helmet and laid it, along with his shield, under the bunk, and then he began to struggle out of his mail shirt.

Ce'Nedra came over to assist him..

"You were magnificent today, dear," she told him warmly.

He grunted noncommittally, leaning forward and extending his arms over his head so that she could pull the shirt off.

She tugged hard, and the mail shirt came free all at once. Thrown off balance by the weight, she sat down heavily on the sandy floor with the shirt in her lap.

Garion laughed and quickly went to her. "Oh, Ce'Nedra," he said, still laughing, "I do love you." He kissed her and then helped her to her feet.

"This is terribly heavy, isn't it?" she said, straining to lift the steel-link shirt.

"You noticed," he said, rubbing at one aching shoulder. "And here you thought I was just having fun."

"Be nice, dear. Do you want me to hang it up for you?" He shrugged. "Just kick it under the bunk."

Her look was disapproving.

"I don't think it's going to wrinkle, Ce'Nedra."

"But it's untidy to do it that way, dear." She made some effort to fold the thing, then gave up, rolled it in a ball, and pushed it far back under the bunk with her foot.

Supper that evening consisted of thick steaks cut from a ham Vella had provided them, a rich soup so thick that it hovered on the very edge of stew, large slabs of bread that had been warmed before the fire, and baked apples with honey and cinnamon.

After they had eaten, Polgara rose and looked around the cave again. "The ladies and I are going to need a bit of privacy now," she said, "and several basins of hot water."

Belgarath sighed. "Again, Pol?" he said.

"Yes, father. It's time to clean up and change clothes -for all of us." She pointedly sniffed at the air in the small cave. "It's definitely time," she added.

They curtained off a portion of the cave to give Polgara, Ce'Nedra, and Velvet the privacy they required and began heating water over the fire.

Though at first reluctant even to move, Garion had to admit that after he had washed up and changed into clean, dry clothes, he did feel much better. He sat back on one of the bunks beside Ce'Nedra, not even particularly objecting to the damp smell of her hair. He had that comfortable sense of being clean, well fed, and warm after a day spent out of doors in bad weather. He was, in fact, right on the edge of dozing off when there echoed up the narrow ravine outside a vast bellow that seemed to be part animal and part human, a cry so dreadful that it chilled his blood and made the hair rise on the back of his neck.

"What's that?" Ce'Nedra exclaimed in fright.

"Hush now, girl," Feldegast warned softly. He jumped to his feet and quickly secured a piece of canvas across the opening of the fireplace, plunging the cave into near-darkness.

Another soulless bellow echoed up the ravine. The sound seemed filled with a dreadful malevolence.

"Can we put a name to whatever it is?" Sadi asked in a quiet voice.

"It's nothing I've ever heard before," Durnik assured him.

"I think I have," Belgarath said bleakly. "When I was in Morindland, there was a magician up there who thought it was amusing to turn his demon out at night to hunt. It made a sound like that."

"What an unsavory practice," the eunuch murmured. "What do demons eat?"

"You really wouldn't want to know," Silk replied. He turned to Belgarath. "Would you care to hazard a guess how big that thing might be?"

"It varies. From the amount of noise it's making, though, I'd say that it's fairly large."

"Then it wouldn't be able to get into this cave, would it?"

"That's a gamble I think I'd rather not take."

"It can sniff out our tracks, I assume?"

The old man nodded.

"Things are definitely going to pieces here, Belgarath. Can you do anything at all to drive it off?" The little man turned to Polgara. "Or perhaps you, Polgara. You dealt with the demon Chabat raised back in the harbor at Rak Urga."

"I had help, Silk," she reminded him. "Aldur came to my aid."

Belgarath began to pace up and down, scowling at the floor.

"Well?" Silk pressed.

"Don't rush me," the old man growled. "I might be able to do something," he said grudgingly, "but if I do, it's going to make so much noise that every Grolim in Katakori is going to hear it -and probably Zandramas as well. We'll have the Chandim or her Grolims hot on our heels all the way to Ashaba."

"Why not use the Orb?" Eriond suggested, looking up from the bridle he was repairing.

"Because the Orb makes even more noise than I do. If Garion uses the Orb to chase off a demon, they're going to hear it in Gandahar all the way on the other side of the continent."

"But it would work, wouldn't it?"

Belgarath looked at Polgara.

"I think he's right, father," she said. "A demon would flee from the Orb -even if it were fettered by its master. An unfettered demon would flee even faster."

"Can you think of anything else?" he asked her.

"A God," she shrugged. "All demons -no matter how powerful- flee from the Gods. Do you happen to know any Gods?"

"A few," he replied, "but they're busy right now."

Another shattering bellow resounded through the mountains. It seemed to come from right outside the cave.

"It's time for some kind of decision, old man," Silk said urgently.

"It's the noise the Orb makes that bothers you?" Eriond asked.

"That and the light. That blue beacon that lights up every time Garion draws the sword attracts a lot of attention, you know."

"You aren't all suggesting that I fight a demon, are you?" Garion demanded indignantly.

"Of course not," Belgarath snorted. "Nobody fights a demon -nobody can. All we're discussing is the possibility of driving it off." He began to pace up and down again, scuffing his feet in the sand. "I hate to announce our presence here," he muttered.

Outside, the demon bellowed again, and the huge granite slab partially covering the cave mouth began to grate back and forth as if some huge force were rocking it to try to move it aside.

"Our options are running out, Belgarath," Silk told him. "And so is our time. If you don't do something quickly, that thing's going to be in here with us."

"Try not to pinpoint our location to the Grolims," Belgarath said to Garion.

"You really want me to go out there and do it?"

"Of course I do. Silk was right. Time's run out on us."

Garion went to his bunk and fished his mail shirt out from under it.

"You won't need that. It wouldn't do any good anyway."

Garion reached over his shoulder and, drew his great sword. He set its point in the sand and peeled the soft leather sheath from its hilt. "I think this is a mistake," he declared. Then he reached out and put his hand on the Orb.

"Let me, Garion," Eriond said. He rose, came over, and covered Garion's hand with his own. Garion gave him a startled look.

"It knows me, remember?" the young man explained, "and I've got a sort of an idea."

A peculiar tingling sensation ran through Garion's hand and arm, and he became aware that Eriond was communing with the Orb in a manner even more direct than he himself was capable of. It was as if during the months that the boy had been the bearer of the Orb, the stone had in some peculiar way taught him its own language.

There was a dreadful scratching coming from the mouth of the cave, as if huge talons were clawing at the stone slab.

"Be careful out there," Belgarath cautioned. "Don't take any chances. Just hold up the sword so that it can see it. The Orb should do the rest."

Garion sighed. "All right," he said, moving toward the cave mouth with Eriond directly behind him.

"Where are you going?" Polgara asked the blond young man.

"With Belgarion," Eriond replied. "We both need to talk with the Orb to get this right. I'll explain it later, Polgara."

The slab at the cave mouth was rocking back and forth again. Garion ducked quickly out from behind it and ran several yards up the ravine with Eriond on his heels.

Then he turned and held up the sword.

"Not yet," Eriond warned. "It hasn't seen us."

There was an overpoweringly foul odor in the ravine, and then, as Garion's eyes slowly adjusted to the darkness, he saw the demon outlined against the clouds rolling overhead. It was enormous, its shoulders blotting out half the sky. It had long, pointed ears like those of a vast cat, and its dreadful eyes burned with a green fire that cast a fitful glow across the floor of the ravine.

It bellowed and reached toward Garion and Eriond with a great, scaly claw.

"Now, Belgarion," Eriond said quite calmly.

Garion lifted his arms, holding his sword directly in front of him with its point aimed at the sky, and then he released the curbs he had placed on the Orb.

He was not in the least prepared for what happened. A huge noise shook the earth and echoed off nearby mountains, causing giant trees miles away to tremble.

Not only did the great blade take fire, but the entire sky suddenly shimmered an intense sapphire blue as if it had been ignited. Blue flame shot from horizon to horizon, and the vast sound continued to shake the earth.

The demon froze, its vast, tooth-studded muzzle turned upward to the blazing blue sky in terror. Grimly, Garion

advanced on the thing, still holding his burning sword before him. The beast flinched back from him, trying to shield its face from the intense blue light. It screamed as if suddenly gripped by an intolerable agony. It stumbled back, falling and scrambling to its feet again. Then it took one more look at the blazing sky, turned, and fled howling back down the ravine with a peculiar loping motion as all four of its claws tore at the earth.

"That is your idea of quiet?" Belgarath thundered from the cave mouth. "And what's all that?" He pointed a trembling finger at the still-illuminated sky.

"It's really all right, Belgarath," Eriond told the infuriated old man. "You didn't want the sound to lead the Grolims to us, so we just made it general through the whole region. Nobody could have pinpointed its source."

Belgarath blinked. Then he frowned for a moment. "What about all the light?" he asked in a more mollified tone of voice.

"It's more or less the same with that," Eriond explained calmly. "If you've got a single blue fire in the mountains on a dark night, everybody can see it. If the whole sky catches on fire, though, nobody can really tell where it's coming from."

"It does sort of make sense, Grandfather," Garion said.

"Are they all right, father?" Polgara asked from behind the old man.

"What could possibly have hurt them? Garion can level mountains with that sword of his. He very nearly did, as a matter of fact. The whole Karandese range rang like a bell." He looked up at the still-flickering sky. "Can you turn that off!" he asked.

"Oh," Garion said. He reversed his sword and re-sheathed it in the scabbard strapped across his back. The fire in the sky died.

"We really had to do it that way, Belgarath," Eriond continued. "We needed the light and the sound to frighten off the demon and we had to do it in such a way the Grolims couldn't follow it, so-" He spread both hands and shrugged.

"Did you know about this?" Belgarath asked Garion.

"Of course, Grandfather," Garion lied.

Belgarath grunted. "All right. Come back inside," he said.

Garion bent slightly toward Eriond's ear. "Why didn't you tell me what we were going to do?" he whispered.

"There wasn't really time, Belgarion."

"The next time we do something like that, take time. I almost dropped the sword when the ground started shaking under me."

"That wouldn't have been a good idea at all."

"I know."

A fair number of rocks had been shaken from the ceiling of the cave and lay on the sandy floor. Dust hung thickly in the air.

"What happened out there?" Silk demanded in a shaky voice.

"Oh, not much," Garion replied in a deliberately casual voice. "We just chased it away, that's all."

"There wasn't really any help for it, I guess," Belgarath said, "but just about everybody in Katakora knows that

something's moving around in these mountains, so we're going to have to start being very careful."

"How much farther is it to Ashaba?" Sadi asked him.

"About a day's ride."

"Will we make it in time?"

"Only just. Let's all get some sleep."

Garion had the same dream again that night. He was not really sure that it was a dream, since dreaming usually involved sight as well as sound, but all there was to this one was that persistent, despairing wail and the sense of horror with which it filled him. He sat up on his bunk, trembling and sweat-covered. After a time, he drew his blanket about his shoulders, clasped his arms about his knees, and stared at the ruddy coals in the fireplace until he dozed off again.

It was still cloudy the following morning, and they rode cautiously back down the ravine to the rutted track leading up into the foothills of the mountains. Silk and Feldegast ranged out in front of them as scouts to give them warning should any dangers arise.

After they had ridden a league or so, the pair came back down the narrow road. Their faces were sober, and they motioned for silence.

"There's a group of Karands camped around the road up ahead," Silk reported in a voice scarcely louder than a whisper.

"An ambush?" Sadi asked him.

"No," Feldegast replied in a low voice. "They're asleep for the most part. From the look of things, I'd say that they spent the night in some sort of religious observance, an' so they're probably exhausted -or still drunk."

"Can we get around them?" Belgarath asked.

"It shouldn't be too much trouble," Silk replied. "We can just go off into the trees and circle around until we're past the spot where they're sleeping."

The old man nodded. "Lead the way," he said.

They left the road and angled off into the timber, moving at a cautious walk.

"What sort of ceremony were they holding?" Durnik asked quietly.

Silk shrugged. "It looked pretty obscure," Silk told him. "They've got an altar set up with skulls on posts along the back of it. There seems to have been quite a bit of drinking going on -as well as some other things."

"What sort of things?"

Silk's face grew slightly pained. "They have women with them," he answered disgustedly. "There's some evidence that things got a bit indiscriminate."

Durnik's cheeks suddenly turned bright red.

"Aren't you exaggerating a bit, Kheldar?" Velvet asked him.

"No, not really. Some of them were still celebrating."

"A bit more important than quaint local religious customs, though," Feldegast added, still speaking quietly, "be the peculiar pets the Karands was keepin'."

"Pets?" Belgarath asked.

"Perhaps 'tis not the right word, Ancient One, but sittin' round the edges of the camp was a fair number of the Hounds -an' they was makin' no move t' devour the celebrants."

Belgarath looked at him sharply. "Are you sure?"

"I've seen enough of the Hounds of Torak t' recognize 'em when I see 'em."

"So there is some kind of an alliance between Mengha and Urvon," the old man said.

"Yer wisdom is altogether a marvel, old man. It must be a delight beyond human imagination t' have the benefit of ten thousand years experience t' guide ye in comin' t' such conclusions."

"Seven thousand," Belgarath corrected.

"Seven- ten- what matter?"

"Seven thousand," Belgarath repeated with a slightly offended expression.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

They rode that afternoon into a dead wasteland, a region foul and reeking, where white snags poked the skeleton-like fingers of their limbs imploringly at a dark, roiling sky and where dank ponds of oily, stagnant water exuded the reek of decay. Clots of fungus lay in gross profusion about the trunks of long-dead trees and matted-down weeds struggled up through ashy soil toward a sunless sky.

"It looks almost like Cthol Mishrak, doesn't it?" Silk asked, looking about distastefully.

"We're getting very close to Ashaba," Belgarath told him. "Something about Torak did this to the ground."

"Didn't he know?" Velvet said sadly.

"Know what?" Ce'Nedra asked her.

"That his very presence befouled the earth?"

"No," Ce'Nedra replied, "I don't think he did. His mind was so twisted that he couldn't even see it. The sun hid from him, and he saw that only as a mark of his and not as a sign of its repugnance for him."

It was a peculiarly astute observation, which to some degree surprised Garion. His wife oftentimes seemed to have a wide streak of giddiness in her nature which made it far too easy to think of her as a child, a misconception reinforced by her diminutive size. But he had frequently found it necessary to reassess this tiny, often willful little woman who shared his life. Ce'Nedra might sometimes behave foolishly, but she was never stupid. She looked out at the world with a clear, unwavering vision that saw much more than gowns and jewels and costly perfumes. Quite suddenly he was so proud of her that he thought his heart would burst.

"How much farther is it to Ashaba?" Sadi asked in a subdued tone. "I hate to admit it, but this particular swamp depresses me."

"You?" Durnik said. "I thought you liked swamps."

"A swamp should be green and rich with life, Goodman," the eunuch replied. "There's nothing here but death." He looked at Velvet. "Have you got Zith, Margravine?" he asked rather plaintively. "I'm feeling a bit lonesome just now."

"She's sleeping at the moment, Sadi," she told him, her hand going to the front of her bodice in an oddly protective fashion. "She's safe and warm and very content. She's even

purring."

"Resting in her perfumed little bower." He sighed. "There are times when I envy her."

"Why, Sadi," she said, blushing slightly, lowering her eyes, and then flashing her dimples at him.

"Merely a clinical observation, my dear Liselle," he said to her rather sadly. "There are times when I wish it could be otherwise, but . . ." He sighed again.

"Do you really have to carry that snake there?" Silk asked the blond girl.

"Yes, Kheldar," she replied, "as a matter of fact, I do."

"You didn't answer my question, Ancient One," Sadi said to Belgarath. "How much farther is it to Ashaba?"

"It's up there," the old sorcerer replied shortly, pointing toward a ravine angling sharply up from the reeking wasteland. "We should make it by dark."

"A particularly unpleasant time to visit a haunted house," Feldegast added.

As they started up the ravine, there came a sudden hideous growling from the dense undergrowth to one side of the weedy track, and a huge black Hound burst out of the bushes, its eyes aflame and with foam dripping from its cruel fangs. "Now you are mine!" it snarled, its jaws biting off the words.

Ce'Nedra screamed, and Garion's hand flashed back over his shoulder; but quick as he was, Sadi was even quicker. The eunuch spurred his terrified horse directly at the hulking dog. The beast rose, its jaws agape, but Sadi hurled a strangely colored powder of about the consistency of coarse flour directly into its face.

The Hound shook its head, still growling horribly. Then it suddenly screamed, a shockingly human sound.

Its eyes grew wide in terror. Then it began desperately to snap at the empty air around it, whimpering and trying to cringe back. As suddenly as it had attacked, it turned and fled howling back into the undergrowth.

"What did you do?" Silk demanded.

A faint smile touched Sadi's slender features. "When ancient Belgarath told me about Torak's Hounds, I took certain precautions," he replied, his head slightly cocked as he listened to the terrified yelps of the huge dog receding off into the distance.

"Poison?"

"No. It's really rather contemptible to poison a dog if you don't have to. The Hound simply inhaled some of that powder I threw in its face. Then it began to see some very distracting things -very distracting." He smiled again. "Once I saw a cow accidentally sniff the flower that's the main ingredient of the powder. The last time I saw her, she was trying to climb a tree." He looked over at Belgarath. "I hope you didn't mind my taking action without consulting you, Ancient One, but as you've pointed out, your sorcery might alert others in the region, and I had to move quickly to deal with the situation before you felt compelled to unleash it anyway."

"That's quite all right, Sadi," Belgarath replied. "I may have said it before, but you're a very versatile fellow."

"Merely a student of pharmacology, Belgarath. I've found that there are chemicals suitable for almost every situation."

"Won't the Hound report back to its pack that we're here?" Durnik asked, looking around worriedly.

"Not for several days." Sadi chuckled, brushing off his hands, holding them as far away from his face as possible.

They rode slowly up the weed-grown track along the bottom of the ravine where mournful, blackened trees spread their branches, filling the deep cut with a pervading gloom. Off in the distance they could hear the baying of Torak's Hounds as they coursed through the forest.

Above them, sooty ravens flapped from limb to limb, croaking hungrily.

"Disquieting sort of place," Velvet murmured.

"And that adds the perfect touch," Silk noted, pointing at a large vulture perched on the limb of a dead snag at the head of the ravine.

"Are we close enough to Ashaba yet for you to be able to tell if Zandramas is still there?" Garion asked Polgara.

"Possibly," she replied. "But even that faint a sound could be heard."

"We're close enough now that we can wait," Belgarath said. "I'll tell you one thing, though," he added. "If my great-grandson is at Ashaba, I'll take the place apart stone by stone until I find him and I don't care how much noise it wakes."

Impulsively, Ce'Nedra pulled her horse in beside his, leaned over, and locked her arms about his waist. "Oh, Belgarath," she said, "I love you." And she burrowed her face into his shoulder.

"What's this?" His voice was slightly surprised.

She pulled back, her eyes misty. She wiped at them with the back of her hand, then gave him an arch look.

"You're the dearest man in all the world," she told him. "I might even consider throwing Garion over for you," she added, "if it weren't for the fact that you're twelve thousand years old, that is."

"Seven," he corrected automatically.

She gave him a sadly whimsical smile, a melancholy sign of her final victory in an ongoing contest that no longer had any meaning for her. "Whatever," she sighed.

And then in a peculiarly uncharacteristic gesture, he enfolded her in his arms and gently kissed her. "My dear child," he said with brimming eyes. Then he looked back over his shoulder at Polgara. "How did we ever get along without her?" he asked.

Polgara's eyes were a mystery. "I don't know, father," she replied. "I really don't."

At the head of the ravine, Sadi dismounted and dusted the leaves of a low bush growing in the middle of the track they were following with some more of his powder.

"Just to be on the safe side," he explained, pulling himself back into his saddle.

The region they entered under a lowering sky was a wooded plateau, and they rode on along the scarcely visible track in a generally northerly direction with the rising wind whipping at their cloaks. The baying of Torak's Hounds still sounded from some distance off, but seemed to be coming no closer.

As before, Silk and Feldegast raged out ahead, scouting for possible dangers. Garion again rode at the head of their

column, his helmet in place and the butt of his lance riding in his stirrup. As he rounded a sharp bend in the track, he saw Silk and the juggler ahead. They had dismounted and were crouched behind some bushes. Silk turned quickly and motioned Garion back. Garion quickly passed on that signal and, step by step, backed his gray stallion around the bend again. He dismounted, leaned his lance against a tree, and took off his helmet.

"What is it?" Belgarath asked, also swinging down from his horse.

"I don't know," Garion replied, "Silk motioned us to stay out of sight."

"Let's go have a look," the old man said.

"Right."

The two of them crouched over and moved forward on feet to join the rat-faced man and the juggler. Silk his finger to his lips as they approached. When Garion reached the brush, he carefully parted the leaves and looked out.

There was a road there, a road that intersected the track they had been following. Riding along that road were half-a-hundred men dressed mostly in furs, with rusty helmets on their heads and bent and dented swords in their hands. The men at the head of the column, however, wore mail coats. Their helmets were polished, and they carried lances and shields.

Tensely, without speaking, Garion and his friends watched the loosely organized mob ride past.

When the strangers were out of sight, Feldegast turned to Belgarath. "It sort of confirms yer suspicion, old friend," he said.

"Who were they?" Garion asked in a low voice.

"The ones in fur be Karands," Feldegast replied, "an' the ones in steel be Temple Guardsmen. 'Tis more evidence of an alliance between Urvon and Mengha, y' see."

"Can we be sure that the Karands were Mengha's men?"

"He's overcome Katakori altogether, an' the only armed Karands in the area be his. Urvon an' his Chandim control the Guardsmen -an' the Hounds. When ye see Karands an' Hounds together the way we did yesterday, it's fair proof of an alliance, but when ye see Karandese fanatics escorted by armed Guardsmen, it doesn't leave hardly any doubt at all."

"What is that fool up to?" Belgarath muttered.

"Who?" Silk asked.

"Urvon. He's done some fairly filthy things in his life, but he's never consorted with demons before."

"Perhaps 'twas because Torak had forbid it," Feldegast suggested. "Now that Torak's dead, though, maybe he's throwin' off all restraints. The demons would be a powerful factor if the final confrontation between the Church an' the imperial throne that's been brewin' all these years should finally come."

"Well," Belgarath grunted, "we don't have time to sort it out now. Let's get the others and move on."

They quickly crossed the road that the Karands and the Guardsmen had been following and continued along the narrow track. After a few more miles, they crested a low knoll that at some time in the past had been denuded by fire. At the far end of the plateau, just before a series of stark cliffs rose sharply up into the mountains, there stood a huge black

building, rearing up almost like a mountain itself. It was surmounted by bleak towers and surrounded by a battlement-topped wall, half-smothered in vegetation.

"Ashaba," Belgarath said shortly, his eyes flinty.

"I thought it was a ruin," Silk said with some surprise.

"Parts of it are, I've been told," the old man replied.

"The upper floors aren't habitable anymore, but the ground floor's still more or less intact -at least it's supposed to be. It takes a very long time for wind and weather to tear down a house that big." The old man nudged his horse and led them down off the knoll and back into the wind-tossed forest.

It was nearly dark by the time they reached the edge of the clearing surrounding the House of Torak. Garion noted that the vegetation half covering the walls of the black castle consisted of brambles and thick-stemmed ivy.

The glazing in the windows had long since succumbed to wind and weather, and the vacant casements seemed to stare out at the clearing like the eye sockets of a dark skull.

"Well, father?" Polgara said.

He scratched at his beard, listening to the baying of the Hounds back in the forest.

"If yer open t' a bit of advice, me ancient friend," Feldegast said, "wouldn't it be wiser t' wait until dark before we go in? Should there be watchers in the house, the night will conceal us from their eyes, An' then, too, once it grows dark, there'll undoubtedly be lights inside if the house be occupied. 'Twill give us some idea of what t' expect."

"It makes sense, Belgarath," Silk agreed. "Walking up to an unfriendly house in broad daylight disturbs my sense of propriety."

"That's because you've got the soul of a burglar. But it's probably the best plan anyhow. Let's pull back into the woods a ways and wait for dark."

Though the weather had been warm and spring-like on the plains of Rakuth and Venna, here in the foothills of the Karandese mountains there was still a pervading chill, for winter only reluctantly released its grip on these highlands. The wind was raw, and there were some places back under the trees where dirty windrows of last winter's snow lay deep and unyielding.

"Is that wall around the house going to cause us any problems?" Garion asked.

"Not unless someone's repaired the gates," Belgarath replied. "When Beldin and I came in here after Vo Mimbire, they were all locked, so we had to break them down to get in."

"Walkin' openly up to them gates might not be the best idea in the world, Belgarath," Feldegast said, "fer if the house do be occupied by Chandim or Karands or Guardsmen, 'tis certain that the gates are goin' t' be watched, an' there be a certain amount of light even on the darkest night. There be a sally port on the east side of the house though, an' it gives entry into an inner court that's sure t' be filled with deep shadows as soon as the night comes on."

"Won't it be barred off?" Silk asked him.

"T' be sure, Prince Kheldar, it was indeed. The lock, however, was not difficult fer a man with fingers as nimble as mine."

"You've been inside, then?"

"I like t' poke around in abandoned houses from time t' time. One never knows what the former inhabitants might have left behind, an' findin' is oftentimes as good as earnin' or stealin'."

"I can accept that," Silk agreed.

Durnik came back from the edge of the woods where he had been watching the house. He had a slightly worried look on his face. "I'm not entirely positive," he said, "but it looks as if there are clouds of smoke coming out of the towers of that place."

"I'll just go along with ye an' have a bit of a look," the juggler said, and he and the smith went back through the deepening shadows beneath the trees. After a few minutes they came back. Durnik's expression was faintly disgusted.

"Smoke?" Belgarath asked.

Feldegast shook his head. "Bats," he replied. "Thousands of the little beasties. They be comin' out of the towers in great black clouds."

"Bats?" Ce'Nedra exclaimed, her hands going instinctively to her hair.

"It's not uncommon," Polgara told her. "Bats need protected places to nest in, and a ruin or an abandoned place is almost ideal for them."

"But they're so ugly!" Ce'Nedra declared with a shudder.

" 'Tis only a flyin' mouse, me little darlin'," Feldegast told her.

"I'm not fond of mice, either."

" 'Tis a very unforgivin' woman ye've married, young Master," Feldegast said to Garion, "brim-full of prejudices an' unreasonable dislikes."

"More important, did you see any lights coming from inside?" Belgarath asked.

"Not so much as a glimmer, Ancient One, but the house be large, an' there be chambers inside which have no windows. Torak was unfond of the sun, as ye'll recall."

"Let's move around through the woods until we're closer to this sally port of yours," the old man suggested, "before the light goes entirely "

They stayed back from the edge of the trees as they circled around the clearing with the great black house in its center. The last light was beginning to fade from the cloud-covered sky as they cautiously peered out from the edge of the woods.

"I can't quite make out the sally port," Silk murmured, peering toward the house.

" 'Tis partially concealed," Feldegast told him. "If ye give ivy the least bit of a toehold, it can engulf a whole buildin' in a few hundred years. Quiet yer fears, Prince Kheldar. I know me way, an' I kin find the entrance t' the House of Torak on the blackest of nights."

"The Hounds are likely to be patrolling the area around here after dark, aren't they?" Garion said. He looked at Sadi. "I hope you didn't use up all of your powder back there."

"There's more than enough left, Belgarion." The eunuch smiled, patting his pouch. "A light dusting at the entrance to Master Feldegast's sally port should insure that we won't be disturbed once we're inside."

"What do you think?" Durnik asked, squinting up at the

dark sky.

"It's close enough," Belgarath grunted. "I want to get inside."

They led their horses across the weed-choked clearing until they reached the looming wall.

" 'Tis this way just a bit," Feldegast said in a low voice as he began to feel his way along the rough black stones of the wall.

They followed him for several minutes, guided more by the faint rustling sound of his feet among the weeds than by sight.

"An' here we are, now," Feldegast said with some satisfaction. It was a low, arched entrance in the wall, almost totally smothered in ivy and brambles. Durnik and the giant Toth, moving slowly to avoid making too much noise, pulled the obstructing vines aside to allow the rest of them and the horses to enter. Then they followed, pulling the vines back in place once again to conceal the entrance.

Once they were inside, it was totally dark, and there was the musty smell of mildew and fungus. "May I borrow yer flint an' steel an' tinder again, Goodman Durnik?" Feldegast whispered. Then there was a small clinking sound, followed by a rapid clicking accompanied by showers of glowing sparks as Feldegast, kneeling so that his body concealed even those faint glimmers, worked with Durnik's flint and steel. After a moment, he blew on the tinder, stirring a tiny flame to life. There was another clink as he opened the front of a square lantern he had taken from a small niche in the wall.

"Is that altogether wise?" Durnik asked doubtfully as the juggler lighted the candle stub inside the lantern and returned the flint and steel.

" 'Tis a well-shielded little bit of a light, Goodman," Feldegast told him, "an' it be darker than the inside of yer boots in this place. Trust me in this, fer I kin keep it so well concealed that not the tiniest bit of a glow will escape me control."

"Isn't that what they call a burglar's lantern?" Silk asked curiously.

"Well, now." Feldegast's whisper sounded slightly injured. "I don't know that I'd call it that, exactly. 'Tis a word that has an unsavory ring t' it."

"Belgarath," Silk chuckled softly. "I think your friend here has a more checkered past than we've been led to believe. I wondered why I liked him so much."

Feldegast had closed down the tin sides of his little lantern, allowing only a single, small spot of light feebly to illuminate the floor directly in front of his feet. "Come along, then," he told them. "The sally port goes back a way under the wall here, an' then we come t' the grate that used t' close it off. Then it makes a turn t' the right an' a little farther on, another t' the left, an' then it comes out in the courtyard of the house."

"Why so many twists and turns?" Garion asked him.

" 'Torak was a crooked sort, don't y' know. I think he hated straight lines almost as much as he hated the sun."

They followed the faint spot of light the lantern cast. Leaves had blown in through the entrance over the centuries to lie in a thick, damp mat on the

floor, effectively muffling the sounds of their horses' hooves.

The grate that barred the passageway was a massively constructed crisscross of rusty iron. Feldegast fumbled for a moment with the huge latch, then swung it clear. "An' now, me large friend," he said to Toth, "we'll be havin' need of yer great strength here. The gate is cruel let me warn ye, an' the hinges be so choked with rust that they'll not likely yield easily." He paused a moment. "An' that reminds me -ah, where have me brains gone? We'll be needin' somethin' t' mask the dreadful squeakin' when ye swing the grate open." He looked back at the others. "Take a firm grip on the reins of yer horses," he warned them, "fer this is likely t' give 'em a bit of a turn."

Toth place his huge hands on the heavy grate, then looked at the juggler.

"Go!" Feldegast said sharply, then he lifted his face and bayed, his voice almost perfectly imitating the sound of one of the great Hounds prowling outside, even as the slowly swung the grate open on shrieking hinges.

Chretienne snorted and shied back from the dreadful howl, but Garion held his reins tightly.

"Oh, that was clever," Silk said in quiet admiration.

"I have me moments from time to time," Feldegast admitted. "With all the dogs outside raisin' their awful caterwallin', 'tis certain that one more little yelp won't attract no notice, but the squealin' of them hinges could have been an altogether different matter."

He led them on through the now-open grate and on along the dank passageway to a sharp right-hand turn. Somewhat farther along, the passage bent again to the left. Before he rounded that corner, the juggler closed down his lantern entirely, plunging them into total darkness. "We be approachin' the main court now," he whispered to them. " 'Tis the time for silence an' caution, fer if there be others in the house, they'll be payin' a certain amount of attention t' be sure that no one creeps up on 'em. There be a handrail along the wall there, an' I think it might be wise t' tie the horses here. Their hooves would make a fearful clatter on the stones of the court, an' we'll not be wantin' t' ride them up an' down the corridors of this accursed place."

Silently they tied the reins of their mounts to the rusty iron railing and then crept on quiet feet to the turn in the passageway. There was a lessening of the darkness beyond the turn -not light, certainly, but a perceptible moderation of the oppressive gloom. And then they watched the inside entrance to the sally port and looked out across the broad courtyard toward the looming black house beyond. There was no discernible grace to the construction of that house. It rose in blocky ugliness almost as if the builders had possessed no understanding of the meaning of the word beauty, but had striven instead for a massive kind of arrogance to reflect the towering Pride of its owner.

"Well," Belgarath whispered grimly, "that's Ashaba."

Garion looked at the dark house before him, half in apprehension and half with a kind of dreadful eagerness.

Something caught his eye then, and he thrust his head out to look along the front of the house across the court.

At the far end, in a window on a lower floor, a dim light glowed, looking for all the world like a watchful eye.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"Now what?" Silk breathed, looking at the dimly lighted window. "We've got to cross that courtyard to get to the house, but we can't be sure if there's somebody watching from that window or not."

"You've been out of the academy for too long, Kheldar," Velvet murmured. "You've forgotten your lessons. If stealth is impossible, then you try boldness."

"You're suggesting that we just walk up to the door and knock?"

"Well, I hadn't planned to knock, exactly."

"What have you got in mind, Liselle?" Polgara asked quietly.

"If there are people in the house, they're probably Grolims, right?"

"It's more than likely." Belgarath said. "Most other people avoid this place."

"Grolims pay little attention to other Grolims, I've noticed," she continued.

"You're forgetting that we don't have any Grolim robes with us," Silk pointed out.

"It's very dark in that courtyard, Kheldar, and in shadows that deep, any dark color would appear black, wouldn't it?"

"I suppose so," he admitted.

"And we still have those green silk slavers' robes in our packs, don't we?"

He squinted at her in the darkness, then looked at Belgarath. "It goes against all my instincts," he said, "but it might just work, at that."

"One way or another, we've got to get into the house. We have to find out who's in there -and why- before we can decide anything."

"Would Zandramas have Grolims with her?" Ce'Nedra asked. "If she's alone in that house and she sees a line of Grolims walking across the courtyard, wouldn't that frighten her into running away with my baby?"

Belgarath shook his head. "Even if she does run, we're close enough to catch her -particularly since the Orb can follow her no matter how much she twists and dodges. Besides, if she's here, she's probably got some of her own Grolims with her. It's not really so far from here to Darshiva that she couldn't have summoned them."

"What about him?" Durnik whispered the question and pointed at Feldegast. "He hasn't got a slavers' robe."

"We'll improvise something," Velvet murmured. She smiled at the juggler. "I've got a nice dark blue dressing gown that should set off his eyes marvelously. We can add a kerchief to resemble a hood and we can slip him by -if he stays in the middle of the group."

" 'Twould be beneath me dignity," he objected.

" 'Would you prefer to stay behind and watch the horses?" she asked pleasantly.

" 'Tis a hard woman y' are, me lady." he complained.

"Sometimes, yes."

"Let's do it," Belgarath decided. "I've got to get inside that house." It took only a few moments to retrace their steps to the place where the horses were tied and to pull the neatly folded slavers' robes from their packs by the dim light of Feldegast's lantern.

"Isn't this ridiculous, now?" the juggler grumbled indignantly, pointing down at the blue satin gown Velvet had draped about him.

"I think it looks just darling," Ce'Nedra said.

"If there are people in there, aren't they likely to be patrolling the corridors?" Durnik asked.

"Only on the main floor, Goodman," Feldegast replied. "The upper stories of the house be almost totally uninhabitable -on account of all the broken windows an' the weather blowin' around in the corridors fer all the world like they was part of the great outdoors. There be a grand staircase just opposite the main door, an' with just a bit of luck we kin nip up the stairs an' be out of sight with no one the wiser. Once we're up there, we're not likely t' encounter a livin' soul -unless ye be countin' the bats an' mice an' an occasional adventuresome rat."

"You absolutely had to say that, didn't you?" Ce'Nedra said caustically.

"Ah, me poor little darlin'." He grinned at her. "But quiet yer fears. I'll be beside ye an' I've yet t' meet the bat or mouse or rat I couldn't best in a fair fight."

"It makes sense, Belgarath," Silk said. "If we all go trooping through the lower halls, sooner or later someone's bound to notice us. Once we're upstairs and out of sight, though, I'll be able to reconnoiter and find out exactly what we're up against."

"All right," the old man agreed, "but the first thing is to get inside."

"Let's be off, then," Feldegast said, swirling his dressing gown about him with a flourish.

"Hide that light," Belgarath told him.

They filed out through the entrance to the sally port and marched into the shadowy courtyard, moving in the measured, swaying pace Grolim priests assumed on ceremonial occasions. The lighted window at the end of the house seemed somehow like a burning eye that followed their every move.

The courtyard was really not all that large, but it seemed to Garion that crossing it took hours. Eventually, however, they reached the main door. It was large, black, and nail-studded, like the door of every Grolim temple Garion had ever seen. The steel mask mounted over it, however, was no longer polished. In the faint light coming from the window at the other end of the house, Garion could see that over the centuries it had rusted, making the coldly beautiful face look scabrous and diseased. What made it look perhaps even more hideous were the twin gobbets of lumpy, semi-liquid rust running from the eye sockets down the cheeks. Garion remembered with a shudder the fiery tears that had run down the stricken God's face before he had fallen.

They mounted the three steps to that bleak door, and Toth slowly pushed it open.

The corridor inside was dimly illuminated by a single

flickering torch at the far end. Opposite the door, as Feldegast had told them, was a broad staircase reaching up into the darkness. The treads were littered with fallen stones, and cobwebs hung in long festoons from a ceiling lost in shadows. Still moving at that stately Grolim pace, Belgarath led them across the corridor and started up the stairs. Garion followed close behind him with measured tread, though every nerve screamed at him to run. They had gone perhaps halfway up the staircase when they heard a clinking sound behind them, and there was a sudden light at the foot of the stairs, "What are you doing?" a rough voice demanded. "Who are you?"

Garion's heart sank, and he turned. The man at the foot of the stairs wore a long, coat-like shirt of mail. He was helmeted and had a shield strapped to his left arm.

With his right he held aloft a sputtering torch.

"Come back down here," the mailed man commanded them. The giant Toth turned obediently, his hood pulled over his face with his arms crossed so that his hands were inside his sleeves. With an air of meekness he started the stairs again.

"I mean all of you," the Temple Guardsman insisted. "I order you in the name of the God of Angarak." As Toth reached the foot of the stairs, the Guardsman's eyes widened as he realized that the robe the huge man wore was not Grolim black. "What's this?" he exclaimed. "You're not Chandim! You're-" He broke off as one of Toth's huge hands seized him by the throat and lifted him off the floor. He dropped his torch, kicking and struggling. Then, almost casually, Toth removed his helmet with his other hand and banged his head several times against the stone wall of the corridor.

With a shudder, the mail-coated man went limp. Toth draped the unconscious form across his shoulder and started back up the stairs.

Silk bounded back down to the corridor, picked up the steel helmet and extinguished torch, and came back up again. "Always clean up the evidence," he murmured to Toth. "No crime is complete until you've tidied up."

Toth grinned at him.

As they neared the top of the stairs, they found the treads covered with leaves that had blown in from the outside, and the cobwebs hung in tatters like rotted curtains, swaying in the wind that came moaning in from the outside through the shattered windows.

The hall at the top of the stairs was littered. Dry leaves lay in ankle-deep windrows on the floor, skittering before the wind. A large, empty casement at the end of the corridor behind them was half covered with thick ivy that shook and rustled in the chill night wind blowing down off the slopes of the mountains. Doors had partially rotted away and hung in chunks from their hinges. The rooms beyond those doors were choked with leaves and dust, and the furniture and bedding had long since surrendered every scrap of cloth or padding to thousands of generations of industrious mice in search of nesting materials. Toth carried his unconscious captive into one of those rooms, bound him hand and foot, and then gagged him to muffle any outcry, should he awaken before dawn.

"That light was at the other end of the house, wasn't it?" Garion asked. "What's at that end?"

" 'Twas the livin' quarters of Torak himself," Feldegast replied, adjusting his little lantern so that it emitted a faint beam of light. "His throne room be there, an' his private chapel. I could even show ye t' his personal bedroom, an' ye could bounce up an' down on his great bed -or what's left of it- just fer fun, if yer of a mind."

"I think I could live without doing that." Belgarath had been tugging at one earlobe. "Have you been here lately?" he asked the juggler.

"Perhaps six months ago."

"Was anybody here?" Ce'Nedra demanded.

"I'm afraid not, me darlin'. 'Twas as empty as a tomb."

"That was before Zandramas got here, Ce'Nedra," Polgara reminded her gently.

"Why do ye ask, Belgarath?" Feldegast said.

"I haven't been here since just after Vo Mimbre," Belgarath said as they continued down the littered hall. "The house was fairly sound then, but Angaraks aren't really notorious for the permanence of their construction. How's the mortar holding out?"

" 'Tis as crumbly as year-old bread."

Belgarath nodded. "I thought it might be," he said.

"Now, what we're after here is information, not open warfare in the corridors."

"Unless the one who's here happens to be Zandramas," Garion corrected. "If she's still here with my son, I'll start a war that's going to make Vo Mimbre look like a country fair."

"And I'll clean up anything he misses," Ce'Nedra added fiercely.

"Can't you control them?" Belgarath asked his daughter."

"Not under the circumstances, no," she replied. "I might even decide to join in myself."

"I thought that we'd more or less erased the Alorn side of your nature, Pol," he said to her.

"That's not the side that was just talking, father."

"My point," Belgarath said, "at least the point I was trying to make before everybody started flexing his -or is her- muscles, is that it's altogether possible that we'll be able to hear and maybe even see what's going on in the main part of the house from up here. If the mortar's as rotten as Feldegast says it is, it shouldn't be too hard to find -or make- some little crevices in the floor of one of these rooms and find out what we need to know. If Zandramas is here, that's one thing, and we'll deal with her in whatever way seems appropriate. But if the only people down there are some of Urvon's Chandim and Guardsmen or a roving band of Mengha's Karandese fanatics, we'll pick up Zandramas' trail and go on about our business without announcing our presence."

"That sounds reasonable," Durnik agreed. "It doesn't make much sense to get involved in unnecessary fights."

"I'm glad that someone in this belligerent little group has some common sense," the old man said.

"Of course, if it is Zandramas down there," the smith added, "I'll have to take steps myself."

"You, too?" Belgarath groaned.

"Naturally. After all, Belgarath, right is right."

They moved on along the leaf-strewn corridor where the

cobwebs hung from the ceiling in tatters and where there were skittering sounds in the corners.

As they passed a large double door so thick that it was still intact, Belgarath seemed to remember something. "I want to look in here," he muttered. As he opened those doors, the sword strapped across Garion's back gave a violent tug that very nearly jerked him off his feet. "Grandfather!" he gasped. He reached back, instructing the Orb to restrain itself, and drew the great blade. The point dipped to the floor, and then he was very nearly dragged into the room. "She's been here," he exulted.

"What?" Durnik asked.

"Zandramas. She's been in this room with Geran." Feldegast opened the front of his lantern wider to throw more light into the room. It was a library, large and vaulted, with shelves reaching from the floor to the ceiling and filled with dusty, moldering books and scrolls.

"So that was what she was looking for," Belgarath said.

"For what?" Silk asked.

"A book. A prophecy, most likely." His face grew grim. "She's following the same trail that I am, and this would probably be just about the only place where she could find an uncorrupted copy of the Ashabine Oracles."

"Oh!" Ce'Nedra's little cry was stricken. She pointed a trembling hand at the dust-covered floor. There were footprints there. Some of them had obviously been made by a woman's shoes, but there were others as well -quite tiny. "My baby's been here," Ce'Nedra said in a voice near tears, and then she gave a little wail and began to weep. "H-he's walking," she sobbed, "and I'll never be able to see his first steps."

Polgara moved to her and took her into a comforting embrace.

Garion's eyes also filled with tears, and his grip on the hilt of his sword grew so tight that his knuckles turned white. He felt an almost overpowering need to smash things.

Belgarath was swearing under his breath.

"What's the matter?" Silk asked him.

"That was the main reason I had to come here," the old man grated. "I need a clean copy of the Ashabine Oracles, and Zandramas has beaten me to it."

"Maybe there's another."

"Not a chance. She's been running ahead of me burning books at every turn. If there was more than one copy here, she'd have made sure that I couldn't get my hands on it. That's why she stayed here so long -ransacking this place to make sure that she had the only copy." He started to swear again.

"Is this in any way significant?" Eriond said, going to a table that, unlike the others in the room, had been dusted and even polished. In the precise center of that table lay a book bound in black leather and flanked on each side by a candlestick. Eriond picked it up, and as he did so, a neatly folded sheet of parchment fell out from between its leaves. The young man bent, picked it up, and glanced at it.

"What's that?" Belgarath demanded.

"It's a note," Eriond replied. "It's for you." He handed the parchment and the book to the old man.

Belgarath read the note. His face went suddenly pale and then beet red. He ground his teeth together with the veins swelling in his face and neck. Garion felt the sudden building up of the old sorcerer's will.

"Father!" Polgara snapped, "No! Remember that we aren't alone here!"

He controlled himself with a tremendous effort, then crumpled the parchment into a ball and hurled it at the floor so hard that it bounced high into the air and rolled across the room. He swung back the hand holding the book as if he were about to send it after the ball of parchment, but then seemed to think better of it. He opened the book at random, turned a few pages, and then began to swear sulfurously. He shoved the book at Garion.

"Here," he said, "hold on to this." Then he began to pace up and down, his face as black as a thundercloud, muttering curses and waving his hands in the air.

Garion opened the book, tilting it to catch the light. He saw at once the reason for Belgarath's anger. Whole passages had been neatly excised -not merely blotted out, but cut entirely from the page with a razor or a very sharp knife. Garion also started to swear.

Silk curiously went over, picked up the parchment, and looked at it. He swallowed hard and looked apprehensively at the swearing Belgarath. "Oh, my," he said.

"What is it?" Garion asked.

"I think we'd all better stay out of your grandfather's way for a while," the rat-faced man replied. "It might take him a little bit to get hold of himself."

"Just read it, Silk," Polgara said. "Don't editorialize." Silk looked again at Belgarath, who was now at the far end of the room pounding on the stone wall with his fist.

'Belgarath,' " he read. " 'I have beaten thee, old man. Now I go to the Place Which Is No More for the final meeting. Follow me if thou canst. Perhaps this book will help thee.' "

"Is it signed?" Velvet asked him.

"Zandramas," he replied. "Who else?"

"That is a truly offensive letter," Sadi murmured. He looked at Belgarath, who continued to pound his fist on the wall in impotent fury. "I'm surprised that he's taking it so well -all things considered."

"It answers a lot of questions, though," Velvet said thoughtfully.

"Such as what?" Silk asked.

"We were wondering if Zandramas was still here. Quite obviously, she's not. Not even an idiot would leave that kind of message for Belgarath and then stay around where he could get his hands on her."

"That's true," he agreed. "There's no real point in our staying here, then, is there? The Orb has picked up the trail again, so why don't we just slip out of the house again and go after Zandramas?"

"Without findin' out who's here?" Feldegast objected. "Me curiosity has been aroused, an' I'd hate t' go off with it unsatisfied." He glanced across the room at the fuming Belgarath. "Besides, it's going t' be a little while before our ancient friend there regains his composure. I think I'll go along t' the far end of the hall an' see if I kin find a

place where I kin look down into the lower part of the house -just t' answer some burnin' questions which have been naggin' at me." He went to the table and lighted one of the candles from his little lantern.

"Would ye be wantin' t' come along with me, Prince Kheldar?" he invited.

Silk shrugged. "Why not?"

"I'll go, too," Garion said. He handed the book to Polgara and then pointedly looked at the raging Belgarath. "Is he going to get over that eventually?"

"I'll talk with him, dear. Don't be too long."

He nodded, and then he, Silk, and the juggler quietly left the library.

There was a room at the far end of the hall. It was not particularly large, and there were shelves along the walls. Garion surmised that it had at one time been a storeroom or a linen closet. Feldegast squinted appraisingly at the leaf-strewn floor, then closed his lantern.

The leaves had piled deep in the corners and along the walls, but in the sudden darkness a faint glow shone up through them, and there came the murmur of voices from below.

"Me vile-tempered old friend seems t' have been right," Feldegast whispered. " 'Twould appear that the mortar has quite crumbled away along that wall. 'Twill be but a simple matter t' brush the leaves out of the way an' give ourselves some convenient spy holes. Let's be havin' a look an' find out who's taken up residence in the House of Torak."

Garion suddenly had that strange sense of re-experiencing something that had happened a long time ago. It had been in King Anheg's palace at Val Alorn, and he had followed the man in the green cloak through the deserted upper halls until they had come to a place where crumbling mortar had permitted the sound of voices to come up from below. Then he remembered something else. When they had been at Tol Honeth, hadn't Belgarath said that most of the things that had happened while they were pursuing Zedar and the Orb were likely to happen again, since everything was leading up to another meeting between the Child of Light and the Child of Dark? He tried to shake off the feeling, but without much success.

They removed the leaves from the crack running along the far wall of the storeroom carefully, trying to avoid sifting any of them down into the room below. Then each of them selected a vantage point from which to watch and listen.

The room into which they peered was very large. Ragged drapes hung at the windows, and the corners were thick with cobwebs. Smoky torches hung in iron rings along the walls, and the floor was thick with dust and the litter of ages. The room was filled with black-robed Grolims, a sprinkling of roughly clad Karands, and a large number of gleaming Temple Guardsmen. Near the front, drawn up like a platoon of soldiers, a group of the huge black Hounds of Torak sat on their haunches expectantly.

In front of the Hounds stood a black altar, showing signs of recent use, flanked on either side by a glowing brazier.

Against the wall on a high dais was a golden throne, backed by thick, tattered black drapes and by a huge replica of the face of Torak.

" 'Twas Burnt-face's throne room, don't y' know,"

Feldegast whispered.

"Those are Chandim, aren't they?" Garion whispered back.

"The very same -both human an' beast- along with their mail-shirted bully boys. I'm a bit surprised that Urvon has chosen t' occupy the place with his dogs -though the best use fer Ashaba has probably always been as a kennel."

It was obvious that the men in the throne room were expecting something by the nervous way they kept looking at the throne.

Then a great gong sounded from below, shimmering in the smoky air.

"On your knees!" a huge voice commanded the throng in the large room. "Pay obeisance and homage to the new God of Angarak!"

"What?" Silk exclaimed in a choked whisper.

"Watch an' be still!" Feldegast snapped.

From below there came a great roll of drums, followed by a brazen fanfare. The rotten drapes near the golden throne parted, and a double file of robed Grolims entered, chanting fervently, even as the assembled Chandim and Guardsmen fell to their knees and the Hounds and the Karands groveled and whined.

The booming of the drums continued, and then a figure garbed in cloth of gold and wearing a crown strode imperiously out from between the drapes. A glowing nimbus surrounded the figure, though Garion could clearly sense that the will that maintained the glow emanated from the gold-clad man himself. Then the figure lifted its head in a move of overweening arrogance. The man's face was splotched -some patches showing the color of healthy skin and others a hideous dead white. What chilled Garion's blood the most, however, was the fact that the man's eyes were totally mad.

"Urvon!" Feldegast said with a sudden intake of his his breath. "You piebald son of a mangy dog!" All trace of his lilting accent had disappeared.

Directly behind the patch-faced madman came a shadowy figure, cowed so deeply that its face was completely obscured. The black that covered it was not that of a simple Grolim robe, but seemed to grow out of the figure itself, and Garion felt a cold dread as a kind of absolute evil permeated the air about that black shape.

Urvon mounted the dais and seated himself on the throne, his insane eyes bulging and his face frozen in that expression of imperious pride. The shadow-covered figure took its place behind his left shoulder and bent forward toward his ear, whispering, whispering.

The Chandim, Guardsmen, and Karands in the throne room continued to grovel, fawning and whining, even as did the Hounds, while the last disciple of Torak preened himself in the glow of their adulation. A dozen or so of the black-robed Chandim crept forward on their knees, bearing gilded chests and reverently placing them on the altar before the dais. When they opened the chests, Garion saw that they were all filled to the brim with red Angarak gold and with jewels.

"These offerings are pleasing to mine eyes," the enthroned Disciple declared in a shrill voice. "Let others come forth to make- also their offerings unto the new God of Angarak."

There was a certain amount of consternation among the

Chandim and a few hasty consultations.

The next group of offerings were in plain wooden boxes; when they were opened, they revealed only pebbles and twigs. Each of the Chandim who bore those boxes to the altar surreptitiously removed one of the gilded chests after depositing his burden on the black stone.

Urvon gloated over the chests and boxes, apparently unable to distinguish between gold and gravel, as the line continued to move toward the altar, each priest laying one offering on the altar and removing another before returning to the end of the line.

"I am well pleased with ye, my priests," Urvon said in his shrill voice when the charade had been played out.

"Truly, ye have brought before me the wealth of nations."

As the Chandim, Karands, and Guardsmen rose to their feet, the shadowy figure at Urvon's shoulder continued to whisper.

"And now will I receive Lord Mengha," the madman announced, "most favored of all who serve me, for he has delivered unto me this familiar spirit who revealed my high divinity unto me." He indicated the shadow behind him.

"Summon the Lord Mengha that he may pay homage to the God Urvon and be graciously received by the new God of Angarak." The voice that boomed that command was as hollow as a voice issuing from a tomb.

From the door at the back of the hall came another fanfare of trumpets, and another hollow voice responded. "All hail Urvon, new God of Angarak," it intoned. "Lord Mengha approacheth to make his obeisance and to seek counsel with the living God."

Again there came the booming of drums, and a man robed in Grolim black paced down the broad aisle toward the altar and the dais. As he reached the altar, he genuflected to the madman seated on Torak's throne.

"Look now upon the awesome face of Lord Mengha, most favored servant of the God Urvon and soon to become First Disciple," the hollow voice boomed.

The figure before the altar turned and pushed back his hood to reveal his face to the throng.

Garion stared, suppressing a gasp of surprise. The man standing before the altar was Harakan.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"Belar!" Silk swore under his breath.

"All bow down to the First Disciple of your God!" Urvon declaimed in his shrill voice. "It is my command that ye honor him."

There was a murmur of amazement among the assembled Chandim, and Garion, peering down from above, thought that he could detect a certain reluctance on the faces of some of them.

"Bow to him!" Urvon shrieked, starting to his feet. "He is my Disciple!" The Chandim looked first at the frothing madman on the dais and then at the cruel face of Harakan. Fearfully they sank to their knees.

"I am pleased to see such willing obedience to the commands of our God," Harakan observed sardonically. "I shall

remember it always." There was a scarcely veiled threat in his voice.

"Know ye all that my Disciple speaks with my voice," Urvon announced, resuming his seat upon the throne. "His words are my words, and ye will obey him even as ye obey me."

"Hear the words of our God," Harakan intoned in that same sardonic voice, "for mighty is the God of Angarak, and swift to anger should any fail to heed him. Know further that I, Mengha, am now the sword of Urvon as well as his voice, and that the chastisement of the disobedient is in my hands." The threat was no longer veiled, and Harakan swept his eyes slowly across the faces of the assembled priests as if challenging each of them to protest his elevation.

"Hail Mengha, Disciple of the living God!" one of the mailed Guardsmen shouted.

"Hail Mengha!" the other Guardsmen responded, smashing their fists against their shields in salute.

"Hail Mengha!" the Karands shrieked.

"Hail Mengha!" the kneeling Chandim said at last, cowed finally into submission. And then the great Hounds crept forward on their bellies to fawn about Harakan's feet and to lick his hands.

"It is well," the enthroned madman declared in his shrill voice. "Know that the God of Angarak is pleased with ye."

And then another figure appeared in the throne room below, coming through the same rotted drapes which had admitted Urvon. The figure was slender and dressed in a robe of clinging black satin. Its head was partially covered by a black hood, and it was carrying something concealed beneath its robe. When it reached the altar, it tipped back its head in a derisive laugh, revealing a face with at once an unearthly beauty and an unearthly cruelty all cast in marble white. "You poor fools," the figure rasped in a harsh voice. "Think you to raise a new God over Angarak without my permission?"

"I have not summoned thee, Zandramas!" Urvon shouted at her.

"I feel no constraint to heed thy summons, Urvon," she replied in a voice filled with contempt, "nor its lack. I am not thy creature, as are these dogs. I serve the God of Angarak, in whose coming shalt thou be cast down."

"I am the God of Angarak!" he shrieked.

Harakan had begun to come around the altar toward her.

"And wilt thou pit thy puny will against the Will of the Child of Dark, Harakan?" she asked coolly. "Thou mayest change thy name, but thy power is no greater." Her voice was like ice.

Harakan stopped in his tracks, his eyes suddenly wide.

She turned back to Urvon. "I am dismayed that I was not notified of thy deification, Urvon," she continued, "for should I have known, I would have come before thee to pay thee homage. and seek thy blessing." Then her lip curled in a sneer that distorted her face. "Thou?" she said. "Thou, a God? Thou mayest sit upon the throne of Torak for all eternity whilst this shabby ruin crumbles about thee, and thou wilt never become a God. Thou mayest fondle dross and call it gold, and thou wilt never become a God. Thou mayest bask in the canine adulation of thy cringing dogs, who even now befoul thy throne

room with their droppings, and thou wilt never become a God. Thou mayest hearken greedily to the words of thy tame demon, Nahaz, who even now whispers the counsels of madness in thine ear, and thou wilt never become a God."

"I am a God!" Urvon shrieked, starting to his feet again.

"So? It may be even as thou sayest, Urvon," she almost purred. "But if thou art a God, I must tell thee to enjoy thy Godhood whilst thou may, then, for even as maimed Torak, thou art doomed."

"Who hath the might to slay a God?" he foamed at her.

Her laugh was dreadful. "Who hath the might? Even he who reft Torak of his life. Prepare thyself to receive the mortal thrust of the burning sword of Iron-grip, which spilled out the life of thy master, for thus I summon the Godslayer!"

And then she reached forward and placed the cloth-wrapped bundle which she had been concealing beneath her robe on the black altar. She raised her face and looked directly at the crack through which Garion was staring in frozen disbelief. "Behold thy son, Belgarion," she called up to him, "and hear his crying!" She turned back the cloth to reveal the infant Geran. The baby's face was contorted with fear, and he began to wail, a hopeless, lost sound.

All thought vanished from Garion's mind. The wailing was the sound he had been hearing over and over again since he had left Mal Zeth. It was not the wail of that doomed child in those plague-stricken streets that had haunted his dreams. It was the voice of his own son!

Powerless to resist that wailing call, he leaped to his feet. It was as if there were suddenly sheets of flame before his eyes, flames that erased everything from his mind but the desperate need to go to the child wailing on the altar below.

He realized dimly that he was running through the shadowy, leaf-strewn halls, roaring insanely even as he ripped Iron-grip's sword from its sheath.

The moldering doors of long-empty rooms flashed by as he ran full tilt along the deserted corridor. Dimly behind him, he heard Silk's startled cry. "Garion! No!" Heedless, his brain afire, he ran on with the great Sword of Riva blazing in his hand before him as he went.

Even years later, he did not remember the stairs. Vaguely, he remembered emerging in the lower hall, raging.

There were Temple Guardsmen and Karands there, flinching before him and trying feebly to face him, but he seized the hilt of his sword in both hands and moved through them like a man reaping grain. They fell in showers of blood as he sheared his way through their ranks.

The great door to the dead God's throne room was closed and jolted, but Garion did not even resort to sorcery. He simply destroyed the door -and those who were trying desperately to hold it closed- with his burning sword.

The fire of madness filled his eyes as he burst into the throne room, and he roared at the terrified men there, who gaped at the dreadful form of the Godslayer, advancing on them, enclosed in a nimbus of blue light. His lips were peeled back from his teeth in a snarl, and his terrible sword, all ablaze, flickered back and forth before him like the shears of fate.

A Grolim jumped in front of him with one arm upraised as Garion gathered his will with an intrushing sound he scarcely heard. Garion did not stop, and the other Grolims in the throne room recoiled in horror as the point of his flaming sword came sliding out from between the rash priest's shoulder blades. The mortally wounded Grolim stared at the sizzling blade sunk into his chest. He tried with shaking hands to clutch at the blade, but Garion kicked him off the sword and continued his grim advance.

A Karand with a skull-surmounted staff stood in his path, desperately muttering an incantation. His words cut off abruptly, however, as Garion's sword passed through his throat.

"Behold the Godslayer, Urvon!" Zandramas exulted. "Thy life is at an end, God of Angarak, for Belgarion hath come to spill it out, even as he spilled out the life of Torak!" Then she turned her back on the cringing madman. "All hail the Child of Light!" she announced in ringing tones. She smiled her cruel smile at him. "Hail, Belgarion," she taunted him. "Slay once again the God of Angarak, for that hath ever been thy task. I shall await thy coming in the Place Which Is No More." And then she took up the wailing babe in her arms, covered it with her cloak again, shimmered, and vanished.

Garion was suddenly filled with chagrin as he realized that he had been cruelly duped. Zandramas had not actually been here with his son, and all his overpowering rage had been directed at an empty projection. Worse than that, he had been manipulated by the haunting nightmare of the wailing child which he now realized she had put into his mind to force him to respond to her taunting commands. He faltered then, his blade lowering and its fire waning.

"Kill him!" Harakan shouted. "Kill the one who slew Torak!"

"Kill him!" Urvon echoed in his insane shriek. "Kill him and offer his heart up to me in sacrifice!"

A half-dozen Temple Guardsmen began a cautious, clearly reluctant, advance. Garion raised his sword again; its light flared anew, and the Guardsmen jumped back.

Harakan sneered as he looked at the armored men. "Behold the reward for cowardice," he snapped. He extended one hand, muttered a single word, and one of the Guardsmen shrieked and fell writhing to the floor as his mail coat and helmet turned instantly white-hot, roasting him alive.

"Now obey me!" Harakan roared. "Kill him!"

The terrified Guardsmen attacked more fervently then, forcing Garion back step by step. Then he heard the sound of running feet in the corridor outside. He glanced quickly over his shoulder and saw the others come bursting into the throne room.

"Have you lost your mind?" Belgarath demanded angrily.

"I'll explain later," Garion told him, still half-sick with frustration and disappointment. He returned his attention to the armored men before him and began swinging his great sword in wide sweeps, driving them back again.

Belgarath faced the Chandim on one side of the central aisle, concentrated for an instant, then gestured shortly. Suddenly a raging fire erupted from the stones of the floor all along the aisle.

Something seemed to pass between the old man and Polgara. She nodded, and quite suddenly the other side of the aisle was also walled off by flame.

Two of the Guardsmen had fallen beneath Garion's sword, but others, accompanied by wild-eyed Karands, were rushing to the aid of their comrades, though they flinched visibly from the flames on either side of the aisle up which they were forced to attack.

"Combine your wills!" Harakan was shouting to the Chandim. "Smother the flames!"

Even as he closed with the Guardsmen and the Karands, beating down their upraised swords and hacking at them with Iron-grip's blade, Garion felt the rush and surge of combined will. Despite the efforts of Belgarath and Polgara, the fires on either side of the aisle flickered and grew low.

One of the huge Hounds came loping through the ranks of the Guardsmen facing Garion. Its eyes were ablaze, and its tooth-studded muzzle agape. It leaped directly at his face, snapping and growling horribly, but fell twitching and biting at the floor as he split its head with his sword.

And then Harakan thrust his way through the Guardsmen and Karands to confront Garion. "And so we meet again, Belgarion," he snarled in an almost doglike voice. "Drop your sword, or I will slay your friends -and your wife. I have a hundred Chandim with me, and not even you are a match for so many." And he began to draw in his will.

Then, to Garion's amazement, Velvet ran forward past him, her arms stretched toward the dread Grolim. "Please!" she wailed. "Please don't kill me!" And she threw herself at Harakan's feet, clutching at his black robe imploringly as she cringed and groveled before him.

Thrown off balance by this sudden and unexpected display of submissiveness, Harakan let his will dissipate and he backed away, trying to shake her hand from his robe and kicking at her to free himself. But she clung to him, weeping and begging for her life.

"Get her off me!" he snapped at his men, turning his head slightly. And that briefest instant of inattention proved fatal. Velvet's hand moved so quickly that it seemed to blur in the air. She dipped swiftly into her bodice; when her hand emerged, she held a small, bright-green snake.

"A present for you, Harakan!" she shouted triumphantly. "A present for the leader of the Bear-cult from Hunter!" And she threw Zith full into his face.

He screamed once the first time Zith bit him, and his hands came up to claw her away from his face, but the scream ended with a horrid gurgle, and his hands convulsed helplessly in the air in front of him. Squealing and jerking, he reeled backward as the irritated little reptile struck again and again. He stiffened and arched back across the altar, his feet scuffing and scrabbling on the floor and his arms flopping uselessly. He banged his head on the black stone, his eyes bulging and his swollen tongue protruding from his mouth. Then a dark froth came from his lips, he jerked several more times, and his body slid limply off the altar.

"And that was for Bethra," Velvet said to the crumpled form of the dead man lying on the floor before the altar.

The Chandim and their cohorts again drew back in fear as

they stared at the body of their fallen pack leader.

"They are few!" Urvon shrieked at them. "We are many! Destroy them all! Your God commands it!"

The Chandim gaped first at Harakan's contorted body, then at the crowned madman on the throne, then at the terrible little snake who had coiled herself atop the altar with her head raised threateningly as she gave vent to a series of angry hisses.

"That's about enough of this," Belgarath snapped. He let the last of the flames die and began to refocus his will. Garion also straightened, pulling in his own will even as he felt the tightened Chandim start to focus their power for a final, dreadful confrontation.

"What is all this now?" Feldegast laughed, suddenly coming forward until he stood between Garion and his foes. "Surely, good masters, we can put aside all this hatred and strife. I'll tell ye what I'll do. Let me give ye a demonstration of me skill, an' we'll laugh together an' make peace between us once an' fer all. No man at all kin keep so great a hatred in his heart while he's bubblin' with laughter, don't y' know." Then he began to juggle, seeming to pull brightly colored balls out of the air. The Grolims gaped at him, stunned by this unexpected interruption, and Garion stared incredulously at the performer, who seemed deliberately bent on self-destruction. Still juggling, Feldegast flipped his body onto the back of a heavy bench, holding himself upside down over it with one hand while he continued to juggle with his free hand and his feet. Faster and faster the balls whirled, more and more of them coming, it seemed out of thin air. The more the balls whirled, the brighter they became until at last they were incandescent and the inverted little man was juggling balls of pure fire.

Then he flexed the arm that was holding him in place, tossing himself high over the bench. When his feet touched the floor, however, it was no longer Feldegast the juggler who stood there. In place of the roguish entertainer stood the gnarled, hunchbacked shape of the sorcerer Beldin. With a sudden evil laugh, he began to hurt his fireballs at the startled Grolims and their warriors.

His aim was unerring, and the deadly fireballs pierced Grolim robes, Guardsmen's mail coats, and Karandese fur vests with equal facility. Smoking holes appeared in the chests of his victims, and he felled them by the dozen. The throne room filled with smoke and the reek of burning flesh as the grinning, ugly little sorcerer continued his deadly barrage.

"You!" Urvon shrieked in terror, the sudden appearance of the man he had feared for so many thousands of years shocking him into some semblance of sanity, even as the terrified Chandim and their cohorts broke and fled, howling in tight.

"So good to see you again, Urvon," the hunchback said to him pleasantly. "Our conversation was interrupted the last time we were talking, but as I recall, I'd just promised to sink a white-hot hook into your belly and yank out all your guts." He held out his gnarled right hand, snapped his fingers, and there was a sudden flash. A cruel hook, smoking and glowing, appeared in his fist. "Why don't we continue with that line of thought?" he suggested, advancing on the splotchy-faced man cowering on the throne.

Then the shadow which had lurked behind the madman's shoulder came out from behind the throne.

"Stop," it said in a voice that was no more than a crackling whisper. No human throat could have produced that sound. "I need this thing," it said, pointing a shadowy hand in the direction of the gibbering Disciple of Torak. "It serves my purposes, and I will not let you kill it."

"You would be Nahaz, then," Beldin said in an ominous voice.

"I am," the figure whispered. "Nahaz, Lord of Demons and Master of Darkness."

"Go find yourself another plaything, Demon Lord," the hunchback grated. "This one is mine."

"Will you pit your will against mine, sorcerer?"

"If need be."

"Look upon my face, then, and prepare for death." The demon pushed back its hood of darkness, and Garion recoiled with a sharp intake of his breath. The face of Nahaz was hideous, but it was not the misshapen features alone which were so terrifying. There emanated from its burning eyes a malevolent evil so gross that it froze the blood. Brighter and brighter those eyes burned with evil green fire until their beams shot forth toward Beldin. The gnarled sorcerer clenched himself and raised one hand. The hand suddenly glowed an intense blue, a light that seemed to cascade down over his body to form a shield against the demon's power.

"Your will is strong," Nahaz hissed. "But mine is stronger."

Then Polgara came down the littered aisle, the white lock at her brow gleaming. On one side of her strode Belgarath and on the other Durnik. As they reached him, Garion joined them. They advanced slowly to take up positions flanking Beldin, and Garion became aware that Eriond had also joined them, standing slightly off to one side.

"Well, Demon," Polgara said in a deadly voice, "will you face us all?"

Garion raised his sword and unleashed its fire. "And this as well?" he added, releasing all restraints on the Orb.

The Demon flinched momentarily, then drew itself erect again, its horrid face bathed in that awful green fire. From beneath its robe of shadow, it took what appeared to be a scepter or a wand of some kind that blazed an intense green. As it raised that wand, however, it seemed to see something that had previously escaped its notice. An expression of sudden fear crossed its hideous face, and the fire of the wand died, even as the intense green light bathing its face flickered and grew wan and weak. Then it raised its face toward the vaulted ceiling and howled -a dreadful, shocking sound. It spun quickly, moving toward the terrified Urvon. It reached out with shadowy hands, seized the gold-robed madman, and lifted him easily from the throne. Then it fled, its fire pushing out before it like a great battering ram, blasting out the walls of the House of Torak as it went.

The crown which had surmounted Urvon's brow fell from his head as Nahaz carried him from the crumbling house, and it clanked when it hit the floor with the tinny sound of brass.

PART FOUR
THE MOUNTAINS OF ZAMAD

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Beldin spat out a rancid oath and hurled his glowing hook at the throne. Then he started toward the smoking hole the fleeing demon had blasted out through the wall of the throne room.

Belgarath, however, managed to place himself in front of the angry hunchback. "No, Beldin," he said firmly.

"Get out of my way, Belgarath."

"I'm not going to let you chase after a demon who could turn on you at any minute."

"I can take care of myself. Now stand aside."

"You're not thinking, Beldin. There'll be time enough to deal with Urvon later. Right now we need to make some decisions."

"What's to decide? You go after Zandramas and I go after Urvon. It's all pretty much cut and dried, isn't it?"

"Not entirely. In any event, I'm not going to let you chase after Nahaz in the dark. You know as well as I do that the darkness multiplies his power -and I haven't got so many brothers left that I can afford to lose one just because he's irritated."

Their eyes locked, and the ugly hunchback finally turned away. He stumped back toward the dais, pausing long enough to kick a chair to pieces on his way, muttering curses all the while.

"Is everyone all right?" Silk asked, looking around as he re-sheathed his knife.

"So it would seem," Polgara replied, pushing back the hood of her blue cloak.

"It was a bit tight there for a while, wasn't it?" The little man's eyes were very bright.

"Also unnecessary," she said, giving Garion a hard look. "You'd better take a quick look through the rest of the house, Kheldar. Let's make sure that it's really empty. Durnik, you and Toth go with him."

Silk nodded and started back up the blood-splashed aisle, stepping over bodies as he went, with Durnik and Toth close behind him.

"I don't understand," Ce'Nedra said, staring in bafflement at the gnarled Beldin, who was once again dressed in rags and had the usual twigs and bits of straw clinging to him. "How did you change places with Feldegast -and where is he?"

A roguish smile crossed Beldin's face. "Ah, me little darlin'," he said to her in the juggler's lilting brogue, "I'm right here, don't y' know. An' if yer of a mind, I kin still charm ye with me wit an' me unearthly skill."

"But I liked Feldegast," she almost wailed.

"All ye have t' do is transfer yer affection t' me, darlin'."

"It's not the same," she objected.

Belgarath was looking steadily at the twisted sorcerer. "Have you got any idea of how much that particular dialect irritates me?" he said.

"Why, yes, brother." Beldin grinned. "As a matter of fact I do. That's one of the reasons I selected it."

"I don't entirely understand the need for so elaborate a disguise," Sadi said as he put away his small poisoned dagger.

"Too many people know me by sight in this part of Mallore," Beldin told him. "Urvon's had my description posted on every tree and fence post within a hundred leagues of Mal Yaska for the last two thousand years, and let's be honest about it, it wouldn't be too hard to recognize me from even the roughest description."

"You are a unique sort of person, Uncle," Polgara said to him, smiling fondly.

"Ah, yer too kind t' say it, me girl," he replied with an extravagant bow.

"Will you stop that?" Belgarath said. Then he turned to Garion. "As I remember, you said that you were going to explain something later. All right -it's later."

"I was tricked," Garion admitted glumly.

"By whom?"

"'Zandramas"

"She's still here?" Ce'Nedra exclaimed.

Garion shook his head. "No. She sent a projection here -a projection of herself and of Geran."

"Couldn't you tell the difference between a projection and the real thing?" Belgarath demanded.

"I wasn't in any condition to tell the difference when it happened."

"I suppose you can explain that."

Garion took a deep breath and sat down on one of the benches. He noticed that his bloodstained hands were shaking. "She's very clever," he said. "Ever since we left Mal Zeth, I've been having the same dream over and over again."

"Dream?" Polgara asked sharply. "What kind of dream?"

"Maybe dream isn't the right word," he replied, "but over and over again, I kept hearing the cry of a baby. At first I thought that I was remembering the cry of that sick child we saw in the streets back in Mal Zeth, but that wasn't it at all. When Silk and Beldin and I were in that room just above this one, we could see down into the throne room here and we saw Urvon come in with Nahaz right behind him. He's completely insane now. He think's he's a God. Anyway, he summoned Mengha -only Mengha turned out to be Harakan, and then-"

"Wait a minute," Belgarath interrupted him. "Harakan is Mengha?"

Garion glanced over at the limp form sprawled in front of the altar. Zith was still coiled atop the black stone, muttering and hissing to herself. "Well, he was," he said.

"Urvon made the announcement before all this broke out," Beldin added. "We didn't have the time to fill you in."

"That explains a great many things, doesn't it?" Belgarath mused. He looked at Velvet. "Did you know about this?" he asked her.

"No, Ancient One," she replied, "as a matter of fact, I didn't. I just seized the opportunity when it arose."

Silk, Durnik, and Toth came back into the body-strewn throne room. "The house is empty," the little man reported. "We've got it all to ourselves."

"Good," Belgarath said. "Garion was just telling us why he

saw fit to start his own private war."

"Zandramas told him to." Silk shrugged. "I'm not sure why he started taking orders from her, but that's what happened."

"I was just getting to that," Garion said. "Urvon was down here telling all the Chandim that Harakan -Mengha- was going to be his first disciple. That's when Zandramas came in -or at least she seemed to. She had a bundle under her cloak. I didn't know it at first, but it was Geran. She and Urvon shouted at each other for a while, and Urvon finally insisted that he was a God. She said something like, 'All right. Then I will summon the Godslayer to deal with you.' That's when she put the bundle on the altar. She opened it, and it was Geran. He started to cry, and I realized all at once that it was his cry I'd been hearing all along. I just totally stopped thinking at that point."

"Obviously," Belgarath said.

"Well, anyway, you know all the rest." Garion looked around at the corpse-littered throne room and shuddered. "I hadn't altogether realized just how far things went," he said. "I guess I was sort of crazy."

"The word is berserk, Garion," Belgarath told him. "It's fairly common among Alorns. I'd sort of thought you might be immune, but I guess I was wrong."

"There was some justification for it, father," Polgara said.

"There's never a justification for losing your wits, Pol," he growled.

"He was provoked." She pursed her lips thoughtfully, then came over and lightly placed her hands on Garion's temples. "It's gone now," she said.

"What is?" Ce'Nedra sounded concerned.

"The possession."

"Possession?"

Polgara nodded. "Yes. That's how Zandramas tricked him. She filled his mind with the sound of a crying child. Then, when she laid the bundle that seemed to be Geran on the altar and Garion heard that same crying, he had no choice but to do what she wanted him to do." She looked at Belgarath. "This is very serious, father. She's already tampered with Ce'Nedra, and now it's Garion. She may try the same thing with others as well."

"What would be the point?" he asked. "You can catch her at it, can't you?"

"Usually, yes -if I know what's going on. But Zandramas is very skilled at this and she's very subtle. In many ways she's even better at it than Asharak the Murgo was." She looked around at them. "Now listen carefully, all of you," she told them. "If anything unusual begins to happen to you -dreams, notions, peculiar ideas, strange feelings- anything at all, I want you to tell me about it at once. Zandramas knows that we're after her and she's using this to delay us. She tried it with Ce'Nedra while we were on our way to Rak Haggga, and now-"

"Me?" Ce'Nedra said in amazement. "I didn't know that."

"Remember your illness on the road from Rak Verkat?" Polgara said. "It wasn't exactly an illness. It was Zandramas putting her hand on your mind."

"But nobody told me."

"Once Andel and I drove Zandramas away, there was no need

to worry you about it. Anyway, Zandramas tried it first with Ce'Nedra and now with Garion. She could try it on any one of the rest of us as well, so let me know if you start feeling in the least bit peculiar."

"Brass," Durnik said.

"What was that, dear?" Polgara asked him.

He held up Urvon's crown. "This thing is brass," he said. "So's that throne. I didn't really think there'd be any gold left here. The house has been abandoned and wide open for looters for too many centuries."

"That's usually the way it is with the gifts of demons," Beldin told him. "They're very good at creating illusions." He looked around. "Urvon probably saw all this as unearthly splendor. He couldn't see the rotten drapes, or cobwebs, or all the trash on the floor. All he could see was the glory that Nahaz wanted him to see." The dirty, twisted man chuckled. "I sort of enjoy the idea of Urvon spending his last days as a raving lunatic," he added, "right up until the moment when I sink a hook into his guts."

Silk had been looking narrowly at Velvet. "Do you suppose you could explain something for me?" he asked.

"I'll try," she said.

"You said something rather strange when you threw Zith into Harakan's face."

"Did I say something?"

"You said, 'A present for the leader of the Bear-cult from Hunter.'"

"Oh, that." She smiled her dimples into life. "I just wanted him to know who was killing him, that's all."

He stared at her.

"You are getting rusty, my dear Kheldar," she chided him. "I was certain that you'd have guessed by now. I've done everything but hit you over the head with it."

"Hunter?" he said incredulously. "You?"

"I've been Hunter for quite some time now. That's why I hurried to catch up with you at Tol Honeth." She smoothed the front of her plain gray traveling gown.

"At Tol Honeth you told us that Bethra was Hunter."

"She had been, Kheldar, but her job was finished. She was supposed to make sure that we'd get a reasonable man as a successor to Ran Borune. First she had to eliminate a few members of the Honeth family before they could consolidate their positions, and then she made a few suggestions about Varana to Ran Borune while the two of them were-" She hesitated, glancing at Ce'Nedra, and then she coughed. "-ah- shall we say, entertaining each other?" she concluded.

Ce'Nedra blushed furiously.

"Oh, dear," the blond girl said, putting one hand to her cheek. "That didn't come out at all well, did it? "Anyway," she hurried on, "Javelin decided that Bethra's task was complete and that it was time for there to be a new Hunter with a new mission. Queen Porenn was very cross about what Harakan did in the west -the attempt on Ce'Nedra's life, the murder of Brand, and everything that went on at Rheon -so she instructed Javelin to administer some chastisement. He selected me to deliver it. I was fairly sure that Harakan would come back to Mallorea. I knew that you were all coming here, too -eventually- so that's why I joined you." She looked

over at the sprawled form of Harakan. "I was absolutely amazed when I saw him standing in front of the altar," she admitted, "but I couldn't allow an opportunity like that to slip by." She smiled. "Actually, it worked out rather well. I was just on the verge of leaving you and going back to Mal Yaska to look for him. The fact that he turned out to be Mengha, too, was just sort of a bonus."

"I thought you were tagging along to keep an eye on me."

"I'm very sorry, Prince Kheldar. I just made that up. I needed some reason to join you, and sometimes Belgarath can be very stubborn." She smiled winsomely at the old sorcerer, then turned back to the baffled-looking Silk. "Actually," she continued, "my uncle isn't really upset with you at all."

"But you said- " He stared at her. "You lied!" he accused.

" 'Lie' is such an ugly word, Kheldar, " she replied, patting his cheek fondly. "Couldn't we just say that I exaggerated a trifle? I wanted to keep an eye on you, certainly, but it was for reasons of my own -which had nothing whatsoever to do with Drasnian state policy."

"A slow flush crept up his cheeks.

"Why, Kheldar," she exclaimed delightedly, "you're actually blushing -almost like a simple village girl who's just been seduced."

Garion had been struggling with something. "What was the point of it, Aunt Pol?" he asked. "What Zandramas did to me, I mean?"

"Delay," she replied, "but more importantly, there was the possibility of defeating us before we ever get to the final meeting."

"I don't follow that."

She sighed. "We know that one of us is going to die," she said. "Cyradis told us that at Rheon. But there's always a chance that in one of these random skirmishes, someone else could be killed -entirely by accident. If the Child of Light -you- meets with the Child of Dark and he's lost someone whose task hasn't been completed, he won't have any chance of winning. Zandramas could win by default. The whole point of that cruel game she played was to lure you into a fight with the Chandim and Nahaz. The rest of us, quite obviously, would come to your aid. In that kind of fight, it's always possible for accidents to happen."

"Accident? How can there be accidents when we're all under the control of a prophecy?"

"You're forgetting something, Belgarion," Beldin said.

"This whole business started with an accident. That's what divided the Prophecies in the first place. You can read prophecies until your hair turns gray, but there's always room for random chance to step in and disrupt things."

"You'll note that my brother is a philosopher," Belgarath said, "always ready to look on the dark side of things."

"Are you two really brothers?" Ce'Nedra asked curiously.

"Yes," Beldin told her, "but in a way that you could never begin to understand. It was something that our Master impressed upon us."

"And Zedar was also one of your brothers?" She suddenly stared in horror at Belgarath.

The old man set his jaw. "Yes," he admitted.

"But you- "

"Go ahead and say it, Ce'Nedra," he said. "There's nothing you can possibly say to me that I haven't already said to myself."

"Someday," she said in a very small voice, "someday when this is all over, will you let him out?"

Belgarath's eyes were stony. "I don't think so, no."

"And if he does let him out, I'll go find him and stuff him right back in again," Beldin added.

"There's not much point in chewing over ancient history," Belgarath said. He thought a moment, then said, "I think it's time for us to have another talk with the young lady from Kell." He turned to Toth. "Will you summon your mistress?" he asked.

The giant's face was not happy. When he finally nodded, it was obviously with some reluctance.

"I'm sorry, my friend," Belgarath said to him, "but it's really necessary."

Toth sighed and then he sank to one knee and closed his eyes in an oddly prayerful fashion. Once again, as it had happened back on the Isle of Verkat and again at Rak Hagga, Garion heard a murmur as of many voices. Then there came that peculiar, multicolored shimmering in the air not far from Urvon's shoddy throne. The air cleared, and the unwavering form of the Seeress of Kell appeared on the dais. For the first time, Garion looked closely at her. She was slender and somehow looked very vulnerable, a helplessness accentuated by her white robe and her blindfolded eyes. There was, however, a serenity in her face -the serenity of someone who has looked full in the face of Destiny and has accepted it without question or reservation. For some reason, he felt almost overcome with awe in her radiant presence.

"Thank you for coming, Cyradis," Belgarath said simply. "I'm sorry to have troubled you. I know how difficult it is for you to do this, but there are some answers I need before we can go any further."

"I will tell thee as much as I am permitted to say, Ancient One," she replied. Her voice was light and musical, but there was, nonetheless, a firmness in it that spoke of an unearthly resolve. "I must say unto thee, however, that thou must make haste. The time for the final meeting draws nigh."

"That's one of the things I wanted to talk about. Can you be any more specific about this appointed time?"

She seemed to consider it as if consulting with some power so immense that Garion's imagination shuddered back from the very thought of it. "I know not time in thy terms, Holy Belgarath," she said simply, "but only for so long as a babe lieth beneath his mother's heart remains ere the Child of Light and the Child of Dark must face each other in the Place Which Is No More, and my task must be completed."

"All right," he said. "That's clear enough, I guess. Now, when you came to us at Mal Zeth, you said that there was a task here at Ashaba that needed to be accomplished before we could move on. A great deal has happened here, so I can't pinpoint exactly what that task was. Can you be a bit more specific?"

"The task is completed, Eternal One, for the Book of the Heavens sayeth that the Huntress must find her prey and bring him low in the House of Darkness in the sixteenth moon. And

lo, even as the stars have proclaimed, it hath come to pass."

The old man's face took on a slightly puzzled expression.

"Ask further, Disciple of Aldur," she told him. "My time with you grows short."

"I'm supposed to follow the trail of the Mysteries," he said, " but Zandramas cut certain key passages out of the copy of the Ashabine Oracles she left here for me to find."

"Nay, Ancient One. It was not the hand of Zandramas which mutilated thy book, but rather the hand of its author."

"Torak?" he sounded startled.

"Even so. For know thou that the words of prophecy come unbidden, and ofttimes their import is not pleasing unto the prophet. So it was with the master of this house."

"But Zandramas managed to put her hands on a copy that hadn't been mutilated?" he asked.

The seeress nodded.

"Are there any other copies that Burnt-face didn't tamper with?" Beldin asked intently.

"Only two," she replied. "One is in the house of Urvon the Disciple, but that one lieth under the hand of Nahaz, the accursed. Seek not to wrest it from him, lest ye die."

"And the other?" the hunchback demanded.

"Seek out the clubfooted one, for he will aid thee in thy search."

"That's not too helpful, you know."

"I speak to thee in the words that stand in the Book of the Heavens and were written ere the world began. These words have no language but speak instead directly to the soul."

"Naturally," he said. "All right. You spoke of Nahaz. Is he going to line our path with demons all the way across Karanda?"

"Nay, gentle Beldin. Nahaz hath no further interest in Karanda, and his legions of darkness abide no longer there and respond to no summons, however powerful. They infest instead the plains of Darshiva where they do war upon the minions of Zandramas."

"Where is Zandramas now?" Belgarath asked her.

"She doth journey unto the place where the Sardion lay hidden for unnumbered centuries. Though it is no longer there, she hopes to find traces of it sunk into the very rocks and to follow those traces to the Place Which Is No More."

"Is that possible?"

Her face grew very still. "That I may not tell thee," she replied. Then she straightened. "I may say no more unto thee in this place, Belgarath. Seek instead the mystery which will guide thee. Make haste, however, for Time will not stay nor falter in its measured pace." And then she turned toward the black altar standing before the dais where Zith was coiled, still muttering and hissing in irritation. "Be tranquil, little sister," she said, "for the purpose of all thy days is now accomplished, and that which was delayed may now come to pass." She then seemed, even though blindfolded, to turn her serene face toward each of them, pausing briefly only to bow her head to Polgara in a gesture of profound respect. At last she turned to Toth. Her face was filled with anguish, but she said nothing. And then she sighed and vanished.

Beldin was scowling. "That was fairly standard," he said. "I hate riddles. They're the entertainment of the

preliterate."

"Stop trying to show off your education and let's see if we can sort things out," Belgarath told him. "We know that this is all going to be decided one way or the other in nine more months. That was the number I needed."

Sadi was frowning in perplexity. "How did we arrive at that number?" he asked. "To be perfectly frank, I didn't understand very much of what she said."

"She said that we have only as much time as a baby lies in its mother's womb," Polgara explained. "That's nine months."

"Oh," he said. Then he smiled a bit sadly. "That's the sort of thing I don't pay too much attention to, I guess."

"What was that business about the sixteenth moon?" Silk asked. "I didn't follow that at all."

"This whole thing began with the birth of Belgarion's son," Beldin told him. "We found a reference to that in the Mrin Codex. Your friend with the snake had to be here at Ashaba sixteen moons later."

Silk frowned, counting on his fingers. "It hasn't been sixteen months yet," he objected.

"Moons, Kheldar," the hunchback said. "Moons, not months. There's a difference, you know."

"Oh. That explains it, I guess."

"Who's this clubfoot who's supposed to have the third copy of the Oracles?" Belgarath said.

"It rings a bell somehow," Beldin replied. "Let me think about it."

"What's Nahaz doing in Darshiva?" Garion asked.

"Apparently attacking the Grolims there," Belgarath replied. "We know that Darshiva is where Zandramas originally came from and that the church in that region belongs to her. If Nahaz wants to put the Sardion in Urvon's hands, he's going to have to stop her. Otherwise, she'll get to it first."

Ce'Nedra seemed to suddenly remember something. She looked at Garion, her eyes hungry. "You said that you saw Geran -when Zandramas tricked you."

"A projection of him, yes."

"How did he look?"

"The same. He hadn't changed a bit since the last time I saw him."

"Garion, dear," Polgara said gently. "That's not really reasonable, you know. Geran's almost a year older now. He wouldn't look the same at all. Babies grow and change a great deal during their first few years."

He nodded glumly. "I realize that now," he replied. "At the time, I wasn't really in any condition to think my way through it." Then he stopped. "Why didn't she project an image of him the way he looks now?"

"Because she wanted to show you something she was sure you'd recognize."

"Now you stop that!" Sadi exclaimed. He was standing near the altar and he had just jerked his hand back out of Zith's range. The little green snake was growling ominously at him. The eunuch turned toward Velvet. "Do you see what you've done?" he accused. "You've made her terribly angry."

"Me?" she asked innocently.

"How would you like to be pulled out of a warm bed and

thrown into somebody's face?"

"I suppose I hadn't thought about that. I'll apologize to her, Sadi -just as soon as she regains her composure a bit. Will she crawl into her bottle by herself?"

"Usually, yes."

"That might be the safest course, then. Lay the bottle on the altar and let her crawl inside and sulk a bit."

"You're probably right," he agreed.

"Are any of the other rooms in the house habitable?" Polgara asked Silk.

He nodded. "More or less. The Chandim and the Guardsmen were staying in them."

She looked around at the corpse-littered throne room.

"Why don't we move out of here, then?" she suggested to Belgarath. "This place looks like a battlefield, and the smell of blood isn't that pleasant."

"Why bother?" Ce'Nedra said. "We're leaving to follow Zandramas, aren't we?"

"Not until morning, dear," Polgara replied. "It's dark and cold outside, and we're all tired and hungry."

"But--"

"The Chandim and the Guardsmen ran away, Ce'Nedra -but we can't be at all sure how far they went. And, of course, there are the Hounds as well. Let's not make the mistake of blundering out into a forest at night when we can't see what might be hiding behind the first tree we come to."

"It makes sense, Ce'Nedra," Velvet told her. "Let's try to get some sleep and start out early in the morning."

The little Queen sighed. "I suppose you're right," she admitted. "It's just that--"

"Zandramas can't get away from me, Ce'Nedra," Garion assured her. "The Orb knows which way she went."

They followed Silk out of the throne room and along the blood-spattered corridor outside. Garion tried as best he could to shield Ce'Nedra from the sight of the crumpled forms of the Guardsmen and Karands he had killed in his raging dash to the throne room of Torak. About halfway down the corridor Silk pushed open a door and held up the guttering torch he had taken from one of the iron rings sticking out of the wall. "This is about the best I can do," he told Polgara. "At least someone made an effort to clean it up."

She looked around. The room had the look of a barracks. Bunks protruded from the walls and there was a table with benches in the center. There was a fireplace at the far end with the last embers of a fire glowing inside. "Adequate," she said.

"I'd better go look after the horses," Durnik said. "Is there a stable anywhere on the grounds?"

"It's down at the far end of the courtyard," Beldin told him, "and the Guardsmen who were here probably put in a supply of fodder and water for their own mounts."

"Good," Durnik said.

"Would you bring in the packs with my utensils and the stores, dear?" Polgara asked him.

"Of course." Then he went out, followed by Toth and Eriond.

"Suddenly I'm so tired that I can barely stand," Garion said, sinking onto a bench.

"I wouldn't be at all surprised." Beldin grunted. "You've had a busy evening."

"Are you coming along with us?" Belgarath asked him.

"No, I don't think so," Beldin replied, sprawling on the bench. "I want to find out where Nahaz took Urvon."

"Will you be able to follow him?"

"Oh, yes." Beldin tapped his nose. "I can smell a demon six days after he passes. I'll trail Nahaz just like a bloodhound. I won't be gone too long. You go ahead and follow Zandramas, and I'll catch up with you somewhere along the way." The hunchback rubbed at his jaw thoughtfully. "I think we can be fairly sure that Nahaz isn't going to let Urvon out of his sight. Urvon is -or was- a Disciple of Torak, after all. Even as much as I detest him, I still have to admit that he's got a very strong mind. Nahaz is going to have to talk to him almost constantly to keep his sanity from returning, so if our Demon Lord went to Darshiva to oversee his creatures there, he's almost certain to have taken Urvon along."

"You will be careful, won't you?"

"Don't get sentimental on me, Belgarath. Just leave me some kind of trail I can follow. I don't want to have to look all over Mallorea for you."

Sadi came from the throne room with his red leather case in one hand and Zith's little bottle in the other. "She's still very irritated," he said to Velvet. "She doesn't appreciate being used as a weapon."

"I told you that I'd apologize to her, Sadi," she replied. "I'll explain things to her. I'm sure she'll understand."

Silk was looking at the blond girl with an odd expression. "Tell me," he said. "Didn't it bother you at all the first time you put her down the front of your dress?" She laughed. "To be perfectly honest with you, Prince Kheldar, the first time it was all I could do to keep from screaming."

CHAPTER TWENTY

At first light the following morning, a light that was little more than a lessening of the darkness of a sky where dense clouds scudded before the chill wind blowing down off the mountains, Silk returned to the room in which they had spent the night. "The house is being watched," he told them.

"How many are there?" Belgarath asked.

"I saw one. I'm sure there are others."

"Where is he? The one that you saw?"

Silk's quick grin was vicious. "He's watching the sky. At least he looks like he's watching. His eyes are open and he's lying on his back." He slid his hand down into his boot, pulled out one of his daggers, and looked sorrowfully at its once-keen edge. "Do you have any idea of how hard it is to push a knife through a chain-mail shirt?"

"I think that's why people wear them, Kheldar," Velvet said to him. "You should use one of these." From somewhere amongst her soft, feminine clothing she drew out a long-bladed poniard with a needle-like point.

"I thought you were partial to snakes."

"Always use the appropriate weapon, Kheldar. I certainly wouldn't want Zith to break her teeth on a steel shirt."

"Could you two talk business some other time?" Belgarath said to them. "Can you put a name to this fellow who's suddenly so interested in the sky?"

"We didn't really have time to introduce ourselves," Silk replied, sliding his jagged-edged knife back into his boot.

"I meant what -not who."

"Oh. He was a Temple Guardsman."

"Not one of the Chandim?"

"All I had to go by was his clothing."

The old man grunted.

"It's going to be slow going if we have to look behind every tree and bush as we ride along," Sadi said.

"I realize that," Belgarath answered, tugging at one earlobe. "Let me think my way through this."

"And while you're deciding, I'll fix us some breakfast," Polgara said, laying aside her hairbrush. "What would you all like?"

"Porridge?" Eriond asked hopefully.

Silk sighed. "The word is gruel, Eriond. Gruel." Then he looked quickly at Polgara, whose eyes had suddenly turned frosty. "Sorry, Polgara," he apologized, "but it's our duty to educate the young, don't you think?"

"What I think is that I need more firewood," she replied.

"I'll see to it at once."

"You're too kind."

Silk rather quickly left the room.

"Any ideas?" the hunchbacked Beldin asked Belgarath.

"Several. But they all have certain flaws in them."

"Why not let me handle it for you?" the gnarled sorcerer asked, sprawling on a bench near the fire and scratching absently at his belly. "You've had a hard night, a ten-thousand-year-old man needs to conserve his strength."

"You really find that amusing, don't you? Why not say twenty -or fifty? Push absurdity to its ultimate edge."

"My," Beldin said, "aren't we testy this morning? Pol, have you got any beer handy?"

"Before breakfast, Uncle?" she said from beside the fireplace where she was stirring a large pot.

"Just as a buffer for the gruel," he said.

She gave him a very steady look.

He grinned at her, then turned back toward Belgarath. "Seriously, though," he went on, "why not let me deal with all the lurkers in the bushes around the house? Kheldar could dull every knife he's carrying, and Liselle could wear that poor little snake's fangs down to the gums, and still wouldn't be sure if you'd cleaned out the woods hereabouts. I'm going off in a different direction anyway, so why not let me do something flamboyant to frighten off the Guardsmen and the Karands and then leave a nice, wide trail for the Chandim and the Hounds? They'll follow me, and that should leave you an empty forest to ride through."

Belgarath gave him a speculative look. "Exactly what have you got in mind?" he asked.

"I'm still working on it." The dwarf leaned back reflectively. "Let's face it, Belgarath, the Chandim and Zandramas already know that we're here, so there's not much point in tiptoeing around anymore. A little noise isn't going to hurt anything."

"That's true, I suppose," Belgarath agreed. He looked at Garion. "Are you getting any hints from the Orb about the direction Zandramas took when she left here?"

"A sort of a steady pull toward the east is all."

Beldin grunted. "Makes sense. Since Urvon's people were wandering all over Katakora, she probably wanted to get to the nearest unguarded border as quickly as possible. That would be Jenno."

"Is the border between Jenno and Katakora unguarded?" Velvet asked.

"They don't even know for sure where the border is." He snorted. "At least not up in the forest. There's nothing up there but trees anyway, so they don't bother with it." He turned back to Belgarath. "Don't get your mind set in stone on some of these things," he advised. "We did a lot of speculating back at Mal Zeth, and the theories we came up with were related to the truth only by implication. There's a great deal of intrigue going on here in Mallorean, so it's a good idea to expect things to turn out not quite the way you thought they would."

"Garion," Polgara said from the fireplace, "would you see if you can find Silk? Breakfast is almost ready."

"Yes, Aunt Pol," he replied automatically.

After they had eaten, they repacked their belongings and carried the packs out to the stable.

"Go out through the sally port," Beldin said as they crossed the courtyard again. "Give me about an hour before you start."

"You're leaving now?" Belgarath asked him.

"I might as well. We're not accomplishing very much by sitting around talking. Don't forget to leave me a trail to follow."

"I'll take care of it. I wish you'd tell me what you're going to do here."

"Trust me." The gnarled sorcerer winked. "Take cover someplace and don't come out again until all the noise subsides." He grinned wickedly and rubbed his dirty hands together in anticipation. Then he shimmered and swooped away as a blue-banded hawk.

"I think we'd better go back inside the house," Belgarath suggested. "Whatever he's going to do out here is likely to involve a great deal of flying debris."

They reentered the house and went back to the room where they had spent the night. "Durnik," Belgarath said, "can you get those shutters closed? I don't think we want broken glass sheeting across the room."

"But then we won't be able to see," Silk objected.

"I'm sure you can live without seeing it. As a matter of fact, you probably wouldn't want to watch, anyway."

Durnik went to the window, opened it slightly, and pulled the shutters closed.

Then, from high overhead where the blue-banded hawk had been circling, there came a huge roar almost like a continuous peal of swirling thunder, accompanied by a rushing surge. The House of Torak shook as if a great wind were tearing at it, and the faint light coming from between the slats of the shutters Durnik had closed vanished, to be replaced by inky darkness. Then there came a vast bellow from high in the air

above the house.

"A demon?" Ce'Nedra gasped. "Is it a demon?"

"A semblance of a demon," Polgara corrected.

"How can anybody see it when it's so dark outside?" Sadi asked.

"It's dark around the house because the house is inside the image. The people hiding in the forest should be able to see it very well -too well, in fact."

"It's that big?" Sadi looked stunned. "But this house is enormous."

Belgarath grinned. "Beldin was never satisfied with halfway measures," he said.

There came another of those huge bellows from high above, followed by faint shrieks and cries of agony.

"Now what's he doing?" Ce'Nedra asked.

"Some kind of visual display, I'd imagine." Belgarath shrugged. "Probably fairly graphic. My guess is that everyone in the vicinity is being entertained by the spectacle of an illusory demon eating imaginary people alive."

"Will it frighten them off?" Silk asked.

"Wouldn't it frighten you?"

From high overhead, a dreadful booming voice roared. "Hungry!" it said. "Hungry! Want food! Mow food!" There came a ponderous, earthshaking crash, the sound of a titanic foot crushing an acre of forest. Then there was another and yet another as Beldin's enormous image stalked away. The light returned, and Silk hurried toward the window.

"I wouldn't," Belgarath warned him.

"But--"

"You don't want to see it, Silk. Take my word for it. You don't want to see it."

The gigantic footsteps continued to crash through the nearby woods.

"How much longer?" Sadi asked in a shaken voice.

"He said about an hour," Belgarath replied. "He'll probably make use of all of it. He wants to make a lasting impression on everybody in the area."

There were screams of terror coming from the woods now, and the crashing continued. Then there was another sound -a great roaring that receded off into the distance toward the southwest, accompanied by the fading surge of Beldin's will.

"He's leading the Chandim off now," Belgarath said. "That means he's already chased off the Guardsmen and the Karands. Let's get ready to leave."

It took them a while to calm the wild-eyed horses, but they were finally able to mount and ride into the courtyard. Garion had once again donned his mail shirt and helmet, and his heavy shield hung from the bow of Chretienne's saddle. "Do I still need to carry the lance?" he asked.

"Probably not," Belgarath replied. "We're not likely to meet anybody out there now."

They went through the sally port and into the brushy woods. They circled the black house until they reached the east-side, then Garion drew Iron-grip's sword. He held it lightly and swept it back and forth until he felt it pull at his hand. "The trail's over there," he said, pointing toward a scarcely visible path leading off into the woods.

"Good," Belgarath said. "At least we won't have to beat

our way through the brush."

They crossed the weed-grown clearing that surrounded the House of Torak and entered the forest. The path they followed showed little sign of recent use, and it was at times difficult to see.

"It looks as if some people left here in a hurry." Silk grinned, pointing at various bits and pieces of equipment lying scattered along the path.

They came up over the top of a hill and saw a wide strip of devastation stretching through the forest toward the southwest.

"A tornado?" Sadi asked.

"No," Belgarath replied. "Beldin. The Chandim won't have much trouble finding his trail."

The sword in Garion's hand was still pointed unerringly toward the path they were following. He led the way confidently, and they increased their pace to a trot and pushed on through the forest. After a league or so, the path began to run downhill, moving out of the foothills toward the heavily forested plains lying to the east of the Karandese range.

"Are there any towns out there?" Sadi asked, looking out over the forest.

"Akkad is the only one of any size between here and the border," Silk told him.

"I don't think I've ever heard of it. What's it like?"

"It's a pigpen of a place," Silk replied. "Most Karandese towns are. They seem to have a great affinity for mud."

"Wasn't Akkad the place where the Melcene bureaucrat was from?" Velvet asked.

"That's what he said," Silk answered.

"And didn't he say that there are demons there?"

"There were," Belgarath corrected. "Cyradis told us that Nahaz has pulled all of his demons out of Karanda and sent them off to Darshiva to fight the Grolims there." He scratched at his beard. "I think we'll avoid Akkad anyway. The demons may have left, but there are still going to be Karandese fanatics there, and I don't think that the news of Mengha's death has reached them yet. In any event, there's going to be a fair amount of chaos here in Karanda until Zakath's army gets back from Cthol Murgos and he moves in to restore order."

They rode on, pausing only briefly for lunch.

By midafternoon, the clouds that had obscured the skies over Ashaba had dissipated, and the sun came back out again. The path they had been following grew wider and more well-traveled, and it finally expanded into a road. They picked up the pace and made better time.

As evening drew on, they rode some distance back from the road and made their night's encampment in a small hollow where the light from their fire would be well concealed. They ate, and, immediately after supper, Garion sought his bed. For some reason he felt bone weary.

After half an hour, Ce'Nedra joined him in their tent. She settled down into the blankets and nestled her head against his back. Then she sighed disconsolately. "It was all a waste of time, wasn't it?" she said. "Going to Ashaba, I mean."

"No, Ce'Nedra, not really," he replied, still on the verge

of sleep. "We had to go there so that Velvet could kill Harakan. That was one of the tasks that have to be completed before we get to the Place Which Is No More."

"Does all that really have any meaning, Garion?" she asked. "Half the time you act as if you believe it, and the other half you don't. If Zandramas had been there with our son, you wouldn't have just let her walk away because all the conditions hadn't been met, would you?"

"Not by so much as one step," he said grimly.

"Then you don't really believe it, do you?"

"I'm not an absolute fatalist, if that's what you mean, but I've seen things come out exactly the way the Prophecy said they were going to far too many times for me to ignore it altogether."

"Sometimes I think that I'll never see my baby again," she said in a weary little voice.

"You mustn't ever think that," he told her. "We will catch up with Zandramas, and we will take Geran home with us again."

"Home," she sighed. "We've been gone for so long that I can barely remember what it looks like."

He took her into his arms, buried his face in her hair, and held her close. After a time she sighed and fell asleep. In spite of his own deep weariness, however, it was quite late before he himself drifted off.

The next day dawned clear and warm. They made their way back to the road again and continued eastward with Iron-grip's sword pointing the way.

About midmorning, Polgara called ahead to Belgarath. "Father, there's someone hiding off to the side of the road just ahead."

He slowed his horse to a walk. "Chandim?" he asked tersely.

"No. It's a Mallorean Angarak. He's very much afraid -and not altogether rational."

"Is he planning any mischief?"

"He's not actually planning anything, father. His thoughts aren't coherent enough for that."

"Why don't you go flush him out, Silk?" the old man suggested. "I don't like having people lurking behind me -sane or not."

"About where is he?" the little man asked Polgara.

"Some distance back in the woods from that dead tree," she replied.

He nodded. "I'll go talk with him," he said. He loped his horse on ahead and reined in beside the dead tree. "We know you're back there, friend," he called pleasantly. "We don't mean you any harm, but why don't you come out in the open where we can see you?"

There was a long pause.

"Come along now," Silk called. "Don't be shy."

"Have you got any demons with you?" The voice sounded fearful.

"Do I look like the sort of fellow who'd be consorting with demons?"

"You won't kill me, will you?"

"Of course not. We only want to talk with you, that's all."

There was another long, fearful pause. "Have you got

anything to eat?" The voice was filled with a desperate need.

"I think we can spare a bit."

The hidden man thought about that. "All right," he said finally. "I'm coming out. Remember that you promised not to kill me." Then there was a crashing in the bushes, and a Malloorean soldier came stumbling out into the road. His red tunic was in shreds, he had lost his helmet, and the remains of his boots were tied to his legs with leather thongs. He had quite obviously neither shaved nor bathed for at least a month. His eyes were wild and his head twitched on his neck uncontrollably. He stared at Silk with a terrified expression.

"You don't look to be in very good shape, friend," Silk said to him. "Where's your unit?"

"Dead, all dead, and eaten by the demons." The soldier's eyes were haunted. "Were you at Akkad?" he asked in a terrified voice. "Were you there when the demons came?"

"No, friend. We just came up from Venna."

"You said that you had something for me to eat."

"Durnik," Silk called, "could you bring some food for this poor fellow?"

Durnik rode to the packhorse carrying their stores and took out some bread and dried meat. Then he rode on ahead to join Silk and the fear-crazed soldier.

"Were you at Akkad when the demons came?" the fellow asked him.

Durnik shook his head. "No," he replied, "I'm with him." He pointed at Silk. Then he handed the fellow the bread and meat.

The soldier snatched them and began to wolf them down in huge bites.

"What happened at Akkad?" Silk asked.

"The demons came," the soldier replied, still cramming food into his mouth. Then he stopped, his eyes fixed on Durnik with an expression of fright. "Are you going to kill me?" he demanded.

Durnik stared at him. "No, man," he replied in a sick voice.

"Thank you." The soldier sat down at the roadside and continued to eat.

Garion and the others slowly drew closer, not wanting to frighten the skittish fellow off.

"What did happen at Akkad?" Silk pressed. "We're going in that direction, and we'd sort of like to know what to expect."

"Don't go there," the soldier said, shuddering. "It's horrible -horrible. The demons came through the gates with howling Karands all around them. The Karands started hacking people to pieces and then they fed the pieces to the demons. They cut off both of my captain's arms and then his legs as well, and then a demon picked up what was left of him and ate his head. He was screaming the whole time." He lowered his chunk of bread and fearfully stared at Ce'Nedra. "Lady, are you going to kill me?" he demanded.

"Certainly not!" she replied in a shocked voice.

"If you are, please don't let me see it when you do. And please bury me someplace where the demons won't dig me up and eat me."

"She's not going to kill you," Polgara told him firmly.

The man's wild eyes filled with a kind of desperate longing. "Would you do it then, Lady?" he pleaded. "I can't stand the horror any more. Please kill me gently -the way my mother would- and then hide me so that the demons won't get me." He put his face into his shaking hands and began to cry.

"Give him some more food, Durnik," Belgarath said, his eyes suddenly filled with compassion. "He's completely mad, and there's nothing else we can do for him."

"I think I might be able to do something, Ancient One," Sadi said. He opened his case and took out a vial of amber liquid. "Sprinkle a few drops of this on the bread you give him, Goodman," he said to Durnik. "It will calm him and give him a few hours of peace."

"Compassion seems out of character for you, Sadi," Silk said.

"Perhaps," the eunuch murmured, "but then, perhaps you don't fully understand me, Prince Kheldar."

Durnik took some more bread and meat from the pack for the hysterical Mallorean soldier, sprinkling them liberally with Sadi's potion. Then he gave them to the poor man, and they all rode slowly past and on down the road.

After they had gone a ways, Garion heard him calling after them. "Come back! Come back! Somebody -anybody- please come back and kill me. Mother, please kill me!"

Garion's stomach wrenched with an almost overpowering sense of pity. He set his teeth and rode on, trying not to listen to the desperate pleas coming from behind.

They circled to the north of Akkad that afternoon, bypassing the city and returning to the road some two leagues beyond. The pull of the sword Garion held on the pommel of his saddle confirmed the fact that Zandramas had indeed passed this way and had continued on along this road toward the northeast and the relative safety of the border between Katakori and Jenno.

They camped in the forest a few miles north of the road that night and started out once more early the following morning. The road for a time stretched across open fields. It was deeply rutted and still quite soft at the shoulders.

"Karands don't take road maintenance very seriously," Silk observed, squinting into the morning sun.

"I noticed that," Durnik replied.

"I thought you might have."

Some leagues farther on, the road they were following reentered the forest, and they rode along through a cool, damp shade beneath towering evergreens.

Then, from somewhere ahead they heard a hollow, booming sound.

"I think we might want to go rather carefully until we're past that," Silk said quietly.

"What is that sound?" Sadi asked.

"Drums. There's a temple ahead."

"Out here in the forest?" The eunuch sounded surprised. "I thought that the Grolims were largely confined to the cities."

"This isn't a Grolim Temple, Sadi. It was nothing to do with the worship of Torak. As a matter of fact, the Grolims used to burn these places whenever they came across them. They were a part of the old religion of the area."

"Demon worship, you mean?"

Silk nodded. "Most of them have been long abandoned, but every so often you come across one that's still in use. The drums are a fair indication that the one just ahead is still open for business."

"Will we be able to go around them?" Durnik asked.

"It shouldn't be much trouble," the little man replied. "The Karands burn a certain fungus in their ceremonial fires. The fumes have a peculiar effect on one's senses."

"Oh?" Sadi said with a certain interest.

"Never mind," Belgarath told him. "That red case of yours has quite enough in it already."

"Just scientific curiosity, Belgarath."

"Of course. "

"What are they worshipping?" Velvet asked. "I thought that the demons had all left Karanda."

Silk was frowning. "The beat isn't right," he said.

"Have you suddenly become a music critic, Kheldar?" she asked him.

He shook his head. "I've come across these places before, and the drumming's usually pretty frenzied when they're holding their rites. That beat up ahead is too measured, It's almost as if they're waiting for something."

Sadi shrugged. "Let them wait," he said. "It's no concern of ours, is it?"

"We don't know that for sure, Sadi," Polgara told him. She looked at Belgarath. "Wait here, father," she suggested. "I'll go on ahead and take a look."

"It's too dangerous, Pol," Durnik objected.

She smiled. "They won't even pay any attention to me, Durnik." She dismounted and walked a short way up the path. Then, momentarily, she was surrounded with a kind of glowing nimbus, a hazy patch of light that had not been there before. When the light cleared, a great snowy owl hovered among the trees and then ghosted away on soft, silent wings.

"For some reason that always makes my blood run cold," Sadi murmured.

They waited while the measured drumming continued.

Garion dismounted and checked his cinch strap. Then he walked about a bit, stretching his legs.

It was perhaps ten minutes later when Polgara returned, drifting on white wings under the low-hanging branches. When she resumed her normal shape, her face was pale and her eyes were filled with loathing. "Hideous! " she said. "Hideous!"

"What is it, Pol?" Durnik's voice was concerned.

"There's a woman in labor in that temple."

"I don't know that a temple is the right sort of place for that, but if she needed shelter-" The smith shrugged.

"The temple was chosen quite deliberately," she replied. "The infant that's about to be born isn't human."

"But-"

"It's a demon." Ce'Nedra gasped.

Polgara looked at Belgarath. "We have to intervene, father," she told him. "This must be stopped."

"How can it be stopped?" Velvet asked in perplexity. "I mean, if the woman's already in labor . . ." She spread her hands.

"We may have to kill her," Polgara said bleakly. "Even that may not prevent this monstrous birth. We may have to

deliver the demon child and then smother it."

"No!" Ce'Nedra cried. "It's just a baby! You can't kill it"

"It's not that kind of baby, Ce'Nedra. It's half human and half demon. It's a creature of this world and a spawn of the other. If it's allowed to live, it won't be possible to banish it. It will be a perpetual horror."

"Garion!" Ce'Nedra cried. "You can't let her."

"Polgara's right, Ce'Nedra," Belgarath told her. "The creature can't be allowed to live."

"How many Karands are gathered up there?" Silk asked.

"There are a half dozen outside the temple," Polgara replied. "There may be more inside."

"However many they are, we're going to have to dispose of them," he said. "They're waiting for the birth of what they believe is a God, and they'll defend the newborn demon to the death."

"All right, then," Garion said bleakly, "let's go oblige them."

"You're not condoning this?" Ce'Nedra exclaimed.

"I don't like it," he admitted, "but I don't see that we've got much choice." He looked at Polgara. "There's absolutely no way it could be sent back to the place where demons originate?" he asked her.

"None whatsoever," she said flatly. "This world will be it's home. It wasn't summoned and it has no master. Within two years, it will be a horror such as this world has never seen. It must be destroyed."

"Can you do it, Pol?" Belgarath asked her.

"I don't have any choice, father," she replied. "I have to do it."

"All right, then," the old man said to the rest of them.

"We have to get Pol inside that temple -and that means dealing with the Karands."

Silk reached inside his boot and pulled out his dagger. "I should have sharpened this," he muttered, looking ruefully at his jagged blade.

"Would you like to borrow one of mine?" Velvet asked him.

"No, that's all right, Liselle," he replied. "I've got a couple of spares." He returned the knife to his boot and drew another from its place of concealment at the small of his back and yet a third from its sheath down the back of his neck.

Durnik lifted his axe from its loop at the back of his saddle. His face was unhappy. "Do we really have to do this, Pol?" he asked.

"Yes, Durnik. I'm afraid we do."

He sighed. "All right, then," he said. "Let's go get it over with."

They started forward, riding at a slow walk to avoid alerting the fanatics ahead.

The Karands were sitting around a large, hollowed-out section of log, pounding on it with clubs in rhythmic unison. It gave forth a dull booming sound. They were dressed in roughly tanned fur vests and cross-tied leggings of dirty sackcloth. They were raggedly bearded, and their hair was matted and greasy. Their faces were hideously painted, but their eyes seemed glazed and their expressions slack-lipped.

"I'll go first," Garion muttered to the others.

"Shouting a challenge, I suppose," Silk whispered.

"I'm not an assassin, Silk," Garion replied quietly. "One or two of them might be rational enough to run, and that means a few less we'll have to kill."

"Suit yourself, but expecting rationality from Karands is irrational all by itself."

Garion quickly surveyed the clearing. The wooden temple was constructed of half-rotten logs, sagging badly at one end and surmounted along its ridgepole by a line of mossy skulls staring out vacantly. The ground before the building was hard-packed dirt, and there was a smoky firepit not far from the drummers.

"Try not to get into that smoke," Silk cautioned in a whisper. "You might start to see all sorts of peculiar things if you inhale too much of it."

Garion nodded and looked around. "Are we all ready?" he asked in a low voice.

They nodded.

"All right then." He spurred Chretienne into the clearing. "Throw down your weapons!" he shouted at the startled Karands.

Instead of obeying, they dropped their clubs and seized up a variety of axes, spears, and swords, shrieking their defiance.

"You see?" Silk said.

Garion clenched his teeth and charged, brandishing his sword. Even as he thundered toward the fur-clad men, he saw four others come bursting out of the temple. Even with these reinforcements, however, the men on foot were no match for Garion and his mounted companions. Two of the howling Karands fell beneath Iron-grip's sword on Garion's first charge, and the one who tried to thrust at his back with a broad-bladed spear fell in a heap as Durnik brained him with his axe. Sadi caught a sword thrust with a flick of his cloak and then, with an almost delicate motion, dipped his poisoned dagger into the swordsman's throat. Using his heavy staff like a club, Toth battered two men to the ground, the sound of his blows punctuated by the snapping of bones. Their howls of frenzy turned to groans of pain as they fell. Silk launched himself from his saddle, rolled with the skill of an acrobat, and neatly ripped open one fanatic with one of his daggers while simultaneously plunging the other into the chest of a fat man who was clumsily trying to wield an axe. Chretienne whirled so quickly that Garion was almost thrown from his saddle as the big stallion trampled a Karand into the earth with his steel-shod hooves.

The lone remaining fanatic stood in the doorway of the crude temple. He was much older than his companions, and his face had been tattooed into a grotesque mask. His only weapon was a skull-surmounted staff, and he was brandishing it at them even as he shrieked an incantation. His words broke off suddenly, however, as Velvet hurled one of her knives at him with a smooth underhand cast. The wizard gaped down in amazement at the hilt of her knife protruding from his chest. Then he slowly toppled over backward.

There was a brief silence, punctuated only by the groans of the two men Toth had crippled. And then a harsh scream came from the temple - a woman's scream.

Garion jumped from his saddle, stepped over the body in

the doorway, and looked into the large, smoky room.

A half-naked woman lay on the crude altar against the far wall. She had been bound to it in a spread-eagle position and she was partially covered by a filthy blanket. Her features were distorted, and her belly grossly, impossibly distended. She screamed again and then spoke in gasps.

"Nahaz! Magrash Klat Grichak! Nahaz!"

"I'll deal with this, Garion," Polgara said firmly from behind him. "Wait outside with the others."

"Were there any others in there?" Silk asked him as he came out.

"Just the woman. Aunt Pol's with her." Garion suddenly realized that he was shaking violently.

"What was that language she was speaking?" Sadi asked, carefully cleaning his poisoned dagger.

"The language of the demons," Belgarath replied. "She was calling out to the father of her baby."

"Nahaz?" Garion asked, his voice startled.

"She thinks it was Nahaz," the old man said. "She could be wrong -or maybe not."

From inside the temple the woman screamed again.

"Is anybody hurt?" Durnik asked.

"They are," Silk replied, pointing at the fallen Karands. Then he squatted and repeatedly plunged his daggers into the dirt to cleanse the blood off them.

"Kheldar," Velvet said in a strangely weak voice, "would you get my knife for me?"

Garion looked at her and saw that her face was pale and that her hands were trembling slightly. He realized then that this self-possessed young woman was perhaps not quite so ruthless as he had thought.

"Of course, Liselle," Silk replied in a neutral tone. The little man quite obviously also understood the cause of her distress. He rose, went to the doorway, and pulled the knife out of the wizard's chest. He wiped it carefully and returned it to her. "Why don't you go back and stay with Ce'Nedra?" he suggested. "We can clean up here."

"Thank you, Kheldar," she said, turned her horse, and rode out of the clearing.

"She's only a girl," Silk said to Garion in a defensive tone. "She is good, though," he added with a certain pride.

"Yes," Garion agreed. "Very good." He looked around at the twisted shapes lying in heaps in the clearing. "Why don't we drag all these bodies over behind the temple?" he suggested. "This place is bad enough without all of this."

There was another scream from the temple.

Noon came and went unnoticed as Garion and the others endured the cries of the laboring woman. By midafternoon, the screams had grown much weaker, and as the sun was just going down, there came one dreadful last shriek that seemed to dwindle off into silence. No other sound came from inside, and after several minutes, Polgara came out. Her face was pale, and her hands and clothing were drenched with blood.

"Well, Pol?" Belgarath asked her.

"She died."

"And the demon?"

"Stillborn. Neither one of them survived the birth." She looked down at her clothing. "Durnik, please bring me a

blanket and water to wash in."

"Of course, Pol." With her husband shielding her by holding up the blanket, Polgara deliberately removed all of her clothing, throwing each article through the temple doorway. Then she drew the blanket about her. "Now burn it," she said to them. "Burn it to the ground."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

They crossed the border into Jenno about noon the following day, still following the trail of Zandramas.

The experiences of the previous afternoon and evening had left them all subdued, and they rode on in silence.

A league or so past the rather indeterminate border, they pulled off to the side of the road to eat. The spring sunlight was very bright and the day pleasantly warm. Garion walked a little ways away from the others and reflectively watched a cloud of yellow-striped bees industriously working at a patch of wild flowers.

"Garion," Ce'Nedra said in a small voice, coming up behind him.

"Yes, Ce'Nedra?" He put his arm around her.

"What really happened back there?"

"You saw about as much of it as I did."

"That's not what I mean. What happened inside the temple? Did that poor woman and her baby really just die -or did Polgara kill them?"

"Ce'Nedra!"

"I have to know, Garion. She was so grim about it before she went inside that place. She was going to kill the baby. Then she came out and told us that the mother and baby had both died in the birth. Wasn't that very convenient?"

He drew in a deep breath. "Ce'Nedra, think back. You've known Aunt Pol for a long time now. Has she ever told you a lie -ever?"

"Well -sometimes she hasn't told me the whole truth. She's told me part of it and kept the rest a secret."

"That's not the same as lying, Ce'Nedra, and you know it."

"Well-"

"You're angry because she said we might have to kill that thing."

"Baby," she corrected firmly.

He took her by the shoulders and looked directly into her face. "No, Ce'Nedra. It was a thing -half human, half demon, and all monster."

"But it was so little -so helpless."

"How do you know that?"

"All babies are little when they're born."

"I don't think that one was. I saw the woman for just a minute before Aunt Pol told me to leave the temple. Do you remember how big you were just before Geran was born? Well, that woman's stomach was at least five times as big as yours was -and she wasn't a great deal taller than you are."

"You aren't serious!"

"Oh, yes, I am. There was no way that the demon could have been born without killing its mother. For all I know, it might just simply have clawed its way out."

"It's own mother?" she gasped.

"Did you think it would love its mother? Demons don't know how to love, Ce'Nedra. That's why they're demons. Fortunately the demon died. It's too bad that the woman had to die, too, but it was much too late to do anything for her by the time we got there."

"You're a cold, hard person, Garion."

"Oh, Ce'Nedra, you know better than that. What happened back there was unpleasant, certainly, but none of us had any choice but to do exactly what we did."

She turned her back on him and started to stalk away.

"Ce'Nedra," he said, hurrying to catch her.

"What?" She tried to free her arm from his grasp.

"We didn't have any choice," he repeated. "Would you want Geran to grow up in a world filled with demons?"

She stared at him. "No," she firmly admitted. "It's just that" She left it hanging.

"I know," He put his arms about her.

"Oh, Garion." She suddenly clung to him, and everything was all right again.

After they had eaten, they rode on through the forest, passing occasional villages huddled deep among the trees. The villages were rude, most of them consisting of a dozen or so rough log houses and surrounded by crude log palisades. There were usually a rather surprising number of hogs rooting among the stumps that surrounded each village.

"There don't seem to be very many dogs," Durnik observed.

These people prefer pigs as house pets," Silk told him. "As a race, Karands have a strong affinity for dirt, and pigs satisfy certain deep inner needs among them."

"Do you know something, Silk," the smith said then.

"You'd be a much more pleasant companion if you didn't try to turn everything into a joke."

"It's a failing I have. I've looked at the world for quite a few years now and I've found that if I don't laugh, I'll probably end up crying."

"You're really serious, aren't you?"

"Would I do that to an old friend?"

About midafternoon, the road they were following curved slightly, and they soon reached the edge of the forest and a fork in the rutted track.

"All right. Which way?" Belgarath asked.

Garion lifted his sword from the pommel of his saddle and swept it slowly back and forth until he felt the familiar tug. "The right fork," he replied.

"I'm so glad you said that," Silk told him. "The left fork leads to Calida, I'd expect that news of Harakan's death has reached there by now. Even without the demons, a town full of hysterics doesn't strike me as a very nice place to visit. The followers of Lord Mengha might be just a bit upset when they hear that he's gone off and left them."

"Where does the right fork go?" Belgarath asked him.

"Down to the lake," Silk replied, "Lake Karanda, It's the biggest lake in the world. When you stand on the shore, it's like looking at an ocean."

Garion frowned. "Grandfather," he said, starting to worry, "Do you think that Zandramas knows that the Orb can follow her?"

"It's possible, yes."

"And would she know that it can't follow her over water?"

"I couldn't say for sure."

"But if she does, isn't it possible that she went to the lake in order to hide her trail from us? She could have sailed out a ways, doubled back, and come ashore just about anyplace. Then she could have struck out in a new direction, and we'd never pick up her trail again."

Belgarath scratched at his beard, squinting in the sunlight. "Pol," he said. "Are there any Grolims about?"

She concentrated a bit. "Not in the immediate vicinity, father," she replied.

"Good. When Zandramas was trying to tamper with Ce'Nedra back at Rak Hagga, weren't you able to lock your thought with hers for a while?"

"Yes, briefly."

"She was at Ashaba then, right?"

She nodded.

"Did you get any kind of notion about which direction she was planning to go when she left?"

She frowned. "Nothing very specific, father -just a vague hint about wanting to go home."

"Darshiva," Silk said, snapping his fingers. "We know that Zandramas is a Darshivan name, and Zakath told Garion that it was in Darshiva that she started stirring up trouble."

Belgarath grunted. "It's a little thin," he said. "I'd feel a great deal more comfortable with some confirmation." He looked at Polgara. "Do you think you could reestablish contact with her -even for just a moment? All I need is a direction."

"I don't think so, father. I'll try, but . . ." she shrugged. Then her face grew very calm, and Garion could feel her mind reaching out with a subtle probing. After a few minutes, she relaxed her will. "She's shielding, father," she told the old man. "I can't pick up anything at all."

He muttered a curse under his breath. "We'll just have to go on down to the lake and ask a few questions. Maybe somebody saw her."

"I'm sure they did," Silk said, "but Zandramas likes to drown sailors, remember? Anyone who saw where she landed is probably sleeping under thirty feet of water."

"Can you think of an alternative plan?"

"Not offhand, no."

"Then we go on to the lake."

As the sun began to sink slowly behind them, they passed a fair-sized town set perhaps a quarter of a mile back from the road. The inhabitants were gathered outside the palisade surrounding it. They had a huge bonfire going, and just in front of the fire stood a crude, skull-surmounted altar of logs. A skinny man wearing several feathers in his hair and with lurid designs painted on his face and body was before the altar, intoning an incantation at the top of his lungs. His arms were stretched imploringly at the sky, and there was a note of desperation in his voice.

"What's he doing?" Ce'Nedra asked.

"He's trying to raise a demon so that the townspeople can worship it," Eriond told her calmly.

"Garion!" she said in alarm. "Shouldn't we run?"

"He won't succeed," Eriond assured her. "The demon won't

come to him anymore. Nahaz has told them all not to.

The wizard broke off his incantation. Even from this distance, Garion could see that there was a look of panic on his face.

An angry mutter came from the townspeople.

"That crowd is starting to turn ugly," Silk observed.

"The wizard had better raise his demon on the next try, or he might be in trouble."

The gaudily painted man with feathers in his hair began the incantation again, virtually shrieking and ranting at the sky. He completed it and stood waiting expectantly.

Nothing happened.

After a moment, the crowd gave an angry roar and surged forward. They seized the cringing wizard and tore his log altar apart. Then, laughing raucously, they nailed his hands and feet to one of the logs with long spikes and, with a great shout, they hurled the log up onto the bonfire.

"Let's get out of here," Belgarath said. "Mobs tend to go wild once they've tasted blood." He led them away at a gallop.

They made camp that night in a willow thicket on the banks of a small stream, concealing their fire as best they could.

It was foggy the following morning, and they rode warily with their hands close to their weapons.

"How much farther to the lake?" Belgarath asked as the sun began to burn off the fog.

Silk looked around into the thinning mist. "It's kind of hard to say. I'd guess a couple more leagues at least."

"Let's pick up the pace, then. We're going to have to find a boat when we get there, and that might take a while."

They urged their horses into a canter and continued on. The road had taken on a noticeable downhill grade.

"It's a bit closer than I thought," Silk called to them. "I remember this stretch of road. We should reach the lake in an hour or so."

They passed occasional Karands, clad in brown fur for the most part and heavily armed. The eyes of these local people were suspicious, even hostile, but Garion's mail shirt, helmet, and sword were sufficient to gain the party passage without incident.

By midmorning the gray fog had completely burned off. As they crested a knoll, Garion reined in. Before him there lay an enormous body of water, blue and sparkling in the midmorning sun. It looked for all the world like a vast inland sea, with no hint of a far shore, but it did not have that salt tang of the sea.

"Big, isn't it?" Silk said, pulling his horse in beside Chretienne. He pointed toward a thatch-and-log village standing a mile or so up the lake-shore. A number of fair-sized boats were moored to a floating dock jutting out into the water. "That's where I've usually hired boats when I wanted to cross the lake."

"You've done business around here, then?"

"Oh, yes. There are gold mines in the mountains of Zamad, and deposits of gem stones up in the forest."

"How big are those boats?"

"Big enough. We'll be a little crowded, but the weather's calm enough for a safe crossing, even if the boat might be a bit overloaded." Then he frowned. "What are they doing?"

Garion looked at the slope leading down to the village and saw a crowd of people moving slowly down toward the lake-shore. There seemed to be a great deal of fur involved in their clothing in varying shades of red and brown, though many of them wore cloaks all dyed in hues of rust and faded blue. More and more of them came over the hilltop, and other people came out of the village to meet them.

"Belgarath," the little Drasnian called. "I think we've got a problem."

Belgarath came jolting up to the crest of the knoll at a trot. He looked at the large crowd gathering in front of the village.

"We need to get into that village to hire a boat," Silk told him. "We're well enough armed to intimidate a few dozen villagers, but there are two or three hundred people down there now. That could require some fairly serious intimidation."

"A country fair, perhaps?" the old man asked.

Silk shook his head. "I wouldn't think so. It's the wrong time of year for it, and those people don't have any carts with them." He swung down from his saddle and went back to the packhorses. A moment or so later, he came back with a poorly tanned red fur vest and a baggy fur hat. He pulled them on, bent over and wrapped a pair of sackcloth leggings about his calves, tying them in place with lengths of cord. "How do I look?" he asked.

"Shabby," Garion told him.

"That's the idea. Shab's in fashion here in Karanda." He remounted.

"Where did you get the clothes?" Belgarath asked curiously.

"I pillaged one of the bodies back at the temple." The little man shrugged. "I like to keep a few disguises handy. I'll go find out what's happening down there." He dug his heels into his horse's flanks and galloped down toward the throng gathering near the lakeside village.

"Let's pull back out of sight," Belgarath suggested. "I'd rather not attract too much attention."

They walked their horses down the back side of the knoll and then some distance away from the road to a shallow gully that offered concealment and dismounted there. Garion climbed back up out of the gully on foot and lay down in the tall grass to keep watch.

About a half-hour later, Silk came loping back over the top of the knoll. Garion rose from the grass and signaled to him.

When the little man reached the gully and dismounted, his expression was disgusted. "Religion," he snorted. "I wonder what the world would be like without it. That gathering down there is for the purpose of witnessing the performance of a powerful wizard, who absolutely guarantees that he can raise a demon -despite the notable lack of success of others lately. He's even hinting that he might be able to persuade the Demon Lord Nahaz himself to put in an appearance. That crowd's likely to be there all day."

"Now what?" Sadi asked.

Belgarath walked down the gully a ways, looking thoughtfully up at the sky. When he came back, his look was

determined. "We're going to need a couple more of those," he said, pointing at Silk's disguise.

"Nothing simpler," Silk replied. "There are still enough latecomers going down that hill for me to be able to waylay a few. What's the plan?"

"You, Garion, and I are going down there."

"Interesting notion, but I don't get the point."

"The wizard, whoever he is, is promising to raise Nahaz, but Nahaz is with Urvon and isn't very likely to show up. After what we saw happen at that village yesterday, it's fairly obvious that failing to produce a demon is a serious mistake for a wizard to make. If our friend down there is so confident, it probably means that he's going to create an illusion -since nobody's been able to produce the real thing lately. I'm good at illusions myself, so I'll just go down and challenge him."

"Won't they just fall down and worship your illusion?" Velvet asked him.

His smile was chilling. "I don't really think so, Liselle," he replied. "You see, there are demons, and then there are demons. If I do it right, there won't be a Karand within five leagues of this place by sunset -depending on how fast they can run, of course." He looked at Silk. "Haven't you left yet?" he asked pointedly.

While Silk went off in search of more disguises, the old sorcerer made a few other preparations. He found a long, slightly crooked branch to use as a staff and a couple of feathers to stick in his hair. Then he sat down and laid his head back against one of their packs. "All right, Pol," he instructed his daughter, "make me hideous."

She smiled faintly and started to raise one hand. "Not that way. Just take some ink and draw some designs on my face. They don't have to be too authentic-looking. The Karands have corrupted their religion so badly that they wouldn't recognize authenticity if they stepped in it."

She laughed and went to one of the packs, returning a moment later with an inkpot and a quill pen.

"Why on earth are you carrying ink, Lady Polgara?" Ce'Nedra asked.

"I like to be prepared for eventualities as they arise. I went on a long journey once and had to leave a note for someone along the way. I didn't have ink with me, so I ended up opening a vein to get something to write with. I seldom make the same mistake twice. Close your eyes, father. I always like to start with the eyelids and work my way out."

Belgarath closed his eyes. "Durnik," he said as Polgara started drawing designs on his face with her quill, "you and the others will stay back here. See if you can find someplace a little better hidden than this gully."

"All right, Belgarath," the smith agreed. "How will we know when it's safe to come down to the lake-shore?"

"When the screaming dies out."

"Don't move your lips, father," Polgara told him, frowning in concentration as she continued her drawing. "Did you want me to blacken your beard too?"

"Leave it the way it is. Superstitious people are always impressed by venerability, and I look older than just about anybody."

She nodded her agreement. "Actually, father, you look older than dirt."

"Very funny, Pol," he said acidly. "Are you just about done?"

"Did you want the death symbol on your forehead?" she asked.

"Might as well," he grunted. "Those cretins down there won't recognize it, but it looks impressive."

By the time Polgara had finished with her artwork, Silk returned with assorted garments.

"Any problems?" Durnik asked him.

"Simplicity itself." Silk shrugged. "A man whose eyes are fixed on heaven is fairly easy to approach from behind, and a quick rap across the back of the head will usually put him to sleep."

"Leave your mail shirt and helmet, Garion," Belgarath said. "Karands don't wear them. Bring your sword, though."

"I'd planned to." Garion began to struggle out of his mail shirt. After a moment, Ce'Nedra came over to help him.

"You're getting rusty," she told him after they had hauled off the heavy thing. She pointed at a number of reddish-brown stains on the padded linen tunic he wore under the shirt.

"It's one of the drawbacks to wearing armor," he replied.

"That and the smell," she added, wrinkling her nose. "You definitely need a bath, Garion."

"I'll see if I can get around to it one of these days," he said. He pulled on one of the fur vests Silk had stolen. Then he tied on the crude leggings and crammed on a rancid-smelling fur cap. "How do I look?" he asked her.

"Like a barbarian," she replied.

"That was sort of the whole idea."

"I didn't steal you a hat," Silk was saying to Belgarath. "I thought you might prefer to wear feathers."

Belgarath nodded. "All of us mighty wizards wear feathers," he agreed. "It's a passing fad, I'm sure, but I always like to dress fashionably." He looked over at the horses. "I think we'll walk," he decided. "When the noise starts, the horses might get a bit skittish." He looked at Polgara and the others who were staying behind. "This shouldn't take us too long," he told them confidently and strode off down the gully with Garion and Silk close behind him.

They emerged from the mouth of the gully at the south end of the knoll and walked down the hill toward the crowd gathering on the lake-shore.

"I don't see any sign of their wizard yet," Garion said, peering ahead.

"They always like to keep their audiences waiting for a bit," Belgarath said. "It's supposed to heighten the anticipation or something."

The day was quite warm as they walked down the hill, and the rancid smell coming from their clothing grew stronger. Although they did not really look that much like Karands, the people in the crowd they quietly joined paid them scant attention. Every eye seemed to be fixed on a platform and one of those log altars backed by a line of skulls on stakes.

"Where do they get all the skulls?" Garion whispered to

Silk.

"They used to be headhunters," Silk replied. "The Angaraks discouraged that practice, so now they creep around at night robbing graves. I doubt if you could find a whole skeleton in any graveyard in all of Karanda."

"Let's get closer to the altar," Belgarath muttered. "I don't want to have to shove my way through this mob when things start happening."

They pushed through the crowd. A few of the greasy-haired fanatics started to object to being thrust aside, but one look at Belgarath's face with the hideous designs Polgara had drawn on it convinced them that here was a wizard of awesome power and that it perhaps might be wiser not to interfere with him.

Just as they reached the front near the altar, a man in a black Grolim robe strode out through the gate of the lakeside village, coming directly toward the altar.

"I think that's our wizard," Belgarath said quietly.

"A Grolim?" Silk sounded slightly surprised.

"Let's see what he's up to."

The black-robed man reached the platform and stepped up to stand in front of the altar. He raised both hands and spoke harshly in a language Garion did not understand. His words could have been either a benediction or a curse. The crowd fell immediately silent. Slowly the Grolim pushed back his hood and let his robe fall to the platform. He wore only a loincloth, and his head had been shaved. His body was covered from crown to toe with elaborate tattoos.

Silk winced. "That must have really hurt," he muttered.

"Prepare ye all to look upon the face of your God," the Grolim announced in a large voice, then bent to inscribe the designs on the platform before the altar.

"That's what I thought," Belgarath whispered. "That circle he drew isn't complete. If he were really going to raise a demon, he wouldn't have made that mistake." The Grolim straightened and began declaiming the words of the incantation in a rolling, oratorical style.

"He's being very cautious," Belgarath told them. "He's leaving out certain key phrases. He doesn't want to raise a real demon accidentally. Wait." The old man smiled bleakly. "Here he goes."

Garion also felt the surge as the Grolim's will focused and then he heard the familiar rushing sound.

"Behold the Demon Lord Nahaz," the tattooed Grolim shouted, and a shadow-encased form appeared before the altar with a flash of fire, a peal of thunder, and a cloud of sulfur-stinking smoke. Although the figure was no larger than an ordinary man, it looked very substantial for some reason.

"Not too bad, really," Belgarath admitted grudgingly.

"It looks awfully solid to me, Belgarath," Silk said nervously.

"It's only an illusion, Silk," the old man quietly reassured him. "A good one, but still only an illusion."

The shadowy form on the platform before the altar rose to its full height and then pulled back its hood of darkness to reveal the hideous face Garion had seen in Torak's throne room at Ashaba.

As the crowd fell to its knees with a great moan, Belgarath drew in his breath sharply. "When this crowd starts

to disperse, don't let the Grolim escape," he instructed. "He's actually seen the real Nahaz, and that means that he was one of Harakan's cohorts. I want some answers out of him." Then the old man drew himself up. "Well, I guess I might as well get started with this," he said. He stepped up in front of the platform. "Fraud!" he shouted in a great voice. "Fraud and fakery!"

The Grolim stared at him, his eyes narrowing as he saw the designs drawn on his face. "On your knees before the Demon Lord," he blustered.

"Fraud!" Belgarath denounced him again. He stepped up onto the platform and faced the stunned crowd. "This is no wizard, but only a Grolim trickster," he declared.

"The Demon Lord will tear all your flesh from your bones," the Grolim shrieked.

"All right," Belgarath replied with calm contempt. "Let's see him do it. Here. I'll even help him." He pulled back his sleeve, approached the shadowy illusion hovering threateningly before the altar and quite deliberately ran his bare arm into the shadow's gaping maw. A moment later, his hand emerged, coming, or so it appeared, out of the back of the Demon Lord's head. He pushed his arm further until his entire wrist and forearm were sticking out of the back of the illusion. Then, quite deliberately, he wiggled his fingers at the people gathered before the altar.

A nervous titter ran through the crowd.

"I think you missed a shred or two of flesh, Nahaz," the old man said to the shadowy form standing before him. "There still seems to be quite a bit of meat clinging to my fingers and arm." He pulled his arm back out of the shadow and then passed both hands back and forth through the Grolim's illusion. "It appears to lack a bit of substance, friend," he said to the tattooed man. "Why don't we send it back where you found it? Then I'll show you and your parishoners here a real demon."

He put his hands derisively on his hips, leaned forward slightly from the waist, and blew at the shadow. The illusion vanished, and the tattooed Grolim stepped back fearfully.

"He's getting ready to run, Silk whispered to Garion. "You get on that side of the platform, and I'll get on this. Thump his head for him if he comes your way."

Garion nodded and edged around toward the far side of the platform.

Belgarath raised his voice again to the crowd. "You fall upon your knees before the reflection of the Demon Lord," he roared at them. "What will you do when I bring before you the King of Hell?" He bent and quickly traced the circle and pentagram about his feet. The tattooed priest edged further away from him.

"Stay, Grolim," Belgarath said with a cruel laugh. "The King of Hell is always hungry, and I think he might like to devour you when he arrives." He made a hooking gesture with one hand, and the Grolim began to struggle as if he had been seized by a powerful, invisible hand.

Then Belgarath began to intone an incantation quite different from the one the Grolim had spoken, and his words reverberated from the vault of heaven as he subtly amplified them into enormity. Seething sheets of vari-colored flame shot

through the air from horizon to horizon.

"Behold the Gates of Hell!" he roared, pointing.

Far out on the lake, two vast columns seemed to appear; between them were great billowing clouds of smoke and flame. From behind that burning gate came the sound of a multitude of hideous voices shrieking some awful hymn of praise.

"And now I call upon the King of Hell to reveal himself!" the old man shouted, raising his crooked staff. The surging force of his will was vast, and the great sheets of flame flickering in the sky actually seemed to blot out the sun and to replace its light with a dreadful light of its own.

From beyond the gate of fire came a huge whistling sound that descended into a roar. The flames parted, and the shape of a mighty tornado swept between the two pillars. Faster and faster the tornado whirled, turning from inky black to pale, frozen white. Ponderously, that towering white cloud advanced across the lake, congealing as it came. At first it appeared to be some vast snow wraith with hollow eyes and gaping mouth. It was quite literally hundreds of feet tall, and its breath swept across the now-terrified crowd before the altar like a blizzard.

"Ye have tasted ice," Belgarath told them. "Now taste fire! Your worship of the false Demon Lord hath offended the King of Hell, and now will ye roast in perpetual flames!" He made another sweeping gesture with his staff, and a deep red glow appeared in the center of the seething white shape that even now approached the shore of the lake. The sooty red glow grew more and more rapidly, expanding until it filled the encasing white entirely. Then the wraithlike figure of flame and swirling ice raised its hundred-foot-long arms and roared with a deafening sound. The ice seemed to shatter, and the wraith stood as a creature of fire. Flames shot from its mouth and nostrils, and steam rose from the surface of the lake as it moved across the last few yards of water before reaching the shore.

It reached down one enormous hand, placing it atop the altar, palm turned up. Belgarath calmly stepped up onto that burning hand, and the illusion raised him high into the air.

"Infidels!" he roared at them in an enormous voice. "Prepare ye all to suffer the wrath of the King of Hell for your foul apostasy!"

There was a dreadful moan from the Karands, followed by terrified screams as the fire-wraith reached out toward the crowd with its other huge, burning hand.

Then, as one man, they turned and fled, shrieking in terror.

Somehow, perhaps because Belgarath was concentrating so much of his attention on the vast form he had created and was struggling to maintain, the Grolim broke free and jumped down off the platform.

Garion, however, was waiting for him. He reached out and stopped the fleeing man with one hand placed flat against his chest, even as he swept the other back and then around in a wide swing that ended with a jolting impact against the side of the tattooed man's head.

The Grolim collapsed in a heap. For some reason, Garion found that very satisfying.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

"Which boat did you want to steal?" Silk asked as Garion dropped the unconscious Grolim on the floating dock that stuck out into the lake.

"Why ask me?" Garion replied, feeling just a bit uncomfortable with Silk's choice of words.

"Because you and Durnik are the ones who are going to have to sail it. I don't know the first thing about getting a boat to move through the water without tipping over."

"Capsizing," Garion corrected absently, looking at the various craft moored to the dock.

"What?"

"The word is 'capsize,' Silk. You tip over a wagon. You capsize a boat."

"It means the same thing, doesn't it?"

"Approximately, yes. "

"Why make an issue of it, then? How about this one?" The little man pointed at a broad-beamed vessel with a pair of eyes painted on the bow.

"Not enough freeboard," Garion told him. "The horses are heavy, so any boat we take is going to settle quite a bit."

Silk shrugged. "You're the expert. You're starting to sound as professional as Barak or Grelidik." He grinned suddenly. "You know, Garion, I've never stolen anything as big as a boat before. It's really very challenging."

"I wish you'd stop using the word 'steal.' Couldn't we just say that we're borrowing a boat?"

"Did you plan to sail it back and return it when we're finished with it?"

"No. Not really."

"Then the proper word is 'steal.' You're the expert on ships and sailing; I'm the expert on theft."

They walked farther out on the dock.

"Let's go on board this one and have a look around," Garion said, pointing at an ungainly-looking scow painted an unwholesome green color.

"It looks like a washtub."

"I'm not planning to win any races with it." Garion leaped aboard the scow. "It's big enough for the horses and the sides are high enough to keep the weight from swamping it." He inspected the spars and rigging. "A little crude," he noted, "but Durnik and I should be able to manage."

"Check the bottom for leaks," Silk suggested. "Nobody would paint a boat that color if it didn't leak."

Garion went below and checked the hold and the bilges. When he came back up on deck, he had already made up his mind. "I think we'll borrow this one," he said, jumping back to the pier.

"The term is still 'steal,' Garion."

Garion sighed. "All right, steal -if it makes you happy."

"Just trying to be precise, that's all."

"Let's go get that Grolim and drag him up here," Garion suggested. "We'll throw him in the boat and tie him up. I don't think he'll wake up for a while, but there's no point in taking chances."

"How hard did you hit him?"

"Quite hard, actually. For some reason he irritated me."
They started back to where the Grolim lay.

"You're getting to be more like Belgarath every day," Silk told him. "You do more damage out of simple irritation than most men can do in a towering rage."

Garion shrugged and rolled the tattooed Grolim over with his foot. He took hold of one of the unconscious man's ankles. "Get his other leg," he said.

The two of them walked back toward the scow with the Grolim dragging limply along behind them, his shaved head bouncing up and down on the logs of the dock. When they reached the scow, Garion took the man's arms while Silk took his ankles. They swung him back and forth a few times, then lobbed him across the rail like a sack of grain. Garion jumped across again and bound him hand and foot.

"Here comes Belgarath with the others," Silk said from the dock.

"Good. Here -catch the other end of this gangplank." Garion swung the ungainly thing around and pushed it out toward the waiting little Drasnian. Silk caught hold of it, pulled it out farther, and set the end down on the dock.

"Did you find anything?" he asked the others as they approached.

"We did quite well, actually." Durnik replied. "One of those buildings is a storehouse. It was crammed to the rafters with food."

"Good. I wasn't looking forward to making the rest of this trip on short rations."

Belgarath was looking at the scow. "It isn't much of a boat, Garion," he objected. "If you were going to steal one, why didn't you steal something a little fancier?"

"You see?" Silk said to Garion. "I told you that it was the right word."

"I'm not stealing it for its looks, Grandfather," Garion said. "I don't plan to keep it. It's big enough to hold the horses, and the sails are simple enough so that Durnik and I can manage them. If you don't like it, go steal one of your own."

"Grumpy today, aren't we?" the old man said mildly. "What did you do with my Grolim?"

"He's lying up here in the scuppers."

"Is he awake yet?"

"Not for some time, I don't think. I hit him fairly hard. Are you coming on board, or would you rather go steal a different boat?"

"Be polite, dear," Polgara chided.

"No, Garion," Belgarath said. "If you've got your heart set on this one, then we'll take this one."

It took awhile to get the horses aboard, and then they all fell to the task of raising the boat's square-rigged sails. When they were raised and set to Garion's satisfaction, he took hold of the tiller. "All right," he said. "Cast off the lines."

"You sound like a real sailor, dear," Ce'Nedra said in admiration.

"I'm glad you approve." He raised his voice slightly.

"Toth, would you take that boat hook and push us out from the

pier, please? I don't want to have to crash through all these other boats to get to open water."

The giant nodded, picked up the long boat hook, and shoved against the dock with it. The bow swung slowly out from the dock with the sails flapping in the fitful breeze.

"Isn't the word 'ship,' Garion?" Ce'Nedra asked.

"What?"

"You called them boats. Aren't they called ships?"

He gave her a long, steady look.

"I was only asking," she said defensively.

"Don't. Please."

"What did you hit this man with, Garion?" Belgarath asked peevishly. He was kneeling beside the Grolim.

"My fist," Garion replied.

"Next time, use an axe or a club. You almost killed him."

"Would anyone else like to register any complaints?" Garion asked in a loud voice. "Let's pile them all up in a heap right now."

They all stared at him, looking a bit shocked.

He gave up. "Just forget that I said it." He squinted up at the sails, trying to swing the bow to the exact angle which would allow the sails to catch the offshore breeze. Then, quite suddenly, they bellied out and boomed, and the scow began to pick up speed, plowing out past the end of the pier and into open water.

"Pol," Belgarath said. "Why don't you come over here and see what you can do with this man? I can't get a twitch out of him, and I want to question him."

"All right, father." She went to the Grolim, knelt beside him, and put her hands on his temples. She concentrated for a moment, and Garion felt the surge of her will.

The Grolim groaned.

"Sadi," she said thoughtfully, "Do you have any nephara in that case of yours?"

The eunuch nodded. "I was just going to suggest it myself, Lady Polgara." He knelt and opened his red case.

Belgarath looked at his daughter quizzically.

"It's a drug, father," she explained. "It induces truthfulness."

"Why not do it the regular way?" he asked.

"The man's a Grolim. His mind is likely to be very strong. I could probably overcome him, but it would take time -and it would be very tiring. Nephara works just as well and it doesn't take any effort."

He shrugged. "Suit yourself, Pol."

Sadi had taken a vial of a thick green liquid from his case. He unstoppered it and then took hold of the Grolim's nose, holding it until the half-conscious man was forced to open his mouth in order to breathe. Then the eunuch delicately tilted three drops of the green syrup onto the man's tongue. "I'd suggest giving him a few moments before you wake him, Lady Polgara," he said, squinting clinically at the Grolim's face. "Give the drug time to take effect first." He restoppered the vial and put it back in his case.

"Will the drug hurt him in any way?" Durnik asked.

Sadi shook his head. "It simply relaxes the will," he replied. "He'll be rational and coherent, but very tractable."

"He also won't be able to focus his mind sufficiently to

use any talent he may have," Polgara added. "We won't have to worry about his translocating himself away from us the moment he wakes up." She critically watched the Grolim's face, occasionally lifting one of his eyelids to note the drug's progress. "I think it's taken hold now," she said finally. She untied the prisoner's hands and feet.

Then she put her hands on the man's temples and gently brought him back to consciousness. "How are you feeling?" she asked him.

"My head hurts," the Grolim said plaintively.

"That will pass," she assured him. She rose and looked at Belgarath. "Speak to him calmly, father," she said, "and start out with simple questions. With nephara it's best to lead them rather gently up to the important things."

Belgarath nodded. He picked up a wooden pail, inverted it, it on the deck beside the Grolim, and sat on it. "Good morning, friend," he said pleasantly, "or is it afternoon?" He squinted up at the sky.

"You're not really a Karand, are you?" the Grolim asked. His voice sounded dreamy. "I thought you were one of their wizards, but now that I look at you more closely, I can see that you're not."

"You're very astute, friend," Belgarath congratulated him. "What's your name?"

"Arshag," the Grolim replied.

"And where are you from?"

"I am of the Temple at Calida."

"I thought you might be. Do you happen to know a Chandim named Harakan, by any chance?"

"He now prefers to be known as Lord Mengha."

"Ah, yes, I'd heard about that. That illusion of Nahaz you raised this morning was very accurate. You must have seen him several times in order to get everything right,"

"I have frequently been in close contact with Nahaz," the Grolim admitted. "It was I who delivered him to Lord Mengha."

"Why don't you tell me about that? I'm sure it's a fascinating story and I'd really like to hear it. Take your time, Arshag. Tell me the whole story, and don't leave out any of the details."

The Grolim smiled almost happily. "I've been wanting to tell someone the story for a long time now," he said.

"Do you really want to hear it?"

"I'm absolutely dying to hear it," Belgarath assured him.

The Grolim smiled again. "Well," he began, "it all started quite a number of years ago -not too long after the death of Torak. I was serving in the Temple at Calida. Though we were all in deepest despair, we tried to keep the faith alive. Then one day Harakan came to our temple and sought me out privately. I had journeyed at times to Mal Yaska on Church business and I knew Harakan to be of high rank among the Chandim and very close to the Holy Disciple Urvon. When we were alone, he told me that Urvon had consulted the Oracles and Prophecies concerning the direction the Church must take in her blackest hour. The Disciple had discovered that a new God was destined to rise over Angarak, and that he will hold Cthrag Sardius in his right hand and Cthrag Yaska in his left. And he will be the almighty Child of Dark, and the Lord of

Demons shall do his bidding."

"That's a direct quotation, I take it?"

Arshag nodded. "From the eighth antistrophe of the Ashabine Oracles," he confirmed.

"It's a little obscure, but prophecies usually are. Go on."

Arshag shifted his position and continued. "The Disciple Urvon interpreted the passage to mean that our new God would have the aid of the demons in quelling his enemies."

"Did Harakan identify these enemies for you?"

Arshag nodded again. "He mentioned Zandramas -of whom I have heard- and one named Agachak, whose name is strange to me. He also warned me that the Child of Light would probably attempt to interfere."

"That's a reasonable assumption," Silk murmured to Garion.

"Harakan, who is the Disciple's closest advisor, had selected me to perform a great task," Arshag continued proudly. "He charged me to seek out the wizards of Karanda and to study their arts so that I might summon up the Demon Lord Nahaz and beseech him to aid the Disciple Urvon in his struggles with his enemies."

"Did he tell you how dangerous that task would be?" Belgarath asked him.

"I understood the perils," Arshag said, "but I accepted them willingly, for my rewards were to be great."

"I'm sure," Belgarath murmured. "Why didn't Harakan do it himself?"

"The Disciple Urvon had placed another task upon Harakan -somewhere in the west, I understand- having to do with a child."

Belgarath nodded blandly. "I think I've heard about it."

"Anyway." Arshag went on, "I journeyed into the forest of the north, seeking out the wizards who still practiced their rites in places hidden from the eyes of the Church. In time, I found such a one." His lip curled in a sneer. "He was an ignorant savage of small skill, at best only able to raise an imp or two, but he agreed to accept me as his pupil -and slave. It was he who saw fit to put these marks upon my body." He glanced with distaste at his tattoos. "He kept me in a kennel and made me serve him and listen to his ravings. I learned what little he could teach me and then I strangled him and went in search of a more powerful teacher."

"Note how deep the gratitude of Grolims goes," Silk observed quietly to Garion, who was concentrating half on the story and half on the business of steering the scow.

"The years that followed were difficult," Arshag continued. "I went from teacher to teacher, suffering enslavement and abuse." A bleak smile crossed his face. "Occasionally, they used to sell me to other wizards -as one might sell a cow or a pig. After I learned the arts, I retraced my steps and repaid each one for his impertinences. At length, in a place near the barrens of the north, I was able to apprentice myself to an ancient man reputed to be the most powerful wizard in Karanda. He was very old, and his eyes were failing, so he took me for a young Karand seeking wisdom. He accepted me as his apprentice, and my training began in earnest. The raising of minor demons is no great chore, but summoning a Demon Lord is much more difficult and much more

perilous. The wizard claimed to have done it twice in his life, but he may have been lying. He did, however, show me how to raise the image of the Demon Lord Nahaz and also how to communicate with him. No spell or incantation is powerful enough to compel a Demon Lord to come when he is called. He will come only if he consents to come -and usually for reasons of his own.

"Once I had learned all that the old wizard could teach me, I killed him and journeyed south toward Calida again." He sighed a bit regretfully. "The old man was a kindly master, and I was sorry that I had to kill him." Then he shrugged. "But he was old," he added, "and I sent him off with a single knife stroke to the heart."

"Steady, Durnik," Silk said, putting his hand on the angry smith's arm.

"At Calida, I found the Temple in total disarray," Arshag went on. "My brothers had finally succumbed to absolute despair, and the Temple had become a vile sink of corruption and degeneracy. I suppressed my outrage, however, and kept to myself. I dispatched word to Mal Yaska, advising Harakan that I had been successful in my mission and that I awaited his commands in the Temple at Calida. In time, I received a reply from one of the Chandim, who told me that Harakan had not yet returned from the west." He paused. "Do you suppose that I could have a drink of water?" he asked. "I have a very foul taste in my mouth for some reason."

Sadi went to the water cask in the stern and dipped out a tin cup of water. "No drug is completely perfect," he murmured defensively to Garion in passing.

Arshag gratefully took the cup from Sadi and drank.

"Go on with your story," Belgarath told him when he had finished.

Arshag nodded. "It was a bit less than a year ago that Harakan returned from the west," he said. "He came up to Calida, and he and I met in secret. I told him what I had accomplished and advised him of the limitations involved in any attempts to raise a Demon Lord. Then we went to a secluded place, and I instructed him in the incantations and spells which would raise an image of Nahaz and permit us to speak through the gate that lies between the worlds and communicate directly with Nahaz. Once I had established contact with the Demon Lord, Harakan began to speak with him. He mentioned Cthrag Sardius, but Nahaz already knew of it. And then Harakan told Nahaz that during the long years that Torak slept, the Disciple Urvon had become more and more obsessed with wealth and power and had at last convinced himself that he was in fact a demigod, and but one step removed from divinity. Harakan proposed an alliance between himself and Nahaz. He suggested that the Demon Lord nudge Urvon over the edge into madness and then aid him in defeating all the others who were seeking the hiding place of Cthrag Sardius. Unopposed, Urvon would easily gain the stone."

"I gather that you chose to go along with them -instead of warning Urvon what was afoot? What did you get out of the arrangement?"

"They let me live." Arshag shrugged. "I think Harakan wanted to kill me -just to be safe- but Nahaz told him that I could still be useful. He promised me kingdoms of my own to

rule -and demon children to do my bidding. Harakan was won over by the Demon Lord and he treated me courteously."

"I don't exactly see that there's much advantage to Nahaz in giving the Sardion to Urvon," Belgarath confessed.

"Nahaz wants Cthrag Sardius for himself," Arshag told him. "If Urvon has been driven mad, Nahaz will simply take Cthrag Sardius from him and replace it with a piece of worthless rock. Then the Demon Lord and Harakan will put Urvon in a house somewhere -Ashaba perhaps, or some other isolated castle- and they'll surround him with imps and lesser demons to blind him with illusions. There he will play at being God in blissful insanity while Nahaz and Harakan rule the world between them."

"Until the real new God of Angarak arises," Polgara added.

"There will be no new God of Angarak," Arshag disagreed.

"Once Nahaz puts his hand on Cthrag Sardius -the Sardion- both Prophecies will cease to exist. The Child of Light and the Child of Dark will vanish forever. The Elder Gods will be banished, and Nahaz will be Lord of the Universe and Master of the destinies of all mankind."

"And what does Harakan get out of this?" Belgarath asked.

"Dominion of the Church -and the secular throne of all the world."

"I hope he got that in writing," Belgarath said dryly.

"Demons are notorious for not keeping their promises. Then what happened?"

"A messenger arrived at Calida with instructions for Harakan from Urvon. The Disciple told him that there must be a disruption in Karanda so violent that Kal Zakath would have no choice but to return from Cthol Murgos. Once the Emperor was back in Mallorea, it would be a simple matter to have him killed, and once he is dead, Urvon believes that he can manipulate the succession to place a tractable man on the throne -one he can take with him when he goes to the place where the Sardion lies hidden. Apparently, this is one of the conditions which must be met before the new God arises."

Belgarath nodded. "A great many things are starting to fall into place," he said. "What happened then?"

"Harakan and I journeyed again in secret to that secluded place, and I once again opened the gate and brought forth the image of Nahaz. Harakan and the Demon Lord spoke together for a time, and suddenly the image was made flesh, and Nahaz himself stood before us."

Harakan instructed me that I should henceforth call him by the name Mengha, since the name Harakan is widely known in Mallorea, and then we went again to Calida, and Nahaz went with us. The Demon Lord summoned his hordes, and Calida fell. Nahaz demanded a certain repayment for his aid, and Lord Mengha instructed me to provide it. It was then that I discovered why Nahaz had let me live. We spoke together, and he told me what he wanted. I did not care for the notion, but the people involved were only Karands, so-" He shrugged. "The Karands regard Nahaz as their God, and so it was not difficult for me to persuade young Karandese women that receiving the attentions of the Demon Lord would be a supreme honor. They went to him willingly, each one of them hoping in her heart to bear his offspring -not knowing, of course, that such a birth would rip them apart like fresh-gutted pigs." He smirked

contemptuously. "The rest I think you know."

"Oh, yes, we do indeed." Belgarath's voice was like a nail scraping across a flat stone. "When did they leave? Harakan and Nahaz, I mean? We know that they're no longer in this part of Karanda."

"It was about a month ago. We were preparing to lay siege to Torpakan on the border of Delchin, and I awoke one morning to discover that Lord Mengha and the Demon Nahaz were gone and that none of their familiar demons were any longer with the army. Everyone looked to me, but none of my spells or incantations could raise even the least of demons. The army grew enraged, and I barely escaped with my life. I journeyed north again toward Calida, but found things there in total chaos. Without the demons to hold them in line, the Karands had quickly become unmanageable. I found that I could, however, still call up the image of Nahaz. It seemed likely to me that with Mengha and Nahaz gone, I could sway Karandese loyalty to me, if I used the image cleverly enough, and thus come to rule all of Karanda myself. I was attempting a beginning of that plan this morning when you interrupted."

"I see," Belgarath said bleakly.

"How long have you been in this vicinity?" Polgara asked the captive suddenly.

"Several weeks," the Grolim replied.

"Good," she said. "Some few weeks ago, a woman came from the west carrying a child."

"I pay little attention to women."

"This one might have been a bit different. We know that she came to that village back on the lake-shore and that she would have hired a boat. Did any word of that reach you?"

"There are few travelers in Karanda right now," he told her. "There's too much turmoil and upheaval. There's only one boat that left that village in the past month. I'll tell you this, though. If the woman you seek was a friend of yours, and if she was on board that boat, prepare to mourn her."

"Oh?"

"The boat sank in a sudden storm just off the city of Karand on the east-side of the lake in Ganesia."

"The nice thing about Zandramas is her predictability," Silk murmured to Garion. "I don't think we're going to have much trouble picking up her trail again, do you?"

Arshag's eyelids were drooping now, and he seemed barely able to hold his head erect.

"If you have any more questions for him, Ancient One, you should ask them quickly." Sadi advised. "The drug is starting to wear off, and he's very close to sleep again."

"I think I have all the answers I need," the old man replied.

"And I have what I need as well," Polgara added grimly.

Because of the size of the lake, there was no possibility of reaching the eastern shore before nightfall, and so they lowered the sails and set a sea anchor to minimize the nighttime drift of their scow. They set sail again at first light and shortly after noon saw a low, dark smudge along the eastern horizon.

"That would be the east-coast of the lake," Silk said to Garion. "I'll go up to the bow and see if I can pick out some landmarks. I don't think we'll want to run right up to the

wharves of Karand, do you?"

"No. Not really."

"I'll see if I can find us a quiet cove someplace, and then we can have a look around without attracting attention."

They beached the scow in a quiet bay surrounded by high sand dunes and scrubby brush about midafternoon.

"What do you think, Grandfather?" Garion asked after they had unloaded the horses.

"About what?"

"The boat. What should we do with it?"

"Set it adrift. Let's not announce that we came ashore here."

"I suppose you're right." Garion sighed a bit regretfully. "It wasn't a bad boat, though, was it?"

"It didn't tip over."

"Capsize," Garion corrected.

Polgara came over to where they were standing. "Do you have any further need for Arshag?" she asked the old man.

"No, and I've been trying to decide what to do with him."

"I'll take care of it, father," she said. She turned and went back to where Arshag still lay, once more bound and half asleep on the beach. She stood over him for a moment, then raised one hand. The Grolim flinched wildly even as Garion felt the sudden powerful surge of her will.

"Listen carefully, Arshag," she said. "You provided the Demon Lord with women so that he could unloose an abomination upon the world. That act must not go unrewarded. This, then, is your reward. You are now invincible. No one can kill you -no man, no demon- not even you yourself. But, no one will ever again believe a single word that you say. You will be faced with constant ridicule and derision all the days of your life and you will be driven out wherever you go, to wander the world as a rootless vagabond. Thus are you repaid for aiding Mengha and helping him to unleash Nahaz and for sacrificing foolish women to the Demon Lord's unspeakable lust." She turned to Durnik. "Untie him," she commanded.

When his arms and legs were free, Arshag stumbled to his feet, his tattooed face ashen. "Who are you, woman?" he demanded in a shaking voice, "and what power do you have to pronounce so terrible a curse?"

"I am Polgara," she replied. "You may have heard of me. Now go!" She pointed up the beach with an imperious finger.

As if suddenly seized by an irresistible compulsion, Arshag turned, his face filled with horror. He stumbled up one of the sandy dunes and disappeared on the far side.

"Do you think it was wise to reveal your identity, my lady?" Sadi asked dubiously.

"There's no danger, Sadi." She smiled. "He can shout my name from every rooftop, but no one will believe him."

"How long will he live?" Ce'Nedra's voice was very small.

"Indefinitely, I'd imagine. Long enough, certainly, to give him time to appreciate fully the enormity of what it was that he did."

Ce'Nedra stared at her. "Lady Polgara!" she said in a sick voice. "How could you do it? It's horrible."

"Yes," Polgara replied, "it is -but so was what happened back at that temple we burned."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The street, if it could be called that, was narrow and crooked. An attempt had been made at some time in the past to surface it with logs, but they had long since rotted and been trodden into the mud. Decaying garbage lay in heaps against the walls of crudely constructed log houses, and herds of scrawny pigs rooted dispiritedly through those heaps in search of food.

As Silk and Garion, once again wearing their Karandese vests and caps and their cross-tied sackcloth leggings, approached the docks jutting out into the lake, they were nearly overcome by the overpowering odor of long-dead fish.

"Fragrant sort of place, isn't it?" Silk noted, holding a handkerchief to his face.

"How can they stand it?" Garion asked, trying to keep from gagging.

"Their sense of smell has probably atrophied over the centuries," Silk replied. "The city of Karand is the ancestral home of all the Karands in all the seven kingdoms. It's been here for eons, so the debris -and the smell- has had a long time to build up."

A huge sow, trailed by a litter of squealing piglets, waddled out into the very center of the street and flopped over on her side with a loud grunt. The piglets immediately attacked, pushing and scrambling to nurse.

"Any hints at all?" Silk asked.

Garion shook his head. The sword strapped across his back had neither twitched nor tugged since the two of them had entered the city early that morning on foot by way of the north gate. "Zandramas might not have even entered the city at all," he said. "She's avoided populated places before, you know."

"That's true, I suppose," Silk admitted, "but I don't think we should go any farther until we locate the place where she landed. She could have gone in any direction once she got to this side of the lake -Darshiva, Zamad, Voresebo- even down into Delchin and then on down the Magan into Rengel or Peldane."

"I know," Garion said, "but all this delay is very frustrating. We're getting closer to her. I can feel it, and every minute we waste gives her that much more time to escape again with Geran."

"It can't be helped." Silk shrugged. "About all we can do here is follow the inside of the wall and walk along the waterfront. If she came through the city at all, we're certain to cross her path."

They turned a corner and looked down another muddy street toward the lake-shore where fishnets hung over long poles. They slogged through the mud until they reached the street that ran along the shoreline where floating docks reached out into the lake and then followed it along the waterfront.

There was a certain amount of activity here. A number of sailors dressed in faded blue tunics were hauling a boat half-full of water up onto the shore with a large deal of shouting and contradictory orders. Here and there on the docks, groups of fishermen in rusty brown sat mending nets,

and farther on along the street several loiterers in fur vests and leggings sat on the log stoop in front of a sour-smelling tavern, drinking from cheap tin cups. A blowzy young woman with frizzy orange hair and a pockmarked face leaned out of a second-story window, calling to passersby in a voice she tried to make seductive, but which Garion found to be merely coarse.

"Busy place," Silk murmured.

Garion grunted, and they moved on along the littered street.

Coming from the other direction, they saw a group of armed men. Though they all wore helmets of one kind or another, the rest of their clothing was of mismatched colors and could by no stretch of the imagination be called uniforms. Their self-important swagger, however, clearly indicated that they were either soldiers or some kind of police.

"You two! Halt!" one of them barked as they came abreast of Garion and Silk.

"Is there some problem, sir?" Silk asked ingratiatingly.

"I haven't seen you here before," the man said, his hand on his sword hilt. He was a tall fellow with lank red hair poking out from under his helmet. "Identify yourselves."

"My name is Saldas," Silk lied. "This is Kvasta." He pointed at Garion. "We're strangers here in Karand."

"What's your business here -and where do you come from?"

"We're from Dorikan in Jenno," Silk told him, "and we're here looking for my older brother. He sailed out from the village of Dashun on the other side of the lake awhile back and hasn't returned."

The redheaded man looked suspicious.

"We talked with a fellow near the north gate," Silk continued, "and he told us that there was a boat that sank in a storm just off the docks here." His face took on a melancholy expression. "The time would have been just about right, I think, and the description he gave us of the boat matched the one my brother was sailing. Have you by any chance heard about it, sir?" The little man sounded very sincere.

Some of the suspicion faded from the red-haired man's face. "It seems to me that I heard some mention of it," he conceded.

"The fellow we talked with said that he thought there might have been some survivors," Silk added, "one that he knew of, anyway. He said that a woman in a dark cloak and carrying a baby managed to get away in a small boat. Do you by chance happen to know anything about that?"

The Karand's face hardened. "Oh, yes," he said. "We know about her, all right."

"Could you by any chance tell me where she went?" Silk asked him. "I'd really like to talk with her and find out if she knows anything about my brother." He leaned toward the other man confidentially. "To be perfectly honest with you, good sir, I can't stand my brother. We've hated each other since we were children, but I promised my old father that I'd find out what happened to him." Then he winked outrageously. "There's an inheritance involved, you understand. If I can take definite word back to father that my brother's dead, I stand to come into a nice piece of property."

The red-haired man grinned. "I can understand your situation, Saldas," he said. "I had a dispute with my own

brothers about our patrimony." His eyes narrowed. "You say you're from Dorikan?" he asked.

"Yes. On the banks of the northern River Magan. Do you know our city?"

"Does Dorikan follow the teachings of Lord Mengha?"

"The Liberator? Of course. Doesn't all of Karanda?"

"Have you seen any of the Dark Lords in the last month or so?"

"The minions of the Lord Nahaz? No, I can't say that I have -but then Kvasta and I haven't attended any worship services for some time. I'm sure that the wizards are still raising them, though."

"I wouldn't be all that sure, Saldas. we haven't seen one here in Karand for over five weeks. Our wizards have tried to summon them, but they refuse to come. Even the Grolims who now worship Lord Nahaz haven't been successful and they'll all powerful magicians, you know."

"Truly," Silk agreed.

"Have you heard anything at all about Lord Mengha's whereabouts?"

Silk shrugged. "The last I heard, he was in Katakori someplace. In Dorikan we're just waiting for his return so that we can sweep the Angaraks out of all Karanda."

The answer seemed to satisfy the tall fellow. "All right, Saldas," he said. "I'd say that you've got a legitimate reason to be in Karand after all. I don't think you're going to have much luck in finding the woman you want to talk to, though. From what I've heard, she was on your brother's boat and she did get away before the storm hit. She had a small boat, and she landed to the south of the city. She came to the south gate with her brat in her arms and went straight to the Temple. She talked with the Grolims inside for about an hour. When she left, they were all following her."

"Which way did they go?" Silk asked him.

"Out the east gate."

"How long ago was it?"

"Late last week. I'll tell you something, Saldas. Lord Mengha had better stop whatever he's doing in Katakori and come back to central Karanda where he belongs. The whole movement is starting to falter. The Dark Lords have deserted us, and the Grolims are trailing after this woman with the baby. All we have left are the wizards, and they're mostly mad, anyway."

"They always have been, haven't they?" Silk grinned.

"Tampering with the supernatural tends to unsettle a man's brains, I've noticed."

"You seem like a sensible man, Saldas," the redhead said, clapping him on the shoulder. "I'd like to stay and talk with you further, but my men and I have to finish our patrol. I hope you find your brother." He winked slyly. "Or don't find him, I should say."

Silk grinned back. "I thank you for your wishes about my brother's growing ill health," he replied.

The soldiers moved off along the street. "You tell better stories than Belgarath does," Garion said to his little friend.

"It's a gift. That was a very profitable encounter, wasn't it? Now I understand why the Orb hasn't picked up the trail yet. We came into the city by way of the north gate, and

Zandramas came up from the south. If we go straight to the Temple, the Orb's likely to jerk you off your feet."

Garion nodded. "The important thing is that we're only a few days behind her." He paused, frowning.

"Why is she gathering Grolims, though?"

"Who knows? Reinforcements maybe. She knows that we're right behind her. Or, maybe she thinks she's going to need Grolims who have training in Karandese magic when she gets home to Darshiva. If Nahaz has sent his demons down there, she's going to need all the help she can get. We'll let Belgarath sort it out. Let's go to the Temple and see if we can pick up the trail."

As they approached the Temple in the center of the city, the Orb began to pull at Garion again, and he felt a surge of exultation. "I've got it," he said to Silk.

"Good." The little man looked up at the Temple. "I see that they've made some modifications," he observed.

The polished steel mask of the face of Torak which normally occupied the place directly over the nail-studded door had been removed, Garion saw, and in its place was a red-painted skull with a pair of horns screwed down into its brow.

"I don't know that the skull is all that big an improvement," Silk said, "but then, it's no great change for the worse either. I was getting a little tired of that mask staring at me every time I turned around."

"Let's follow the trail," Garion suggested, "and make certain that Zandramas left the city before we go get the others."

"Right," Silk agreed.

The trail led from the door of the Temple through the littered streets to the east gate of the city. Garion and Silk followed it out of Karand and perhaps a half mile along the highway leading eastward across the plains of Ganesia.

"Is she veering at all?" Silk asked.

"Not yet. She's following the road."

"Good. Let's go get the others -and our horses. we won't make very good time on foot."

They moved away from the road, walking through knee-high grass.

"Looks like good, fertile soil here," Garion noted. "Have you and Yarblek ever considered buying farmland? It might be a good investment."

"No, Garion." Silk laughed. "There's a major drawback to owning land. If you have to leave a place in a hurry, there's no way that you can pick it up and carry it along with you."

"That's true, I guess."

The others waited in a grove of large old willows a mile or so north of the city, and their faces were expectant as Garion and Silk ducked in under the branches.

"Did you find it?" Belgarath asked.

Garion nodded. "She went east," he replied.

"And apparently she took all the Grolims from the Temple along with her," Silk added.

Belgarath looked puzzled. "Why would she do that?"

"I haven't got a clue. I suppose we could ask her when we catch up with her."

"Could you get any idea of how far ahead of us she is?"

Ce'Nedra asked.

"Just a few days," Garion said. "With any luck we'll catch her before she gets across the Mountains of Zamad."

"Not if we don't get started," Belgarath said.

They rode on back across the wide, open field to the highway leading across the plains toward the upthrusting peaks lying to the east. The Orb picked up the trail again, and they followed it at a canter.

"What kind of a city was it?" Velvet asked Silk as they rode along.

"Nice place to visit," he replied, "but you wouldn't want to live there. The pigs are clean enough, but the people are awfully dirty."

"Cleverly put, Kheldar."

"I've always had a way with words," he conceded modestly.

"Father," Polgara called to the old man, "a large number of Grolims have passed this way."

He looked around and nodded. "Silk was right, then," he said. "For some reason she's subverting Mengha's people. Let's be alert for any possible ambushes."

They rode on for the rest of the day and camped that night some distance away from the road, starting out again at first light in the morning. About midday they saw a roadside village some distance ahead. Coming from that direction was a solitary man in a rickety cart being pulled by a bony white horse.

"Do you by any change have a flagon of ale, Lady Polgara?" Sadi asked as they slowed to a walk.

"Are you thirsty?"

"Oh, it's not for me. I detest ale personally. It's for that carter just ahead. I thought we might want some information." He looked over at Silk. "Are you feeling at all sociable today, Kheldar?"

"No more than usual. Why?"

"Take a drink or two of this," the eunuch said, offering the little man the flagon Polgara had taken from one of the packs. "Not too much, mind. I only want you to smell drunk."

"Why not?" Silk shrugged, taking a long drink.

"That should do it," Sadi approved. "Now give it back."

"I thought you didn't want any."

"I don't. I'm just going to add a bit of favoring." He opened his red case. "Don't drink any more from this flagon," he warned Silk as he tapped four drops of a gleaming red liquid into the mouth of the flagon. "If you do, we'll all have to listen to you talk for days on end." He handed the flagon back to the little man. "Why don't you go offer that poor fellow up there a drink," he suggested. "He looks like he could use one."

"You didn't poison it, did you?"

"Of course not. It's very hard to get information out of somebody who's squirming on the ground clutching at his belly. One or two good drinks from that flagon, though, and the carter will be seized by an uncontrollable urge to talk -about anything at all and to anybody who asks him a question in a friendly fashion. Go be friendly to the poor man, Kheldar. He looks dreadfully lonesome."

Silk grinned, then turned and trotted his horse toward the oncoming cart, swaying in his saddle and singing loudly and very much off-key.

"He's very good," Velvet murmured to Ce'Nedra, "but he always overacts his part. When we get back to Boktor, I think I'll send him to a good drama coach."

Ce'Nedra laughed.

By the time they reached the cart, the seedy-looking man in a rust-red smock had pulled his vehicle off to the side of the road, and he and Silk had joined in song -a rather bawdy one.

"Ah, there you are," Silk said, squinting owlishly at Sadi. "I wondered how long it was going to take you to catch up. Here-" He thrust the flagon at the eunuch. "Have a drink."

Sadi feigned taking a long drink from the flagon. Then he sighed lustily, wiped his mouth on his sleeve, and handed the flagon back.

Silk passed it to the carter. "Your turn, friend." The carter took a drink and then grinned foolishly. "I haven't felt this good in weeks," he said.

"We're riding toward the east," Sadi told him.

"I saw that right off," the carter said. "That's unless you've taught your horses to run backward." He laughed uproariously at that, slapping his knee in glee.

"How droll," the eunuch murmured. "Do you come from that village just up ahead?"

"Lived there all my life," the carter replied, "and my father before me -and his father before him- and his father's father before that and-"

"Have you seen a dark-cloaked woman with a babe in her arms go past here within the last week?" Sadi interrupted him. "She probably would have been in the company of a fairly large party of Grolims."

The carter made the sign to ward off the evil eye at the mention of the word "Grolim."

"Oh, yes. She came by all right," he said, "and she went into the local Temple here -if you can really call it a Temple. It's no bigger than my own house and it's only got three Grolims in it -two young ones and an old one. Anyway, this woman with the babe in her arms, she goes into the Temple, and we can hear her talking, and pretty soon she comes out with our three Grolims -only the old one was trying to talk the two young ones into staying, and then she says something to the young ones and they pull out their knives and start stabbing the old one, and he yells and falls down on the ground dead as mutton, and the woman takes our two young Grolims back out to the road, and they join in with the others and they all go off, leaving us only that old dead one lying on his face in the mud and-"

"How many Grolims would you say she had with her?" Sadi asked.

"Counting our two, I'd say maybe thirty -or forty- or it could be as many as fifty. I've never been very good at quick guesses like that. I can tell the difference between three and four, but after that I get confused, and-"

"Could you give us any idea of exactly how long ago all that was?"

"Let's see." The carter squinted at the sty, counting on his fingers. "It couldn't have been yesterday, because yesterday I took that load of barrels over to Toad-face's farm. Do you know Toad-face? Ugliest man I ever saw, but his

daughter's a real beauty. I could tell you stories about her, let me tell you."

"So it wasn't yesterday?"

"No. It definitely wasn't yesterday. I spent most of yesterday under a haystack with Toad-face's daughter. And I know it wasn't the day before, because I got drunk that day and I don't remember a thing that happened after midmorning." He took another drink from the flagon.

"How about the day before that?"

"It could have been," the carter said, "or the day before that."

"Or even before?"

The carter shook his head. "No, that was the day our pig farrowed, and I know that the woman came by after that. It had to have been the day before the day before yesterday or the day before that."

"Three or four days ago, then?"

"If that's the way it works out," the carter shrugged, drinking again.

"Thanks for the information, friend," Sadi said. He looked at Silk. "We should be moving on, I suppose," he said.

"Did you want your jar back?" the carter asked.

"Go ahead and keep it, friend," Silk said. "I think I've had enough anyway."

"Thanks for the ale -and the talk," the carter called after them as they rode away. Garion glanced back and saw that the fellow had climbed down from his cart and was engaging in an animated conversation with his horse.

"Three days!" Ce'Nedra exclaimed happily.

"Or, at the most, four," Sadi said.

"We're gaining on her!" Ce'Nedra said, suddenly leaning over and throwing her arms about the eunuch's neck.

"So it appears, your Majesty," Sadi agreed, looking slightly embarrassed.

They camped off the road again that night and started out again early the following morning. The sun was just coming up when the large, blue-banded hawk came spiraling in, flared, and shimmered into the form of Beldin at the instant its talons touched the road. "You've got company waiting for you just ahead," he told them, pointing at the first line of foothills of the Mountains of Zamad lying perhaps a mile in front of them.

"Oh?" Belgarath said, reining in his horse.

"About a dozen Grolims," Beldin said. "They're hiding in the bushes on either side of the road."

Belgarath swore.

"Have you been doing things to annoy the Grolims?" the hunchback asked.

Belgarath shook his head. "Zandramas has been gathering them as she goes along. She's got quite a few of them with her now. She probably left that group behind to head off pursuit. She knows that we're right behind her."

"What are we going to do, Belgarath?" Ce'Nedra asked.

"We're so close. We can't stop now."

The old man looked at his brother sorcerer. "Well?" he said.

Beldin scowled at him. "All right," he said. "I'll do it, but don't forget that you owe me, Belgarath."

"Write it down with all the other things. We'll settle up when this is all over."

"Don't think I won't."

"Did you find out where Nahaz took Urvon?"

"Would you believe they went back to Mal Yaska?" Beldin sounded disgusted.

"They'll come out eventually," Belgarath assured him. "Are you going to need any help with the Grolims? I could send Pol along if you like."

"Are you trying to be funny?"

"No. I was just asking. Don't make too much noise." Beldin made a vulgar sound, changed again, and swooped away.

"Where's he going?" Silk asked.

"He's going to draw off the Grolims."

"Oh? How?"

"I didn't ask him," Belgarath shrugged. "We'll give him a little while and then we should be able to ride straight on through."

"He's very good, isn't he?"

"Beldin? Oh, yes, very, very good. There he goes now."

Silk looked around. "Where?"

"I didn't see him -I heard him. He's flying low a mile or so to the north of where the Grolims are hiding, and he's kicking up just enough noise to make it sound as if the whole group of us are trying to slip around them without being seen." He glanced at his daughter. "Pol, would you take a look and see if it's working?"

"All right, father." She concentrated, and Garion could feel her mind reaching out, probing. "They've taken the bait," she reported. "They all ran off after Beldin."

"That was accommodating of them, wasn't it? Let's move on."

They pushed their horses into a gallop and covered the distance to the first foothills of the Mountains of Zamad in a short period of time. They followed the road up a steep slope and through a shallow notch. Beyond that the terrain grew more rugged, and the dark green forest rose steeply up the flanks of the peaks.

Garion began to sense conflicting signals from the Orb as he rode. At first he had only felt its eagerness to follow the trail of Zandramas and Geran, but now he began to feel a sullen undertone, a sound of ageless, implacable hatred, and at his back where the sword was sheathed, he began to feel an increasing heat.

"Why is it burning red?" Ce'Nedra asked from behind him.

"What's burning red?"

"The Orb, I think. I can see it glowing right through the leather covering you have over it."

"Let's stop awhile," Belgarath told them, reining in his horse.

"What is it, Grandfather?"

"I'm not sure. Take the sword out and slip off the sleeve. Let's see what's happening."

Garion drew the sword from its sheath. It seemed heavier than usual for some reason, and when he peeled off the soft leather covering, they were all able to see that instead of its usual azure blue, the Orb of Aldur was glowing a dark, sooty red.

"What is it, father?" Polgara asked.

"It feels the Sardion," Eriond said in a calm voice.

"Are we that close?" Garion demanded. "Is this the Place Which Is No More?"

"I don't think so, Belgarion," the young man replied.

"It's something else."

"What is it, then?"

"I'm not sure, but the Orb is responding to the other stone in some way. They talk to each other in a fashion I can't understand."

They rode on, and some time later the blue-banded hawk came swirling in, blurred into Beldin's shape, and stood in front of them. The gnarled dwarf had a slightly self-satisfied look on his face. "

"You look like a cat that just got into the cream," Belgarath said.

"Naturally. I just sent a dozen or so Grolims off in the general direction of the polar icecap. They'll have a wonderful time when the pan ice starts to break up and they get to float around up there for the rest of the summer."

"Are you going to scout on ahead?" Belgarath asked him.

"I suppose so," Beldin replied. He held out his arms, blurred into feathers, and drove himself into the air.

They rode more cautiously now, climbing deeper and deeper into the Mountains of Zamad. The surrounding country grew more broken. The reddish-hued peaks were jagged, and their lower flanks were covered with dark firs and pines. Rushing streams boiled over rocks and dropped in frothy waterfalls over steep cliffs. The road, which had been straight and flat on the plains of Ganesia, began to twist and turn as it crawled up the steep slopes.

It was nearly noon when Beldin returned again. "The main party of Grolims turned south," he reported. "There are about forty of them."

"Was Zandramas with them?" Garion asked quickly.

"No. I don't think so -at least I didn't pick up the sense of anyone unusual in the group."

"We haven't lost her, have we?" Ce'Nedra asked in alarm.

"No," Garion replied. "The Orb still has her trail." He glanced over his shoulder. The stone on the hilt of his sword was still burning a sullen red.

"About all we can do is follow her," Belgarath said. "It's Zandramas we're interested in, not a party of stray Grolims. Can you pinpoint exactly where we are?" he asked Beldin.

"Mallorea."

"Very funny."

"We've crossed into Zamad. This road goes on down into Voresebo, though. Where's my mule?"

"Back with the packhorses," Durnik told him.

As they moved on, Garion could feel Polgara probing on ahead with her mind.

"Are you getting anything, Pol?" Belgarath asked her.

"Nothing specific, father," she replied. "I can sense the fact that Zandramas is close, but she's shielding, so I can't pinpoint her."

They rode on, moving at a cautious walk now. Then, as the road passed through a narrow gap and descended on the far side, they saw a figure in a gleaming white robe standing in

the road ahead. As they drew closer, Garion saw that it was Cyradis.

"Move with great care in this place," she cautioned, and there was a note of anger in her voice. "The Child of Dark seeks to circumvent the ordered course of events and hath laid a trap for ye."

"There's nothing new or surprising about that," Beldin growled. "What does she hope to accomplish?"

"It is her thought to slay one of the companions of the Child of Light and thereby prevent the completion of one of the tasks which must be accomplished ere the final meeting. Should she succeed, all that hath gone before shall come to naught. Follow me, and I will guide you safely to the next task."

Toth stepped down from his horse and quickly led it to the side of his slender mistress. She smiled at him, her face radiant, and laid a slim hand on his huge arm. With no apparent effort, the huge man lifted her into the saddle of his horse and then took the reins in his hand.

"Aunt Pol," Garion whispered, "is it my imagination, or is she really there this time?"

Polgara looked intently at the blindfolded Seeress. "It's not a projection," she said. "It's much more substantial. I couldn't begin to guess how she got here, but I think you're right, Garion. She's really here."

They followed the Seeress and her mute guide down the steeply descending road into a grassy basin surrounded on all sides by towering firs. In the center of the basin was a small mountain lake sparkling in the sunlight.

Polgara suddenly drew in her breath sharply. "We're being watched," she said.

"Who is it, Pol?" Belgarath asked.

"The mind is hidden, father. All I can get is the sense of watching -and anger." A smile touched her lips. "I'm sure it's Zandramas. She's shielding, so I can't reach her mind, but she can't shield out my sense of being watched, and she can't control her anger enough to keep me from picking up the edges of it."

"Who's she so angry with?"

"Cyradis, I think. She went to a great deal of trouble to lay a trap for us, and Cyradis came along and spoiled it. She still might try something, so I think we'd all better be on our guard."

He nodded bleakly. "Right." he agreed.

Toth led the horse his mistress was riding out into the basin and stopped at the edge of the lake. When the rest of them reached her, she pointed down through the crystal water. "The task lies there," she said. "Below lies a submerged grot. One of ye must enter that grot and then return. Much shall be revealed there."

Belgarath looked hopefully at Beldin.

"Not this time, old man," the dwarf said, shaking his head. "I'm a hawk, not a fish, and I don't like cold water any more than you do."

"Pol?" Belgarath said rather plaintively.

"I don't think so, father," she replied. "I think it's your turn this time. Besides, I need to concentrate on Zandramas."

He bent over and dipped his hand into the sparkling water. Then he shuddered. "This is cruel," he said.

Silk was grinning at him.

"Don't say it, Prince Kheldar." Belgarath scowled, starting to remove his clothing. "Just keep your mouth shut."

They were perhaps all a bit surprised at how sleekly muscular the old man was. Despite his fondness for rich food and good brown ale, his stomach was as flat as a board; although he was as lean as a rail, his shoulders and chest rippled when he moved.

"My, my," Velvet murmured appreciatively, eyeing the loincloth-clad old man.

He suddenly grinned at her impishly. "Would you care for another frolic in a pool, Liselle?" he invited with a wicked look in his bright blue eyes.

She suddenly blushed a rosy red, glancing guiltily at Silk.

Belgarath laughed, arched himself forward, and split the water of the lake as cleanly as the blade of a knife.

Several yards out, he broached, leaping high into the air with the sun gleaming on his silvery scales and his broad, forked-tail flapping and shaking droplets like jewels across the sparkling surface of the lake. Then his dark, heavy body drove down and down into the depths of the crystal lake.

"Oh, my," Durnik breathed, his hands twitching.

"Never mind, dear." Polgara laughed. "He wouldn't like it at all if you stuck a fishhook in his jaw."

The great, silver-sided salmon swirled down and disappeared into an irregularly shaped opening near the bottom of the lake.

They waited, and Garion found himself unconsciously holding his breath.

After what seemed an eternity, the great fish shot from the mouth of the submerged cave, drove himself far out into the lake, and then returned, skipping across the surface of the water on his tail, shaking his head and almost seeming to balance himself with his fins. Then he plunged forward into the water near the shore, and Belgarath emerged dripping and shivering. "Invigorating," he observed, climbing back up onto the bank. "Have you got a blanket handy, Pol?" he asked, stripping the water from his arms and legs with his hands.

"Show-off," Beldin grunted.

"What was down there?" Garion asked.

"It looks like an old temple of some kind," the old man answered, vigorously drying himself with the blanket Polgara had handed him. "Somebody took a natural cave and walled up the sides to give it some kind of shape. There was an altar there with a special kind of niche in it -empty, naturally-but the place was filled with an overpowering presence, and all the rocks glowed red."

"The Sardion?" Beldin demanded intently.

"Not any more," Belgarath replied, drying his hair. "It was there, though, for a long, long time -and it had built a barrier of some kind to keep anybody from finding it. It's gone now, but I'll recognize the signs of it the next time I get close."

"Garion!" Ce'Nedra cried. "Look!" with a trembling hand she was pointing at a nearby crag. High atop that rocky

promontory stood a figure wrapped in shiny black satin. Even before the figure tossed back its hood with a gesture of supreme arrogance, he knew who it was. Without thinking, he reached for Iron-grip's sword, his mind suddenly aflame.

But then Cyradis spoke in a clear, firm voice. "I am wroth with thee, Zandramas," she declared. "Seek not to interfere with that which must come to pass, lest I make my choice here and now."

"And if thou dost, sightless, creeping worm, then all will turn to chaos, and thy task will be incomplete, and blind chance will supplant prophecy. Behold, I am the Child of Dark, and I fear not the hand of chance, for chance is my servant even more than it is the servant of the Child of Light."

Then Garion heard a low snarl, a dreadful sound -more dreadful yet because it came from his wife's throat. Moving faster than he thought was possible, Ce'Nedra dashed to Durnik's horse and ripped the smith's axe from the rope sling which held it. With a scream of rage, she ran around the edge of the tiny mountain lake brandishing the axe.

"Ce'Nedra!" he shouted, lunging after her. "No!"

Zandramas laughed with cruel glee. "Choose, Cyradis!" she shouted. "Make thine empty choice, for in the death of the Rivan Queen, I triumph!" and she raised both hands over her head.

Though he was running as fast as he could, Garion saw that he had no hope of catching Ce'Nedra before she moved fatally close to the satin-robed sorceress atop the crag. Even now, his wife had begun scrambling up the rocks, screeching curses and hacking at the boulders that got in her way with Durnik's axe.

Then the form of a glowing blue wolf suddenly appeared between Ce'Nedra and the object of her fury.

Ce'Nedra stopped as if frozen, and Zandramas recoiled from the snarling wolf. The light around the wolf flickered briefly, and there, still standing between Ce'Nedra and Zandramas stood the form of Garion's ultimate grandmother, Belgarath's wife and Polgara's mother. Her tawny hair was aflame with blue light, and her golden eyes blazed with unearthly fire.

"You!" Zandramas gasped, shrinking back even further.

Poledra reached back, took Ce'Nedra to her side, and protectively put one arm about her tiny shoulders. With her other hand she gently removed the axe from the little Queen's suddenly nerveless fingers. Ce'Nedra's eyes were wide and unseeing, and she stood immobilized as if in a trance.

"She is under my protection, Zandramas," Poledra said, "and you may not harm her." The sorceress atop the crag howled in sudden, frustrated rage. Her eyes ablaze, she once again drew herself erect.

"Will it be now, Zandramas?" Poledra asked in a deadly voice. "Is this the time you have chosen for our meeting? You know even as I that should we meet at the wrong time and in the wrong place, we will both be destroyed."

"I do not fear thee, Poledra!" the sorceress shrieked.

"Nor I you. Come then, Zandramas, let us destroy each other here and now -for should the Child of Light go on to the Place Which Is No More unopposed and find no Child of Dark awaiting him there, then I triumph!"

If this be the time and place of your choosing, bring forth your power and let it happen -for I grow weary of you."

The face of Zandramas was twisted with rage, and Garion could feel the force of her will building up. He tried to reach over his shoulder for his sword, thinking to unleash its fire and blast the hated sorceress from atop her crag, but even as Ce'Nedra's apparently were, he found that his muscles were all locked in stasis. From behind him he could feel the others also struggling to shake free of the force which seemed to hold them in place as well.

"No," Poledra's voice sounded firmly in the vaults of his mind. "This is between Zandramas and me. Don't interfere."

"Well, Zandramas," she said aloud then, "What is your decision? Will you cling to life a while longer, or will you die now?"

The sorceress struggled to regain her composure, even as the glowing nimbus about Poledra grew more intense.

Then Zandramas howled with enraged disappointment and disappeared in a flash of orange fire.

"I thought she might see it my way," Poledra said calmly. She turned to face Garion and the others. There was a twinkle in her golden eyes. "What took you all so long?" she asked. "I've been waiting for you here for months." She looked rather critically at the half-naked Belgarath, who was staring at her with a look of undisguised adoration. "You're as thin as a bone, Old Wolf," she told him. "You really ought to eat more, you know." She smiled fondly at him. "Would you like to have me go catch you a nice fat rabbit?" she asked. Then she laughed, shimmered back into the form of the blue wolf, and loped away, her paws seeming scarcely to touch the earth.

Here ends Book III of The Malloreon.

Book IV, Sorceress of Darsheva, continues the search for Zandramas and for the Sardion, which has been at many sites, but is now to be found at the "Place Which Is No More" -whatever that means!

The Sorceress of Darshiva
By David Eddings

PROLOGUE

Being a Brief History of the Eastern Empire.

-from Emperors of Melcena and Mallorean University of Melcene Press

The origins of the Melcene Empire are forever lost to us. Some legends maintain that the precursors of the Mel-cenes came in rude canoes out of the vast sea lying east of the Melcene Islands; others contend that the ancestral Melcene was an offshoot of that curious culture existing in Dal-asia. Whatever the source, however, Melcena stands as the oldest civilization on the earth.

Melcena has always been closely allied with the sea, and her original home lay in the islands off the east coast of the Mallorean continent. The capital at Melcena was a city of light and culture when Tol Honeth was a rude village and

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Mal Zeth was only a shabby cluster of tents. Only Kell stood in contemplation of the heavens to rival the ancestral home of the Melcenes.

It was the advent of a catastrophe which caused Melcena to abandon its splendid isolation. At a time estimated to be five thousand years ago, a disaster occurred far to the west. The Angarak and Alorns blame this on a theological dispute between the Gods. Such explanation is not to be taken seriously, but it does give some insight into the gropings of primitive minds to explain the forces of nature.

Whatever the source, the cataclysm involved a great split in the protocontinent and engendered colossal tidal waves. The seas first fell, then rose, and ultimately came to rest at more or less the present shoreline. For Melcena, this was disastrous. Fully half the land area of ancient Melcena was lost to the sea. Although the loss of property was enormous, the bulk of the people were saved. This left a pitifully overcrowded population clinging to the remnants of their former islands. The capital at Melcena had been a fair city in the mountains, where affairs could be managed without the debilitating effects of the climate in the tropical lowlands. Following the catastrophe, Melcena was a shattered city, destroyed by earthquake and flood, lying no more than a league from the new coast.

After a period of rebuilding, it became clear that the shrunken homeland could no longer support the population. Thus the Melcenes turned to the mainland. Southeastern Mallorean lay closest, a region populated by peoples of their own racial stock with a compatible, though corrupted, language; to that region the Melcenes turned their attention. There were five primitive kingdoms in the area-Gandahar, Darshiva, Celanta, Peldane, and Rengel. These were quickly overrun by the technologically superior Melcenes and were absorbed into their growing empire.

The dominating force in the Melcene Empire was the bureaucracy. While there were drawbacks to a bureaucratic form of government, it provided the advantages of continuity and a clear-eyed pragmatism more concerned with finding the most practical way to get the job done than with whim, prejudice, and egocentricity, which so frequently move other forms of government. Melcene bureaucracy was

practical almost to a fault. The concept of "an aristocracy of talent" dominated Melcene thinking. If one bureau ignored a talented individual, another was almost certain to snap him up.

The various departments of the Melcene government rushed into the newly conquered mainland provinces to winnow through the population in search of genius. The conquered peoples were thus absorbed directly into the mainstream of the life of the empire. Always pragmatic, the Melcenes left the royal houses of the five mainland provinces in place, preferring to operate through established lines of authority rather than set up new ones.

For the next fourteen hundred years, the Melcene Empire prospered, far removed from the theological and political squabbles of the western continent. Melcene culture was secular, civilized, and highly educated. Slavery was unknown, and trade with the Angaraks and their subject peoples in Kar-anda and Dalasia was extremely profitable. The old capital at Melcena became a major center of learning. Unfortunately, some Melcene scholars turned toward the arcane. Their summoning of evil spirits went far beyond the mumbo jumbo of the Morindim or the Karandese and began to delve into darker and more serious areas. They made progress in witchcraft and necromancy. But the major interest lay in the field of alchemy.

The first encounter with the Angaraks took place during this period. Although victorious in that first meeting, the Melcenes realized that eventually the Angaraks would overwhelm them by sheer weight of numbers.

While the Angaraks bent most of their efforts to the establishment of the Dalasian Protectorates, there was a wary, tentative peace. The trade contacts between the two nations yielded a somewhat better understanding of each other, though the Melcenes were amused by the preoccupation with religion of even the most worldly Angarak. Over the next eighteen hundred years relations between the two nations deteriorated into little wars, seldom lasting more than a year or two. Both sides scrupulously avoided committing their full forces, obviously not wishing all-out confrontation.

To gain more information about each other, the two nations developed a tradition of exchanging the children of various

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leaders for certain periods of time. The sons of high-ranking Melcene bureaucrats were sent to Mal Zeth to live with the families of Angarak generals, and the generals' sons were sent to the imperial capital to be raised. The result was a group of young men with cosmopolitanism which later became the norm for the ruling class of the Mallolean Empire.

One such exchange toward the end of the fourth millennium ultimately resulted in the unification of the two peoples. At about the age of twelve, a youth named Kallath, son of a high-ranking Angarak general, was sent to Melcena to spend his formative years in the household of the Imperial Minister of Foreign Affairs. The minister had frequent official and social contacts with the imperial family, and Kallath soon became a welcome guest at the imperial palace. Emperor Molvan was an elderly man with but one surviving child, a daughter named Danera, perhaps a year younger than Kallath. Matters between the two youngsters progressed in a not uncommon fashion until Kallath was recalled at eighteen to Mal Zeth to begin his military career. Kallath rose meteorically through the ranks to the position of Governor-General of the District of Rakuth by the time he was twenty-eight, thereby becoming the youngest man ever elevated to the General Staff. A year later he journeyed to Melcene, where he and Princess Danera were married.

In the years that followed, Kallath divided his time between Melcena and Mal Zeth, building a power base in each, and when Emperor Molvan died in 3829, he was ready. There had been others in line for the throne, but most of these had died frequently under mysterious circumstances. It was, nonetheless, over the violent objections of many noble families of Melcena that Kallath was declared Emperor of Melcena in 3830; these objections were quieted with brutal efficiency by Kallath's cohorts. Danera had produced seven healthy children to insure that Kallath's line would continue.

Journeying to Mal Zeth the following year, Kallath brought the Melcene array to the border of Delchin, where it stood poised. At Mal Zeth, Kallath delivered an ultimatum to the General Staff. His forces comprised the army of his own district of Rakuth and of the eastern principalities in Karand, where the Angarak military governors had sworn allegiance to him. Together with the army on the Delchin border, these

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gave him absolute military supremacy. His demand was to be appointed OverGeneral of the armies of Angarak. There were precedents. In the past, an occasional general had been granted that office, though it was far more common for the General Staff to rule jointly. But Kallath's demand brought something new into the picture. His position as emperor was hereditary, and he insisted that the OverGeneralship of Angarak also be passed to his heirs. Helplessly, the generals acceded to his demands. Kallath stood supreme on the continent as Emperor of Melcene and Commander in Chief of Angarak.

The integration of Melcene and Angarak was turbulent, but in the end, Melcene patience won out over Angarak brutality, as it became evident over the years that the Melcene bureaucracy was infinitely more efficient than Angarak military administration. The bureaucracy first moved on such mundane matters as standards and currency. From there it was but a short step to establishing a continental Bureau of Roads. Within a few hundred years, the bureaucracy ran virtually every aspect of life on the continent. As always, it gathered up talented men and women from every corner of Mallorean, regardless of race; soon administrative units comprised of Melcenes, Karands, Dalasians, and Angaraks were not at all uncommon. By 4400, the bureaucratic ascendancy was complete. In the interim, the title of OverGeneral had begun to fall into disuse, perhaps because the bureaucracy customarily addressed all communications to "the Emperor." There appears to have been no specific date when the Emperor of Melcene became the Emperor of Mallorean, and such usage was never formally approved until after the disastrous adventure in the West which ended in the Battle of Vo Mimbire.

The conversion of Melcenes to the worship of Torak was at best superficial. They pragmatically accepted the forms of Angarak worship out of political expediency, but the Grolims were unable to command the abject submission to the Dragon God which had always characterized the Angaraks.

In 4850, Torak himself suddenly emerged from his eons of seclusion at Ashaba. A vast shock ran through Mallorean as the living God, his maimed face concealed behind a polished steel mask, appeared at the gates of Mal Zeth. The Emperor

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was disdainfully set aside, and Torak assumed full authority as "Kal"-King and God. Messengers were dispatched to Cthol Murgos, Mishrak ac Thull, and Gar og Nadrak, and a council of war was held at Mal Zeth in 4852. The Dalasians, Karands, and Melcenes were stunned by the appearance of a figure they had always thought purely mythical, and their shock was compounded by the presence of Torak's disciples.

Torak was a God and did not speak, except to issue commands. But the Disciples, Ctuchik, Zedar, and Urvon, were men and they probed and examined everything with a kind of cold disdain. They saw at once that Mallorean society had become almost totally secular and took steps to rectify the situation. A reign of terror descended upon Mallorean. Gro-lims were everywhere, and secularism was a form of heresy to them. The sacrifices, long virtually unknown, were renewed with fanatic enthusiasm; soon not a village in all Mallorean did not have its altar and reeking bonfire. In one stroke, Torak's disciples overturned millennia of military and bureaucratic rule and returned absolute dominion to the Gro-lims. Soon there was not one facet of Mallorean life that did not bow abjectly to the will of Torak.

The mobilization of Mallorean in preparation for the war with the West virtually depopulated the continent, and the disaster at Vo Mimbire wiped out an entire generation. The catastrophic campaign, coupled with the apparent death of Torak at the hands of the Rivan Warder, utterly demoralized Mallorean. The doddering old emperor emerged from retirement to try to rebuild the shattered bureaucracy. Grolim efforts to maintain control were met with universal hatred. Without Torak, they had no real power. Most of the emperor's sons

had perished at Vo Mimbire, but one gifted child remained, a boy of seven, the son of his old age. The emperor spent his few remaining years instructing and preparing his son for the task of ruling. When age finally rendered the emperor incompetent, Korzeth, then about fourteen, callously deposed his father and ascended the imperial throne.

After the war, Mallorea society had fractured back to its original components of Melcena, Karanda, Dalasia, and Mallorea Antiqua. There was even a movement to disintegrate further into the prehistoric kingdoms which had existed before the coming of the Angaraks. This movement was par-

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ticularly strong in the principality of Gandahar in southern Melcena, in Zamad and Voresebo in Karanda, and in Perivor in the Dalasian Protectorates. Deceived by Korzeth's youth, these regions rashly declared independence from the imperial throne at Mat Zeth, and other principalities gave indications that they would soon follow suit. Korzeth moved immediately to stem the tide of revolution. The boy emperor spent the rest of his life on horseback in perhaps the greatest bloodbath in history; but when he was done, he delivered a reunified Mallorea to his successor to the throne.

The descendants of Korzeth brought a different kind of rule to the continent. Before the disastrous war, the Emperor of Mallorea had often been little more than a figurehead, and power had largely rested with the bureaucracy. But now the imperial throne was absolute. The center of power shifted from Melcena to Mat Zeth in keeping with the military orientation of Korzeth and his descendants. As is usual when power rests in the hands of one supreme ruler, intrigue became commonplace. Plots and conspiracies abounded as various functionaries schemed to discredit rivals and gain imperial favor. Rather than trying to stop these palace intrigues, Korzeth's descendants encouraged them, perceiving that men divided by mutual distrust could never unite to challenge the power of the throne.

The present emperor, Zakath, assumed the throne during his eighteenth year. Intelligent, sensitive, and capable, he gave early promise of enlightened rule. A personal tragedy, however, turned him from that course and made him a man feared by half the world. Now he is obsessed with the concept of power; the idea of becoming Overking of all the Angaraks has dominated his thoughts for the past two decades. Only time will determine if Zakath will succeed in asserting dominance over the Western Angarak Kingdoms, but if he succeeds, the history of the entire world may be profoundly altered.

Part One

MELGENA

CHAPTER ONE

Her Majesty, Queen Porenn of Drasnia, was in a pensive mood. She stood at the window of her pink-frilled sitting room in the palace at Boktor watching her son Kheva and Unrak, the son of Barak of Trelheim, at play in a garden drenched with morning sunlight. The boys had reached that age where sometimes it seemed almost possible to see them growing, and their voices wavered uncertainly between boyish soprano and manly baritone. Porenn sighed, smoothing the front of her black gown. The Queen of Drasnia had worn black since the death of her husband. "You would be proud of him, my dear Rhodar," she whispered sadly.

There was a light knock at her door.

"Yes?" she replied, not turning.

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"There's a Nadrak here to see you, your Majesty," the aged butler at the door reported. "He says you know him."

"Oh?"

"He says his name is Yarblek."

"Oh, yes. Prince Kheldar's associate. Show him in, please."

"There's a woman with him, your Majesty," the butler said with a disapproving expression. "She uses language your Majesty might prefer not to hear."

Porenn smiled warmly. "That must be Vella," she said. "I've heard her swear before. I don't know that she's really all that serious about it. Show them both in, if you would, please."

"At once, your Majesty."

Yarblek was as shabby as ever. At some point, the shoulder seam of his long black overcoat had given way and had been rudimentarily repaired with a piece of rawhide thong. His beard was coarse and black and scraggly, his hair was unkempt, and he looked as if he didn't smell very good. "Your Majesty," he said grandly, attempting a bow which was marred a bit by an unsteady lurch.

"Drunk already, Master Yarblek?" Porenn asked him archly.

"No, not really, Porenn," he replied, unabashed. "It's just a little carry-over from last night."

The queen was not offended by the Nadrak's use of her first name. Yarblek's grip on formality had never been very firm.

The woman who had entered with him was a stunningly beautiful Nadrak with blue-black hair and smoldering eyes. She was dressed in tight-fitting leather trousers and a black leather vest. A silver-hilled dagger protruded from each of her boot tops, and two more were tucked under the wide leather belt about her waist. She bowed with infinite grace. "You're looking tired, Porenn," she observed. "I think you need more sleep."

Porenn laughed. "Tell that to the people who bring me stacks of parchment every hour or so."

"I made myself a rule years ago," Yarblek said, sprawling uninvited in a chair. "Never put anything down in writing. It saves time as well as keeping me out of trouble." *

"It seems to me that I've heard Kheldar say the same thing."

Yarblek shrugged. "Silk's got a good grip on reality."

"I haven't seen you two for quite some time," Porenn noted, also sitting.

"We've been in Mallorean," Vella told her, wandering around the room and looking appraisingly at the furnishings.

"Isn't that dangerous? I've heard that there's plague there."

"It's pretty much confined to Mal Zeth," Yarblek replied. "Polgara persuaded the Emperor to seal up the city."

"Polgara?" Porenn exclaimed, coming to her feet. "What's she doing in Mallorean?"

"She was going in the general direction of a place called Ashaba the last time I saw her. She had Belgarath and the others with her."

"How did they get to Mallorean?"

"By boat, I'd imagine. It's a long swim."

"Yarblek, am I going to have to drag every single scrap of information out of you?" Porenn demanded in exasperation.

"I'm getting to it, Porenn," he said, sounding a little injured. "Do you want the story first or the messages? I've got lots of messages for you, and Vella's got a couple more that she won't even talk about—at least not to me."

"Just start at the beginning, Yarblek."

"Any way you want it." He scratched at his beard. "The way I got the story is that Silk and Belgarath and the others were in Cthol Murgos. They got captured by the Mallo-reans, and Zakath took them all to Mal Zeth. The young fellow with the big sword—Belgarion, isn't it? Anyway, he and Zakath got to be friends—"

"Garion and Zakath?" Porenn asked incredulously. "How?"

"I wouldn't know. I wasn't there when it happened. To make it short, they were friends, but then the plague broke

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out in Mal Zeth. I managed to sneak Silk and the others out of the city, and we went north. We separated before we got to Venna. They wanted to go to this Ashaba place, and I had a caravan load of goods I wanted to get to Yar Marak. Made a fairly good profit, actually."

"Why were they going to Ashaba?"

"They were after some woman named Zandramas—the one who abducted Belgarion's son."

"A woman! Zandramas is a woman?"

"So they told me. Belgarath gave me a letter for you. It's all in there. I told him that he shouldn't write it down, but he wouldn't listen to me." Yarblek unwound himself from his chair, fished around inside his overcoat, and handed a crumpled and none-too-clean piece of parchment to the queen. Then he strolled to the window and looked out. "Isn't that Trellheim's boy down there?" he asked. "The husky one with the red hair?"

Porenn was reading the parchment. "Yes," she said absently, trying to concentrate on the message.

"Is he here? Trellheim, I mean?"

"Yes. I don't know if he's awake yet, though. He stayed up rather late last night and he was a little tipsy when he went to bed."

Yarblek laughed. "That's Barak, all right. Has he got his wife and daughters with him, too?"

"No," Porenn said. "They stayed in Val Alorn, making the preparations for his oldest daughter's wedding."

"Is she that old already?"

"Chereks marry young. They seem to think it's the best way to keep a girl out of trouble. Barak and his son came here to get away from all the fuss."

Yarblek laughed again. "I think I'll go wake him up and see if he's got anything to drink." He touched his forefinger to the spot between his eyes with a pained look, "I'm feeling a little delicate this morning, and Barak's a good man to get well with. I'll stop back when I'm feeling better. Besides, you've got your mail to read. Oh," he said, "I almost forgot. Here are some others." He started rummaging around inside his shabby coat. "One from Polgara." He tossed it negligently on the table. "One from Belgarion."

One from Silk, and one from the blond girl with the dimples-the one they call Velvet. The snake didn't send anything-you know how snakes are. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm really not feeling too good." He lurched to the door and went out.

"That is the most exasperating man in the world," Porenn declared.

"He does it on purpose." Vella shrugged. "He thinks it's funny."

"Yarblek said that you have some messages for me, too," the queen said. "I suppose I should read them all at once- get all the shocks over with at one time."

"I've only got one, Porenn," Vella replied, "and it isn't in writing. Liselle-the one they call Velvet-asked me to tell you something when we were alone."

"All right," Porenn said, putting down Belgarath's letter.

"I'm not sure how they found out about this," Vella said, "but it seems that the King of Cthol Murgos is not the son of Taur Urgas."

"What are you saying, Vella?"

"Urgit isn't even related to that frothing lunatic. It seems that a number of years ago, a certain Drasnian businessman paid a visit to the palace in Rak Goska. He and Taur Urgas' second wife became friendly." She smiled with one eyebrow slightly raised. "Very friendly. I've always had that suspicion about Murgo women. Anyway, Urgit was the result of that friendship."

A terrible suspicion began to dawn on Queen Porenn.

Vella grinned impishly at her. "We all knew that Silk had royal connections," she said. "We just didn't know how many royal families he was connected to."

"No!" Porenn gasped.

Vella laughed. "Oh, yes. Liselle confronted Urgit's mother with it, and the lady confessed." The Nadrak girl's face grew serious. "The whole point of Liselle's message is that Silk doesn't want that bony fellow, Javelin, to find out about it. Liselle felt that she had to report it to somebody. That's why she told me to pass it on to you. I guess you're supposed to decide whether to tell Javelin or not."

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"How very kind of her," Porenn said drily. "Now they want me to keep secrets from the chief of my own intelligence service."

Vella's eyes twinkled. "Liselle's in a kind of difficult situation, Porenn," she said. "I know that I drink too much and I swear a lot. That makes people think that I'm stupid, but I'm not. Nadrak women know the world, and I have very good eyes. I didn't actually catch them at it, but I'd be willing to wager half the money I'll get when Yarblek sells me that Silk and Liselle are keeping company."

"Vella!"

"I couldn't prove it, Porenn, but I know what I saw." The Nadrak girl sniffed at her leather vest and made a sour face. "If it's not too much trouble, I would really like to take a bath. I've been in the saddle for weeks. Horses are nice enough animals, I suppose, but I really don't want to smell like one."

Porenn's mind was working very fast now; to give herself time to think, she rose and approached the wild Nadrak girl. "Have you ever worn satin, Vella?" she asked. "A gown, perhaps?"

"Satin? Me?" Vella laughed coarsely. "Nadraks never wear satin,"

"Then you might be the very first." Queen Porenn reached out her small white hands and lifted Vella's wealth of blue-black hair into a tumbled mass atop her head. "I'd give my soul for hair like that," she murmured.

"I'll trade you," Vella offered. "Do you know what price I could bring if I were blond?"

"Hush, Vella," Porenn said absently. "I'm trying to think." She twined the girl's hair loosely about her hands, startled at how alive it felt. Then she reached out, lifted Vella's chin, and looked into her huge eyes. Something seemed to reach out and touch the Queen of Drasnia, and she suddenly knew the destiny of this half-wild child before her. "Oh, my dear," she almost laughed, "what an amazing future you have in store for you. You'll touch the sky, Vella, the very sky."

"I really don't know what you're talking about, Porenn."

"You will." Porenn looked at the perfect face before

her. "Yes," she said, "satin, I think. Lavender would be nice."

"I prefer red."

"No, dear," Porenn told her. "Red just wouldn't do. It definitely has to be lavender." She reached out and touched the girl's ears. "And I think amethyst here and here."

"What are you up to?"

"It's a game, child. Drasnians are very good at games. And when I'm done, I'll double your price." Porenn was just a bit smug about it. "Bathe first, then let's see what we can do with you."

Vella shrugged. "As long as I can keep my daggers."

"We'll work that out."

"Can you really do something with a lump like me?" Vella asked, almost plaintively.

"Trust me," Porenn said, smiling. "Now go bathe, child. I have letters to read and decisions to make."

After the Queen of Drasnica had read the letters, she summoned her butler and issued a couple of orders. "I want to speak with the Earl of Trelheim," she said, "before he gets any drunker. I also need to talk with Javelin just as soon as he can get to the palace."

It was perhaps ten minutes later when Barak appeared in her doorway. He was a bit bleary-eyed, and his vast red beard stuck out in all directions. Yarblek came with him.

"Put away your tankards, gentlemen," Porenn said crisply. "There's work to be done. Barak, is the Seabird ready to sail?"

"She's always ready," he said in an injured tone.

"Good. Then round up your sailors. You have a number of places to go. I'm calling a meeting of the Alorn Council. Get word to Anheg, Fulrach, and Brand's son Kail at Riva. Stop off in Arendia and pick up Mandorallen and Lell-dorin." She pursed her lips. "Korodullin's not well enough to travel, so bypass Vo Mimbire. He'd get out of his deathbed to attend if he knew what was going on. Go to Tol Honeth instead and get Varana. I'll send word to Cho-Hag and Het-tar myself. Yarblek, you go to Yar Nadrak and get Drosta. Leave Vella here with me."

"But--"

"No buts, Yarblek. Do exactly as I say."

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"I thought you said this was a meeting of the Alorn Council, Porenn," Barak objected. "Why are we inviting the Arends and the Tolnedrans-and the Nadraks?"

"WeVe got an emergency on our hands, Barak, and it concerns everybody."

They stood staring stupidly at her.

She clapped her hands together sharply. "Quickly, gentlemen, quickly. We don't have any time to waste."

Urgit, High King of Cthol Murgos, sat on his garish throne in the Drojim Palace in Rak Urga. He was dressed in his favorite purple doublet and hose, he had one leg negligently cocked over the arm of the throne, and he was absently tossing his crown back and forth between his hands as he listened to the droning voice of Agachak, the cadaverous-looking Hierarch of Rak Urga. "It's going to have to wait, Agachak," he said finally. "I'm getting married next month."

"This is a command of the Church, Urgit."

"Wonderful. Give the Church my regards."

Agachak looked taken a bit aback. "You don't believe in anything now, do you, my King?"

"Not very much, no. Is this sick world we live in ready for atheism yet?"

For the first time in his life, Urgit saw doubt on the face of the Hierarch. "Atheism's a clean place, Agachak," he said, "a flat, gray, empty place where man makes his own destiny, and let the Gods go hang. I didn't make them; they didn't make me; and we're quits on all of that. I wish them well, though."

"This is unlike you, Urgit," Agachak said.

"No, not really. I'm just tired of playing the clown." He stretched out his leg and tossed his crown at his foot like a hoop. He caught it and kicked it back again. "You don't really understand, do you, Agachak?" he said as he caught the crown out of midair.

The Hierarch of Rak Urga drew himself up. "This is not a request, Urgit. I'm not asking you."

"Good. Because I'm not going."

"I command you to go."

"I don't think so."

"Do you realize to whom you're talking?"

"Perfectly, old boy. You're the same tiresome old Gro-lim who's been boring me to tears ever since I inherited the throne from that fellow who used to chew on the carpets back in Rak Goska. Listen carefully, Agachak. I'll use short words and simple sentences so that I don't confuse you. I am not going to Mallorean. I've never had any intention of going to Mallorean. There's nothing I want to see in Mallorean. There's nothing I want to do there. I most definitely do not intend to put myself anywhere near Kal Zakath, and he's gone back to Mal Zeth. Not only that, they have demons in Mallorean. Have you ever seen a demon, Agachak?"

"Once or twice," the Hierarch replied sullenly.

"And you're still going to Mallorean? Agachak, you're as crazy as Taur Urga was."

"I can make you king of all of Angarak."

"I don't want to be king of all of Angarak. I don't even want to be King of Cthol Murgos. All I want is to be left alone to contemplate the horror that's about to descend on me."

"Your marriage, you mean?" Agachak's face grew sly. "You could evade that by coming to Mallorean with me."

"Have I been going too fast for you, Agachak? A wife is bad enough. Demons are much worse. Did anybody ever tell you what that thing did to Chabat?" Urgit shuddered.

"I can protect you."

Urgit laughed scornfully. "You, Agachak? You couldn't even protect yourself. Even Polgara had to have help from a God to deal with that monster. Do you plan to resurrect Torak to give you a hand? Or maybe you could appeal to Aldur. He's the one who helped Polgara. I don't really think He'd like you, though, /don't even like you, and I've known you all my life."

"You go too far, Urgit."

"No. Not far enough, Agachak. For centuries-eons, probably-you Grolims have held the upper hand in Cthol Murgos, but that was when Ctuchik was still alive, and Ctu-chik is dead now. You did know about that, didn't you, old

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boy? He tried his hand against Belgarath, and Belgarath disassembled him right down to the floor. I may be the only Murgo alive who's ever met Belgarath and lived to talk about it. We're actually on fairly good terms. Would you like to meet him? I could probably arrange an introduction, if you'd like."

Agachak visibly shrank back.

"Much better, Agachak," Urgit said smoothly. "I'm delighted at your grasp of the realities of the situation. Now, I'm certain that you can raise your hand and wiggle your fingers at me, but now I know how to recognize that sort of thing. I watched Belgarion rather closely while we were trotting across Cthaka last winter. If your hand moves even a fraction of an inch, you're going to get about a bushel basket full of arrows right in the middle of the back. The archers are already in place, and their bows are already drawn. Give it some thought, Agachak-while you're leaving."

"This is not like you, Urgit," Agachak said, his nostrils white with fury.

"I know. Delightful, isn't it? You may go now, Agachak."

The Hierarch spun on his heel and started toward the door.

"Oh, by the way, old boy," Urgit added. "I've had news that our dear brother Gethel of Thulldom recently died- probably something he ate. Thulls eat almost anything that swims, flies, crawls, or spawns on rotten meat. It's a pity, actually. Gethel was one of the few people in the world I could bully. Anyway, he's been succeeded on the throne by his half-wit son, Nathel. I've met Nathel. He has the mentality of an earthworm, but he's a true Angarak king. Why don't you see if he wants to go to Mallorea with you? It might take you a while to explain to him where Mallorea is, since I think he believes that the world is flat, but I have every confidence in you, Agachak." Urgit flipped his hand at the fuming Hierarch. "Run along now," he said. "Go back to your temple and gut a few more Grolims. Maybe you can even get the fires started in your sanctum again. If nothing else, I'm sure it will calm your nerves."

Agachak stormed out, slamming the door behind him.

Urgit doubled over, pounding on the arm of his throne and howling in glee.

"Don't you think you might have gone just a bit too far, my son?" Lady Tamazin asked from the shadowy alcove where she had been listening.

"Perhaps so, mother," he agreed, still laughing, "but wasn't it fun?"

She limped into the light and smiled fondly at him. "Yes, Urgit," she agreed, "it was, but don't push Agachak too far. He can be a dangerous enemy."

"I've got lots of enemies, mother," Urgit said, tugging unconsciously at his long, pointed nose. "Most of the people in the world hate me, but I've learned to live with that. It's not as if I had to run for reelection, you know."

The bleak-faced seneschal, Oskatat, also came out of the shadowed alcove. "What are we going to do with you, Urgit?" he said wryly. "What did Belgarion teach you, anyway?"

"He taught me how to be a king, Oskatat. I may not last very long, but by the Gods, as long as I'm here, I'm going to be a king. They're going to kill me anyway, so I might as well enjoy myself while I can."

His mother sighed, then raised her hands helplessly. "There's no reasoning with him, Oskatat," she said.

"I suppose not, my Lady Tamazin," the gray-haired man agreed.

"Princess Praia wants to speak with you," Tamazin said to her son.

"I am at her immediate disposal," Urgit said. "Not only immediate, but perpetual, if I understand the terms of the marriage contract."

"Be nice," Tamazin chided.

"Yes, mother."

The Princess Praia of the House of Cthan swept in through a side door. She wore a riding habit consisting of a calf-length black skirt, a white satin blouse and polished boots. Her heels hit the marble floor like little hammers. Her long black hair swayed at her back, and her eyes were dangerous. She held a parchment scroll in her hands.

"Will you assist me, my Lord Oskatat?" Lady Tamazin asked, holding one hand out to the seneschal.

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"Of course, my Lady," he replied, offering his arm to Urgit's mother with tender solicitude. The two of them withdrew.

"Now what?" Urgit warily asked his bride-to-be.

"Am I disturbing your Majesty?" Praia asked. She did not bother to curtsy. The princess had changed. She was no longer a properly submissive Murgo lady. The time she had spent with Queen Ce'Nedra and the Margravine Lis-elle had definitely corrupted her, Urgit felt, and the unwholesome influence of Polgara the sorceress showed in her every move and gesture. She was, however, Urgit concluded, absolutely adorable now. Her black eyes flashed, her delicate white skin seemed to reflect her mood, and her wealth of black hair seemed almost alive as it flowed down her back. Rather surprisingly, Urgit found that he was very fond of her.

"You always disturb me, my beloved," he answered her question, spreading his arms extravagantly.

"Stop that," she snapped. "You sound like your brother."

"It runs in the family."

"Did you put this in here?" she demanded, waving the scroll at him like a club.

"Did I put what in where?"

"This." She unrolled the scroll. " 'It is agreed that Princess Praia of the House of Cthan shall be his majesty's most favored wife, ' " she read. "Most favored wife" came out from between clenched teeth.

"What's wrong with that?" he asked, a little surprised at the girl's vehemence.

"The implication is that there will be others."

"It's the custom, Praia. I didn't make the rules."

"You're the king. Make different rules."

"Me?" He swallowed hard.

"There will be no other wives, Urgit-or royal concubines." Her usually gentle voice seemed to crackle. "You are mine, and I'm not going to share you with anybody."

"Do you really feel that way?" he asked, a bit amazed.

"Yes, I do." She lifted her chin.

"Nobody's ever felt that way about me before."

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' 'Get used to it." Her voice was flat and had the overtone of daggers in it.

"We'll amend the passage," he agreed quickly. "I don't need more than one wife anyway."

"Definitely not, my Lord. A very wise decision."

"Naturally. All royal decisions are wise. It says so in the history books."

She tried very hard not to smile, but finally gave up, laughed, and hurled herself into his arms. "Oh, Urgit," she said burrowing her face into his neck, "I do love you."

"You do? What an amazing thing." Suddenly an idea came to him, and its sheer purity almost blinded him. "What's your feeling about a double wedding, love?" he asked her.

She pulled her face back from where she had been grazing on his neck. "I don't quite follow you," she admitted.

"I'm the king, right?"

"A little more than you were before you met Belgarion," she admitted.

He let that pass. "I've got this female relative," he said. "I'm going to be busy being married."

"Very busy, my love," she agreed.

He coughed nervously. "Anyway," he rushed on. "I'm not really going to have all that much time to look after this certain female relative, am I? Wouldn't it be better if I married her off to some deserving fellow who's always held her in the highest regard?"

"I don't quite follow you, Urgit. I didn't think you had any female relatives."

"Only one, my princess," he grinned. "Only one."

She stared at him. "Urgit!" she gasped.

He gave her a rat-faced little grin. "I'm the king," he said grandly. "I can do anything I want to do, and my mother's been alone for far too long, wouldn't you say? Oskatat's loved her since she was a girl, and she's at least fond of him-although I think it might go a little farther than that. If I order them to get married, they'd have to do it, wouldn't they?"

"That's absolutely brilliant, Urgit," she marveled.

"It comes from my Drasnian heritage," he admitted

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modestly. "Kheldar himself couldn't have come up with a neater scheme."

"It's perfect," she almost squealed. "This way I won't have a mother-in-law interfering when I start changing you."

"Changing?"

"Just a few little things, love," she said sweetly. "You have a few bad habits, and your taste in clothing is terrible. Whatever possessed you to start wearing purple?"

"Anything else?"

"I'll bring the list with me next time I visit."

Urgit began to have second thoughts at that point.

His Imperial Majesty, Kal Zakath of Malloreia, had a busy morning that day. Most of the time, he was closeted with Brador, Chief of the Bureau of Internal Affairs, in a small, blue-draped office on the second floor of the palace.

"It's definitely subsiding, your Majesty," Brador reported when the subject of the plague came up. "There hasn't been a new case in the past week, and a surprising number of people are actually recovering. The plan of walling off each separate district of the city seems to have worked."

"Good," Zakath said. He turned to another matter. "Is there any further word out of Karanda?"

Brador shuffled through the papers he was holding. "Mengha hasn't been seen for several weeks now, your Majesty." The Chief of the Bureau of Internal Affairs smiled briefly. "That particular plague also seems to be subsiding. The demons appear to have left, and the fanatics are losing heart." He tapped one of the papers against his pursed lips. "This is only an educated guess, your Majesty, since I can't get any agents into the region, but the turmoil appears to have shifted to the east coast. Shortly after Mengha disappeared, large bodies of Karandese irregular troops, along with Urvon's Temple Guardsmen and his Chandim, crossed the Mountains of Zamad, and all communications out of Voresebo and Rengel have broken down."

"Urvon?" Zakath asked.

"It appears so, your Majesty. I'd say that the Disciple is moving into position for a final confrontation with Zandra-

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mas. One is tempted to suggest that we just let them fight it out. I don't think that the world would miss either of them very much."

A faint, icy smile touched Zakath's lips. "You're right, Brador," he said. "It is tempting, but I don't think we should encourage that sort of thing—just as a matter of policy. Those principalities are a part of the empire and they're entitled to imperial protection. It might start some ugly rumors if we were to just stand idly by and let Urvon and Zandramas rip up the countryside. If anybody brings military force to bear in Malloreia, it's going to be me." He leafed through the papers on the table in front of him, picked one up, and frowned at it. "I suppose we'd better deal with this," he said. "Where have you got Baron Vasca?"

"He's in a cell with a splendid view," Brador replied. "He can look out at the executioner's block. I'm sure it's been most educational."

Zakath remembered something then. "Demote him," he said.

"That's a novel word for the procedure," Brador murmured.

"That's not exactly what I meant," Zakath said with another chill smile. "Persuade him to tell us where he hid all the money he extorted from the people he dealt with. We'll transfer the funds to the imperial treasury." He turned to look at the large map on the wall of his study. "Southern Ebal, I think."

"Your Majesty?" Brador looked puzzled.

"Assign him to the post of Minister of Trade in southern Ebal."

"There isn't any trade in southern Ebal, your Majesty. There aren't any seaports, and the only thing they raise in the Temba marshes is mosquitoes."

"Vasca's inventive. I'm sure he'll come up with something."

"Then you don't want him—" Brador made a suggestive gesture across his throat with one hand.

"No," Zakath said. "I'm going to try something Belga-rion suggested. I may need Vasca again someday and I don't want to have to dig him up in pieces." A faintly pained

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look crossed the Emperor's face. "Has there been any word about him?" he asked.

"Vasca? I just—"

"No. Belgarion."

"They were seen shortly after they left Mal Zeth, your Majesty. They were traveling with Prince Kheldar's Nadrak partner, Yarblek. Not long after that, Yarblek sailed for Gar og Nadrak."

"It was all a ruse, then," Zakath sighed. "All Belgarion really wanted was to get back to his own country. That wild story of theirs was made up out of whole cloth." Zakath passed a weary hand before his eyes. "I really liked that young man, Brador," he said sadly. "I should have known better."

"Belgarion didn't go back to the West, your Majesty," Brador informed him, "at least not with Yarblek. We always check that fellow's ships rather closely. So far as we're able to determine, Belgarion has not left Mallorea."

Zakath leaned back with a genuine smile on his face. "I'm not sure why, but that makes me feel better. The thought that he'd betrayed me was quite painful for some reason. Any idea about where he's gone?"

"There was some turmoil in Katakora, your Majesty-up around Ashaba. It was the sort of thing one might associate with Belgarion-strange lights in the sky, explosions, that sort of thing."

Zakath laughed out loud, a delighted kind of laugh. "He can be a little ostentatious when he's irritated, can't he? He blew the whole wall out of my bedchamber in Rak Hagga one time."

"Oh?"

"He was trying to make a point."

There was a respectful rap on the door.

"Come," Zakath replied shortly.

"General Atesca has arrived, your Majesty," one of the red-garbed guards at the door reported.

"Good. Send him in."

The broken-nosed general entered and saluted smartly. "Your Majesty," he said. His red uniform was travel-stained.

"You made good time, Atesca," Zakath said. "It's good to see you again."

"Thank you, your Majesty. We had a good following wind, and the sea was calm."

"How many men did you bring with you?"

"About fifty thousand."

"How many men do we have now?" Zakath asked Brador.

"Something in excess of a million, your Majesty."

"That's a solid number. Let's stage up the troops and get ready to move." He rose and went to the window. The leaves had begun to turn, filling the garden below with bright reds and yellows. "I want to quiet things down on the east coast," he said, "and it's turning into autumn now, so I think we want to move the troops before the weather starts to deteriorate. We'll go on down to Maga Renn and send out scouting parties from there. If the circumstances are right, we'll march. If not, we can wait at Maga Renn for more troops to come back from Cthol Murgos."

"I'll get started on that immediately, your Majesty." Brador bowed and quietly left the room.

"Sit down, Atesca," the Emperor said. "What's happening in Cthol Murgos?"

"We're going to try to hold the cities we've already taken, your Majesty," Atesca reported, drawing up a chair. "We've gathered the bulk of our forces near Rak Cthan. They're waiting there for transport to bring them back to Mallorea."

"Any chance that Urgit might try a counterattack?"

"I wouldn't think so, your Majesty. I don't believe he'll gamble his army in open country. Of course, you never know what a Murgo might do."

"That's true," Zakath agreed. He kept his knowledge that Urgit was not actually a Murgo to himself. He leaned back. "You captured Belgarion for me once, Atesca," he said.

"Yes, your Majesty."

"I'm afraid you're going to have to do it again. He managed to get away. Careless of me, I suppose, but I had a lot on my mind at the time."

"We'll just have to pick him up again then, won't we, your Majesty?"

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The Alorn Council met at Bektor that year. Somewhat uncharacteristically, Queen Porenn took charge. The tiny blond queen of Drasnia, dressed in her usual black, walked quietly to the head of the table in the red-draped council chamber in the palace and took the chair normally reserved for the Rivan King. The others stared at her in astonishment.

"Gentlemen," she began crisply, "I recognize the fact that this flies in the face of tradition, but our time is limited. Certain information has come to me that I think you should be made aware of. We have decisions to make and very little time in which to make them."

Emperor Varana leaned back in his chair with an amused twinkle in his eyes. "We will now pause while the Alorn kings go into collective apoplexy," he said.

King Anheg scowled at the curly-haired emperor for a moment, then laughed. "No, Varana," he said wryly. "We all got that out of our systems when Rhodar persuaded us to follow Ce'Nedra into Mishrak ac Thull. It's Porenn's house; let her run things."

"Why, thank you, Anheg." The Queen of Drasnia actually sounded a little surprised. She paused, gathering her thoughts. "As I'm sure you've noticed, our gathering this year includes kings who would not normally attend. The matter before us, however, concerns us all. I've recently received communications from Belgarath, Belgarion, and the others."

There was an excited stir in the room. Porenn held up one hand. "They're in Mallorea, close on the trail of the abductor of Belgarion's son."

"That young man can move faster than the wind sometimes," King Fulrach of Sendaria observed. The years had given Fulrach a tendency toward portliness, and his brown beard was now streaked with silver.

"How did they get to Mallorea?" King Cho-Hag asked in his quiet voice.

"It seems that they were captured by Kal Zakath," Porenn replied. "Garion and Zakath became friends, and Zakath took them with him when he returned to Mal Zeth."

"Zakath actually became friends with somebody?" King

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Drosta of Gar og Nadrak demanded incredulously in his shrill voice. "Impossible!"

"Garion has a way about him, sometimes," Hettar murmured.

"The friendship, however, may have run its course," Porenn continued. "Late one night, Garion and his friends slipped out of Mal Zeth without saying good-bye to the Emperor."

"With the whole imperial army on their trail, I'd imagine," Varana added.

"No," Porenn disagreed. "Zakath can't leave Mal Zeth just now. Tell them, Yarblek."

Silk's rangy partner rose to his feet. "They've got plague in Mal Zeth," he said. "Zakath has sealed up the city. No one can go in or out."

"Prithee," Mandorallen asked, "how then was it possible for our friends to make good their escape?"

"I'd picked up an itinerant comedian," Yarblek said sourly. "I didn't think much of him, but he amused Vella. She's fond of bawdy stories."

"Be careful, Yarblek," the Nadrak dancer warned. "You still have your health, but I can fix that for you." She put one hand suggestively on a dagger hilt. Vella wore a stunning lavender gown. There were a few concessions to Nadrak customs in her dress, however. She still wore polished leather boots-with daggers in their tops-and the customary wide leather belt about her waist was still adorned with similar knives. The men in the room, however, had all been surreptitiously eyeing her since she had entered. No matter how she was dressed, Vella still had the power to attract every eye.

"Anyway," Yarblek hurried on, "the fellow knew of a tunnel that runs from the palace to an abandoned quarry outside the city. It got us all out of Mal Zeth with no one the wiser."

"Zakath won't like that," Drosta said. "He hates to let people go once he's caught them."

"There's been an uprising of some sort in the Seven Kingdoms of Karanda in northern Mallorean," Porenn went on. "I understand that there are demons involved."

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"Demons?" Varana said skeptically. "Oh, come now, Porenn."

"That's what Belgarath reports."

"Belgarath has a warped sense of humor, sometimes," Varana scoffed. "He was probably just joking. There's no such thing as a demon."

"You're wrong, Varana," King Drosta said with uncharacteristic soberness. "I saw one once-up in Morindland when I was a boy."

"What did it look like?" Varana did not sound convinced.

Drosta shuddered. "You really don't want to know."

"At any rate," Porenn said, "Zakath has ordered the bulk of his army back from Cthol Murgos to put down this uprising. It won't be very long until he floods the entirety of K a ran da with troops, and that's the area where our friends are. That's why I've called this meeting. What are we going to do about it?"

Lelldorin of Wildantor came to his feet. "We'll need fast horses," he said to Hettar.

"Why?" Hettar asked.

"To get to their aid, of course." The young Asturian's eyes were flashing with excitement.

"Uh-Lelldorin," Barak said gently, "the Sea of the East is between here and Malloreia."

"Oh," Lelldorin said, looking slightly abashed. "I didn't know that. We'll need a boat, too, won't we?"

Barak and Hettar exchanged a long look. "Ship," Barak corrected absently.

"What?"

"Never mind, Lelldorin," Barak sighed.

"We can't," King Anheg said flatly. "Even if we could get through, we'd destroy Garion's chances of winning in the fight with the Child of Dark. That's what the Seeress told us at Rheon, remember?"

"But this is different," Lelldorin protested, tears standing in his eyes.

"No," Anheg said. "It's not. This is exactly what we were warned against. We can't go near them until this is over."

"But--"

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"Lelldorin," Anheg said. "I want to go as much as you do, but we can't. Would Garion thank us if we were responsible for the loss of his son?"

Madorallen rose to his feet and began to pace up and down, his armor clinking. "Methinks thy reasoning is aright, your Majesty," he said to Anheg. "We may not join with our friends, lest our presence imperil their quest, and we would all give up our lives to prevent that. We may, however, journey straightaway to Malloreia and, without going near them, place ourselves between them and the hordes of Kal Zakath. We can thereby bring the unfriendly advance of the Malloreans to a precipitous halt and thus allow Gar-ion to escape."

Barak stared at the great knight, whose face shone with unthinking zeal. Then he groaned and buried his face in his hands.

"There, there," Hettar murmured, patting the big man sympathetically on the shoulder.

King Fulrach nibbled at his beard. "Why does it seem that we've done this before?" he asked. "It's the same as last time. We have to create a diversion to help our friends get through. Any ideas?"

"Invade Malloreia," Drosta said eagerly.

"Sack Zakath's coastline," Anheg said just as eagerly.

Porenn sighed.

"We could invade Cthol Murgos," Cho-Hag suggested thoughtfully.

"Yes!" Hettar agreed fiercely.

Cho-Hag held up his hand. "Only as a ruse, my son," he said. "Zakath has committed forces to the conquest of Cthol Murgos. If the armies of the West moved into that region, he'd almost be obliged to try to counter us, wouldn't he?"

Varana slid lower in his chair. "It's got possibilities," he admitted, "but it's already autumn, and the mountains of Cthol Murgos are brutal in the winter. It's a bad time to move troops around down there. An army can't move very fast on frozen feet. I think we might be able to accomplish the same thing by diplomacy-without risking a single toe."

"Trust a Tolnedran to be devious," Anheg growled.

"Do you like freezing, Anheg?" Varana asked.

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Anheg shrugged. "It's something to do in the wintertime," he said.

Varana rolled his eyes ceilingward. "Alorns," he said.

"All right," Anheg said by way of apology. "I was only joking. What's this brilliantly devious plan of yours?"

Varana looked across the room at Javelin. "How good is the Malloreal intelligence service, Margrave Khendon?" he asked bluntly.

Javelin rose to his feet, straightening his pearl-gray doublet. "By himself, Brador is very good, your Imperial Majesty," he replied. "His people are sometimes awkward and obvious, but he has a lot of them. He has unlimited money to work with." He cast a slightly reproachful glance at Queen Porenn.

"Be nice, Khendon," she murmured. "I'm on a tight budget."

"Yes, ma'am." He bowed with a faint smile, then straightened and spoke in a crisp, businesslike manner. "Malloreal intelligence is crude by our standards, but Bra-dor has the resources to put as many agents in the field as he needs. Neither Drasnian nor Tolnedran intelligence has that luxury. Brador sometimes loses a hundred people in the process, but he can usually get the information." He sniffed disdainfully. "I prefer a neater type of operation, personally."

"Then this Brador has operatives in Rak Urga?" Varana pressed.

"Almost certainly," Javelin replied. "I have four in the Drojim Palace at this time myself-and your Majesty's service has two that I know of."

"I didn't know that," Varana said with an innocent look.

"Really?"

Varana laughed. "AH right," he went on, "what would Zakath do if word reached Mat Zeth that the Kingdoms of the West were about to conclude a military alliance with the King of Murgodum?"

Javelin began to pace up and down. "It's very hard to know exactly what Zakath will do in any given situation," he mused. "A lot depends on just how serious his domestic problems are, but an alliance between the Murgos and the West would pose a major threat to Mallorean. He'd almost

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have to come back immediately and make an all-out effort to crush the Murgos before our troops could reinforce them."

"Ally ourselves with the Murgos?" Hettar exclaimed. "Never!"

"Nobody's suggesting a real alliance, my Lord Hettar," Kail, the son of the Rivan Warder, told him, "All we want to do is distract Zakath for long enough to give Belgarion the time to slip past him. The negotiations can drag on and then fall apart later on."

"Oh," Hettar said, looking a bit abashed, "that's different, then-I suppose."

"All right," Varana went on crisply. "Perhaps we can persuade Zakath that we're about to conclude an alliance with Urgit-if we do it right. Javelin, have your people kill a few Mallorean agents in the Drojim Palace-not all of them, mind you-just enough to convince Mal Zeth that this is a serious diplomatic effort."

"I understand perfectly, your Majesty," Javelin smiled. "I have just the man-a recently recruited Nyissan assassin named Issus."

"Good. A possible alliance will serve the same purpose as a real one. We can distract Zakath without the loss of a single man-unless we count this Issus fellow."

"Don't worry about Issus, your Majesty," Javelin assured him. "He's a survivor."

"I think we're missing something," Anheg growled. "I wish Rhodar were here."

"Yes," Porenn agreed in a voice near to tears.

"Sorry, Porenn," Anheg said, engulfing her tiny hand in his huge one, "but you know what I mean."

"I have a diplomat in Rak Urga," Varana continued. "He can make the overtures to King Urgit. Do we know anything useful about the King of the Murgos?"

"Yes," Porenn said firmly. "He'll be amenable to the suggestion."

"How do you know, your Majesty?"

Porenn hesitated. "I'd rather not say," she said with a quick glance at Javelin. "Just take my word for it."

"Of course," Varana agreed.

Vella rose and walked to the window, her satin gown fill-

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ing the room with its music. "You people of the West always want to complicate things," she said critically. "Zakath's your problem. Send somebody to Mal Zeth with a sharp knife."*

"You should have been a man, Vella." Anheg laughed.

She turned and looked at him with smoldering eyes. "Do you really think so?" she asked.

"Well," he hesitated, "maybe not."

She leaned disconsolately against the window casing. "I wish I had my juggler here to entertain me," she said. "Politics always give me a headache." She sighed. "I wonder whatever happened to him."

Porenn smiled, watching the girl intently and remembering the sudden insight she had when the Nadrak girl first arrived in Boktor. "Would you be terribly disappointed to find out that your juggler was not who he seemed to be?" she asked. "Belgarath mentioned him in his letter."

Vella looked at her sharply.

"Belgarath would have known him, of course," Porenn went on. "It was Beldin,"

Vella's eyes went wide. "The hunchbacked sorcerer?" she exclaimed. "The one who can fly?"

Porenn nodded.

Vella said a number of things that no genteel lady would have said. Even King Anheg turned slightly pale at her choice of language. Then she drew a dagger and advanced on Yarblek, her bream hissing between her teeth. Mandor-allen, clad all in steel, stepped in front of her, and Hettar and Barak seized her from behind and wrested the knife from her grasp.

"You idiot!" she shrieked at the cringing Yarblek. "You absolute idiot! You could have sold me to him!" Then she collapsed weeping against Barak's fur-clad chest, even as Hettar prudently relieved her of her other three daggers.

Zandramas, the Child of Dark, stood gazing across a desolate valley where shattered villages smoked and smoldered under a lead-gray sky. The eyes of the Child of Dark were hooded, and she looked unseeing at the devastation spread before her. A lusty wail came from behind her, and she set her teeth together. "Feed him," she said shortly.

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"As you command, mistress," the man with white eyes said quickly in a mollifying tone.

"Don't patronize me, Naradas," she snapped. "Just shut the brat up. I'm trying to think."

It had been a long time. Zandramas had worked everything out so very carefully. Now she had come half around the world, and, despite her best efforts, the Godslayer with his dreadful sword was but a few days behind her.

The sword. The flaming sword. It filled her sleep with nightmares-and the burning face of the Child of Light terrified her even more. "How does he stay so close behind?" she exploded. "Will nothing slow him?"

She thrust her hands out in front of her and turned them palm-up. A myriad of tiny points of light seemed to swirl beneath the skin of her hands-swirling, glittering like a constellation of minuscule stars spinning in

her very flesh. How long would it be until those constellations invaded her entire body and she ceased even to be human? How long until the dreadful spirit of the Child of Dark possessed her utterly? The child wailed again.

"I told you to shut him up!" she half shouted.

"At once, mistress," Naradas said.

The Child of Dark went back to the contemplation of the starry universe enclosed in her flesh.

Eriond and Horse rode out at the first light before the others had awakened, cantering across a mountain meadow in the silvery dawn-light. It was good to ride alone, to feel the surge and flow of Horse's muscles under him and the wind against his face without the distraction of talk.

He reined in atop a knoll to watch the sun rise, and that was good, too. He looked out over the sun-touched mountains of Zamad, drinking in the beauty and solitude, then gazed at the fair sight of the bright green fields and forests. Life was good here. The world was filled with loveliness and with people he loved.

How could Aldur have forced Himself to leave all this? Aldur had been the God who must have loved this world above all things, since He had refused to take a people to worship Him, but had chosen to spend His time alone to

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study this fair world. And now He could only visit occasionally in spiritual form.

But Aldur had accepted the sacrifice. Eriond sighed, feeling that perhaps no sacrifice could be truly unbearable if it were made out of love. Eriond took comfort in that belief.

Then he sighed again and slowly rode back toward the little lake and the cluster of tents where the others slept.

CHAPTER TWO

They rose late that morning. The turmoil of the past several weeks seemed finally to have caught up with Garion, and, even though he could tell by the light streaming in through the front of the tent that the sun was already high, he was reluctant to move. He could hear the clinking of Polgara's cooking utensils and the murmur of voices. He knew that he was going to have to get up soon anyway. He considered trying to doze off to catch a last few moments of sleep, but he decided against it. He moved carefully to avoid waking Ce'Nedra as he slid out from under their blankets. He leaned over and gently kissed her hair, then he pulled on his rust-colored tunic, picked up his boots and sword, and ducked out of the tent.

Polgara, in her gray traveling dress, was by her cook-fire. As usual, she hummed softly as she worked. Silk and Bel-37

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garath were talking quietly nearby. Silk had, for some reason, changed clothes and he now wore the soft, pearl-gray doublet which marked him as a prosperous businessman. Belgarath, of course, still wore his rust-colored tunic, patched hose, and mismatched boots. Durnik and Toth were fishing, lacing the blue surface of the little mountain lake with their lines, and Eriond was brushing the gleaming chestnut coat of his stallion. The rest of their friends had apparently not arisen yet.

"We thought you were going to sleep all day," Belgarath said as Garion sat on a log to pull on his boots.

"I gave it some thought," Garion admitted. He stood up and looked across the sparkling lake. There was a grove of aspens on the far side, their trunks the color of new snow. The leaves had begun to turn and they shimmered in the morning sun like beaten gold. The air was cool and slightly damp. Suddenly he wished that they could stay here for a few days. He sighed and walked over to join his grandfather and Silk near the fire. "Why the fancy clothes?" he asked the rat-faced little Drasnian.

Silk shrugged. "We're moving into an area where I'm fairly well known," he replied. "We might be able to take advantage of that-as long as people recognize me. Are you absolutely sure the trail goes toward the southeast?"

Garion nodded. "There was a little confusion right at first, but I got it sorted out."

"Confusion?" Belgarath asked.

"The Sardion was here, too-a long time ago. For a few moments, the Orb seemed to want to follow both trails at the same time. I had to speak with it rather firmly about that." Garion draped the sword belt over his shoulder and buckled it. Then he shifted the scabbard slightly until it was more comfortable. The Orb on the pommel of the sword was glowing a sullen red color.

"Why's it doing that?" Silk asked curiously.

"Because of the Sardion," Garion told him. He looked over his shoulder at the glowing stone. "Stop that," he said.

"Don't hurt its feelings," Silk warned. "We could be in a great deal of trouble if it decides to start sulking."

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"What lies off to the southeast?" Belgarath asked the little man.

"Voresebo," Silk replied. "There isn't much there except some caravan tracks and a few mines up in the mountains. There's a seaport at Pannor. I land there sometimes on my way back from Melcena."

"Are the people there Karands?"

Silk nodded. "But they're even cruder than the ones back in the central kingdoms-if that's possible."

The blue-banded hawk came spiraling out of a bright morning sky, flared, and shimmered into the form of Beldin as soon as the talons touched the ground. The hunchbacked little sorcerer was dressed in his usual rags tied on with bits of thong, and twigs and straw clung to his hair and beard. He shivered. "I hate to fly when it's cold," he grumbled. "It makes my wings ache."

"It's not really that cold," Silk said.

"Try it a couple thousand feet up." Beldin pointed toward the sky, then turned, and spat out a couple of soggy gray feathers.

"Grazing again, uncle?" Polgara asked from her cook-fire.

"Just a bite of breakfast, Pol," he replied. "There was a pigeon that got up too early this morning."

"You didn't have to do that, you know." She tapped meaningfully on the side of her bubbling pot with a long-handled wooden spoon.

Beldin shrugged. "The world isn't going to miss one pigeon."

Garion shuddered. "How can you stand to eat them raw like that?"

"You get used to it. I've never had much luck trying to build a cook-fire with my talons." He looked at Belgarath. "There's some trouble up ahead," he said, "a lot of smoke and groups of armed men wandering around."

"Could you see who they were?"

"I didn't get that close. There's usually a bored archer or two in any crowd like that, and I'd prefer not to have my tail feathers parted with an arrow just because some idiot wants to show off his skill."

"Has that ever happened?" Silk asked curiously.

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"Once-a long time ago. My hip still aches in cold weather."

"Did you do something about it?"

"I had a chat with the archer. I asked him not to do it any more. He was breaking his bow across his knee when I left." He turned back to Belgarath. "Are we sure the trail goes on down to that plain?"

"The Orb is."

"Then we'll have to chance it." The little man looked around. "I thought you'd have struck the tents by now."

"I decided it might not hurt to let everybody get some sleep. We've been traveling hard and we're going to have to do it some more, I think."

"You always want to pick these idyllic spots for your rest stops, Belgarath," Beldin observed. "I think you're secretly a romantic."

Belgarath shrugged. "Nobody's perfect."

"Garion," Polgara called.

"Yes, Aunt Pol?"

"Why don't you wake the others? Breakfast's almost ready."

"Right away, Aunt Pol."

After breakfast, they broke camp and started out about midmorning with Beldin flying on ahead to scout out possible trouble. It was pleasantly warm now, and there was the pungent smell of evergreens in the air.

Ce'Nedra was strangely quiet as she rode along beside Garion with her dark gray cloak pulled tightly around her.

"What's the matter, dear?" he asked her.

"She didn't have Geran with her," the little queen murmured sadly.

"Zandramas. you mean? No, she didn't, did she?"

"Was she really there, Garion?"

"In a way, but in a way she wasn't. It was sort of the way Cyradis was here and not here at the same time."

"I don't understand."

"It was more man a projection, but less than actually being there. We talked it over last night, and Beldin explained it. I didn't understand very much of what he said. Beldin's explanations get a little obscure sometimes."

"He's very wise, isn't he?"

Garion nodded. "But he's not a very good teacher. He gets impatient with people who can't keep up with him. Anyway, this business of being somewhere between a projection and the real thing makes Zandramas very dangerous. We can't hurt her, but she can hurt us. She came very close to killing you yesterday, you know-until Poledra stopped her. She's very much afraid of Poledra."

"That's the first time I've ever seen your grandmother."

"No, actually it's not. She was there at Aunt Pol's wedding, remember? And she helped us in Ulgoland when we had to fight the Eldrak."

"But one time she was an owl, and the other time she was a wolf."

"In Poledra's case, I don't think that really matters."

Ce'Nedra suddenly laughed.

"What's so funny?"

"When this is all over and we're back home with our baby, why don't you change into a wolf for a while?" she suggested.

"Why?"

"It might be nice having a big gray wolf lying before the fire. And then on cold nights, I could burrow my feet into your fur to keep them warm."

He gave her a long steady look.

"I'd scratch your ears for you, Garion," she offered by way of inducement, "and get you nice bones from die kitchen to chew on."

"Never mind," he said flatly.

"But my feet get cold."

"I've noticed."

Just ahead of them as they rode up through a shady mountain pass, Silk and Sadi were engaged in a heated discussion. "Absolutely not," Silk said vehemently.

"I really think you're being unreasonable about this, Kheldar," Sadi protested. The eunuch had discarded his iridescent silk robe and now wore western-style tunic and hose and stout boots. "You have the distribution system already in place, and I have access to unlimited supplies. We could make millions."

"Forget it, Sadi. I won't deal in drugs."

"You deal in everything else, Kheldar. There's a market

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out there just waiting to be tapped. Why let scruples stand in the way of business?"

"You're Nyissan, Sadi. Drugs are a part of your culture, so you wouldn't understand."

"Lady Polgara uses drugs when she treats the sick," Sadi pointed out defensively.

"That's different."

"I don't see how."

"I could never explain it to you."

Sadi sighed. "I'm very disappointed in you, Kheldar. You're a spy, an assassin, and a thief. You cheat at dice, you counterfeit money, and you're unscrupulous with married women. You swindle your customers outrageously and you soak up ale like a sponge. You're the most corrupt man I've ever known, but you refuse to transport a few harmless little compounds that would make your customers very happy."

"A man has to draw the line somewhere," Silk replied loftily.

Velvet shifted in her saddle to look back at them. "That was one of the more fascinating conversations I've ever heard, gentlemen," she complimented them. "The implications in the field of comparative morality are absolutely staggering." She gave them a sunny smile with her dimples flashing into view.

"Uh-Margravine Liselle," Sadi said. "Do you happen to have Zith again?"

"Why, yes, Sadi, as a matter of fact, I do." The honey-blond girl held up one hand to head off his objections. "But I didn't steal her this time. She crawled into my tent in the middle of the night and crept into her favorite hiding place all on her own. The poor dear was actually shivering."

Silk turned slightly pale.

"Would you like to have her back?" Velvet asked the shaved-headed eunuch.

"No," Sadi sighed, rubbing his hand over his scalp, "I suppose not. As long as she's happy where she is, we might as well leave her there."

"She's very happy. In fact, she's purring." Velvet frowned slightly. "I think you should watch her diet just a bit, Sadi," she said critically. "Her little tummy seems to

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be getting bigger." She smiled again. "We wouldn't want a fat snake on our hands, would we?"

"Well, excuse me!" Sadi said, sounding very offended.

There was a large snag at the top of the pass, and the blue-banded hawk perched on a dead limb, busily preening his feathers with his hooked beak. As they approached, he swooped down, and Beldin stood in the trail in front of them, muttering curses.

"Something wrong, uncle?" Polgara asked him.

"I got caught in a crosswind," he growled. "It scrambled my feathers a bit. You know how that goes."

"Oh, goodness yes. It happens to me all the time. Night breezes are so unpredictable."

"Your feathers are too soft."

"I didn't design the owl, uncle, so don't blame me about the feathers."

"There's a crossroads tavern just up ahead," Beldin said to Belgarath. "Did you want to stop and see if we can find out what's going on down there on the plain?"

"That might not be a bad idea," Belgarath agreed. "Let's not ride into trouble if we don't have to."

"I'll wait for you inside then," Beldin said and soared away again.

Polgara sighed. "Why must it always be a tavern?" she complained.

"Because people who've been drinking like to talk, Pol," Belgarath explained in a reasonable tone. "You can gather more information in five minutes in a tavern than you can in an hour in a tearoom."

"I knew you'd be able to find a reason for it."

"Naturally."

They crossed over the top of the wooded pass and on down the shade-splotched trail to the tavern. It was a low building made of logs crudely chinked with mud. The roof was low, and its shingles had curled with the weather and the passage of years. Buff-colored chickens scratched at the dirt in the dooryard, and a large speckled sow lay in a mud puddle, nursing a litter of happily grunting piglets. There were a few spavined nags tied to a hitch rail in front of the tavern, and a Karand dressed in mom-eaten furs snored on the front stoop.

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Polgara reined in her horse as they approached the tavern and the first whiff of its reeking interior reached her nostrils. "I think, ladies, that we might prefer to wait over there in the shade."

"There is a certain fragrance coming out that door, isn't there?" Velvet agreed.

"You, too, Eriond," Polgara said firmly. "There's no need for you to start picking up bad habits this early in life." She rode over toward a grove of tall fir trees some distance away from the tavern and dismounted in

the shade. Dumik and Toth exchanged a quick glance, then joined her there with Velvet, Ce'Nedra, and Eriond.

Sadi started to dismount in front of the tavern. Then he sniffed once and gagged slightly. "This is not my sort of place, gentlemen," he said. "I think I'll wait outside as well. Besides, it's Zith's feeding time."

"Suit yourself," Belgarath shrugged, dismounting and leading the way toward the building. They stepped over the snoring Karand on the stoop and went on inside. "Split up and spread out," the old man muttered. "Circulate and talk to as many as you can." He looked at Silk. "We're not here to make a career out of this," he cautioned.

"Trust me," Silk said, moving away.

Garion stood just inside the door, blinking to let his eyes adjust to the dimness. The tavern showed no signs of ever having been cleaned. The floor was covered with moldy straw that reeked of spilled beer, and scraps of rotting food lay in heaps in the corners. A crudely built fireplace smoked at the far end, adding its fumes to the generally unpleasant odor of the place. The tables consisted of rough-hewn planks laid on trellises, and the benches were half logs with sticks drilled into their undersides for legs. Garion saw Beldin talking with several Karands over in one corner and he started over to join him.

As he passed one of the tables, his foot came down on something soft. There was a protesting squeal and a sudden scramble of hooved feet.

"Don't step on my pig," the bleary-eyed old Karand sitting at the table said belligerently. "I don't step on your pig, do I?" He pronounced it "peg," and Garion had a little trouble sorting out his dialect.

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"Watch yer fate," the Karand said ominously.

"Fate?" Garion shrank back from that word just a bit.

"Fate. Them thangs you got on the end of yer laigs."

"Oh. Feet."

"That's what I just said-fate."

"Sorry," Garion apologized. "I didn't quite understand."

"That's the trouble with you outlanders. You can't even understand the language when she's spoke to you plain as day."

"Why don't we have a tankard of ale?" Garion suggested. "I'll apologize to your pig just as soon as he conies back."

The Karand squinted at him suspiciously. The old man was bearded and he wore clothing made of poorly tanned furs. He wore a hat made from the whole skin of a badger- with the legs and tail still attached. He was very dirty, and Garion could clearly see the fleas peeking out of his beard.

"I'm buying," Garion offered, sitting down across the table from the pig's owner.

The old Karand's face brightened noticeably.

They had a couple of tankards of ale together. Garion noticed that the stuff had a raw, green flavor to it, as if it had been dipped from the vat a week or so too soon. His host, however, smacked his lips and rolled his eyes as if this were the finest brew in the world. Something cold and wet touched Garion's hand, and he jerked it away. He looked down into a pair of earnest blue eyes fenced in by bristly white eyelashes. The pig had recently been to the wallow and he carried a powerful odor with him.

The old Karand chortled. "That's just my peg," he said. "He's a good-natured young peg, and he don't hold no grudges." The fur-clad fellow blinked owlishly. "He's a orphan, y'know."

"Oh?"

"His ma made real good bacon, though." The old man snuffled and wiped his nose on the back of his hand. "Sometimes I miss her real bad," he admitted. He squinted at Garion. "Say, that's a mighty big kniie you got there."

"Yes," Garion agreed. He absently scratched the half-

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grown pig's ears, and the animal closed his eyes in bliss, laid his head in Garion's lap, and grunted contentedly.

"We were coming down the trail out of the mountains," Gallon said, "and we saw a lot of smoke out on the plain. Is there some kind of trouble out there?"

"The worst kinda trouble there is, friend," the old man said seriously. He squinted at Garion again. "You're not one of them Mal-or-eens, are you?"

"No," Garion assured him, "not Mallorean. I come from farther west,"

"I didn't know there was anythin' to the west of the Mal-or-eens. Anyhow, there's whole bunches of people down there on the plains havin' some kind of a argument about religion."

"Religion?"

"I don't hold much with it myself," the Karand admitted. "There's them as do and them as don't, and I'm one of them as don't. Let the Gods take care of themselves, I say. I'll take care of me and mine, and we're quits on the whole business."

"Seems like a good way," Garion said carefully.

"Glad you see it like that. Anyhow, there's this Grolim named Zandramas down in Dar-sheeva. This Zandramas, she come up into Voresebo and started talkin' about this here new God of Angarak-Torak bein' dead an' all, y'know. Now, I'm just about as interested in all that as my peg is. He's a smart peg and he knows when people is talkin' nonsense."

Garion patted the pig's muddy flank, and the plump little animal made an ecstatic sound. "Good pig," Garion agreed. "Peg, that is."

"I'm fond of him. He's warm and good to snuggle up against on a cold night-and he don't hardly snore none at all. Well, sir, this Zandramas, she come up here and started preachin' and yellin' and I don't know what all. The Grolims all gives out a moan and falls down on their faces. Then, a while back, a whole new bunch of Grolims comes over the mountains, and they says that this Zandramas is dead wrong. They says that

there's gonna be a new God over Angarak, right enough, but that this Zandramas don't have the straight of it. That's what all the smoke down there

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on the plains is about. Both sides is a-burnin* and a-killin' and a-preachin' about their idea of who the new God's gonna be. I'm not gonna have anythin' to do with either side. Me and my peg are gonna go back up in the mountains and let them folks kill each other. When they get it all sorted out, we'll come back and nod at whichever altar comes out on top as we go by."

"You keep calling this Zandramas 'she,' " Garion noted.

"Would you believe it's a woman?" the Karand snorted. "That's the foolishhest thing I ever heard tell of. Women got no business mixin' up in men's affairs."

"Have you ever seen her?"

"Like I say, I don't mess around in religious stuff. Me and my peg, we just kinda keep to ourselves when it comes to that."

"Good way to get along," Garion said to him. "My friends and I have to go through that plain down there, though. Are Grolims all we need to worry about?"

"I can see you're a stranger," the Karand said, suggestively looking down into his empty tankard.

"Here," Garion said, "let's get another one." He fished another coin out of the pouch at his waist and signaled the servingman.

"The whole thang, friend," the garrulous owner of the pig went on, "is that in this part of the country, them Grolims always has troops with 'em. The ones as follows Zandramas, they got the army of the king of Voresebo with 'em. The old king, he didn't hold with none of this religious stuff, but he got hisself de-posed. His son decided the old man was gettin' too silly to run the country, so he set his pa aside and took the throne for hisself. The son's a squinty-eyed sort and he's lookin* to put hisself on the side most likely to win. He's throwed in with Zandramas, but then this Urvon fella, he comes along, and he's got this whole army out of Jenno and Ganesia and folks in armor and some real ugly big black dogs with him-not to mention all the Grolims. It's mean down there on the plains, friend. They're killin' and burnin' and sacrificin¹ prisoners on this altar or mat. If it was me, I'd go a long way around all that foolishness."

"I wish I could, friend," Garion told him sincerely. "We

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heard that there were demons up in Jenno-off toward Cal-lida. Have any of them shown up around here?"

"Demons?" The Karand shuddered, making the sign against evil. "None that I ever heard tell of. If I had, me and my peg would already be so far back in the mountains that they'd have to ship daylight in to us by pack train."

Despite himself, Garion found that he liked this gabbly old fellow. There was an almost musical flow to his illiterate speech, a kind of warm inclusiveness that paid no attention to any kind of social distinctions, and a shrewd, even penetrating, assessment of the chaos around him. It was almost with regret that Garion briefly acknowledged Silk's jerk of the head in the direction of the door. Gently, he removed the pig's head from his lap. The animal made a small, discontented sound. "I'm afraid I'm going to have to go now," he told the Karand as he rose to his feet. "I thank you for your company-and the loan of your pig."

"Peg," the Karand corrected.

"Peg," Garion agreed. He stopped the servingman who was going by and handed him a coin. "Give my friend and his peg whatever they'd like," he said.

"Why, thank you, my young friend." The old Karand grinned expansively.

"My pleasure," Garion said. He looked down. "Have a nice day, pig," he added.

The pig grunted rather distantly and clattered around the table to his master.

Ce'Nedra wrinkled her nose as he approached the shady spot where the ladies had been waiting. "What on earth have you been doing, Garion?" she asked. "You smell awful."

"I was getting acquainted with a pig."

"A pig?" she exclaimed. "Whatever for?"

"You almost had to have been there."

As they rode along exchanging the information they had gleaned, it became evident that the owner of the pig had offered a surprisingly complete and succinct perception of the situation in Voresebo. Garion repeated the conversation, complete with dialect.

"He didn't really talk that way, did he?" Velvet giggled incredulously.

"Why, no'm," Garion said, exaggerating just a bit, "when you get right down to the core of it, he didn't. There was 'theses' and 'theses' and 'themselves' that I can't quite get the hang of. Me and the pig got along good, though."

"Garion," Polgara said a bit distantly, "do you suppose you could ride back there a ways?" She gestured toward the rear of the column. "Several hundred yards or so, I'd say."

"Yes, ma'am," he said. He reined Chretienne in. The big gray horse, he noted, also seemed a bit offended by something in the air.

By general request, Garion bathed that night in a shockingly cold mountain stream. When he returned, shivering, to the fire, Belgarath looked at him and said, "I think you'd better put your armor back on. If half of what your friend with the pig said is true, you might need it."

"Peg," Garion corrected.

"What?"

"Never mind."

The next morning dawned clear and definitely chilly. The mail coat felt clammy even through the padded tunic Garion always wore under it, and it was heavy and uncomfortable. Durnik cut him a lance from a nearby thicket and leaned it against a tree near where the horses were picketed.

Belgarath came back from a small hilltop where he had been surveying the plains below. "From what I can see, the turmoil is fairly general down there, so there isn't much point in trying to avoid people. The quicker we get past Voresebo, the better, so we might as well ride straight on through. We'll try to talk our way out of any difficulties first; and, if that doesn't work, we'll do it the other way."

"I suppose I'd better go find another club," Sadi sighed.

They rode out with Garion jingling along in the lead. His helmet was in place, and his shield was strapped to his left arm. The butt of his lance rested beside his foot in his stirrup, and he affected a menacing scowl. The sword strapped across his back pulled steadily at him, indicating that they were still on the trail of Zandramas. When they reached the edge of the foothills, the winding mountain track became a narrow, rutted road stretching off toward the southeast. They picked up their pace and moved along the road at a brisk

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A few miles out onto the plain, they passed a burning village set back about a half mile from the road. They did not stop to investigate.

About noon, they encountered a party of armed men on foot. There were about fifteen of them, and they wore clothing which vaguely resembled uniforms.

"Well?" Garion said back over his shoulder, tightening his grip on his lance.

"Let me talk to them first," Silk said, moving his horse forward. "Try to look dangerous." The little man walked his horse toward the strangers. "You're blocking the road," he told them in a flat, unfriendly tone.

"We have orders to check everyone who passes," one of them said, looking at Garion a little nervously.

"All right, you've checked us. Now stand aside."

"Which side are you on?"

"Now, that's a stupid question, man," Silk replied. "Which side are you on?"

"I don't have to answer that."

"Then neither do I. Use your eyes, man. Do I look like a Karand-or a Temple Guardsman-or a Grolim?"

"Do you follow Urvon or Zandramas?"

"Neither one. I follow money, and you don't make money by getting mixed up in religion."

The roughly dressed soldier looked even more uncertain. "I have to report which side you're on to my captain."

"That's assuming that you've seen me," Silk told him, bouncing a purse suggestively on the palm of his hand. "I'm in a hurry, friend. I have no interest in your religion. Please do me the same courtesy."

The soldier was looking at the purse in Silk's hand with undisguised greed.

"It would be worth quite a bit to me not to be delayed," Silk suggested slyly. He theatrically wiped his brow. "It's getting hot out here," he said. "Why don't you and your men go find some shade to rest in? I'll 'accidentally' drop this purse here, and you can 'find' it later. That way, you make a nice profit, and I get to move along without interference and without having someone in authority find out that I've passed."

"It is getting warm out here," the soldier agreed.

"I thought you might have noticed that."

The other soldiers were grinning openly.

"You won't forget to drop the purse?"

"Trust me," Silk said.

The soldiers trooped across the field toward a grove of trees. Silk negligently tossed the purse into the ditch beside the road and motioned for the others to come ahead. "We might want to move right along," he suggested.

"Another purse full of pebbles?" Durnik grinned.

"Oh, no, Durnik. The purse has real money in it- Mallolean brass halfpennies. You can't buy very much with them, but they're real money, right enough."

"What if he'd asked to see what was inside?"

Silk grinned and held up his cupped hand. Tightly wedged between the folds of skin in his palm were several silver coins. "I like to be ready for eventualities," he said. Then he looked back over his shoulder. "I think we should leave now. The soldiers are coming back to the road."

The next encounter was a bit more serious. Three Temple Guardsmen blocked the road. Their shields were in front of them and their lances were at the ready. Their faces were devoid of thought. "My turn," Garion said, settling his helmet more firmly in place and shifting his shield. He lowered his lance and thumped Chretienne with his heels. As he charged, he could hear another horse pounding along behind him, but he did not have time to look back. It was all so stupid, but he felt that surge in his blood again. "Idiocy," he muttered. Then he easily unhorsed the Guardsman in the center. Durnik, he noted, had cut his lance perhaps two feet longer than was standard. With a quick flick of his shield, he deflected the lances of the other two Guardsmen and thundered on between them. Chretienne's hooves slammed down into the still-tumbling body of the fallen Guardsman. Garion reined in sharply and whirled the big gray to face the two he had left behind. But there was no need. The man riding behind him was Toth, and the two Guardsmen had already tumbled limply from their saddles.

"I could find work for you in Arendia, Toth," he said to the huge man. "Somewhere there has to be someone to convince them that they're not invincible."

Toth grinned at him in a soundless laugh.

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Central Voresebo was in total chaos. Pillars of smoke rose from burning villages and farms. Crops had been put to the torch, and bands of armed men savagely attacked each other. One such skirmish was taking place in a burning field, and both sides were caught up in such a frenzy that they paid no attention to the wall of flame sweeping down on them.

Mutilated bodies seemed to be everywhere, and there was no way Garion could shield Ce'Nedra from the horrors littering the ditches and even the road itself.

They galloped on.

As dusk descended over the stricken countryside, Durnik and Toth turned aside from the road to seek shelter for the night. They returned to report that they had discovered a low thicket lying in a gully a mile or so back from the road. "We won't be able to build any fires," Durnik said soberly, "but if we stay fairly quiet, I don't think anybody's going to find us."

The night was not pleasant. They took a cold supper in the thicket and tried for what scant shelter they could make out of what was available, since they could not erect their tents in the dense brush. Autumn was in the air, and it was cold, once the sky turned dark. As the first light of dawn touched the eastern horizon, they rose, ate a hasty breakfast, and rode on.

The cold, miserable night and the senseless slaughter all around them made Garion angry, and he grew angrier with each passing mile. About midmorning he saw a black-robed Grolim standing beside an altar several hundred yards out in a field to the right of the road. A band of roughly dressed soldiers were dragging three terrified villagers toward the altar by ropes tied about the victims' necks. Garion did not even stop to think. He discarded his lance, drew Iron-grip's sword, cautioned the Orb to avoid display, and then charged.

The Grolim was apparently so caught up in his religious frenzy that he neither heard nor saw Garion bearing down on him. He screamed once as Chretienne thundered over the top of him. The soldiers took one startled look at Gar-ion, threw away their weapons, and fled. That did not seem to satisfy his anger, however. Implacably, he pursued them. His anger was not so great, though, as to goad him into

killing unarmed men. Instead, he simply rode them down one by one. When the last had tumbled beneath the big gray's hooves, Garion wheeled, freed the prisoners, and cantered back to the road.

"Don't you think that was a little excessive?" Belgarath demanded angrily.

"Not under the circumstances, no," Garion snapped back. "At least I'm fairly sure that one group of soldiers in this stinking country won't be dragging civilians to the altar-at least not until all the broken bones mend."

Belgarath snorted in disgust and turned away.

Still enraged, Garion glared belligerently at Polgara. "Well?" he demanded.

"I didn't say anything, dear," she said mildly. "Next time, though, don't you think you should let your grandfather know what you're planning? These little surprises set his teeth on edge sometimes."

Beldin came flaring in. "What happened out there?" he asked curiously when he had resumed his own form. He pointed at the groaning soldiers dotting the nearby field.

"My horse needed some exercise," Garion said flatly. "Those soldiers got in his way."

"What's got you so foul-tempered this morning?"

"This is all so stupid."

"Of course it is, but get ready for some more of it. The border of Rengel is just ahead, and things are just as bad down there as they are here."

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They paused at the border to consider their alternatives. The guardpost at the boundary was deserted, but black columns of smoke rose from burning villages, and they could clearly see large groups of men moving across the landscape, looking tiny in the distance.

"Things are a little more organized down here," Beldin reported. "About all we saw in Voresebo were fairly small bands, and they were more interested in loot than fighting. The groups are bigger on up ahead, and there's a certain semblance of discipline. I don't think we'll be able to bluff our way through Rengel the way we did Voresebo."

Toth made a series of obscure gestures.

"What did he say?" Belgarath asked Durnik.

"He suggests that we travel at night," Durnik replied.

"That's an absurd notion, loth," Sadi protested. "If

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things are dangerous in the daytime, they'll be ten times more dangerous at night."

Toth's hands began to move again. For some reason, Gar-ion found that he could almost understand what the huge mute was trying to say.

"He says that you looked at the idea too fast, Sadi," Durnik translated. "We've got certain advantages." The smith frowned slightly, and he looked back at his friend. "How did you find out about that?" he asked.

Toth gestured again.

"Oh," Durnik nodded. "I guess she would know, wouldn't she?" He turned to the others. "He says that Belgarath, Pol, and Garion can lead the way in their other forms. The darkness wouldn't be that big a problem for a pair of wolves and an owl."

Belgarath tugged thoughtfully at one earlobe. "It's got possibilities," he said to Beldin. "We could avoid just about anybody out there that way. Soldiers don't move around in the dark very much."

"They post sentries, though," the hunchback pointed out.

"Garion, Pol, and I wouldn't have much trouble locating them and leading the rest of you around them."

"It's going to be slow going," Velvet said. "We won't be able to travel at a gallop, and we'll have to detour around every sentry we come across."

"You know," Silk said, "now that I think about it, it's not such a bad idea. I sort of like it."

"You always enjoy sneaking around in the dark, Khel-dar," Velvet said to him.

"Don't you?"

"Well-" Then she smiled at him. "I suppose I do, yes- but then, I'm a Drasnian, too."

"It would take too long," Ce'Nedra protested. "We're only a little way behind Zandramas. If we try to sneak, she'll get ahead again."

"I don't see that we've got much choice, Ce'Nedra," Garion told her gently. "If we just try to plow our way across Rengel, sooner or later we're going to run into more soldiers than we can handle."

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"You're a sorcerer," she said accusingly. "You could wave your hand and just knock them out of our way."

"There are limits to that, Ce'Nedra," Polgara said. "Both Zandramas and Urvon have Grolims in the region. If we tried to do it that way, everybody in Renget would know exactly where we were."

Ce'Nedra's eyes filled with tears, and her lower lip began to tremble. She turned and ran blindly away from the road, sobbing.

"Go after her, Garion," Polgara said. "See if you can get her calmed down."

They took shelter for the rest of the day in a grove of beech trees about a mile from the road. Garion tried to sleep, knowing that the night ahead of them would be very long; but after about an hour, he gave up and wandered restlessly about the camp. He shared Ce'Nedra's impatience. They were so close to Zandramas now, and moving at night would slow their pace to a crawl. Try though he might, however, he could think of no alternative.

As the sun was going down, they struck camp and waited at the edge of the beech grove for it to get dark. "I think I've just hit a flaw in the plan," Silk said. "Oh?" Belgarath asked.

"We need the Orb to be able to follow Zandramas. If Garion turns into a wolf, the Orb won't be able to tell him which way to go-or will it?"

Belgarath and Beldin exchanged a long look. "I don't know," Belgarath admitted. "Do you?"

"I haven't got the slightest idea," Beldin said. "Well, there's only one way to find out," Garion said. He handed Chretienne's reins to Durnik and went some distance away from the horses. Carefully, he created the image of the wolf in his mind, then he began to focus his will upon the image. He seemed, as always, to go through a peculiar sensation of melting, and men it was done. He sat on his haunches for a moment, checking himself over to make sure everything was there.

His nose suddenly caught a familiar fragrance. He turned his head and looked back over his shoulder. Ce'Nedra stood there, her eyes very wide and the fingertips of one hand to

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her lips. "I-is that still really you, Garion?" she stammered.

He rose to his feet and shook himself. There was no way he could answer her. Human words would not fit in the mouth of a wolf. Instead, he padded over to her and licked her hand. She sank to her knees, wrapped her arms about his head, and laid her cheek against his muzzle. "Oh, Gar-ion," she said in a tone of wonder.

On an impulse born out of sheer mischief, he deliberately licked her face from chin to hairline. His tongue was quite long-and quite wet.

"Stop that," she said, giggling in spite of herself and trying to wipe her face. He momentarily touched his cold nose to the side of her neck. She flinched away. Then he turned and loped off toward the road where the trail was. He paused in the bushes beside the road and carefully peered out, his ears alert and his nose searching for the scent of anyone in the vicinity. Then, satisfied, he slipped out of the bushes with his belly low to the ground to stand in the middle of the road.

It was not the same, of course. There was a subtle difference to the pulling sensation, but it was still there. He felt a peculiar satisfaction and had to restrain an urge to lift his muzzle in a howl of triumph. He turned then and loped back toward where the others were hidden. His toe-nails dug into the turf, and he exulted in a wild sense of freedom. It was almost with regret that he changed back into his own shape.

"Well?" Belgarath asked as he walked toward them in the gathering dusk.

"No problem," Garion replied, trying to sound casual about it. He suppressed the urge to grin, knowing that his offhand manner would irritate his grandfather enormously.

"Are you really sure we need him along on this trip?" Belgarath asked his daughter.

"Ah-yes, father," she said. "He is sort of necessary."

"I was afraid you might feel that way about it." He looked at the others. "All right," he said. "This is the way it works. Pol and Durnik can keep in touch with each other over quite some distance, so he'll be able to warn you if we

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run across any soldiers-or if the trail moves off the road. Move at a walk to keep down the noise, and be ready to take cover on short notice. Garion, keep your mind in contact with Pol's and don't forget that you've got a nose and ears as well as eyes. Swing back to the road from time to time to make sure we're still on the trail. Does anybody have any questions?"

They all shook their heads.

"All right then, let's go."

"Do you want me to go along?" Beldin offered.

"Thanks all the same, uncle," Polgara declined, "but hawks don't really see all that well in the dark. You wouldn't be much help after you'd flown head-on into a

few trees."

It was surprisingly easy. The first impulse of any group of soldiers when setting up for the night is to build fires, and the second is to keep them going until the sun comes up. Guided by these cheery beacons, Garion and Belgarath were able to locate the night encampments of all the bands of troops in the area and to sniff out the sentries. As luck had it, in most cases the troops had set up some distance from the road, and the party was able to ride through undetected.

It was well into the night. Garion had crept to the top of a hill to survey the next valley. There were a fair number of campfires out there, winking at him in the darkness.

"Garion?" Ce'Nedra's voice seemed right on top of him. With a startled yelp, he jumped high in the air.

It took him a moment to regain his composure. "Ce'Nedra," he whined plaintively, "please don't do that. You almost scared me out of my fur."

"I just wanted to be sure you were all right," she said defensively. "If I have to wear this amulet, I may as well get some use out of it."

"I'm fine, Ce'Nedra," he said in a patient tone. "Just don't startle me like that. Wolves are edgy animals."

"Children," Polgara's voice cut in firmly. "You can play some other time. I'm trying to hear Durnik, and you're drowning him out with all this chatter."

"Yes, Aunt Pol," Garion replied automatically.

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"I love you, Garion," Ce'Nedra whispered by way of farewell.

They traveled by night and sought cover as dawn began to stain the eastern sky for the next several days. It all became so easy that finally Garion grew careless. He was padding through a thicket on the fourth night and accidentally stepped on a dry twig.

"Who's there?" The voice was downwind of him, and the soldier's scent had not reached his nostrils. The fellow came pushing into the thicket, making a great deal of noise. He was warily holding a spear out in front of him. Angry more at himself than at the clumsy sentry, Garion shouted the spear aside, raised up on his hind legs, and put his forepaws on the terrified man's shoulders. Then he swore at some length, his oaths coming out as a horrid growling and snarling.

The soldier's eyes bulged as Garion's awful fangs snapped within inches of his face. Then he screamed and fled. Garion slunk guiltily out of the thicket and loped away.

Polgara's voice came to him. "What was that?"

"Nothing important," he replied, more than a little ashamed of himself. "Tell Durnik and the others to swing out to the west for a while. This group of soldiers is camped fairly close to the road."

It was nearly dawn on the following night when the night breeze brought the smell of frying bacon to Garion's nostrils. He crept forward through the tall grass, but before he could get near enough to see who was cooking, he encountered his grandfather.

"Who is it?" he asked in the manner of wolves.

"A couple hundred soldiers," Belgarath replied, "and a whole herd of pack mules."

"They're right on the road, aren't they?"

"I don't think that's going to be a problem. I heard a couple of them talking. It seems that they work for Silk."

"Silk's got his own army?" Garion asked incredulously.

"So it would seem. I wish that little thief wouldn't keep secrets from me." Garion felt the old man's thought reaching out. "Pol, tell Durnik to send Silk up here." Then he looked at Garion. "Let's go back to the road. I want to have a little talk with the pride of Drasnia."

They loped back to the road, resumed their own shapes, and intercepted Silk. Belgarath, Garion thought, showed enormous restraint. "There's a large group of soldiers wearing blue tunics just up ahead," he said in a level tone. "Would you by any chance know who they are?"

"What are they doing here?" Silk asked with a puzzled frown. "They've been told to avoid any area where there's trouble."

"Maybe they didn't hear you." Belgarath's tone was sarcastic.

"It's a standing order, I'm definitely going to talk with the captain about this."

"You've got a private army?" Garion asked the little man.

"I don't know that I'd call it an army, exactly. Yarblek and I hired some mercenaries to guard our caravans, is all."

"Isn't that terribly expensive?"

"Not nearly as expensive as losing those caravans would be. Highway robbery is a cottage industry in Karanda, Let's go talk with them."

"Why don't we?" Belgarath's tone was flat-even unfriendly.

"You're not taking this very well, old friend."

"Don't crowd it, Silk. I've been slinking through wet grass for five nights running. I've got burrs in my coat and a snarl in my tail that's going to take me a week to chew out, and all this time you've had an armed escort within shouting distance."

"I didn't know they were here, Belgarath," Silk protested. "They're not supposed to be here."

Belgarath stalked away muttering curses under his breath.

The muleteers in the camp had begun to load their animals when Silk, with Garion walking on one side of him and Belgarath on the other, rode in. A hard-bitten looking man with a pockmarked face and thick wrists approached them and saluted. "Your Highness," he said to Silk, "we didn't know that you were in this part of Mallorea."

"I move around a lot," Silk said. "Is it all right if we join you, Captain Rakos?"

"Of course, your Highness."

"The rest of our party will be along shortly," Silk told him. "What are we having for breakfast this morning?"

"Bacon, fried eggs, chops, hot bread, jam-the usual, your Highness."

"No gruel?"

"I can have the cook mix some up for you, if you'd like, your Highness," Rakos replied.

"No, thanks, Captain," Silk said. "I think I can live without gruel, for today anyway."

"Would your Highness care to inspect the troops?"

Silk made a face, then sighed. "They sort of expect it, don't they?"

"It's good for morale, your Highness," Rakos assured him. "An uninspected trooper begins to feel unappreciated."

"Right you are, Captain," Silk said, dismounting. "Fall them in if you would please, and I'll boost their morale."

The captain turned and bellowed an order.

"Excuse me," Silk said to Belgarath and Garion. "Certain formalities are the price of command." He smoothed down his hair with the palm of his hand and carefully adjusted his clothing. Then he followed Captain Rakos toward the ranks of soldiers standing at attention beside the road. His manner was grand as he inspected his troops, and he later meticulously pointed out missing buttons, unshaved faces, and boots not polished to perfection. Durnik, Pol-gara, and the others arrived while he was progressing down the last rank. Belgarath quickly explained the situation to them.

When Silk returned, he had a certain self-satisfied look on his face.

"Was all that really necessary?" Velvet asked him.

"It's expected." He shrugged. He looked rather proudly at his men. "They look good, don't they? I may not have the biggest army in Mallorean, but I've got the sharpest. Why don't we go have some breakfast?"

"I've eaten soldiers' rations before," Beldin told him. "I think I'll go look for another pigeon!"

"You're jumping to conclusions, Beldin," the little man assured him. "Bad food is the greatest cause of dissatisfaction in the ranks in any army. Yarblek and I are very careful to hire only the best cooks and to provide them with the

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finest food available. Dry rations might be good enough for Kal Zakath's army, but not for mine."

Captain Rakos joined them for breakfast. Rakos was obviously a field soldier and he had certain difficulties with his utensils.

"Where's the caravan bound?" Silk asked him.

"Jarot, your Highness."

"What are we carrying?"

"Beans."

"Beans?" Silk sounded a little startled.

"It was your order, your Highness," Rakos said. "Word came from your factor in Mal Zeth before the plague broke out that you wanted to corner the market in beans. Your warehouses in Maga Renn are overflowing with them, so lately we've been transferring them to Jarot."

"Why would I do that?" Silk said, scratching his head in bafflement.

"Zakath was bringing his army back from Cthol Mur-gos," Garion reminded him. "He was going to mount a campaign in Karanda. You wanted to buy up all the beans in Mallorean so that you could gouge the Bureau of Military Procurement."

"Gouge is such an ugly word, Garion," Silk protested with a pained look. He frowned. "I thought I'd rescinded that order."

"Not that I've heard, your Highness," Rakos said. "You've got tons of beans pouring into Maga Renn from all over Delchin and southern Ganesia."

Silk groaned. "How much longer is it going to take us to reach Jarot?" he asked. "I've got to put a stop to this."

"Several days, your Highness," Rakos replied.

"And the beans will just keep piling up the whole time."

"Probably, your Highness."

Silk groaned again.

They rode on down through the remainder of Rengel with no further incidents. Silk's professional soldiers apparently had a wide reputation in the region, and the poorly trained troops of the varying factions there gave them a wide berth. Silk rode at the head of the column like a field marshal, looking about with a lordly manner.

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"Are you going to let him get away with that?" Ce'Nedra asked Velvet after a day or so.

"Of course not," Velvet replied, "but let him enjoy it for now. Time enough to teach him the realities of the situation later on."

"You're terrible," Ce'Nedra giggled.

"Naturally. But didn't you do the same thing to our hero here?" Velvet looked pointedly at Garion.

"Liselle," Polgara said firmly, "you're giving away secrets again."

"Sorry, Lady Polgara," Velvet replied contritely.

The trail of Zandramas was soon joined by the sullen scarlet trail of the Sardion, and both proceeded down across Rengel to the River Kallahar and the border of Celanta. The trails also seemed to be going toward Jarot.

"Why is she going toward the sea?" Garion worriedly asked Belgarath.

"Who knows?" the old man replied shortly. "She's read the Ashabine Oracles, and I haven't. It could be that she knows where she's going, and I'm just floundering along in the rear."

"But what if-"

"Please don't 'what if me, Garion," Belgarath said. "I've got enough problems already."

They crossed the River Kallahar aboard a cluster of ferries that seemed to belong to Silk and arrived in the port city of Jarot on the Celanta side. As they rode through the cobbled streets, crowds came out to cheer. Silk rode at the head of the column graciously waving his acknowledgment of the cheers.

"Have I missed something?" Durnik asked.

"His people love him very much," Eriond explained.

"His people?"

"Who owns a man, Durnik?" the blond young man asked sadly. "The one who rules him, or the one who pays him?"

Silk's offices in Jarot were opulent-even ostentatious. Mallorean carpets lay thick upon the floors, the walls were paneled in rare, polished woods, and officials in costly livery were everywhere.

"One sort of has to keep up appearances," the little man

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explained apologetically as they entered. "The natives are so impressed by show."

"Of course," Belgarath said drily.

"Surely you don't think-"

"Just let it pass, Silk."

"But it's all so much fun, Belgarath." Silk grinned.

Belgarath then did something Garion had never thought he would see him do. He raised his hands imploringly, assumed a tragic expression, and said, "Why me?"

Beldin chortled.

"Well?" Belgarath said crossly to him.

"Nothing," Beldin replied.

Silk's factor in Jarot was a baggy-eyed Melcene named Kasvor. Kasvor walked as if he had the weight of the world on his shoulders and he sighed often. He came wearily into the office where Silk sat as if enthroned behind a very large writing desk and the rest of them lounged in comfortable chairs along the walls. "Prince Kheldar," Kasvor said, bowing.

"Ah, Kasvor," Silk said.

"I've seen to the rooms your Highness wanted." Kasvor sighed. "The inn is called the Lion. It's two streets over. I've taken the entire top floor for you."

Durnik leaned over and whispered to Garion. "Wasn't that inn we stayed at in Camaar also called the Lion?" he asked. "The place where Brendig arrested us that time?"

"I'd imagine that you could find a Lion Inn in just about every city in the world," Garion replied.

"Capital, Kasvor. Capital," Silk was saying.

Kasvor smiled faintly.

"How's business?" Silk asked.

"We're showing a fair profit, your Highness."

"How fair?"

"About forty-five percent."

"Not bad. I need to talk to you about something else, though. Let's stop buying beans."

"I'm afraid it's a little late for that, your Highness. We own just about every bean in Malloreia already."

Silk groaned and buried his face in his hands.

"The market's up ten points, though, your Highness."

"It is?" Silk sounded startled, and his eyes brightened. "How did that happen?"

"There have been all manner of rumors going about and some tentative inquiries from the Bureau of Military Procurement. Everyone's been scrambling around trying to buy up beans, but we've got them all."

"Ten points, you say?"

"Yes, your Highness."

"Sell," Silk said.

Kasvor looked startled.

"We bought up the bean crop in the expectation of an imperial military campaign in Karanda. There won't be one now."

"Can your Highness be sure?"

"I have access to certain sources of information. When the word gets out, the market in beans is going to sink like a rock, and we don't really want several million tons of beans on our hands, do we? Have there been any offers?"

"The Melcene consortium has expressed some interest, your Highness. They're willing to go two points above the market."

"Negotiate with them, Kasvor. When they get to three points above the market price, sell. I don't want to have to eat all those beans myself."

"Yes, your Highness."

Belgarath cleared his throat meaningfully.

Silk glanced at the old man and nodded. "We just came down through Voresebo and Rengel," he said. "Things are a bit chaotic up there."

"So I've heard, your Highness," Kasvor replied.

"Is there unrest anywhere else in the region? We have some things to do in this part of the world and we don't want to have to do them in a war zone if we don't have to."

Kasvor shrugged. "Darshiva's in an uproar, but there's nothing new about that. Darshiva's been in an uproar for the past dozen years. I took the liberty of pulling all our people out of that principality. There's nothing left there that's worth our while." He looked toward the ceiling in mock piety. "May Zandramas grow a boil on her nose," he prayed.

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"Amen," Silk agreed fervently. "Is there any place else we ought to avoid?"

"I've heard that northern Gandahar is a bit nervous," Kasvor answered, "but that doesn't affect us, since we don't deal in elephants."

"Smartest decision we ever made," Silk said to Belgarath. "Do you have any idea how much an elephant can eat?"

"Peldane is also reported to be in turmoil just now, your Highness," Kasvor reported. "Zandramas is spreading her infection in all directions."

"Have you ever seen her?" Silk asked him.

Kasvor shook his head. "She hasn't come this far east yet. I think she's trying to consolidate her position before she comes this way. The Emperor won't mourn the loss of Darshiva, Rengel, and Voresebo very much, and Peldane and Gandahar are more trouble than they're worth. Ce-lanta and certainly Melcena--are altogether different matters, though."

"Truly," Silk agreed.

Kasvor frowned. "I did hear something, though, your Highness," he said. "There's a rumor going around the waterfront that Zandramas' cohort, Naradas, hired a ship for Melcena a few days ago."

"Naradas?"

"Your Highness may never have seen him, but he's fairly easy to pick out of a crowd. He has absolutely white eyes." Kasvor shuddered. "Gruesome-looking fellow. Anyway, he's reputed to have been with Zandramas since the beginning and, as I understand it, he's her right arm. There are some other rumors as

well, but I don't think I should repeat them in the presence of the ladies." He looked apologetically at Polgara, Ce'Nedra, and Velvet.

Silk tapped his forefinger thoughtfully on his chin. "So Naradas went to Melcena," he said. "I think I'd like to get a few more details about that."

"I'll circulate some people around the waterfront, your Highness," Kasvor said. "I'm sure we'll be able to find someone who can give us more information."

"Good," Silk said, rising to his feet. "If you find some-
one, send him to me at the Lion Inn. Tell him that I'll be very generous."

"Of course, your Highness."

Silk hefted the leather pouch at his belt. "I'll need some money," he noted.

"I'll see to it at once, Prince Kheldar."

As they left the building and walked down the polished stone steps toward their horses, Beldin made a disgusted sound. "It's unwholesome," he muttered.

"What is?" Belgarath asked him.

"How lucky you are."

"I don't quite follow you."

"Isn't it remarkable that Kasvor just happened to remember the one thing you really had to know? He threw it out almost as an afterthought."

"The Gods have always been fond of me," Belgarath replied complacently.

"You think of luck as a God? Our Master would put you on bread and water for several centuries if he heard you talking like that."

"It may not have been entirely luck," Durnik said thoughtfully. "This prophecy of ours has nudged people a bit now and then. I remember one time in Arendia when Ce'Nedra was supposed to give a speech. She was so terrified she was almost sick until a drunken young nobleman insulted her. Then she got angry, and her speech set fire to the whole crowd. Pol said that maybe the prophecy had made him get drunk so that he'd insult Ce'Nedra in order to make her angry enough to give the speech. Couldn't this have been sort of like that? Fate instead of luck?"

Beldin looked at the smith, his eyes suddenly alight. "This man is a jewel, Belgarath," he said. "I've been looking for someone to talk philosophy with for centuries now, and here he is, right under my nose." He put his large, gnarled hand on Durnik's shoulder. "When we get to that inn, my friend," he said, "you and I are going to begin a very long conversation. It might just go on for several centuries."

Polgara sighed.

The Lion Inn was a large building with walls of yellow

brick and a red tile roof. A broad stairway led up to an imposing main door attended by a liveried footman. "Where are the stables?" Durnik asked, looking about. "Probably around back," Silk replied. "Melcene architecture is a bit different from the style in the West."

As they dismounted, two grooms came trotting around the building to take their horses. Silk mounted the stairs, and the footman at the door bowed deeply to him. "This house is honored by your presence, Prince Kheldar," he said. "My master's waiting inside to greet you."

"Why, thank you, my good man," Silk replied, giving him a coin. "There may be someone along later to see me. It's possible that he'll be a sailor or a longshoreman. When he arrives, would you be so good as to send him to me immediately?"

"Of course, your Highness."

The top floor of the inn was palatial. The rooms were large and deeply carpeted. The walls were covered with white mortar, and the windows were draped with blue velvet. The furnishings were massive and comfortable-looking. The doorways were arched.

Durnik wiped his feet carefully before entering. He looked around.

"They seem to be awfully fond of arches," he noted. "I've always preferred post-and-lintel construction myself. For some reason, I just don't quite trust an arch."

"It's perfectly sound, Durnik," Silk assured him.

"I know the theory," Durnik said. "The trouble is that I don't know the man who built the arch, so I don't know if he can be trusted."

"Do you still want to talk philosophy with him?" Bel-garath said to Beldin.

"Why not? Solid practicality has a place in the world, too, and sometimes my speculations get a little airy."

"I think the word is windy, Beldin. Windy."

"You didn't really have to say that, did you?"

Belgarath looked at him critically. "Yes," he replied. "I think I did."

Polgara, Ce'Nedra, and Velvet retired to an elaborate bath that was even larger than those in their quarters in the imperial palace at Mal Zeth.

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While the ladies were bathing, Silk excused himself. "There are a few other things I need to attend to," he explained. "I won't be very long."

It was after bath time, but before suppertime, when a wiry little fellow in a tar-smeared canvas smock was escorted into the main sitting room. "I was told that there was a Prince Kheldar as was wantin' words with me," he said, looking around. He spoke in a brogue almost identical to Feldegast's.

"Ah-" Garion floundered, "the prince has stepped out fora moment."

"I surely don't have all day to sit around coolin' me heels, me boy," the little fellow objected. "I've things to do an' people to see, don't y' know."

"I'll handle this, Garion," Durnik said mildly.

"But-"

"It's no problem at all," Durnik said just a bit more firmly. He turned to the little deckhand. "The prince just had a few questions, is all," he said in an almost lazy tone. "It's nothing that you and I can't take care of without bothering his Highness." He laughed. "You know how these highborn people are-excitabile."

"Now dial's the truth, surely. There's nothin' like a title t* rob a man of his good sense."

Durnik spread his hands. "What can I say?" he said. "Why don't we sit down and talk a bit? Would you take a spot of ale?"

"I've been known t' take a sup from time t' time." The little fellow grinned. "Yer a man after me own heart, me friend. What trade is it ye follow?"

Durnik held out his callused and burn-scarred hands. "I'm a blacksmith," he admitted.

"Whoosh!" the dockhand exclaimed. " 'Tis a hot an' heavy line o' work ye've chose fer yerself. I labor on the docks, meself. 'Tis heavy enough, but at least it's out in the open air."

"It is indeed," Durnik agreed in that same easygoing fashion. Then he turned and snapped his fingers at Belgarath. "Why don't you see if you can find some ale for my friend and me?" he suggested. "Get some for yourself, too-if you're of a mind."

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Belgarath made a number of strangling noises and went to the door to talk to the servant waiting outside.

"A relative of my wife's," Durnik confided to the tar-smeared man. "He's not quite bright, but she insists that I keep him on. You know how that goes."

"Oh, by the Gods, yes. Me own dear wife's got cousins by the score who can't tell one end of a shovel from another. They kin surely find the ale barrel an' supper table, though."

Durnik laughed. "How's the work?" he asked. "On the docks, I mean?"

"Tis cruel hard. The masters keep all the gold fer their-selves, and we git the brass."

Durnik laughed ironically. "Isn't that always the way of it?"

"It is indeed, me friend. It is indeed."

"There's no justice in the world," Durnik sighed, "and a man can only bow to the ill winds of fortune."

"How truly ye speak. I see that yeVe suffered under unkind masters yerself."

"A time or two," Durnik admitted. He sighed. "Well," he said, "on to the business at hand, then. The prince has got a certain interest in a fellow with white eyes. Have you ever seen him?"

"Ah," the dockhand said, "that one. May he sink in a cesspool up to the eyebrows."

"YouVe met him, I take it."

"An' the meetin' gave me no pleasure, I kin tell ye."

"Well, then," Durnik said smoothly, "I can see that we're of the same opinion about this fellow."

"If it's in yer mind t' kill him, I'll lend ye me cargo hook."

"It's a thought." Durnik laughed.

Garion stared in amazement at his honest old friend. This was a side of Durnik he had never seen before. He glanced quickly to one side and saw Polgara's eyes wide with astonishment.

At that moment, Silk came in, but stopped as Velvet motioned him to silence.

"However," Durnik went on slyly, "what better way to upset somebody that we both dislike than to overturn a scheme he's been hatching for a year or more?"

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The dockhand's lips peeled back from his teeth in a feral grin. "I'm listenin', me friend," he said fervently. "Tell me how to spoke the white-eyed man's wheel, an' I'm with ye to the end." He spat in his hand and held it out.

Durnik also spat on his palm, and the two of them smacked their hands together in a gesture as old as time. Then the smith lowered his voice confidentially. "Now," he said, "we've heard that this white-eyed one may have all of his teeth fall out-hired a ship for Melcena. What we need to know is when he left, on what ship, who went with him, and where he was to land."

"Simplicity in itself," the dockhand said expansively, leaning back in his chair.

"You, there," Durnik said to Belgarath, "is that ale on the way?"

Belgarath made a few more strangling noises.

"It's so hard to get good help these days." Durnik sighed.

Polgara tried very hard to stifle a laugh.

"Well, now," the dockhand said, leaning forward in that same confidential manner, "this is what I seen with me own two eyes, so I'm not handin' along secondhand information. I seen this white-eyed one come to the docks on a mornin' about five days ago. 'Twas about daybreak, it was, an' one of them cloudy mornin's when ye can't tell the difference between fog an' smoke, an' ye don't want to breathe too deep of either. Anyway, the white-eyed one, he had a woman with him in a black satin robe with a hood coverin' her head, an' she had a little boy with her."

"How do you know it was a woman?" Durnik interrupted.

"Have ye no eyes, man?" the dockhand laughed. "They don't walk the same as we do. There's a certain swayin' of the hips that no man alive could imitate. 'Twas a woman, right enough, an' ye have me word on that. An' the little boy was as fair as a mornin' sunrise, but he seemed a little sad. Sturdy little lad he was, an' looked fer all the world as if he wished he could put his hands on a sword to rid hisself of them as he didn't like too much. Anyway, they went aboard ship, an' the ship, she slipped her hawsers an' rowed off into the fog. Word was that they was bound fer the city."

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of Melcena-or some well-hid cove nearby, smugglin' not bein* unknown in these parts, don't y' know."

"And this was five days ago?" Durnik asked.

"Five or four. Sometimes I lose track of the days."

Durnik seized the man's tar-smeared hand warmly. "My friend," he said, "between us, we'll kick all the spokes out of the white-eyed man's wheel yet."

"I'd surely like to help with the kickin'," the deckhand said a bit wistfully.

"You have, friend," Durnik said. "You definitely have. I'll kick a time or two for you myself. Silk," the smith said very seriously, "I think our friend here should have something to pay him for his trouble."

Silk, looking a bit awed, shook a few coins out of his purse.

"Is that the best you can do?" Durnik asked critically.

Silk doubled the amount. Then, after a glance at Durnik's disapproving expression, doubled that in gold.

The deckhand left, his fist clutched protectively around his coins.

Velvet rose wordlessly to her ieet and curtsied to Durnik with profound respect.

"Where did you learn how to do that?" Silk demanded.

Durnik looked at him with some surprise. "Haven't you ever traded horses at a country fair before, Silk?" he asked.

"As I told ye, me old friend," Betdin said gaily, "the old speech has not died out yet altogether, an' 'tis music to me ears t' hear it again."

"Must you?" Belgarath said in a highly offended tone. He turned to Durnik. "What was all that folksy business?"

Durnik shrugged. "I've met that sort of man many times," he explained. "They can be very helpful, if you give them a reason to be-but they're very touchy, so you have to approach them just right." He smiled. "Given a little time, I could have sold that fellow a three-legged horse-and convinced him that he'd got the best of the bargain."

"Oh, my Durnik," Polgara said, throwing her arms about the smith's neck. "What would we ever do without you?"

"I hope we never have to find out," he said.

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"All right," Belgarath said, "now we know that Zandra-mas went to Melcena. The question is why."

"To get away from us?" Silk suggested.

"I don't think so, Kheldar," Sadi disagreed. "Her center of power is in Darshiva. Why should she run off in the other direction?"

"I'll work on that."

"What's in Melcena?" Velvet asked.

"Not too much," Silk replied, "unless you count all the money in Melcena itself-most of the world's supply, last time I heard."

"Would Zandramas be interested in money?" the blond girl asked.

"No," Polgara said very firmly. "Money would have no meaning to her-not at this point. It's something else."

"The only thing that means anything to Zandramas right now is the Sardion, isn't it?" Garion said. "Could the Sardion be out there in the islands someplace?"

Beldin and Belgarath exchanged a look. "What does that phrase mean?" Beldin demanded in exasperation. "Think, Belgarath. What does it mean when they say the 'Place Which Is No More'?"

"You're smarter than I am," Belgarath retorted. "You answer the riddle."

"I hate riddles!"

"I think about all we can do at this point is trail along behind and find out," Silk said. "Zandramas seems to know where she's going, and we don't. That doesn't leave us much choice, does it?"

"The Sardion came to Jarot as well," Garion mused. "It was a long time ago, but the Orb picked up its trail just outside of town. I'll go down to the docks and see if both trails are still running together. It's possible that Zandramas has some way of following the Sardion, the same as we do. She might not really know where it's going. Maybe she's just following it."

"He's got a point there," Beldin said.

"If the Sardion is hidden somewhere out there in Melcena, this could all end before the week is out," Garion added.

"It's too early," Polgara said flatly.

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"Too early?" Ce'Nedra exclaimed. "Lady Polgara, my baby's been gone for over a year now. How can you say it's too early?"

"It has nothing to do with that, Ce'Nedra," the sorceress replied. "You've waited a year for the return of your baby. I waited a thousand years and more for Garion. Fate and time and the Gods pay no attention to our years, but Cyradis said at Ashaba that we still had nine months until the final meeting, and it hasn't been that long yet."

"She might have been wrong," Ce'Nedra objected.

"Perhaps-but only by a second or so either way."

CHAPTER FOUR

It was foggy in the harbor the next morning, one of those thick early autumn fogs that always hovers on the verge of rain. As they were loading the horses, Garion glanced up and found that he could see no more than a few feet up the masts of the ship they were boarding. Silk stood on the aft deck talking with the ship's captain.

"It should clear off when we get a few leagues out to sea, your Highness," the captain was saying as Garion approached. "There's a fairly steady wind that always blows down the passage between the coast and Melcena."

"Good," Silk said. "I wouldn't want to run into anything. How long is it likely to take us to get to Melcena?"

"Most of the day, your Highness," the captain replied. "It's a fair distance, but the prevailing wind works to our advantage. The return voyage takes several days, though."

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"We'll be all loaded shortly," Silk told him.

"We can leave any time you're ready, your Highness."

Silk nodded and joined Garion at the rail. "Are you feeling any better?" he asked.

"I don't quite follow you."

"You were just a bit grumpy when you got up this morning."

"Sorry. I've got a lot on my mind."

"Spread it around," Silk suggested. "Worries get lighter when you've got people to share them with you."

"We're getting closer," Garion said. "Even if this meeting doesn't happen out here in the islands, it's still only a matter of a few more months."

"Good. I'm getting a little tired of living out of a saddlebag."

"But we don't know what's going to happen yet."

"Of course we do. You're going to meet Zandramas, divide her down the middle with that big knife of yours, and take your wife and son back to Riva where they belong."

"But we don't know that, Silk."

"We didn't know you were going to win the duel with Torak either, but you did. Anyone who goes around picking fights with Gods has very little to fear from a second-rate sorceress."

"How do we know she's second-rate?"

"She's not a disciple, is she? Or would the word be disciple-ess?"

"How would I know?" Garion smiled faintly, then grew serious again. "I think Zandramas has stepped over discipline. She's the Child of Dark, and that makes her a bit more serious than an ordinary disciple." He banged his fist down on the rail. "I wish I knew what I'm supposed to do. When I went after Torak, I knew. This time I'm not sure."

"You'll get instructions when the time comes, I'm sure."

"But if I knew, I could sort of get ready."

"I get the feeling that this is not the sort of thing you can get ready for, Garion." The little man glanced over the rail at the garbage bobbing in the water beside the ship. "Did you follow the trail all the way to the harbor last night?" he asked.

Garion nodded. "Yes-both of them. Both Zandramas

and the Sardion left from here. We're fairly sure that Zandramas is going to Melcena. Only the Gods know where the Sardion went."

"And probably not even they."

A large drop of water fell from the rigging lost in the fog overhead and landed with a splat on Silk's shoulder. "Why is it always me?" the little man complained. "What?"

"Anytime something wet falls out of the sky, it lands on me."

"Maybe somebody's trying to tell you something," Garion grinned.

Toth and Durnik led the last of the horses up the gangway and on down into the hold.

"That's the lot, Captain," Silk called. "We can leave any time now."

"Yes, your Highness," the captain agreed. He raised his voice and started shouting orders.

"I've been meaning to ask you about something," Garion said to Silk. "Always before, you acted almost as if you were ashamed of your title. Here in Malloreia, though, you seem to want to wallow in it." "What a fascinating choice of words." "You know what I mean."

Silk tugged at one earlobe. "In the West, my title's an

inconvenience. It attracts too much attention, and it gets in

the way. Things are different here in Malloreia. Here, no-

body takes you seriously unless you've got a title. I've got

it, so I use it. It opens certain doors for me and permits

me to have dealings with people who wouldn't have time

for Ambar of Kotu or Radek of Boktor. Nothing's really

"changed, though."

> "Then all of that posturing and pomposity-pardon the ! ;terms-are just for show?"

' "Of course they are, Garion. You don't think I've turned Xfcrto a complete ass, do you?"

t, A strange thought came to Garion. "Then Prince Kheldar jdjs as much a fiction as Ambar and Radek, isn't he?" f\$4 "Of course he is." f| "But where's the real Silk?" lfe "It's very hard to say, Garion." Silk sighed. "Sometimes

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I think I lost him years ago." He looked around at the fog. "Let's go below," he said. "Murky mornings always seem to start off these gloomy conversations."

A league or so beyond the breakwater, the sky turned a rusty color, and the fog began to thin. The sea lying to the east of the coast of Malloreia rolled in long, sullen swells that spoke of vast stretches of uninterrupted water. The ship ran before the prevailing wind, her prow knifing through the swells, and by late afternoon the coast of the largest of the Melcene Islands was clearly visible on the horizon.

The harbor of the city of Melcena was crowded with shipping from all over Malloreia. Small and large, the vessels jostled against each other in the choppy water as Silk's captain carefully threaded his way toward the stone quays thrusting out from the shore. It was dusk by the time they had unloaded, and Silk led them through the broad streets toward the house he maintained there. Melcena appeared to be a sedate, even stuffy city. The streets were wide and scrupulously clean. The houses were imposing, and the inhabitants all wore robes in sober hues. There was none of the bustle here that was evident in other cities. The citizens of Melcena moved through the streets with decorum, and the street hawkers did not bawl their wares in those strident voices that helped so much to raise that continual shouted babble that filled the streets of less reserved cities. Although Melcena lay in tropic latitudes, the prevailing breeze coming in off the ocean moderated the temperature enough to make the climate pleasant.

Silk's house here was what might more properly be called a palace. It was constructed of marble and was several stories high. It was fronted by a large formal garden and flanked by stately trees. A paved drive curved up through the garden to a porch lined with columns, and liveried servants stood attentively at the entryway.

"Opulent," Sadi noted as they dismounted.

"It's a nice little place," Silk admitted in an offhand way. Then he laughed. "Actually, Sadi, it's mostly for show. Personally, I prefer shabby little offices in back streets, but Melcena takes itself very seriously, and one has to try to fit in, if one plans to do business here. Let's go inside."

They went up the broad steps and through an imposing

door. The foyer inside the door was very large, and the walls were clad with marble. Silk led them on through the foyer and up a grand staircase. "The rooms on the ground floor are given over to offices," he explained. "The living quarters are up here."

"What sort of business do you do here?" Durnik asked. '.,, "I didn't see anything that looked like a warehouse." V "There aren't many warehouses in Melcena," Silk said : as he opened a door and led them

into a very large, blue-carpeted sitting room. "The decisions are made here, of course, but the goods are normally stored on the mainland. There's not much point in shipping things here and then turning around and shipping them back again."

- "That makes sense," Durnik approved.

The furnishings of the room they had entered were ornate. Divans and comfortable chairs were clustered in little groupings here and there, and wax candles burned in sconces along the wood-paneled walls.

"It's a little late to be wandering around the streets looking for Zandramas," Silk observed. "I thought we might have something to eat, get a good night's sleep, and then Garion and I can start out early in the morning." ; "That's probably the best way to go at it," Belgarath agreed, sinking down onto a well-upholstered divan.

"Could I offer you all something to drink while we're waiting for dinner?" Silk asked.

"I thought you'd never ask," Beldin growled, sprawling in a chair and scratching his beard.

Silk tugged at a bellpull, and a servant entered immediately. "I think we'll have some wine," Silk told him. c "Yes, your Highness." "Bring several varieties."

- "Have you got any ale?" Beldin asked. "Wine sours my stomach."

"Bring ale for my messy friend as well," Silk ordered, "and tell the kitchen that there'll be eleven of us for dinner."

"At once, your Highness." The servant bowed and quietly left the room.

"You have bathing facilities, I assume?" Polgara asked, removing the light cloak she had worn on the voyage.

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"You bathed just last night in Jarot, Pol," Belgarath pointed out.

"Yes, father," she said dreamily. "I know."

"Each suite has its own bath," Silk told her. "They're not quite as large as the ones in Zakath's palace, but they'll get you wet."

She smiled and sat on one of the divans.

"Please, everybody, sit down," Silk said to the rest of them.

* "Do you think any of your people here might know what's going on in the world?" Belgarath asked the little man.

"Naturally."

"Why naturally?"

"My boyhood occupation was spying, Belgarath, and old habits die hard. All of my people are instructed to gather information."

"What do you do with it?" Velvet asked him.

He shrugged. "I sort through it. I get almost as much pleasure from handling information as I do from handling money. "

"Do you forward any of this information to Javelin in Boktor?"

"I send him a few crumbs now and then-just to remind him that I'm still alive."

"I'm sure he knows that, Silk."

"Why don't you send for someone who can bring us up to date?" Belgarath suggested. "We've been out of touch for quite a while, and I'd sort of like to know what certain people are up to."

"Right," Silk agreed. He tugged the bellpull again, and another liveried servant responded. "Would you ask Vetter to step in here for a moment?" Silk asked.

The servant bowed and left.

"My factor here," Silk said, taking a seat, "We lured him away from Brador's secret police. He's got a good head for business and he's had all that training in the intelligence service."

Vetter proved to be a narrow-faced man with a nervous tic in his left eyelid. "Your Highness wanted to see me?" he asked respectfully as he entered the room.

"Ah, there you are, Vetter," Silk said. "I've been back

in the hinterlands and I was wondering if you could fill me in on what's been happening lately."

"Here in Melcena, your Highness?"

"Perhaps a bit more general than that."

"All right," Vetter paused, gathering his thoughts. "There was a plague in Mal Zeth," he began. "The Emperor sealed the city to prevent the spread of the disease, I i so, for a time, we couldn't get any information out of the capital. The plague has subsided, however, so the gates have been opened again. The Emperor's agents are moving freely around Mallorea now.

"There was an upheaval in central Karanda. It appeared to have been fomented by a former Grolim named Mengha. The Karands all believed that there were demons involved, but Karands think that there's a demon behind any unusual occurrence. It does appear, though, that there were at least a few supernatural events in the region. Mengha hasn't been f seen for quite some time, and order is being gradually re-stored. The Emperor took the business seriously enough to

- "summon the army back from Cthol Murgos to put down the
| uprising."

| "Has he rescinded that order yet?" Silk asked. "If things
fgare quieting down in Karanda, he's not going to need all

Those troops, is he?"

Vetter shook his head in disagreement. "The troops are

still landing at Mal Gemila," he reported. "The word we've

been getting out of Mal Zeth is that the Emperor has lost his enthusiasm for the conquest of Cthol Murgos. He had personal reasons for the campaign in the first place, and those reasons don't seem to be as pressing any more. His major concern at the moment seems to be the impending

confrontation between the Disciple Urvon and Zandramas of Ae Sorceress. That situation is about to come to a head. ; Urvon seems to be suffering from some form of mental in-

stability, but his subordinates are moving large numbers of people into the region in preparation for something fairly major. Zandramas is also marshaling her forces. Our best assessment of the situation is that it's only going to be a matter of time before the Emperor moves his forces out of Zeth to restore order. There have been reports of sup-

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plies being stockpiled at Maga Renn. It's apparent that Kal Zakath intends to use it as a staging area."

"Were we able to capitalize on that in any way?" Silk asked intently.

"To some degree, your Highness, We sold a part of our bean holdings to the Bureau of Military Procurement just today."

"What was the price?"

"About fifteen points above what we paid."

"You'd better get word to Kasvor in Jarot," Silk said with a sour expression. "I told him to sell at thirteen. The Mel-cene consortium has been making offers. Is the price likely to go higher?"

Vetter spread one hand and rocked it back and forth uncertainly.

"Let the word get out that we sold at fifteen and tell Kasvor to hold out for that figure. Even if the price goes to sixteen, we'll have still taken most of the profit out of the transaction."

"I'll see to it, your Highness." Vetter frowned a bit. "There's something going on in Dalasia," he continued his report. "We haven't been able to get the straight of it yet, but the DaJasians all seem to be very excited about it. Kelt has been sealed off, so we can't get anybody there to investigate, and Kell is the source of just about everything that goes on in Dalasia.**

"Any news from the West?" Garion asked.

"Things are still stalemated in Cthol Murgos," Vetter replied. "Kal Zakath is reducing his forces there and he's called all his generals home. He's still holding the cities in eastern Cthol Murgos, but the countryside is

reverting. It's not certain whether King Urgit is going to take advantage of the situation. He has other things on his mind."

"Oh?" Silk asked curiously.

"He's getting married. A princess from the House of Cthan, as I understand it." Silk sighed.

"King Gethel of Mishrak ac Thull died," Vetter went on, "and he was succeeded by his son, Nathel. Nathel's a hopeless incompetent, so we can't be sure how long he'll last." Vetter paused, scratching at his chin.

"We've had reports

that there was a meeting of the Alorn Council at Boktor. The Alorns get together once a year, but it's usually at Riva. About the only other thing unusual about it was the fact that a fair number of non-Alorn monarchs attended."

"Oh?" Belgarath said. "Who?"

"The king of the Sendars, the Emperor of Tolnedra, and King Drosta of Gar og Nadrak. The king of Arendia was ill, but he sent representatives."

"Now what are they up to?" Belgarath muttered.

"We weren't able to get our hands on the agenda," Vetter told him, "but not long afterward, a delegation of diplomats from their kingdoms went to Rak Urga. There are rumors that some fairly serious negotiations are going on."

"What are they doing?" Belgarath demanded in an exasperated voice.

"I've told you over and over not to go off and leave the Alorns untended," Beldin said. "If there's any way at all for them to do something wrong, they'll do it."

"The price of gold is up," Vetter continued, "and the price of Malloreal crowns is down. Melcene imperials are holding steady, but the diamond market is fluctuating so wildly that we've withdrawn our investments in that commodity. That's more or less what's current, your Highness. I'll have a more detailed report on your desk first thing in the morning."

"Thank you, Vetter," Silk replied. "That's all for right now."

Vetter bowed and quietly left.

Belgarath began to pace up and down, swearing to himself.

"There's nothing you can do about it, father," Polgara told him, "so why upset yourself?"

"Perhaps they have some reason for what they're doing," Silk suggested.

"What possible reason could they have to be negotiating with the Murgos?"

"I don't know." Silk spread his hands. "I wasn't there when they made the decision. Maybe Urgit offered them something they wanted."

Belgarath continued to swear.

About a half-hour later, they adjourned to the dining room

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and took seats near one end of a table that could easily have accommodated a half a hundred. The linen was snowy white, the knives and forks were solid silver, and the porcelain plates were edged in gold. The service was exquisite, and the meal was of banquet proportions.

"I must talk with your cook," Polgara said as they lingered over dessert. "He appears to be a man of talent."

"I should hope so," Silk replied. "He's costing me enough."

"I'd say you can afford it," Durnik noted, looking around at the luxurious furnishings.

Silk leaned back in his chair, toying with the stem of a silver goblet. "It doesn't really make much sense to maintain a place like this when I only come here about twice a year," he admitted, "but it's expected, I guess."

"Doesn't Yarblek use it, too?" Garion asked him.

Silk shook his head. "No. Yarblek and I have an agreement. I give him free rein in the rest of the world as long as he stays out of Melcena. He doesn't really fit in here, and he insists on taking Vella with him everywhere he goes. Vella really shocks the Melcenes."

"She's a good wench, though," Beldin said, grinning. "When this is all over, I might just buy her." "That's disgusting!" Ce'Nedra flared. "What did I say?" Beldin looked confused. "She's not a cow, you know." "No. If I wanted a cow, I'd buy a cow." "You can't just buy people."

"Of course you can," he said. "She's a Nadrak woman. She'd be insulted if I didn't try to buy her."

"Just be careful of her knives, uncle," Polgara cautioned. "She's very quick with them."

He shrugged. "Everybody has a few bad habits."

Garion did not sleep well that night, although the bed he shared with Ce'Nedra was deep and soft. At first he thought that might be part of the problem. He had been sleeping on the ground for weeks now, and it seemed reasonable that he was just not used to a soft bed. About midnight, however, he realized that the bed had nothing to do with his sleeplessness. Time was moving on inexorably, and his meeting with Zandramas marched toward him with a measured, unstop-

pable pace. He still knew little more than he had at the beginning. He was, to be sure, closer to her than he had been at the start—no more than a week at most behind, if the reports were correct—but he was still trailing after her and he still did not know where she was leading him. Darkly, he muttered a few choice oaths at the madman who had written the Mrin Codex. Why did it all have to be so cryptic? Why couldn't it have been written in plain language?

"Because if it had been, half the world would be waiting for you when you got to the place of the meeting," the dry voice in his mind told him. "You're not the only one who wants to find the Sardion, you know, "

"I thought you'd left for good."

"Oh, no, I'm still around. "

"How far behind Zandramas are we?"

' 'About three days."

Garion felt a wild surge of hope.

' 'Don't get too excited," the voice said, ' 'and don't just dash off as soon as you find the trail again. There's something else that has to be done here."

"What?"

' 'You know better than to ask that, Garion. I can't tell you, so quit trying to trick me into answering. "

' 'Why can't you just tell me?"

"Because if I tell you certain things, the other spirit will be free to tell other things to Zandramas-like the location of the Place Which Is No More, for instance. "

"You mean she doesn't know?" Garion asked incredulously.

' 'Of course she doesn 't know. If she knew, she 'd be there by now."

"Then the location isn't written down in the Ashabine Oracles ?"

"Obviously. Pay attention tomorrow. Somebody's going to say something in passing that's very important. Don't miss it. "

"Who's going to say it?"

But the voice was gone.

It was breezy the following morning when Silk and Gar-ion set out, wearing long robes of a sober blue color. At

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Silk's suggestion, Garion had detached the Orb from the hilt of his sword and carried it concealed beneath his robe. "Melcenes rarely wear arms inside the city," the little man had explained, "and your sword is very conspicuous." They did not take their horses, but rather walked out into the street to mingle with the citizens of Melcena.

"We might as well start along the waterfront," Silk suggested. "Each wharf is owned by a different group of businessmen, and if we can find out which wharf Zandramas landed on, we'll know whom to question for more information."

"Sounds reasonable," Garion said shortly, striding off toward the harbor.

"Don't run," Silk told him.

"I'm not."

"You're moving too fast," the little man said. "People in Melcena go at a more stately pace."

"You know, Silk, I really don't care what the people here think of me. I'm not here to waste time."

Silk took hold of his friend's arm with a firm grip. "Gar-ion," he said seriously, "we know that Zandramas and her underling have come here. She knows that we're after her, and there are people in Melcena who can be hired for various kinds of mischief. Let's not make it easy for them by standing out in the crowd."

Garion looked at him. "All right," he said. "We'll do it your way."

They walked at an infuriatingly slow pace down a broad avenue. At one point, Silk stopped with a muttered oath.

"What's wrong?" Garion asked him.

"That fellow just ahead-the one with the big nose-he's a member of Brador's secret police."

"Are you sure?"

Silk nodded. "I've known him for quite some time." The little man squared his shoulders. "Well, there's no help for it, I guess. He's already seen us. Let's move along."

But the man with the large, bulbous nose moved forward to stand in their path. "Good morning, Prince Kheldar," he said, bowing slightly.

"Rolla," Silk replied distantly.

"And your Majesty," Rolla added, bowing more deeply

to Garion. "We weren't expecting you to appear here in Melcena. Brador will be very surprised."

"Surprises are good for him." Silk shrugged. "An unsurprised man gets complacent."

"The Emperor was most put out with you, your Majesty," Rolla said reproachfully to Garion.

"I'm sure he'll survive it."

"In Mallorea, your Majesty, it's the ones who offend Kal Zakath who need to be concerned about survival."

"Don't make threats, Rolla," Silk warned. "If his Majesty here decides that your report to the Chief of the Bureau of Internal Affairs would be embarrassing, he might decide to take steps to keep you from ever writing it. His Majesty is an Alorn, after all, and you know how short-tempered they can be."

Rolla stepped back apprehensively.

"Always nice talking with you, Rolla," Silk said in a tone of dismissal. Then he and Garion walked on. Garion noticed that the big-nosed man had a slightly worried look on his face as they passed him.

"I love to do that to people," Silk smirked.

"You're easily amused," Garion said. "You do know that when his report gets to Mal Zeth, Zakath's going to flood this whole region with people trying to find us."

"Do you want me to go back and kill him for you?" Silk offered.

"Of course not!"

"I didn't think so. If you can't do something about a situation, there's no point in worrying about it."

When they reached the harbor, Garion tightened his grip on the Orb. The pulling of Iron-grip's sword had sometimes been quite strong, and Garion had no desire to have the stone jump out of his hand. They walked northward along the wharves with the salt tang of the sea in their nostrils. The harbor of Melcena, unlike that of most of the port cities in the world, was surprisingly clear of floating garbage. "How do they keep it so clean?" Garion asked curiously. "The water, I mean?"

"There's a heavy fine for throwing things in the harbor," Silk replied. "Melcenes are compulsively tidy. They also have workmen with nets in small boats patrolling the wa-

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terfront to scoop up any floating debris. It helps to maintain full employment." He grinned. "It's a nasty job and it's always assigned to people who aren't interested in finding regular work. A few days in a small boat full of garbage and dead fish increases their ambition enormously."

"You know," Garion said, "that's really a very good idea. I wonder if-" The Orb suddenly grew very warm in his hand. He pulled his robe open slightly and looked at it. It was glowing a sullen red.

"Zandramas?" Silk asked.

Garion shook his head. "The Sardion," he replied.

Silk nervously tugged at his nose. "That's a sort of dilemma, isn't it? Do we follow the Sardion or Zandramas?"

"Zandramas," Garion said, "She's the one who's got my son."

"It's up to you." Silk shrugged. "That's the last wharf just up ahead. If we don't pick up the trail there, we'll go on and check the north gate."

They passed the last wharf. The Orb gave no indication of interest.

"Could they have landed on one of the other islands?" Garion asked with a worried frown.

"Not unless they changed course once they were at sea," Silk replied. "There are plenty of other places to land a ship along this coast. Let's go have a look at the north gate."

Once again they moved through the streets at that frustratingly leisurely pace. After they had crossed several streets, Silk stopped. "Oh, no," he groaned.

"What is it?"

"That fat man coming this way is Viscount Esca. He's one of the senior members of the Melcene Consortium. He's bound to want to talk business."

"Tell him we have an appointment."

"It wouldn't do any good. Time doesn't mean that much to Melcenes."

"Why, there you are, Prince Kheldar," the fat man in a gray robe said, waddling up to them. "I've been looking all over the city for you."

"Viscount Esca," Silk said, bowing.

"My colleagues and I have stood in awe of your recent

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venture into the commodities market," Esca said admiringly.

Silk's eyes grew sly, and his long nose twitched. Then he assumed a pained expression. "A blunder, actually, my dear Viscount," he said mournfully. "There's little profit to be made in something as bulky as farm produce."

"Have you been keeping abreast of the market?" Esca asked, his face taking on a transparent cast of neutrality, but his eyes filled with undisguised greed.

"No," Silk lied, "not really. I've been upcountry, and I haven't had the chance to talk with my factor as yet. I left instructions for him to take the first offer that comes along, though-even if we have to take a loss. I need my warehouses, and they're all filled to the rafters with beans."

"Well, now," Esca said, rubbing his hands together, 'Til speak with my colleagues. Perhaps we can make you a modest offer." He had begun to sweat.

"I couldn't let you do that, Esca. My holdings are virtually worthless. Why don't we let some stranger take the loss? I couldn't really do that to a friend."

"But, my dear Prince Kheldar," Esca protested in a tone verging on anguish, "we wouldn't really expect to make a vast profit. Our purchase would be more in the nature of long-term speculation."

"Well," Silk said dubiously, "as long as you're fully aware of the risks involved-"

"Oh, we are, we are," Esca said eagerly.

Silk sighed. "All right, then," he said. "Why don't you make your offer to Vetter? I'll trust you not to take advantage of my situation."

"Oh, of course, Kheldar, of course." Esca bowed hastily. "I really must be off now. Pressing business, you understand."

"Oh," Silk said, "quite."

Esca waddled off at an unseemly rate of speed.

"Hooked him!" Silk chortled. "Now I'll let Vetter land him."

"Don't you ever think about anything else?" Garion asked.

"Of course I do, but we're busy right now and we didn't

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have all morning to listen to him babble. Let's move along, shall we?"

A thought occurred to Garion. "What if Zandramas avoided the city?" he asked.

"Then we'll get our horses and check the coastline. She had to have landed somewhere."

As they approached the north gate of Melcena, the press in the street grew noticeably heavier. Carriages and people on horseback began to become more frequent, and the normally sedate citizens began to move more rapidly. Garion and Silk found it necessary to push their way through the throng.

"Anything?" Silk asked.

"Not yet," Garion replied, taking a firmer grip on the Orb. Then, as they passed a side street, he felt the now-familiar pulling. "She's been here," he reported. "She came out of that street-or went into it. I can't quite tell which yet." He went a few steps up the side street. The Orb tried to push him back. He turned around and rejoined his rat-faced friend. The steady pull of the Orb drew him toward the gate. "She went out this way," he reported as they reached the arched opening.

"Good," Silk said. "Let's go back and get the others. And then maybe we can find out why Zandramas came to Melcena."

CHAPTER FIVE

It seemed somehow that Cation's impatience had communicated itself to Chretienne. The big gray stallion was restive as they left Silk's house and rode into the street and he flicked his ears in irritation as Garion tried to curb him with the reins. Even the sound of his steel-shod hooves on the cobblestones came as a kind of restless staccato. As Garion leaned forward to lay a calming hand on the arched gray neck, he could feel the nervous quivering of his horse's muscles under the sleek skin. "I know," he said. "I feel the same way, but we have to wait until we're outside the city before we can run."

Chretienne snorted and then made a plaintive whinnying sound.

"It won't take that long/" Garion assured him.

They rode in single file through the busy streets with Silk

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in the lead. The breeze swirling through the streets carried with it the dusty smell of autumn.

"What are all those buildings over there?" Eriond called ahead to Silk. The blond young man pointed toward a large complex of structures that seemed to be set in the center of a lush green park.

"The University of Melcena," Silk replied. "It's the largest institution of higher learning in the world."

"Even bigger than the one in Tol Honeth?" Garion asked. "Yes, much. The Melcenes study everything. There are branches of learning at that university that the Tolnedrans won't even admit exist." "Oh? Such as what?"

"Applied alchemy, astrology, necromancy, fundamentals of witchcraft, that sort of thing. They've even got an entire college devoted to the reading of tea leaves." "You're not serious." "I'm not, but they are." Garion laughed and rode on.

The streets of Melcena grew even busier, but there was a decorum to the bustle. No matter how urgent his affairs might be, a Melcene businessman was never so preoccupied that he didn't have time for a friendly chat with one of his competitors. The snatches of conversation Garion heard as they rode along the boulevards ranged in subject from the weather to politics to flower arrangement. The major concentration that morning, however, seemed to be centered on the price of beans.

When they reached the north gate, the great sword strapped across Garion's back began to pull at him. Despite Silk's critical look, Garion had decided that he was not going out into the countryside without the sword. Zandramas had a way of leaving traps behind her, and Garion definitely did not want to walk into one of them unprepared. As they passed through the gate, he nudged Chretienne forward to ride beside Silk. "The trail seems to be following this road," he said, pointing up a broad highway stretching off to the north.

"At least it doesn't go across open country," Silk said. "The ground gets a little marshy in spots up here, and I hate to ride through mud."

Belgarath had said nothing since they had left Silk's bouse, but had ridden along with an irritated expression on his face. Now he came forward to join Silk and Garion. He looked around to make sure that none of the local citizens were close enough to overhear what they were saying and then spoke to Garion. "Let's go over it again-step by step this time. Exactly what did your friend say?"

"Well," Garion replied, "he started out by saying that all the prophecies are cryptic in order to keep the information out of the wrong hands."

' 'That makes a certain amount of sense, Belgarath," Bel-din said from just behind them.

"It might make sense," Belgarath said, "but it doesn't make things any easier."

"Nobody promised you easy."

"I know. I just wish they'd stop going out of their way to make it difficult. Go ahead, Garion."

"Then he said that we're only three days behind Zandramas," Garion told him.

"That means that she's left the island," Silk noted.

"How did you arrive at that conclusion?" Belgarath asked.

"Melcena's a big island, but not that big. You can ride from one end of it to the other in two days. She might have gone on to one of the northern islands, but if we're three days behind her, she isn't on this one any more."

Belgarath grunted. "What else did he say?" he asked Garion.

"He said that there's something else we have to do here- besides finding the trail, I mean."

"I gather he wasn't very specific."

"No. He explained why not, though. He said if he told me what it was, the other prophecy could tell Zandramas certain things she didn't know yet. That's when he told me that she doesn't know where the Place Which Is No More is, and that the location's not in the Ashabine Oracles."

"Did he give you any clues at all about this task of ours?"

"Only that somebody's going to say something to us today that's very important."

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"Who?"

"He wouldn't tell me. All he said was that somebody was going to say something in passing that we shouldn't miss. He said that we should be alert for that kind of thing."

"Anything else?"

"No. That's when he left."

The old man started to swear.

"I felt pretty much the same way myself," Garion agreed.

"He's done as much as he can, Belgarath," Beldin said. "The rest is up to us."

Belgarath made a wry face. "I suppose you're right."

"Of course I'm right. I'm always right."

"I wouldn't go that far. Well, first things first, I guess. Let's find out where Zandramas went. Then we can start analyzing every casual remark we hear." He turned in his saddle. "Keep your ears open today, all of you." Then he nudged his mount into a trot.

A rider in sober blue galloped past, going toward the city with uncharacteristic haste. Silk began to laugh after the man had passed them.

"Who was that?" Durnik asked.

"A member of the Consortium," Silk replied gaily. "It appears that Viscount Esca's called an emergency session. "

"Is this something I ought to know about?" Belgarath asked.

"Not unless you're interested in the market price of beans."

"Will you keep your mind on what we're here for and stop playing?"

"It was sort of necessary, Grandfather," Garion came to his friend's defense. "The Viscount stopped us in the street while we were looking for the trail. He'd have talked all day if Silk hadn't sent him off on a fool's errand."

"Did he say anything at all that might be what we're looking for?"

"No. He just talked about beans." "Did you meet anybody else today? Share these little encounters with us, Garion."

"We ran into one of Brador's secret policemen. I'd

imagine that his messenger is already on the way to Mal Zeth."

"Did he say anything?"

"He made a few veiled threats, is all. I guess Emperor Zakath's a little unhappy with us. The policeman recognized me, but I suppose that's only natural. Silk was going to kill him, but I said no."

"Why?" Beldin asked bluntly.

"We were in the middle of a busy street for one thing. Killing somebody's the sort of thing you ought to do in private, wouldn't you say?"

"You were a much nicer boy before you developed this clever mouth," Beldin snapped.

Garion shrugged. "Nothing ever stays the same, uncle."

"Be polite, Garion," Polgara called from behind.

"Yes, ma'am."

A black carriage rattled by. The team of white horses drawing it was moving at a dead run and they were flecked with foam.

"Another bean buyer?" Belgarath asked.

Silk smirked and nodded.

Durnik had been looking around. "I don't see any signs that this land is being farmed," he said.

Silk laughed. "Land in Melcena's too valuable to be wasted on farming, Durnik. The people here import all their food from the mainland. About all we'll find out here are the estates of the very wealthy-retired businessmen, nobles, that sort of thing. The whole countryside's one huge park. Even the mountains have been landscaped."

"That doesn't seem very practical," Durnik said disapprovingly.

"The people who live on the estates spent a great deal of money for them, so I guess they can do what they like with the land."

"It still seems wasteful."

"Of course it is. That's what rich people do best-waste tilings."

The green hills to the north of the city were gently rolling and were dotted with artistically placed groves of trees. Many of the trees had been carefully pruned to ac-

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centuate their pleasing shapes. Garion found this tampering with nature somehow offensive. It appeared that he was not alone in this feeling. Ce'Nedra rode with a stiff look of disapproval on her face and frequently made little sounds of disgust, usually at the sight of a well-trimmed oak tree.

They moved into a canter, following the trail north along a road surfaced with gleaming white gravel. The road curved gently from hillside to hillside and in level spots it frequently made wide bends, evidently for no other purpose than to relieve the monotony of long straight stretches. The houses set far back from the road were universally constructed of marble and were usually surrounded by parks and gardens. It was a sunny autumn day, and the prevailing breeze carried with it the smell of the sea, a smell Garion found very familiar. He suddenly felt a sharp pang of homesickness for Riva.

As they cantered past one estate, a large number of gaily dressed people crossed the road ahead of them at a gallop, chasing after a pack of barking dogs. The people jumped fences and ditches with what appeared to be reckless abandon.

"What are they doing?" Eriond called to Silk.

"Fox hunting."

"That doesn't really make any sense, Silk," Durnik objected. "If they don't farm, they don't raise chickens. Why are they worried about foxes?"

"It makes even less sense in view of the fact that the fox isn't native to these islands. They have to be imported."

"That's ridiculous!"

"Of course it is. Rich people are always ridiculous, and their sports are usually exotic-and often cruel."

Bel dm gave an ugly little chuckle. "I wonder how sporting they'd find chasing a pack of Algoths-or maybe an Eldrak or two."

"Never mind," Belgarath told him.

"It wouldn't really take much effort to raise a few, Belgarath," The hunchback grinned. "Or maybe some Trolls," he mused. "Trolls are great fun, and I'd love to see the look on the face of one of those overdressed butterflies when he

jumped a fence and came face to face with a full-grown Troll."

"Never mind," Belgarath repeated.

The road forked at one point, and the Orb pulled toward the left. "She's headed toward the ocean again," Silk noted. "I wonder what it is that makes her so fond of water. She's been hopping from island to island ever since we started out after her."

"Maybe she knows that the Orb can't follow her over water," Garion said.

"I don't think that would be her major concern at this point," Polgara disagreed. "Time's running out-for her as well as us. She doesn't have the leisure for side trips."

The road they were following led down toward the cliffs, and finally the Orb pulled Garion onto a long, paved drive that curved down toward an imposing house set at the very edge of a precipitous drop and overlooking the ocean far below. As they rode toward the house, Garion loosened his sword in its scabbard.

"Expecting trouble?" Silk asked.

"I just like to be ready," Garion replied. "That's a big house up ahead, and a lot of people could be hiding inside."

The men who came out of the cliff-top villa, however, were not armed and they were all garbed in purple livery. "May I ask your business?" one of them asked. He was tall and thin and had an imposing mane of snowy white hair. He carried himself with an air of self-importance, that kind of air usually assumed by senior servants accustomed to ordering grooms and maids about.

Silk pushed forward. "My friends and I have been out for a morning ride," he said, "and we were struck by the beauty of this house and its location. Is the owner about perhaps?"

"His Lordship, the Archduke, is away at present," the tall man replied.

' 'What a shame,' * Silk said. He looked around. "I'm really taken with this place," he said. Then he laughed. "Maybe it's as well that he's not at home. If he

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were, I might be tempted to make him an offer for his house."

"I don't know that his Grace would be very interested," the servant said.

"I don't believe I know his Grace," Silk said artfully. "Do you suppose you could tell me his name?"

"He's the Archduke Otrath, sir," the servant answered, puffing himself up slightly. "He's a member of the imperial family."

"Oh?"

"He's the third cousin-twice removed-of his Imperial Majesty, Kal Zakath."

"Really? What an amazing thing. I'm so sorry to have missed him. I'll tell his Majesty that I stopped by the next time I see him, though."

"You know his Majesty?"

"Oh, yes. We're old friends."

"Might I ask your name, honored sir?"

"Oh, sorry. How very stupid of me. I'm Prince Kheldar of Drasnia."

"The Prince Kheldar?"

"I certainly hope there aren't any others." Silk laughed. "I can get into enough trouble all by myself."

"His Grace will be very sorry to have missed you, your Highness."

"I'll be in Melcena for several weeks," Silk said. "Perhaps I can call again. When do you expect his Grace to return?"

"That's very hard to say, your Highness. He left not three days ago with some people from the mainland." The white-haired servant paused thoughtfully. "If you and your friends wouldn't mind waiting for a few moments, Prince Kheldar, I'll go advise her Grace, the Archduke's wife, that you're here. Her Grace has so few visitors out here, and she loves company. Won't you please come inside? I'll go to her at once and tell her that you're here."

They dismounted and followed him into a broad entry-way. He bowed rather stiffly and went off down a corridor lined with tapestries.

"Very smooth, Kheldar," Velvet murmured admiringly.

"They don't call me Silk for nothing," he said, polishing his ring on the front of his pearl-gray doublet.

When the tall servant returned, he had a slightly pained look on his face. "Her Grace is a bit indisposed at the moment, your Highness," he apologized to Silk.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Silk replied with genuine regret. "Perhaps another time, then."

"Oh, no, your Highness. Her Grace insists on seeing you, but please forgive her if she seems a bit-ah-disoriented."

One of Silk's eyebrows shot up.

"It's the isolation, your Highness," the servant confided, looking embarrassed. "Her Grace is not happy in this somewhat bucolic locale, and she's resorted to a certain amount of reinforcement in her exile."

"Reinforcement?"

"I trust I can count on your Highness' discretion?"

"Of course."

"Her Grace takes some wine from time to time, your Highness, and this appears to be one of those times. I'm afraid she's had a bit more than is really good for her."

"This early in the morning?"

"Her Grace does not keep what one might call regular hours. If you'll come with me, please."

As they followed the servant down a long corridor, Silk murmured back over his shoulder to the rest of them. "Follow my lead on this," he said. "Just smile and try not to look too startled at what I say."

"Don't you just love it when he gets devious?" Velvet said admiringly to Ce'Nedra.

The archduchess was a lady in her mid-thirties. She had luxurious dark hair and very large eyes. She had a pouting lower lip and an ever-so-slightly overgenerous figure which filled her burgundy gown to the point of overflowing. She was also as drunk as a lord. She had discarded her goblet and now drank directly from a decanter. "Prince Kheldar," She hiccuped, trying to curtsy. Sadi moved sinuously to catch her arm to prevent a disaster.

" 'Scuse me," she slurred to him. "So nice of you."

**My pleasure, your Grace," the eunuch said politely.

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She blinked at him several times. "Are you really balder is that an affectation?"

"It's a cultural thing, your Grace," he explained, bow-ing.

"How disappointing," she sighed, rubbing her hand over his head and taking another drink from the decanter. "Could I offer you all something to drink?" she asked brightly.

Most of them declined with faint headshakes. Be 1dm, however, stumped forward with his hand extended. "Why not?" the grotesque little man said. "Let's try a rip of that, me girl." For some reason he had lapsed into Feldegast's brogue.

Belgarath rolled his eyes ceiling ward.

The archduchess laughed uproariously and passed over the decanter.

Beldin drained it without stopping for breath. "Very tasty," he belched, tossing the decanter negligently into a corner, "but ale's me preference, y'r Ladyship. Wine's hard on the stomach so early of a morning."

"Ale it shall be, then," she crowed happily. "We'll all sit around and swill ourselves into insensibility." She fell back on a couch, exposing a great deal of herself in the process. "Bring ale," she commanded the embarrassed servant, "lots and lots of ale."

"As your Grace commands," the tall man replied stiffly, withdrawing.

"Nice enough fellow," the archduchess slurred, "but he's so terribly stuffy sometimes. He absolutely refuses to take a drink with me." Her eyes suddenly filled with tears. "Nobody wants to drink with me," she complained. She held out her arms imploringly to Beldin, and he enfolded her in an embrace. "You understand, don't you, my friend?" she sobbed, burying her face in his shoulder.

' 'Of course I do," he said, patting her shoulder. * 'There, there, me little darlin'," he said, " 'twill all be right again soon."

The noblewoman regained her composure, sniffed loudly, and fished for a handkerchief. "It's not that I want to be like this, your Highness," she apologized, trying to focus her eyes on Silk. "It's just that I'm so absolutely bored out here. Otrath has all the social grace of an oyster, so he's

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imprisoned me out here in the hinterlands with nothing but the booming of the surf and the screeching of gulls for company. I so miss the balls and the dinner parties and the conversation in Melcena. What am I to do with myself out here?"

"Tis crue! hard, me darlin'," Beldin agreed. He took the small cask of ale the servant cringingly brought, placed it between his knees, and bashed in the top with his gnarled fist. "Would ye care fer a sup, sweetening?" he asked the duchess politely, holding out the cask.

"I'd drown if I tried to drink out of that," she protested with a silly little laugh.

"Right y' are," he agreed. "You there," he said to Belgarath. "Get the poor girl a cup or somethin'."

Belgarath scowled at his gnarled brother, then wordlessly fetched a silver tankard from a sideboard.

Beldin dipped deeply into the cask with the tankard, swiped off the bottom with his sleeve, and offered it to their hostess. "To yer good health, me darlin'," he said, drinking from the cask.

"You're so kind," she hiccuped. Then she drained off about half the tankard with foamy ale spilling out of the comers of her mouth and down the front of her gown.

"We were very sorry to have missed his Grace," Silk said, obviously a little nonplussed by Beldin's rough-and-ready approach to a highborn, though tipsy, lady.

"You didn't miss a thing, your Highness," she burped, politely covering her mouth. "My husband's a fat green -toad with all the charm of a dead rat. He spends his time

-trying to decipher his proximity to the imperial throne. Kal Zakath has no heir, so all the imperial cousins sit around waiting for one another to die and trying to cement alliances. Have you ever been in Mal Zetn, your Highness? It's an absolutely ghastly place. Frankly, imperial crown or no, I'd sooner live in Hell." She drained her tankard and handed it wordlessly back to Beldin. Then she looked around brightly, her eyes slightly unfocused. "But my dear Prince

'Kheldar," she said, "you haven't introduced me to your friends as yet."

; "How terribly forgetful of me, your Grace," he ex-claimed, slapping his hand to his forehead. He rose for-

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mally to his feet. "Your Grace, I have the honor to present her Grace, the Duchess of Erat." He held his hand out grandly to Polgara, who rose and curtsied. "Your Grace," she murmured.

"Your Grace," the archduchess replied, trying to rise, but not quite succeeding.

"There, there, me darlin'," Beldin said, pressing down on her shoulder to keep her more or less in place. "Tis early, an' we're all friends. There's no need at all fer us t' be goin' through all these tiresome formalities."

"I like him," the noblewoman said, pointing at Beldin with one hand and dipping out more ale with the other. "Can I keep him?"

"Sorry, your Grace," Belgarath said. "We might need him later on."

"So grim a face," she observed, looking at the ancient sorcerer. She grinned roguishly. "I'll wager I could make you smile."

Silk rushed on. "Her Highness, Princess Ce'Nedra of the House of Borune," he said, "and the Margravine Liselle of Drasnia. The young man with the sword is known as the Lord of the Western Sea-an obscure title, I'll grant you, but his people are an obscure sort of folk." Garion bowed deeply to the tipsy archduchess. "So great a sword you have, my Lord," she said, "It's a family heirloom, your Grace," he replied. "I'm more or less obliged to carry it."

"The others have no titles they care to acknowledge," Silk said. "They're business associates, and we don't worry about titles where money is concerned."

"Do you have a title?" the lady asked Beldin. "Several, me little darlin'," he replied in an offhand way, "but none from any land ye'd be recognizin' the name of- most of 'em havin' disappeared long ago." He raised the cask again and drank noisily.

"What a dear little man you are," she said in a smoldering sort of voice.

" 'Tis me charm, darlin'," he replied with a resigned sort of sigh. " 'Tis always been me bane, this charmin' quality about me. Sometimes I must actually hide myself t' keep

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.off the maids overpowered with unreasonin' passion." He sighed again, then belched.

; "We might want to talk about that one of these days," she suggested.

Silk was obviously out of his depth here. "Ah-" he said lamely, "-as I was saying, we're sorry to have missed the archduke."

"I can't for the life of me think why, your Highness," the lady said bluntly. "My husband's an unmitigated ass, and he doesn't bathe regularly. He has wild aspirations about : the imperial throne and very little in the way of prospects in that direction." She held out her tankard to Beldin. "Would you, dear?"

He squinted down into the cask. "It could just be that we'll need another, me darlin'," he suggested.

"I've got a cellar full," she sighed happily. "We can go ;on like this for days, if you'd like."

Belgarath and Beldin exchanged a long look. "Never (•mind," Belgarath said. "But-" "Never mind."

"You were saying that your husband has imperial ambitions, your Grace," Silk floundered on.

"Can you imagine that idiot as emperor of Mallorea?" She sneered. "Half the time he can't even get his shoes on the right feet. Fortunately, he's a long way down the line of succession."

Garion suddenly remembered something. "Has anyone : ever suggested anything to him that might have encouraged f'these ambitions?" he asked.

| "/ certainly didn't," she declared. She frowned bleakly at the far wall. "Now that you mention it, though, there >' was a fellow who came through here a few years ago-a fellow with white eyes. Have you ever seen anybody with eyes like that? It makes your blood run cold. Anyway, he and the archduke went off to my husband's study to talk." ' She snorted derisively. "Study! I don't think my idiot hus-d can even read. He can barely talk to me, but he calls room his study. Isn't that absurd? Well, at any rate, that happened at a time when I was still curious about the oaf's affairs. I'd had one of the footmen drill a hole through the

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wall so I could watch-and hear-what the fool was up to." Her lower lip began to tremble. "Not long after that, I saw him in there with the upstairs maid." She threw her arms out tragically, sloshing ale on Beldin. "Betrayed!" she cried. "In my own house!"

"What were they talking about?" Garion asked her gently. "Your husband and the white-eyed man, I mean?"

"White-eyes told my husband thaj-somebody named Zan-dramas could guarantee him succession to the throne in Mal Zeth. That name sounds familiar for some reason. Has anybody ever heard it before?" She looked around, trying to focus her eyes.

"Not that I recall," Silk lied blandly. "Have you ever seen this white-eyed man again?"

The archduchess was busily trying to dip the last bit of ale out of the cask. "What?" she asked.

"The white-eyed man," Belgarath said impatiently. "Did he ever come back?"

"Of course." The lady leaned back and lustily drained her tankard. "He was here just a few days ago. He came here with some woman in a black satin robe and a little boy." She belched modestly. "Could you give that bellpull over there a bit of a jerk, my twisted little friend?" she asked Beldin. "I think we've used up all of this cask, and I'm still sort of thirsty."

"I'll see to it at once, me darlin'!" The hunchback stumped to the bellpull.

"It's so very nice to have friends about," the archduchess said dreamily. Then her head drooped to one side and she began to snore.

"Wake her up, Pol," Belgarath said.

"Yes, father."

It was a very light surge, but the tipsy noblewoman's eyes popped open immediately. "Where was I?" she asked.

"Ah-you were telling us about the visit of the white-eyed man a few days back, your Grace," Silk supplied.

"Oh, yes. He came in about dusk-him and that hag in black satin."

"Hag?" Silk asked.

"She must have been a hag. She went to a lot of trouble to keep her face covered. The little boy was adorable,

though-reddish-blond curls and the bluest eyes you ever saw. I got some milk for him, because he was hungry. Anyway, White-eyes and the hag went off along with my husband, and then they all took horses and rode off. The toad, my husband, told me that he was going to be gone for a while and that I should send for my dressmaker-something about a gown suitable for an imperial coronation. I forget exactly."

"What happened to the little boy?" Ce'Nedra asked in a very tense voice.

The archduchess shrugged. "Who knows? As far as I know, they did take him with them." She sighed. "I'm suddenly so sleepy," she murmured.

"Did your husband give you any hint about where they were going?" Silk asked her.

She waved her hands helplessly. "I stopped listening to him years ago," she said. "We have a small yacht in a cove about a mile from here. It's gone, so I think they took that. My husband was saying something about those commercial wharves south of the city." She looked around. "Has that other cask of ale got here yet?" she asked drowsily.

" 'Twill only be a moment or two, me darlin'," Beldin assured her in a gentle voice.

"Oh, good."

"You need anything more?" Silk quietly asked Belgarath.

"I don't think so." The old man turned to his daughter. "Put her to sleep again, Pol," he said.

"There's no need, father," she replied. She looked rather sadly at the lush-bodied noblewoman, who had once again wrapped her arms about Beldin's neck, burrowed her face into his shoulder, and was lightly snoring. Gently, the dwarfed hunchback disengaged her arms and laid her softly on the couch. He straightened her gown, then crossed the room, picked up a comforter from a divan, returned, and covered her with it. "Sleep well, my Lady," he murmured, touching her face with one sad hand. Then he turned and glared pugnaciously at Belgarath. "Well?" he demanded in the tone of a man ready to fight.

"I didn't say anything," Belgarath said to him.

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Wordlessly, Ce'Nedra rose, went to the hideous little man, embraced him, and kissed him on the cheek.

"What was that all about?" he asked suspiciously.

"I didn't say anything either," she replied, absently picking a few pieces of straw out of his beard and handing them to him.

CHAPTER SIX

As they emerged from the house, Garion went immediately to Chretienne and swung up into his saddle.

"What have you got in mind?" Silk asked him.

"I'm going to stay on the trail," Garion replied.

"Why? All it's going to do is run down to that cove the lady mentioned and then go out to sea again."

Garion looked at him helplessly.

"I'd say that the best thing for us to do right now is get back to Melcena as quickly as possible. I have a lot of people working for me there. I'll saturate those commercial wharves with men-the same way we did in Jarot. Naradas won't be hard to follow."

"Why don't I just take the Orb and go down to the wharves myself?" Garion protested.

"Because all you'll find out that way is which wharf she

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sailed from. We need more than that." Silk looked sympathetically at his friend. "I know you're impatient, Gar-ion-we all are-but my way's going to be faster, actually. My people can find out when Zandramas sailed and where she was going. That's the thing we really have to know." "All right, then," Belgarath said, "let's ride." They mounted quickly and rode at a canter back up the drive to the road. Then they went south toward Melcena at a gallop.

It was about noon when they reached the north gate and not long after that when they dismounted in front of Silk's house. They went inside and on up the stairs to the sitting room. "Would you ask Vetter to come up?" the little man asked a passing servant as they entered the room.

"At once, your Highness."

"I'd say we'd better pack again," Silk suggested, removing his businessman's robe. "As soon as we find out where Zandramas is going, I think we'll be leaving again."

Sadi smiled faintly. "Poor Zith," he murmured. "She's getting very tired of traveling."

"She's not the only one," Velvet said a bit ruefully. "When this is all over, I don't think I'll ever want even to look at another horse."

There was a polite knock at the door, and Vetter opened it. "You wanted to see me, your Highness?" he asked.

"Yes, Vetter. Come in, please." Silk was pacing up and down, his eyes deep in thought. "We've been looking for some people," he said.

"I surmised as much, your Highness."

"Good. We know that these people came to Melcena not too long back. Then they left again about three days ago. We need to know where they went."

"Very well, your Highness. Can you give me a description?"

"I was just getting to that. There were two men, a woman, and a small boy. One of the men was the Archduke Otrath. Do you know him?"

Vetter nodded. "I can give our people an accurate description of him, yes."

"Very good, Vetter. The other man is named Naradas."

"I've heard the name, your Highness, but I don't think I've ever seen him."

"You wouldn't have forgotten him. His eyes are totally white."

"He's a blind man?"

"No, but his eyes have no color to them."

"That should make things simpler."

"I thought it might. The woman's been going to some trouble to keep her face covered, but she MI be with the archduke and Naradas. We've picked up the information that they may have sailed from one of the commercial wharves to the south of the city. Start out by concentrating the search there. Send every man you can put your hands on down there. Have them talk with everybody on those wharves. We need information and we need it fast. Spread money around if you have to. I want to know when they left, on which ship, and where they were going. If the ship happens to be back in port, bring me one of the sailors-or even better yet, the captain. Speed is essential, Vetter."

"I'll see to it at once, your Highness. I'll have several hundred men on those wharves within the hour and I'll keep you posted about the progress of the search. Will there be anything else?"

Silk frowned. "Yes," he decided. "We came to Melcena aboard one of our own ships. It should still be down in the harbor. Send someone to the captain and tell him to make ready to sail again. We'll be leaving as soon as we get the information."

"I'll attend to it." Vetter bowed and quietly left the room.

"He seems like a good man," Beldin noted.

"One of the best," Silk agreed. "He gets things done and he never gets excited." The little man smiled. "I've heard that Bradors been trying to lure him back, but I've got more money than Brador has."

Beldin grunted and looked at Belgarath. "We've got some tilings to sort out," he said. "Why is Zandramas saddling herself with this archduke? This whole side trip of hers didn't make any sense at all." t "Of course it did."

"I'm sure you'll explain mat to me-sometime in the next week or so."

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Belgarath fished around inside his tunic and pulled out a tattered scrap of paper. He looked at it. "This is it," he grunted. He held the paper out in front of him. " 'Behold:' " he read. " 'In the days which shall follow the ascension of the Dark God into the heavens shall the King of the East and the King of the South do war upon each other, and this shall be a sign unto ye that the day of the meeting is at hand. Hasten therefore unto the Place Which Is No More when battles do rage upon the plains of the South. Take with thee the chosen sacrifice and a King of Angarak to bear witness to what shall come to pass. For lo, whichever of ye cometh into the presence of Cthrag Sardius with the sacrifice and an Angarak king shall be exalted above all the rest and shall have dominion over them. And know further that in the moment of sacrifice shall the Dark God be reborn, and he shall triumph over the Child of Light in the instant of his rebirth.' "

"What a fascinating piece of gibberish," Beldin said. "Where did you come by it?"

"We picked it up in Cthol Murgos." Belgarath shrugged. "It's a part of the Grolim Prophecies of Rak Cthol. I told you about it before."

"No," Beldin disagreed, "as a matter of fact, you didn't."

"I must have."

"I'm sorry, Belgarath," the grubby little man said from between clenched teeth, "you didn't."

"What an amazing thing." Belgarath frowned. "It must have completely slipped my mind."

"We knew it was going to happen eventually, Pol," Bel-din said. "The old boy's finally slipped over the line into senility."

"Be nice, uncle," she murmured.

"Are you positive I didn't tell you about this?" Belgarath said a little plaintively.

"There's no such thing as positive," Beldin replied, automatically, it seemed.

"I'm awfully glad you said that," Belgarath said just a bit smugly.

"Stop that."

"Stop what?"

"Don't try to use my own prejudices against me. Where does this Grolim insanity put us?"

"Grolims obey orders beyond the point of reason."

"So do we, when you get down to it."

"Perhaps, but at least we question the orders now and then. Grolims don't. They follow instructions blindly. When we were in Rak Urga, we saw the Hierarch Agachak bullying King Urgit about this. Agachak knows that he has to have an Angarak king in tow if he's going to have any chance at all when he gets to this place of the final meeting. He's going to take Urgit, even if he has to drag him by the hair. Up until now, Zandramas hasn't bothered herself about the requirement."

"She must be planning to kill Zakath, then," Durnik said, "and then put this archduke on the throne in his place."

"She won't even have to do that, Durnik. All you need to be called a king in Angarak society is a hint of royal blood, a coronation ceremony, and recognition by a major Grolim priest. Back in the old days, every clan-chief was a king. It didn't really matter that much, because all the power was in the hands of Torak anyway. They all had crowns and thrones, though. Anyway, Zandramas is a recognized Grolim priest-or priestess, in this case. Otrath is of royal blood. A coronation, spurious or not, would qualify him as a King of Angarak, and that would satisfy the prophecy."

"It still seems a little questionable to me," Durnik said.

"This comes from a man whose people elected a rutabaga farmer as their first king," Beldin said.

"Actually, Fundor the Magnificent wasn't a bad king," Belgarath said. "At least, once he got the hang of it all. Fanners always make good kings. They know what's important. At any rate, Otrath will be king enough to

fulfill the prophecy, and that means that Zandramas has everything she needs now. She has Geran and an Angarak king."

"Do we need one, too?" Durnik asked. "An Angarak king, I mean?"

"No. We'd need an Alorn King. I think Garion qualifies."

"It wasn't this complicated last time, was it?"

"Actually it was. Garion was already the Rivan King as

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well as the Child of Light. Tbrak was both king and God, and he was the Child of Dark."

"Who was the sacrifice, then?"

Belgarath smiled affectionately at the good man. "You were, Durnik," he said gently. "Remember?"

"Oh," Durnik said, looking a bit embarrassed. "I forget about that sometimes."

"I wouldn't be at all surprised," Beldin growled. "Getting killed is the sort of thing that might tend to make one's memory wander just a bit."

"That's enough of that, uncle," Polgara said dangerously, putting a protective arm about Durnik's shoulders.

Garion suddenly realized that not one of them had ever spoken with Durnik about that terrible time between the moment Zedar had killed him and the moment when the Orb and the Gods had returned him to life. He had the very strong feeling that Polgara fully intended to keep it that way.

"She's completed all her tasks then, hasn't she?" Ce'Nedra asked sadly. "Zandramas, I mean. She has my son and an Angarak king. I do so wish I could see him one more time before I die."

"Die?" Garion asked incredulously. "What do you mean, die?"

"One of us is going to," she said simply. "I'm sure it's going to be me. There's no other reason for me being along, is there? We all have tasks to perform. Mine is to die, I think."

"Nonsense!"

"Really?" She sighed.

"Actually, Zandramas still has several more tasks," Belgarath told her. "She has to deal with Urvon at the very least."

"And Agachak, I think," Sadi added. "He wants to play, too, as I recall."

"Agachak's in Cthol Murgos," Silk objected.

"So were we-until some months back," the eunuch pointed out. "AH it takes to get to Malloreia from Cthol Murgos is a boat and a little luck with the weather."

"Zandramas has one other thing she has to do as well,"

Velvet said, moving over until she was beside Ce'Nedra and wrapping her arms about the sad little queen.

"Oh?" Ce'Nedra said without much interest. "What's that?"

"The prophecy told Garion that she still doesn't know where the Place Which Is No More is. She can't go there until she finds out, can she?"

Ce'Nedra's face brightened just a bit. "That's true, isn't it?" she conceded. "I suppose it's something," she said, laying her head against Velvet's shoulder.

"Zandramas isn't the only one with things left to do," Belgarath said. "I still have to find an unmutated copy of the Ashabine Oracles." He looked at Silk. "How long do you think it's going to take your men to find out what we need to know?"

Silk spread his hands. "It's a little hard to say," he admitted. "A lot could depend on luck. A day at the most, I'd imagine."

"How fast is that ship of yours?" Garion asked him. "I mean, can it go any faster than it did when we were coming here?"

"Not by very much," Silk replied. "Melcenese are better shipbuilders than Angarak, but that ship was built to carry cargo, not to win races. If the wind gets too strong, the captain's going to have to shorten his sails."

"I'd give a lot to have a Cherek warship right now," Garion said. "A fast boat could make up for a lot of lost time." He gazed thoughtfully at the floor. "It wouldn't really be too hard, would it?" he suggested. He looked at Belgarath. "Maybe you and I could put our heads together, and-" He made a kind of vague gesture with his hand.

"Uh-Garion," Durnik interrupted him, "even if you did have a Cherek boat, who would you find to sail her? I don't think the sailors here would understand what's involved."

"Oh," Garion said glumly. "I hadn't thought about that, I guess."

There was a light rap at the door, and Vetter entered carrying a sheaf of parchments. "The men have been dispatched to the south wharves, your Highness," he reported. "You suggested that the matter was of some urgency, so I

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took the liberty of posting couriers on fast horses to central locations near the waterfront. As soon as anyone gets news of any kind, the word should reach us here within five minutes." He glanced at Ce'Nedra. "I hope that will relieve some of her Majesty's anxiety," he added.

"Her-" Silk burst out, then controlled himself. He stared at his factor for a moment, then burst out laughing. "How did you find out, Vetter?" he asked. "I didn't introduce anybody."

"Please, your Highness," Vetter replied with a pained look. "You didn't engage me in this position to be stupid, did you? I've maintained certain contacts with my former associates in Mal Zeth, so I more or less know who your guests are and what your mission is. You chose not to mention the matter, so I didn't make an issue of it, but you aren't paying me to keep my eyes and ears closed, are you?"

"Don't you just love Melcenes?" Velvet said to Sadi.

Sadi, however, was already looking at Vetter with a certain interest. "It may just happen that in time I'll be able to resolve the slight misunderstanding I presently have with my queen," he said delicately to Silk's factor. "Should that happen, I might want to make you aware of certain employment opportunities in Sthiss Tor."

"Sadi!" Silk gasped.

"Business is business, Prince Kheldar," Sadi said blandly.

Vetter smiled. "There are these few documents, your Highness," he said to Silk, handing over the parchments he carried. "As long as you're waiting, I thought you might want to glance at them. A few require your signature."

Silk sighed. "I suppose I might as well," he agreed.

"It does save time, your Highness. Sometimes it takes quite a while for things to catch up with you."

Silk riffled through the stack. "This all seems fairly routine. Is there anything else of note going on?"

"The house is being watched, your Highness," Vetter reported. "A couple of Rolla's secret policemen. I imagine they'll try to follow you when you leave."

Silk frowned. "I'd forgotten about him. Is there some way to get them off our trail?"

"I think I can manage that for your Highness."

"Nothing fatal, though," Silk cautioned. "The Rivan King here disapproves of random fatalities." He grinned at Garion.

"I think we'll be able to deal with the situation without bloodshed, your Highness."

"Anything else I should know about?"

"The Consortium will make an offer on our bean holdings tomorrow morning," Vetter replied. "They'll start at three points below market and go as high as five above it."

"How did you find that out?" Silk looked amazed.

"I've bribed one of the members." Vetter shrugged. "I promised to give him a quarter point commission on everything over ten-a bit generous, perhaps, but we may need him again sometime, and now I'll have a hold on him."

"That's worth a quarter of a point right there."

"I thought so myself, your Highness." Vetter laughed suddenly. "Oh, one other thing, Prince Kheldar. We have this investment opportunity."

"Oh?"

"Actually, it's more in the nature of a charitable contribution."

"I gave at the office," Silk said with an absolutely straight face. Then his nose twitched slightly. "It wouldn't hurt to hear about it, though, I guess."

"There's a very grubby little alchemist at the university," Vetter explained. "He absolutely swears that he can turn brass into gold."

"Well, now." Silk's eyes brightened.

Vetter held up a cautioning hand. "The cost, however, is prohibitive at this time. It doesn't make much sense to spend two pieces of gold to get back one."

"No, I wouldn't say so."

"The little clubfoot maintains that he can reduce the cost, though. He's been approaching every businessman in Mel-cena about the project. He needs a rich patron to underwrite the cost of his experiments."

"Did you look into the matter at all?"

"Of course. Unless he's a very skilled trickster, it appears that he actually can turn brass into gold. He has a rather peculiar reputation. They say that he's been around

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for centuries. He's got a bad temper and he smells awful- the chemicals he uses, I understand."

Belgarath's eyes suddenly went very wide. "What did you call him?" he demanded.

"I don't believe I mentioned his name, Ancient One," Vetter replied. "He's called Senji."

"I don't mean his name. Describe him."

"He's short and mostly bald. He wears a beard-though most of his whiskers have been singed off. Sometimes his experiments go awry, and there have been explosions. Oh, and he has a clubfoot-the left one, I believe."

"That's it!" Belgarath exclaimed, snapping his fingers.

"Don't be cryptic, father," Polgara said primly.

"The prophecy told Garion that somebody was going to say something to us in passing today that was very important. This is it."

"I don't quite-"

"At Ashaba, Cyradis told us to seek out the clubfooted one because he'd help us in our search."

"There are many men with clubfeet in the world, father."

"I know, but the prophecy went out of its way to introduce this one."

"Introduce?"

"Maybe that's the wrong word, but you know what I mean."

"It does sort of fit, Pol," Beldin said. "As I remember, we were talking about the Ashabine Oracles when Cyradis told us about this clubfoot. She said that Zandramas has one uncut copy, Nahaz has another, and that this clubfoot has the third-or knows where it is."

"It's pretty thin, Belgarath," Durnik said dubiously.

"We've got time enough to chase it down," the old man replied. "We can't go anywhere until we find out where Zandramas is going anyway." He looked at Vetter. "Where do we find this Senji?"

"He's on the faculty of the College of Applied Alchemy at the university, Ancient One."

"All right, I'll take Garion and we'll go there. The rest of you might as well get ready to leave."

"Grandfather," Garion protested, "I have to stay here."

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I want to hear the word about Zandramas with my own

rs. , ,

"Pol can listen for you. I might need you along to help persuade the alchemist to talk to me. Bring the Orb, but leave the sword behind."

"Why the Orb?"

"Let's just call it a hunch."

"I'll come with you," Beldin said, rising to his feet.

"There's no need of that."

"Oh, yes there is. Your memory seems to be failing a bit, Belgarath. You forget to tell me things. If I'm there when you locate the Oracles, I'll be able to save you all the time and trouble of trying to remember."

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CHAPTER SEVEN

The University of Melcena was a sprawling complex of buildings situated in a vast park. The buildings were old and stately, and the trees dotting the close-clipped lawns were gnarled with age. There was a kind of secure serenity about the place that bespoke a dedication to the life of the mind. A calm came over Garion as he walked with the two old sorcerers across the green lawn, but there was a kind of melancholy as well. He sighed.

"What's the problem?" Belgarath asked him.

"Oh, I don't know, Grandfather. Sometimes I wish I might have had the chance to come to a place like this. It might be kind of nice to study something for no reason except that you want to know about it. Most of my studying has been pretty urgent-you know, find the answer, or the world will come to an end."

"Universities are overrated places," Beldin said. "Too many young men attend simply because their fathers insist, and they spend more time carousing than they do studying. His noise is distracting to the serious student. Stick to studying alone. You get more done." He looked at Belgarath. "Have you got even the remotest idea where we're going to find this Senji?"

4' Vetter said that he's a member of the faculty of the College of Applied Alchemy. I'd imagine that's the place to start."

^ "Logic, Belgarath? You? The next question that pops to mind is where we're going to find the College of Applied Alchemy."

Belgarath stopped a robed scholar who was walking across the lawn with an open book in his hand. "Excuse me, learned sir," he said politely, "but could you direct me to the College of Applied Alchemy?"

"Umm?" the scholar said, looking up from his book. "The College of Applied Alchemy. Could you tell me where I could find it?"

"The sciences are all down that way," the scholar said, , "near the theology department." He waved rather vaguely toward the south end of the campus.

"Thank you," Belgarath said. "You're too kind." : "It's a scholar's duty to provide instruction and direction," the fellow replied pompously.

"Ah, yes," Belgarath murmured. "Sometimes I lose sight of that."

They walked on in the direction the scholar had indicated. "If he doesn't give his students any more specific directions than that, they probably come out of this place with a rather vague idea of the world," Beldin observed. O' The directions they received from others gradually grew more precise, and they finally reached a blocky-looking building constructed of thick gray rock and solidly built; tressed along its walls. They went up the steps in front and V^ntered a hallway that was also shored up with stout buttresses.

"I don't quite follow the reason for all the interior reinforcement," Garion confessed.

As if in answer to his question, there came a thunderous

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detonation from behind a door partway up the hall. The door blew outward violently, and clouds of reeking smoke came pouring out.

"Oh," Garion said. "Now I understand."

A fellow with a dazed look on his face and with his clothes hanging from his body in smoking tatters came staggering out through the smoke. "Too much sulfur," he was muttering over and over again. "Too much sulfur."

"Excuse me," Belgarath said, "do you by any chance know where we might find the alchemist Senji?"

"Too much sulfur," the experimenter said, looking blankly at Belgarath.

"Senji," the old man repeated. "Could you tell us where to find him?"

The tattered fellow frowned. "What?" he said blankly.

"Let me," Beldin said. "Can you tell us where to find Senji?" he bellowed at the top of his lungs. "He's got a clubfoot."

"Oh," the man replied, shaking his head to clear his befuddlement. "His laboratory's on the top floor-down toward the other end."

"Thank you," Beldin shouted at him.

"Too much sulfur. That's the problem, all right. I put in too much sulfur."

"Why were you shouting at him?" Belgarath asked curiously as the three of them went on down the hall.

"I've been in the middle of a few explosions myself." The hunchback shrugged. "I was always deaf as a post for a week or two afterward."

"Oh."

They went up two flights of stairs to the top floor. They passed another door that had only recently been exploded out of its casement. Belgarath poked his head through the opening. "Where can we find Senji?" he shouted into the room.

There was a mumbled reply.

"Last door on the left," the old man grunted, leading the way.

"Alchemy seems to be a fairly dangerous occupation," Garion noted.

•< "Also fairly stupid," Beldin growled. "If they want gold so badly, why don't they just go dig it up?" , "I don't think that's occurred to very many of them," Belgarath said. He stopped before the last door on the left, a door showing signs of recent repair. He knocked. "Go away," a rusty-sounding voice replied. "We need to talk with you, Senji," Belgarath called mildly.

The rusty voice told him at some length what he could do with his need to talk. Most of the words were very colorful.

i Belgarath's face grew set. He gathered himself up and spoke a single word. The door disappeared with a shocking sound.

"Now that's something you don't see around here very much," the grubby little man sitting in the midst of the splintered remains of his door said in a conversational tone.

• **I can't remember the last time I saw a door blow in." He started picking splinters out of his beard. "Are you all right?" Garion asked him. "Of course, just a little surprised is all. When you've been blown up as many times as I have, you sort of get used to the idea. Does one of you want to pull this door off me?" Beldin stumped forward and lifted the remains of the door.

"You're an ugly one, aren't you?" the man on the floor said.

"You're no beauty yourself." "I can live with it." "So can I."

"Good. Are you the one who blew my door in?" "He did." Beldin pointed at Belgarath and then helped the fellow to his feet.

"How did you manage that?" the grubby little man asked Belgarath curiously. "I don't smell any chemicals at all." "It's a gift," Belgarath replied. "You're Senji, I take

"I am. Senji the clubfoot, senior member of the faculty the College of Applied Alchemy." He thumped on the side of his head with the heel of his hand. "Explosions always make my ears ring," he noted. "You-my ugly

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friend," he said to Beldin. "There's a barrel of beer over there in the corner. Why don't you bring me some? Get some for yourself and your friends as well."

"We're going to get along fairly well," Beldin said.

Senji limped toward a stone table in the center of the room. His left leg was several inches shorter than his right, and his left foot was grotesquely deformed. He leafed through several sheets of parchment. "Good," he said to Belgarath. "At least your explosion didn't scatter my calculations all over the room." He looked at them. "As long as you're here, you might as well find something to sit down on."

Beldin brought him a cup of beer, then went back to the corner where the barrel was and filled three more cups.

"That is really an ugly fellow," Senji noted, hauling himself up and sitting on top of the table. "I sort of like him, though. I haven't met anybody quite like that for almost a thousand years."

Belgarath and Garion exchanged a quick look. "That's quite a long time," Belgarath said cautiously.

"Yes," Senji agreed, taking a drink from his cup. He made a face. "It's gone flat again," he said. "You there," he called to Beldin. "There's an earthenware jar on the shelf just above the barrel. Be a good fellow and dump a couple handfuls of that powder into the beer. It wakes it up again." He looked back at Belgarath. "What was it you wanted to talk about?" he asked. "What's so important that you have to go around blowing doors apart?"

"In a minute," Belgarath said. He crossed to where the little clubfoot sat. "Do you mind?" he asked. He reached out and lightly touched his fingertips to the smelly man's bald head.

"Well?" Beldin asked.

Belgarath nodded. "He doesn't use it very often, but it's there. Garion, fix the door. I think we'll want to talk in private."

Garion looked helplessly at the shattered remains of the door. "It's not in very good shape, Grandfather," he said dubiously.

"Make a new one then."

"Oh. I guess I forgot about that."

"You need some practice anyway. Just make sure that

•{you can get it open later. I don't want to have to blow it
f,down again when the time comes to leave."

f Garion gathered in his will, concentrated a moment,

•pointed at the empty opening, and said, "Door." The opening was immediately filled again.

"Door?" Beldin said incredulously.

"He does that sometimes," Belgarath said. "I've been trying to break him of the habit, but he backslides from time to time."

• Senji's eyes were narrow as he looked at them. "Well, Inow," he said. "I seem to have some talented guests. I haven't met a real sorcerer in a long, long time." "How long?" Belgarath asked bluntly. "Oh, a dozen centuries or so, I guess. A Grolim was here giving lectures in the College of Comparative Theology. Stuffy sort of fellow, as I recall, but then, most Grolims :are."

•' "All right, Senji," Belgarath said, "just how old are you?"

"I think I was born during the fifteenth century," Senji replied. "What year is it now?"

'Fifty-three seventy-nine," Garion told him. 'Already?" Senji said mildly. "Where does the time go?" He counted it up on his fingers. "I guess that would make me about thirty-nine hundred or so."

"When did you find out about the Will and the Word?" JBelgarath pressed. | "The what?" |r "Sorcery."

|r "Is that what you call it?" Senji pondered a bit. "I sup-\pose the term is sort of accurate, at that," he mused. "I Hke that. The Will and the Word. Has a nice ring to it, doesn't it?"

'When did you make the discovery?" Belgarath repeated.

"During the fifteenth century, obviously. Otherwise I'd died in the normal course of time, like everybody

'You didn't have any instruction?"

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"Who was around in the fifteenth century to instruct me? I just stumbled over it."

Belgarath and Beldin looked at each other. Then Belgar-ath sighed and covered his eyes with one hand.

"It happens once in a while," Beldin said. "Some people just fall into it."

"I know, but it's so discouraging. Look at all the centuries our Master took instructing us, and this fellow just picks it up on his own." He looked back at Senji. "Why don't you tell us about it?" he suggested. "Try not to leave too much out."

"Do we really have time, Grandfather?" Garion asked.

"We have to make time," Beldin told him. "It was one of our Master's final commandments. Any time we come across somebody who's picked up the secret spontaneously, we're supposed to investigate. Not even the Gods know how it happens."

Senji slid down from the table and limped over to an overflowing bookcase. He rummaged around for a moment and finally selected a book that looked much the worse for wear. "Sorry about the shape it's in," he apologized. "It's been blown up a few times." He limped back to the table and opened the book. "I wrote this during the twenty-third century," he said. "I noticed that I was starting to get a little absentminded, so I wanted to get it all down while it was still fresh in my memory."

"Makes sense," Beldin said. "My grim-faced friend over there has been suffering from some shocking lapses of memory lately-of course, that's to be expected from somebody who's nineteen thousand years old."

"Do you mind?" Belgarath said acidly.

"You mean it's been longer?"

"Shut up, Beldin."

"Here we are," Senji said. Then he began to read aloud. " 'For the next fourteen hundred years the Melcene Empire prospered, far removed from the theological and political squabbles of the western part of the continent. Melcene culture was secular, civilized, and highly educated. Slavery was unknown, and trade with the Angaraks and their subject peoples in Karanda and Dalasia was extremely profitable.

The old imperial capital at Melcena became a major center of learning.' "

"Excuse me," Belgarath said, "but isn't that taken directly from Emperors of Melcena and Mallorean"

, "Naturally," Senji replied without any embarrassment. "Plagiarism is the first rule of scholarship. Please don't interrupt."

"Sorry," Belgarath said.

" 'Unfortunately,' " Senji read on, " 'some of the thrust of Melcene scholarship turned toward the arcane. Their major field of concentration lay in the field of alchemy.' " He

itooked at Belgarath. "This is where it gets original," he

^said. He cleared his throat. " 'It was a Melcene alchemist,

"Senji the clubfooted, who inadvertently utilized sorcery during the course of one of his experiments.' "

"You speak of yourself in the third person?" Beldin asked.

t "It was a twenty-third-century affectation," Senji replied. "Autobiography was considered to be in terribly bad taste-immodest, don't you know. It was a very boring century. I yawned all the way through it." He went back to reading. " 'Senji, a fifteenth-century practitioner of alchemy at the university in the imperial city, was notorious for his ineptitude.' " He paused. "I might want to edit that part just a bit," he noted critically. He glanced at the next Une. "And this just won't do at all," he added. " 'To be quite frank about it,* " he read with distaste, " 'Senji's experiments more often turned gold into lead than the reverse. In a fit of colossal frustration at the failure of his

•most recent experiment, Senji accidentally converted a half ton of brass plumbing into solid gold. An immediate debate arose, involving the Bureau of Currency, the Bureau of

(Mines, the Department of Sanitation, the faculty of the College of Applied Alchemy and the faculty of the College of Comparative Theology about which organization should have control of Senji's discovery. After about three hundred years of argumentation, it suddenly occurred to the dispu-

plants that Senji was not merely talented, but also appeared "to be immortal. In the name of scientific experimentation, the varying bureaus, departments, and faculties agreed that

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an effort should be made to have him assassinated to verify that fact.' "

"They didn't!" Beldin said.

"Oh, yes," Senji replied with a grim smugness. "Mel-cenes are inquisitive to the point of idiocy. They'll go to any lengths to prove a theory.' *

"What did you do?"

Senji smirked so hard that his long nose and pointed chin almost touched. " 'A well-known defenestrator was retained to throw the irascible old alchemist from a high window in one of the towers of the university administration building,' " he read. " "The experiment had a threefold purpose. What the curious bureaus wished to find out was: (A) if Senji was in fact unkillable, (B) what means he would take to save his life while plummeting toward the paved courtyard, and (C) if it might be possible to discover the secret of flight by giving him no other alternative.' " The clubfooted alchemist tapped the back of his hand against the text. "I've always been a little proud of that sentence," he said. "It's so beautifully balanced."

"It's a masterpiece," Beldin approved, slapping the little man on the shoulder so hard that it nearly knocked him off the table. "Here," he said, taking Senji's cup, "let me refill that for you." His brow creased, there was a surge, and the cup was full again. Senji took a sip and fell to gasping.

"It's a drink that a Nadrak woman of my acquaintance brews," Beldin told him. "Robust, isn't it?"

"Very," Senji agreed in a hoarse voice.

"Go on with your story, my friend."

Senji cleared his throat-several times-and went on. " 'What the officials and learned men actually found out as a result of their experiment was that it is extremely dangerous to threaten the life of a sorcerer-even one as inept as Senji. The defenestrator found himself suddenly translocated to a position some fifteen hundred meters above the harbor, five miles distant. At one instant he had been wrestling Senji toward the window; at the next, he found himself standing on insubstantial air high above a fishing fleet. His demise occasioned no particular sorrow-except among the fishermen, whose nets were badly damaged by his rapid descent.' "

"That was a masterful passage," Beldin chortled, "but where did you discover the meaning of the word 'translo-cation'?"

"I was reading an old text on the exploits of Belgarath the Sorcerer, and I-" Senji stopped, going very pale, turned, and gaped at Garion's grandfather.

"It's a terrible letdown, isn't it?" Beldin said. "We always told him he ought to try to look more impressive."

"You're in no position to talk," the old man said.

"You're the one with the earthshaking reputation." Beldin shrugged. "I'm just a flunky. I'm along for comic relief."

"You're really enjoying this, aren't you, Beldin?"

"I haven't had so much fun in years. Wait until I tell Pol."

"You keep your mouth shut, you hear me?"

"Yes, O mighty Belgarath," Beldin said mockingly.

Belgarath turned to Garion. "Now you understand why Silk irritates me so much," he said.

"Yes, Grandfather, I think I do."

Senji was still a little wild-eyed.

"Take another drink, Senji," Beldin advised. "It's not nearly so hard to accept when your wits are half-fuddled."

Senji began to tremble. Then he drained his cup in one gulp without so much as a cough.

"Now there's a brave lad," Beldin congratulated him. "Please read on. Your story is fascinating."

Falteringly, the little alchemist continued. "In an out-burst of righteous indignation, Senji then proceeded to chastise the department heads who had consorted to do violence to his person. It was finally only a personal appeal from the emperor himself that persuaded the old man to desist from some fairly exotic punishments. After that, the department heads were more than happy to allow Senji to go his own way unmolested.

On his own, Senji established a private academy and sorted for students. While his pupils never became sor-srs of the magnitude of Belgarath, Polgara, Ctuchik, or some of them were, nonetheless, able to perform rudimentary applications of the principle their master inadvertently discovered. This immediately elevated

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them far above the magicians and witches practicing their art forms within the confines of the university.' " Senji looked up. "There's more," he said, "but most of it deals with my experiments in the field of alchemy."

"I think that's the crucial part," Belgarath said. "Let's go back a bit. What were you feeling at the exact moment that you changed all that brass into gold?"

"Irritation," Senji shrugged, closing his book. "Or maybe more than that. I'd worked out my calculations so very carefully, but the bar of lead I was working on just lay there not doing anything. I was infuriated. Then I just sort of pulled everything around me inside, and I could feel an enormous power building up. I shouted 'Change!'-mostly at the lead bar, but there were some pipes running through the room as well, and my concentration was a little diffused."

"You're lucky you didn't change the walls, too," Beldin told him. "Were you ever able to do it again?"

Senji shook his head. "I tried, but I never seemed to be able to put together that kind of anger again."

"Are you always angry when you do this sort of thing?" the hunchback asked.

"Almost always," Senji admitted. "If I'm not angry, I can't be certain of the results. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't."

"That seems to be the key to it, Belgarath," Beldin said. "Rage is the common element in every case we've come across."

"As I remember, / was irritated the first time I did it as well," Belgarath conceded.

"So was I," Beldin said. "With you, I think."

"Why did you take it out on that tree, then?"

"At the last second I remembered that our Master was fond of you, and I didn't want to hurt his feelings by obliterating you."

"That probably saved your life. If you'd said 'be not,' you wouldn't be here now."

Beldin scratched at his stomach. "That might explain why we find so few cases of spontaneous sorcery," he mused. "When somebody's enraged at something, his first impulse is usually to destroy it. This might have happened many,

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many times, but the spontaneous sorcerers probably annihilated themselves in the moment of discovery."

"I wouldn't be at all surprised that you've hit it," Belgarath agreed.

Senji had gone pale again. "I think there's something I need to know here," he said.

"It's the first rule," Garion told him. "The universe won't let us unmake things. If we try, all the force turns inward, and we're the ones who vanish." With a shudder he remembered the obliteration of Ctuchik. He looked at Beldin. "Did I get that right?" he asked.

"Fairly close. The explanation is a little more complex, but you described the process pretty accurately."

"Did that by any chance happen to any of your students?" Belgarath asked Senji.

The alchemist frowned. "It might have," he admitted. "Quite a few of them disappeared. I thought they'd just gone off someplace, but maybe not."

"Are you taking any more students these days?"

Senji shook his head. "I don't have the patience for it any more. Only about one in ten could even grasp the concept, and the rest stood around whining and sniveling and blaming me for not explaining it any better. I went back to alchemy. I almost never use sorcery any more."

"We were told that you can actually do it," Garion said. "Turn brass or lead into gold, I mean."

"Oh, yes," Senji replied in an offhand way. "It's really fairly easy, but the process is more expensive than the gold is worth. That's what I'm trying to do now-simplify the process and substitute less expensive chemicals. I can't get anyone to fund my experiments, though."

Garion felt a sudden throbbing against his hip. Puzzled, he looked down at the pouch in which he was carrying the Orb. There was a sound in his ears, an angry sort of buzz that was unlike the shimmering sound the Orb usually made.

"What's that peculiar sound?" Senji asked.

Garion untied the pouch from his belt and opened it. The Orb was glowing an angry red.

"Zandramas?" Belgarath asked intently.

Garion shook his head. "No, Grandfather. I don't think so."

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"Does it want to take you someplace?" "It's pulling."

"Let's see where it wants to go." Garion held the Orb out in his right hand and it drew him steadily toward the door. They went out into the corridor with Senji limping along behind them, his face afire with curiosity. The Orb led them down the stairs and out the front door of the building.

"It seems to want to go toward that building over there," Garion said, pointing toward a soaring tower of pure white marble.

"The College of Comparative Theology," Senji sniffed. "They're a sorry group of scholars with an inflated notion of their contribution to the sum of human knowledge." "Follow it, Garion," Belgarath instructed. They crossed the lawn. Startled scholars scattered before them like frightened birds after one look at Belgarath's face.

They entered the ground floor of the tower. A thin man in ecclesiastical robes sat at a high desk just inside the door. "You're not members of this college," he said in an outraged voice. "You can't come in here."

Without even slowing his pace, Belgarath translocated the officious doorman some distance out onto the lawn, desk

and all.

"It does have its uses, doesn't it?" Senji conceded. "Maybe I should give it a little more study. Alchemy's beginning to bore me."

"What's behind this door?" Garion asked, pointing.

"That's their museum." Senji shrugged. "It's a hodgepodge of old idols, religious artifacts, and that sort of thing."

Garion tried the handle. "It's locked."

Beldin leaned back and kicked the door open, splintering the wood around the lock.

"Why did you do that?" Belgarath asked him.

"Why not?" Beldin shrugged. "I'm not going to waste the effort of pulling in my will for an ordinary door."

"You're getting lazy."

"I'll put it back together, and you can open it."

"Never mind."

They went into the dusty, cluttered room. There were rows of glass display cases in the center, and the walls were lined with grotesque statues. Cobwebs hung from the ceiling and dust lay everywhere.

"They don't come in here very often," Senji noted. "They'd rather cook up addleheaded theories than look at the real effects of human religious impulses."

"This way," Garion said as the Orb continued to pull steadily at his hand. He noticed that the stone was glowing redder and redder, and it was getting uncomfortably warm.

Then it stopped before a glass case where a rotting cushion lay behind the dusty panes. Aside from the cushion, the case was empty. The Orb was actually hot now, and its ruddy glow filled the entire room.

"What was in this case?" Belgarath demanded.

Senji leaned forward to read the inscription on the corroded brass plate attached to the case. "Oh," he said, "now I remember. This is the case where they used to keep Cthrag Sardius-before it was stolen."

Suddenly, without any warning, the Orb seemed to jump in Garion's hand, and the glass case standing empty before them exploded into a thousand fragments.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

"How long was it here?" Belgarath asked the shaken Senji, who was gaping in awe first at the stilt sullenly glowing Orb in Garion's hand, then at the shattered remains of the case.

"Senji," Belgarath said sharply, "pay attention."

"Is that what I think it is?" the alchemist asked, pointing at the Orb with a trembling hand.

"Cthrag Yaska," Beldin told him. "If you're going to play this game, you may as well learn what's involved. Now answer my brother's question."

Senji floundered. "I'm not-" he began. "I've always been just an alchemist. I'm not interested in-"

"It doesn't work that way," Belgarath cut him off. "Like it or not, you're a member of a very select group. Stop

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thinking about gold and other nonsense, and start paying attention to what's important."

Senji swallowed hard. "It was always just a kind of game," he quavered. "Nobody ever took me seriously."

"We do," Garion told him, holding out the Orb to the now-cringing little man. "Do you have any idea of the kind of power you've stumbled over?" He was suddenly enormously angry. "Would you like to have me blow down this tower-or sink the Melcene Islands back into the sea-just to show you how serious we are?" "You're Belgarath, aren't you?" "Yes."

"The Godslayer?" "Some people call me that." "Oh, my God," Senji whimpered. "We're wasting time," Belgarath said flatly. "Start talking. I want to know just where Cthrag Sardius came from, how long it was here, and where it went from here." "It's a long story," Senji said.

"Abbreviate it," Beldin told him, kicking aside the glass shards on the floor. "We're a little pressed for time right now."

"How long was the Sardion here?" Belgarath asked. "Eons," Senji replied. "Where did it come from?"

"Zamad," the alchemist responded. "The people up there are Kalandars, but they're a little timid about demons. I think a few of their magicians were eaten alive. Anyway- ;pr so the legends say-at about the time of the cracking of the world some five thousand years or so ago . . ."he fal-Jered again, staring at the two dreadful old men facing him. "It was noisy," Beldin supplied distastefully. "A lot of lpteam and earthquakes. Torak was always ostentatious- some kind of character defect, I think." "Oh, my God," Senji said again. "Don't keep saying that," Belgarath told him in a dis-sted tone. "You don't even know who your God is." "But you will, Senji," Garion said in a voice that was his own, "and once you have met Him, you will follow all the days of your life." Belgarath looked at Garion with one raised eyebrow.

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Garion spread his hands helplessly. "Get on with this, Belgarath," the voice said through Garion's lips. "Time isn't waiting for you, you know."

Belgarath turned back to Senji. "All right," he said. "The Sardion came to Zamad. How?" "It's said to have fallen out of the sky." "They always do," Beldin said. "Someday I'd like to see something rise up out of the earth-just for the sake of variety. "

"You get bored too easily, my brother," Belgarath told him.

"I didn't see you sitting over Burnt-face's tomb for five hundred years, my brother," Beldin retorted.

"I don't think I can stand this," Senji said, burying his face in his trembling hands.

"It gets easier as you go along," Garion said in a comforting tone. "We're not really here to make your life unpleasant. All we need is a little information and then we'll go away. If you think about it in the right way, you might even be able to make yourself believe that this is all a dream."

"I'm in the presence of three demigods, and you want me to pass it off as a dream?"

"That's a nice term," Beldin said. "Demigod. I like the sound of it."

"You're easily impressed by words," Belgarath told him. "Words are the core of thought. Without words there is no thought."

Senji's eyes brightened. "Now, we might want to talk about that a little bit," he suggested.

"Later," Belgarath said. "Get back to Zamad-and the Sardion."

"All right," the clubfooted little alchemist said. "Cthrag Sardius-or the Sardion, whatever you want to call it-came out of the sky into Zamad. The barbarians up there thought that it was holy and built a shrine to it and fell down on their faces and worshiped it. The shrine was in a valley up in the mountains, and there was a grotto and an altar and that sort of thing."

"We've been there," Belgarath said shortly. "It's at the bottom of a lake now. How did it get to Melcena?"

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"That came years later," Senji replied. "The Karands have always been a troublesome people, and their social organization is fairly rudimentary. About three thousand years ago-or maybe a little longer-a King of Zamad began to feel ambitious, so he assimilated Voresebo and started looking hungrily south. There were a series of raids in force across the border into Rengel. Of course, Rengel was a part of the Melcene Empire, and the emperor decided that it was time to teach the Karands a lesson. He mounted a punitive expedition and marched into Voresebo and then Zamad at the head of a column of elephant cavalry. The Karands had never seen an elephant before and they fled in panic. The emperor systematically destroyed all the towns and villages up there. He heard about the holy object and its shrine and he went there and took Cthrag Sardius-more I think to punish the Karands than out of any desire to possess the stone for himself. It's not really very attractive, you know."

"What does it look like?" Garion asked him.

"It's fairly large," Senji said. "It's sort of oval-shaped and about so big." He indicated an object about two feet in diameter with his hands. "It's a strange reddish sort of color, and kind of milky-looking-like certain kinds of flint. Anyway, as I said, the emperor didn't really want the thing, so when he got back to Melcena, he donated it to the univer-sity. It was passed around from department to department, and it finally ended up here in this museum. It lay in that case for thousands of years, collecting dust, and nobody really paid any attention to it."

"How did it leave here?" Belgarath asked.

"I was just getting to that. About five hundred years ago there was a scholar in the College of Arcane Learning. He a strange sort who heard voices. At any rate, he became absolutely obsessed with Cthrag Sardius. He used to sneak in here at night and sit for hours staring at it. I think he [ffbelieved that it was talking to him."

"It's possible," Beldin said. "It could probably do that."

This scholar grew more and more irrational and he fi-

ly came in here one night and stole Cthrag Sardius. I m't think anyone would have noticed that it was missing, the scholar fled the island as if all the legions of Mel-were on his heels. He took ship and sailed south. His

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ship was last seen near the southern tip of Gandahar, and it seemed to be bound in the direction of the Dalasian Protectorates. The ship never came back, so it was generally assumed that she went down in a storm somewhere in those waters. That's all I really know about it."

Beldin scratched reflectively at his stomach. "It sort of fits together, Belgarath. The Sard ion has the same kind of power that the Orb has. I'd say that it's been taking conscious steps to move itself from place to place-probably in response to certain events. It's my guess that if we pinned it down, we'd find that this Melcene emperor took it out of Zamad at just about the time that you and Bear-shoulders went to Cthol

Mishrak to steal back the Orb. Then that scholar Senji mentioned stole it from here at just about the time of the Battle of Vo Mimbren."

"You speak as if it were alive," Senji objected.

"It is," Beldin told him, "and it can control the thoughts of people around it. Obviously it can't get up and walk by itself, so it has men do the picking and carrying."

"It's pretty speculative, Beldin," Belgarath said.

"That's what I do best. Shall we move along? We've got a boat to catch, you know. We can sort all this out later."

Belgarath nodded and looked at Senji. "We've been advised that you might be able to help us," he said.

"I can try."

"Good. Someone told us that you might be able to put your hands on an uncut copy of the Ashabine Oracles."

"Who said so?" Senji asked warily.

"A Dalasian seeress named Cyradis."

"Nobody believes anything the seers say," Senji scoffed.

"I do. In seven thousand years, I've never known a seer to be wrong-cryptic, sometimes, but never wrong."

Senji backed away from him.

"Don't be coy, Senji," Beldin told him. "Do you know where we can find a copy of the Oracles?"

"There used to be one in the library of this college," the alchemist replied evasively.

"Used to be?"

Senji looked around nervously. Then he lowered his voice to a whisper. "I stole it," he confessed.

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"Does it have any passages cut out of it?" Belgarath asked intently.

"Not that I could see, no."

Belgarath let his breath out explosively. "Well, finally," he said. "I think we just beat Zandramas at her own game."

"You're going up against Zandramas?" Senji asked incredulously.

"Just as soon as we can catch up with her," Beldin told him.

"She's terribly dangerous, you know."

"So are we," Belgarath said. "Where's this book you stole?"

"It's hidden in my laboratory. The university officials are very narrow about people from one department pilfering from other people's libraries."

"Officials are always narrow," Beldin shrugged. "It's one of the qualifications for the job. Let's go back to your laboratory. My ancient friend here has to read that book."

Senji limped toward the door and back out into the hallway again.

The thin man in ecclesiastical robes had somehow managed to get his desk back where it belonged and he sat at it again. Garion noticed that his eyes were a little wild.

"We'll be leaving now," Belgarath told him. "Any objections?"

The thin man shrank back.

"Wise decision," Beldin said.

It was late afternoon by now, and the autumn sun streamed down on the well-maintained lawn.

"I wonder if the others have traced down Naradas yet," Garion said as they walked back toward the College of Applied Alchemy.

"More than likely," Belgarath replied. "Silk's people are very efficient."

They entered the reinforced building again to find the halls full of smoke and several more splintered doors lying in the corridor.

Senji sniffed at the smoke. "They're putting in too much sulfur," he noted professionally. -• "A fellow we ran into was saying exactly the same

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," Garion told him. "It was right after he blew himself

up, I think."

"I've told them over and over again," Senji said. "A little sulfur is necessary, but put in too much and-poof!" *

' "It looks as if there's been a fair amount of pooling going on in here," Beldin said, fanning at the smokey air in front of his face with one hand.

"That happens frequently when you're an alchemist," Senji replied. "You get used to it." He laughed. "And you never know what's going to happen. One idiot actually turned glass into steel."

Belgarath stopped. "He did what?"

' "He turned glass into steel-or something very much like it. It was still transparent, but it wouldn't bend, break, or splinter. It was the hardest stuff I've ever seen."

Belgarath smacked his palm against his forehead.

"Steady," Beldin told him. Then he turned to Senji. "Does this fellow happen to remember the process?"

"I doubt it. He burned all his notes and men went into a monastery."

Belgarath was making strangling noises.

"Do you have any idea what a process like that would be worth?" Beldin asked Senji. "Glass is just about the cheapest stuff in the world-it's only melted sand, after all-and you can mold it into any shape you want. That particular process might just have been worth more than all the gold in the world."

Senji blinked.

"Never mind," Beldin said to him. "You're a pure scholar, remember? You're not interested in money, are you?"

Senji's hands began to shake.

They climbed the stairs and reentered Senji's cluttered laboratory. The alchemist closed and locked the door, then limped to a large cabinet near the window. Grunting, he moved it out from the wall a few inches, knelt, and reached behind it.

The book was not thick and it was bound in black leather. Belgarath's hands were shaking as he carried it to a table, sat, and opened it.

"I couldn't really make very much out of it," Senji con-

fessed to Beldin. "I think whoever wrote it might have been insane."

"He was," the hunchback replied.

"You know who he was?"

Beldin nodded. "Torak," he said shortly.

"Torak's just a myth-something the Angaraks dreamed up."

"Tell that to him," Beldin said, pointing at Garion.

Senji swallowed hard, staring at Garion. "Did you really-I mean-?"

"Yes," Garion answered sadly. Oddly enough, he found that he still regretted what had happened at Cthol Mishrak over a dozen years ago.

"It's uncut!" Belgarath exclaimed triumphantly. "Somebody copied from the original before Torak had time to mutilate it. The missing passages are all here. Listen to this: 'And it shall come to pass that the Child of Light and the Child of Dark shall meet in the City of Endless Night. But that is not the place of the final meeting, for the choice will not be made there, and the Spirit of Dark shall flee. Know, moreover, that a new Child of Dark shall arise in the east.' "

"Why would Torak cut that passage?" Garion asked, puzzled.

"The implications of it aren't good-at least not for him," Belgarath replied. "The fact that there was going to be a new Child of Dark hints rather strongly that he wouldn't survive the meeting at Cthol Mishrak."

"Not only that," Beldin added, "even if he did survive, he was going to be demoted. That might have been just a little hard for him to swallow."

Belgarath quickly leafed through several pages.

"Are you sure you're not missing things?" Beldin asked him.

"I know what that copy at Ashaba said, Beldin. I have a very good memory."

"Really?" Beldin's tone was sardonic.

"Just let it lie." Belgarath read another passage rapidly. "I can see why he cut this one," he said. "'Behold, the stone which holds the power of the Dark Spirit will not reveal itself to that Child of Dark who shall come to the City of Endless Night, but will yield instead only to Him

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who is yet to come.' " He scratched at his beard. "If I'm reading this right, the Sardion concealed itself from Tbrak because he wasn't intended to be the ultimate instrument of the Dark Prophecy."

"I imagine that hurt his ego just a little." Beldin laughed.

But Belgarath had already moved on. His eyes suddenly widened, and his face paled slightly. " 'For lo,' " he read, " 'only one who hath put his hand to Cthrag Yaska shall be permitted to touch Cthrag Sardius. And in the moment of that touch, all that he is or might have become shall be sacrificed, and he shall become the Vessel of the Spirit of Dark. Seek ye, therefore, the son of the Child of Light, for he shall be our champion in the Place Which Is No More. And should he be chosen, he shall rise above all others and shall bestride the world with Cthrag Yaska in one hand and Cthrag Sardius in the other, and thus shall all that was divided be made one again, and he will have lordship and dominion over all things until the end of days.' "

Garion was thunderstruck. "So that's what they mean by the word 'sacrifice'!" he exclaimed. "Zandramas isn't going to kill Geran."

"No," Belgarath said darkly. "She's going to do something worse. She's going to turn him into another Tbrak."

"It goes a little further than that, Belgarath," Beldin growled. "The Orb rejected Torak-and burned off half his face in the process. The Sardion didn't even let Torak know that it was around. But the Orb will accept Geran, and so will the Sardion. If he gets his hands on both those stones, he'll have absolute power. Torak was a baby compared to what he'll be." He looked somberly at Garion. "That's why Cyradis told you at Rheon that you might have to kill your son."

"That's unthinkable!" Garion retorted hotly.

"Maybe you'd better start thinking about it. Geran won't be your son any more. Once he touches the Sardion, he'll be something totally evil-and he'll be a God."

Bleakly, Belgarath read on. "Here's something," he said. " 'And the Child of Dark who shall bear the champion to the place of choosing shall be possessed utterly by the Dark Spirit, and her flesh shall be but a husk, and all the starry universe shall be contained therein.' "

"What does that mean?" Garion asked.

"I'm not sure," Belgarath admitted. He leafed through a couple more pages. He frowned. " 'And it shall come to pass that she who gave birth unto the champion shall reveal unto ye the place of the final meeting, but ye must beguile her ere she will speak.' "

"Ce'Nedra?" Garion asked incredulously.

"Zandramas has tampered with Ce'Nedra before," Belgarath reminded him. "We'll have Pol keep an eye on her." He frowned again. "Why would Torak cut out that passage?" he asked with a baffled look.

"Torak wasn't the only one with a sharp knife, Belgarath," Beldin said. "That's a fairly crucial bit of information. I don't think Zandramas would have wanted to leave it behind, do you?"

"That confuses the issue, doesn't it," Belgarath said sourly. "I read a book at Ashaba that had two editors. I'm surprised there was anything left of it at all."

"Read on, old man," Beldin said, glancing at the window. "The sun's going down."

"Well, finally," Belgarath said after reading for a moment more. "Here it is. 'Behold, the place of the final meeting shall be revealed at Kell, for it lies hidden within the pages of the accursed book of the seers.' " He thought about it. "Nonsense!" he burst out. "I've read parts of the Malloreal Gospels myself, and there are dozens of copies scattered all over the world. If this is right, anybody could have picked up the location."

"They're not all the same," Senji murmured.

"What?" Belgarath exploded.

"The copies of the Malloreal Gospels aren't all the same," the alchemist repeated. "I used to look through all these holy books. Sometimes the ancients ran across things that could prove helpful in my experiments. I've gathered up a fair library of that sort of thing. That's why I stole the book you've got in your hands."

"I suppose you've even got a copy of the Mrin Codex," Beldin said.

"Two, actually, and they're identical. That's the peculiar thing about the Malloreal Gospels. I've got three sets, and no two copies are the same."

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"Oh, fine," Belgarath said. "I knew there was a reason not to trust the seers."

"I think they do it on purpose," Senji shrugged. "After I started running across discrepancies, I went to Kell, and the seers there told me that there are secrets in the Gospels that are too dangerous to have out there for just anyone to read. That's why every copy is different. They've all been modified to hide those secrets-except for the original, of course. That's always been kept at Kell."

Beldin and Belgarath exchanged a long look. "All right," Beldin said flatly, "we go to Kell."

"But we're right behind Zandramas," Garion objected.

"And that's where we'll stay if we don't go to Kell," Beldin told him. "Behind her. Going to Kell is the only way we can get ahead of her."

Belgarath had turned to the last page of the Oracles. "I think this is a personal message, Garion," he said in an awed sort of voice, holding out the book.

"What?"

"Torak wants to talk to you."

"He can talk all he wants. I'm not going to listen to him. I almost made that mistake once-when he tried to tell me he was my father, remember?"

"This is a little different. He's not lying this time."

Garion took hold of the book, and a deathly chill seemed to run up through his hands and into his arms.

"Read it," Belgarath said implacably.

Compelled-driven, even-Garion lowered his eyes to the spidery script on the page before him. " 'Hail, Belgarion,' " he read aloud in a faltering voice. " 'If it should ever come to pass that thine eyes fall upon this, then it means that I have fallen beneath thy hand. I mourn that not. I will have cast myself into the crucible of destiny, and, if I have failed, so be it. Know that I hate thee, Belgarion. For hate's sake I will throw myself into the darkness. For hate's sake will I spit out my last breath at thee, my damned brother.* " Garion's voice failed him. He could actually feel the maimed God's towering hatred reaching down to him through the eons. He now understood the full import of what had happened in the terrible City of Endless Night.

"Keep reading," Belgarath told him. "There's more."

"Grandfather, this is more than I can bear." "Read!" Belgarath's voice was like the crack of a whip. Helplessly, Garion again lifted the book. " 'Know that'; we are brothers, Belgarion, though our hate for each other '> may one day sunder the heavens. We are brothers in that we share a dreadful task. That thou art reading my words means V that thou hast been my destroyer. Thus must I charge thee with the task. What is foretold in these pages is an abomination. Do not let it come to pass. Destroy the world. Destroy the universe if need be, but do not permit this to come 'to pass. In thy hand is now the fate of all that was; all that f is; and all that is yet to be. Hail, my hated brother, and farewell. We will meet-or have met-in the City of Endless Night, and there will our dispute be concluded. The task, however, still lies before us in the Place Which Is No More. : One of us must go there to face the ultimate horror. Should | it be thou, fail us not. Failing all else, thou must reave the Vlife from thine only son, even as thou hath reft mine from Kme.' " "

J The book fell from Garion's hands as his knees failed and f: he sank to the floor, weeping uncontrollably. He howled a t wolflike howl of absolute despair and hammered at the floor •; with both his fists and with tears streaming openly down his "face.

Part Two

PELDANE

CHAPTER NINE

There was a man in a sea coat talking alone with Silk in the second floor sitting room when Garion, Belgarath, and Beldin returned. The man was stocky. He had silver-shot hair and beard and he wore a large gold earring : in his left ear.

'Ah, there you are," Silk said, looking up as the three of them entered. The rat-faced little man had changed his clothes and now wore plain doublet and hose of a nondescript brown. "This is Captain Kadian. He's the one who took our friends to the mainland." He looked back at the jiteaman. "Why don't you tell them what you just told me,

i?" he suggested.

'If you want me to, your Highness," Kadian agreed. He that rusty sort of voice seafaring men often have-the lot of bad weather and strong drink, Garion surmised.

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He took a swallow from the silver tankard he was holding. "Well, sir," he began, "it was three days ago when it happened. I'd just come up from Bashad in Gandahar. It's down by the mouth of the Magan." He made a face. "It's an unhealthy sort of a place-all swamps and jungles. Anyhow, I'd carried a cargo of ivory up here for the Consortium, and we'd just off-loaded, so I was sort of looking around for a cargo. A ship doesn't make any money for her owner when she's tied up to a wharf, y'know. I went to a certain tavern I know of. The tavern keeper's an old friend of mine-we were shipmates when we were younger-and he sort of keeps his ear to the ground for me. Well sir, I no sooner got there and set myself down, when my friend, he comes over to me and he asks me if I'd be interested in a short, easy voyage at a good price. I says to him that I'm always interested in that kind of proposition, but that I'd want to know what kind of cargo was involved before I made up my mind. There's some things I don't like to carry-cattle, for instance. They can dirty up the hold of a ship to the point where it takes weeks to get it clean again. Well, my friend, he says to me that there wouldn't be no cargo involved at all. It was just some people as wanted passage to the mainland. I says that it wouldn't hurt none to talk with them, and so he takes me into this room in the back of the tavern where four people was sitting at a table-two men, a woman, and a little boy. One of the men was dressed in expensive clothes-a nobleman of some kind, I think-but it was the other one as did all the talking."

"Was there anything unusual about that one?" Silk prompted.

"I was just getting to that. He was wearing ordinary clothes, but that wasn't what caught my attention. At first I thought he was blind-because of his eyes, you understand-but it seems that he can see well enough, even though his eyes don't have no color at all. I had a ship's cook one time, and one of his eyes was the same way. Foul-tempered sort he was, and a real poor excuse for a cook. Well sir, this man with the funny eyes, he says that he and his friends had to get to Peldane in a hurry, but that they sort of wanted it kept quiet that they was going there. Then he asks me if I knows of a place outside of the town of Selda where I

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could put them on the beach with no one the wiser, and I says that I did." He pulled his nose slyly. "Just about any man as owns a ship knows of a few places like that-customs people being what they are and all. I sort of had my suspicions up by now. People who want to end a voyage on a lonely beach someplace are usually up to no good. Now, I figure that what a man does is his own concern, but if he gets me mixed up in it, it starts being my business real quick. I can get into trouble enough on my own without no help from others." He paused and took a long drink from his tankard and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Like I say, I had my suspicions about these people by now and I was just about to tell them that I wasn't really interested in the proposition, but then the woman, she says something I didn't hear to the one as was doing the talking. She was wearing a kind of long cloak or robe of some kind made out of black satin. She

kept the hood of it up the whole time, so I never saw her face, but she was keeping a real tight grip on the little boy. Anyhow, the one with the white eyes, he pulls out a purse and spills it out on the table, and that purse was full of gold, my friends, more than I'd make in a dozen voyages along these coasts. That put a whole new light on the situation, let me tell you. Well sir, to make it short, we struck the bargain right then and there, and I asks them when they wanted to leave, and the fellow as was doing the talking, he says they'd come down to my ship just as soon as it gets dark. I saw right off that my suspicions wasn't too far off the mark. You don't find very many as is honest who want to sail out of a harbor in the dark of night, but we'd already struck our bargain, and I had his purse tucked under my belt, so it was too late to back out. We sailed that very night and got to the coast of Peldane on the next afternoon."

"Tell them about the fog," Silk said intently.

"I was just about to, your Highness," Kadian said. "That coast down there is sunk in fog almost all spring, and the day we got there wasn't no exception. It was thicker than a wool cloak, but the people in Selda, they're used to it, so [they always lights beacons on the city walls to guide ships ;into their harbor on foggy days. I took my bearings on those ^beacons and I didn't have no trouble finding the beach I

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wanted. We hove to a few hundred yards offshore, and I sent my passengers toward the beach in a small boat with my bo'sun in charge. We hung a lantern from the mainmast to guide him back through the fog, and I put some men to banging on pots and pans to help him And the way. Anyhow, after some time passed, we could hear the sound of the oarlocks out there in the fog near the beach, and we knowed the bo'sun's coming back. And then, all of a sudden, I seen the light of a fire coming through the fog all sort of misty, like. I heard some screaming, and then everything got quiet. We waited for a bit, but the bo'sun, he never came back. I didn't like the smell of things, so I ordered the anchor up, and we sort of eased on back out to sea. I don't know what happened and I wasn't going to stay around to find out. There was things going on that made me real nervous."

"Oh," Beldin said, "such as what?"

"Well sir, one time in the main cabin, this woman as the white-eyed man and the aristocrat had with them, she reached out to take hold of the little boy, him acting kind of restless and all, and I seen her hand. Now, it might have been bad light in the cabin or some such-I don't spend all that much on lamp oil or candles. But-and strike me blind if I "m wrong-it seemed to me that there was sparkles under the skin of her hand."

"Sparkles?" Belgarath asked him.

"Yes, sir. I seen it with my own eyes, and they was moving-all these little tiny sparkles moving around in her flesh, almost like fireflies on a summer's evening."

"As if all the starry universe were contained therein?" Beldin asked intently, quoting from the obscure passage in the Ashabine Oracles.

"Now that you put it that way, that's exactly how it was," Kadian agreed. "I knowed right off that these wasn't no ordinary folks and, after I seen that fire in the fog, I didn't really want to stay around to find out just how un-ordinary they was."

"That might just have saved your life, Captain," Belgarath told him. "Have you ever heard of Zandramas?"

"The witch? Everybody's heard of her."

"I think she was your glittering passenger, and Zandramas is a firm believer in the old notion that dead people

can't tell stories. So far as we know, she's drowned three ships and fed several people to the lions. I expect it was only the fog that saved you. If she'd have been able to see you, you wouldn't be here now."

Captain Kadian swallowed hard.

"Do you need any more?" Silk asked.

"No," Belgarath replied. "I think that covers everything." He looked at the captain. "We thank you, Kadian. Can you sketch us a map of the beach where you dropped off" these passengers of yours?"

"I can indeed," Kadian replied bleakly. "Is it in your mind to chase down the witch?"

"We were sort of thinking along those lines, yes."

"When you burn her, throw on a few logs of wood in memory of my bo'sun and his oarsmen."

"You have my word on that, Captain," Garion told him.

"Green logs," Kadian added. "They don't burn so fast."

"We'll keep that in mind."

Silk stood up and handed the captain a leather pouch.

Kadian bounced it on his palm a few times, and it gave forth a jingling sound. "You're very generous, your Highness," he said, also rising to his feet. "Is there pen and ink handy? I'll draw you that chart."

"Right over on that table," Silk said, pointing.

The captain nodded and crossed the room.

"Where's Aunt Pol," Garion asked, "and the others?"

"They're changing clothes," Silk replied. "I sent word to our ship just as soon as one of Vetter's men came back and told us that they'd found Captain Kadian. She's waiting in the harbor for us right now." He looked closely at Gar-ion. "Aren't you feeling well?" he asked. "You're looking a little pale."

"I got a message that had some bad news in it."

Silk gave Belgarath a puzzled look.

"We found the Ashabine Oracles," the old man explained tersely. "Torak left a message for Garion on the last page. It wasn't very pleasant. We can talk about it once we get on board ship."

Captain Kadian came back holding a sheet of parchment.

I "This is Selda," he said, pointing at his drawing. "There's

a headland to the south, and the beach I was telling you

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about is just south of that. I can't tell you exactly where the witch landed because of the fog, but this place marked with the X should be fairly close."

"Thanks again, Captain," Silk said. "My pleasure, your Highness, and good hunting." Ka-dian turned and left the room with the rolling gait of a man who spends little time on shore.

It was only a few moments later when Polgara and the others joined them. Ce'Nedra and Velvet were both wearing plain gray dresses much like the one Polgara always wore when she was traveling. Gray, Garion noticed, was not a good color for Ce'Nedra. It made her skin look very pale, and the only touch of color about her was her flaming wealth of copper-colored hair.

Durnik and the other men-except for Toth, who still wore only his unbleached blanket and loincloth-were dressed in the same nondescript brown that Silk wore.

"Well, father?" Polgara asked as she entered, "did you find what we wanted?"

He nodded. "Why don't we talk about that after we get on board ship, though? We've done what we came to do in Melcena and we can talk while our ship's moving." He led the way out and down the stairs.

It was a silvery evening. The full moon had risen early and it filled the streets of Melcena with its pale light. Candles glowed golden in the windows of the houses they passed, and hundreds of lanterns winked from the rigging of the ships anchored in the harbor. Garion rode in silence, his melancholy thoughts still on the dreadful communication Torak had left for him thousands of years ago.

They boarded their ship quickly and went immediately below to the cramped cabin beneath the aft deck.

"AH right," Belgarath said to them after Durnik had closed the door, "we found the Oracles and we also found the place where the Sardion was kept until just about the time of the battle of Vo Mimbire."

"That was a profitable trip, wasn't it?" Silk noted. "Is Senji really as old as they say?"

Betdin grunted. "Older."

"Wouldn't that mean that he's a sorcerer?" Ce'Nedra asked. Perhaps it was the somber gray dress, but she seemed

I a bit disconsolate as she sat on an ornately carved bench I under a swinging oil lamp.

Belgarath nodded. "He's not very good at it, but he does

the ability, yes."

"Who was his instructor?" Polgara wanted to know. She sat down beside Ce'Nedra and laid one arm affectionately across the little queen's shoulders.

"Nobody," Belgarath said with a certain disgust. "Would you believe that he just stumbled over it on his own?" "Did you look into that?"

"Yes. Beldin's got a theory. He can explain it to you ;r. At any rate, the Sardion was brought to the university ;here several thousand years ago. They kept it in a museum, don't think anybody knew what it really was. Then, about five hundred years ago, one of the scholars stole it and took it around the southern tip of Gandahar and sailed off in the leral direction of the Dalasian Protectorates. Nobody knows for sure what happened to it after that. Anyway, Senji

an unmutated copy of the Ashabine Oracles." "What did it say?" Velvet asked intently. "A great deal. We found out why Zandramas abducted iGeran."

"As a sacrifice?" she said.

"Only in an obscure sense of the word. If the Dark phecy wins out, Geran is going to be the new God of igarak."

"My baby?" Ce'Nedra exclaimed. "He won't be your baby any more, I'm afraid," the old fman told her bleakly. "He'll be Torak."

"Or worse," Beldin added. "He'll have the Orb in one id and the Sardion in the other. He'll have dominion over srything that exists, and I don't think he'll be a kindly 1"

"We have to stop her!" Ce'Nedra cried. "We can't let this happen!"

"I think that's the general idea, your Majesty," Sadi told

| "What else did it say, father?" Polgara asked. "It said something about Zandramas that's a little ob-ire. For some reason her body's being gradually taken by some kind of light. The sea captain who carried her

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to Selda caught a glimpse of her hand and he said that there are moving lights under her skin. The Oracles said it was going to happen."

"What does it mean?" Durnik asked.

"I haven't got the faintest idea," Belgarath admitted. He looked at Garion and moved his fingers slightly. -/ don't think we need to tell Ce'Nedra what the book said about her, do you?-

Garion shook his head.

"Anyway, we're going to have to go to Kell."

"Kell?" Polgara's voice was startled. "What for?"

"The location of the place we're looking for is in the copy of the Mallorean Gospels the seers keep there. If we go to Kell, we can get to this meeting place before Zandra-mas does."

"That might be a nice change," Silk said. "I'm getting a little tired of tagging along behind her."

"But we'll lose the trail," Ce'Nedra protested.

"Little girl," Beldin said to her gruffly, "if we know where Zandramas is going, we won't need the trail. We can just go directly to the Place Which Is No More and wait for her to show up."

Polgara's arm curled more tightly about Ce'Nedra's shoulders in a protective fashion. "Be gentle with her, uncle. She was brave enough to kiss you at the archduke's house, and I'd imagine that was quite a shock to her sensibilities."

"Very funny, Pol." The ugly hunchback dropped heavily into a chair and scratched vigorously at one armpit.

"Was there anything else, father?" Polgara asked.

"Torak wrote something to Garion," Belgarath replied. "It was fairly bleak, but it appears that even he knew how bad things would get if Zandramas succeeds. He told Garion to stop her at all costs."

"I was going to do that anyway," Garion said quietly. "I didn't need any suggestions from Torak."

"What are we going to be up against in Peldane?" Belgarath asked Silk.

"More of what we ran into in Voresebo and Rengel, I'd imagine."

"What's the fastest way to get to Kell?" Durnik asked.

"It's in the Protectorate of Likandia," Silk replied, "and the shortest way there is right straight across Peldane and Darshiva and then down through the mountains."

"What about Gandahar?" Sadi asked. "We could avoid all that unpleasantness if we sailed south and went through there." Somehow Sadi looked peculiar in hose and a belted tunic. Once he had discarded his iridescent robe, he seemed more like an ordinary man and less like a eunuch. His scalp, however, was freshly shaved.

Silk shook his head. "It's all jungle down in Gandahar, Sadi," he said. "You have to chop your way through."
• "Jungles aren't all that bad, Kheldar."

"They are if you're in a hurry."

"Could you send for those soldiers of yours?" Velvet asked.

"It's possible, I suppose," Silk answered, "but I'm not sure they'd be all that much help. Vetter says that Darshiva's crawling with Grolims and Zandramas' troops, and Peldane's been in chaos for years. My troops are good, but not that good." He looked at Belgarath. "I'm afraid you're going to get more burrs in your fur, old friend."

"Are we just going to ignore the trail, then," Garion asked, "and make straight for Kell?"

Belgarath tugged at one earlobe. "I've got a suspicion that the trail is going to lead in the general direction of Kell anyway," he said. "Zandramas read the Ashabine Oracles, too, you know, and she knows that Kell's the only place where she can get the information she needs."

"Will Cyradis let her look at the Gospels?" Durnik asked.

"Probably. Cyradis is still neutral and she's not likely to show any favoritism."

Garion rose to his feet. "I think I'll go up on deck, Grandfather," he said. "I've got some thinking to do, and sea air helps to clear my head."

The lights of Melcena twinkled low on the horizon behind

em, and the moon laid a silvery path across the surface of

e sea. The ship's captain stood at the tiller on the aft deck,

s hands steady and sure.

"Isn't it a little hard to know which way you're going at Bight?" Garion asked him.

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"Not at all," the captain replied. He pointed up toward the night sky. "Seasons come and go, but the stars never change."

"Well," Garion said, "we can hope, I guess." Then he walked forward to stand in the bow of the ship.

The night breeze that blew down the strait between Melcena and the mainland was erratic, and the sails first bellied and then fell slack, their booming sounding like a funeral drum. That sound fitted Garion's mood. For a long time he stood toying with the end of a knotted rope and looking out over the moon-touched waves, not so much thinking as simply registering the sights and sounds and smells around him.

He knew she was there. It was not merely the fragrance he had known since his earliest childhood, but also the calm sense of her presence. With a peculiar kind of abstraction he sought back through his memories. He had, it seemed, always known exactly where she was. Even on the darkest of nights he could have started from sleep in a strange room in some forgotten town and pointed unerringly to the place where she was. The captain of this ship was guided by the lights in the sky, but the star that had led Garion for his entire life was not some far-distant glimmer on the velvet throat of night. It was much closer, and much more constant.

"What's troubling you, Garion?" she asked, laying a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"I could hear his voice, Aunt Pol-Torak's voice. He hated me thousands of years before I was even born. He even knew my name."

"Garion," she said very calmly, "the universe knew your name before that moon up there was spun out of the emptiness. Whole constellations have been waiting for you since the beginning of time."

"I didn't want them to, Aunt Pol."

"There are those of us who aren't given that option, Gar-ion. There are things that have to be done and certain people who have to do them. It's as simple as that."

He smiled rather sadly at her flawless face and gently touched the snowy white lock at her brow. Then, for the last time in his life, he asked the question that had been on

his lips since he was a tiny boy. "Why me, Aunt Pol? Why me?"

"Can you possibly think of anyone else you'd trust to deal with these matters, Garion?"

He had not really been prepared for that question. It came at him in stark simplicity. Now at last he fully understood. "No," he sighed, "I suppose not. Somehow it seems a little unfair, though. I wasn't even consulted."

"Neither was I, Garion," she answered. "But we didn't have to be consulted, did we? The knowledge of what we have to do is born in us." She put her arms around him and drew him close. "I'm so very proud of you, my Garion," she said.

He laughed a bit wryly. "I suppose I didn't turn out too badly after all," he conceded. "I can get my shoes on the right feet at least."

"And you have no idea how long that took to explain to you," she replied with a light laugh. "You were a good boy, Garion, but you'd never listen. Even Rundorig would listen. He didn't usually understand, but at least he'd listen."

"I miss him sometimes. Him and Doroona and Zubrette." Garion paused. "Did they ever get married? Rundorig and Zubrette, I mean?"

"Oh, yes. Years and years ago, and Zubrette is up to her waist in children-five or so. I used to get a message every autumn, and I'd have to go back to Faldor's farm to deliver her newest baby."

"You did that?" He was amazed.

"I certainly wouldn't have let anyone else do it. Zubrette and I disagreed about certain things, but I'm still very fond of her."

"Is she happy?"

"I think she is, yes. Rundorig's easy to manage, and she has all those children to keep her mind occupied." She looked at him critically. "Are you a little less moody now?" she asked.

c "I feel better," he replied. "I always feel better when you're around." : "That's nice."

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He remembered something. "Did Grandfather get a chance to tell you what the Oracles said about Ce'Nedra?"

"Yes," she said. "I'll keep an eye on her. Why don't we go below now? The next few weeks might be hectic, so let's get all the sleep we can while we have the chance."

The coast of Peldane was engulfed in fog just as Captain Kadian had predicted, but the beacon fires burning on the walls of Selda provided reference points, and they were able to feel their way carefully along the coast until the ship's captain estimated that they were near the beach shown on Kadian's chart.

"There's a fishing village about a mile south of here, your Highness," the captain advised Silk. "It's deserted now, because of all the troubles in the area, but there's a dock there-or at least there was the last time I sailed past this coast. We should be able to unload your horses there.' *

"Excellent, Captain," Silk replied.

They crept along through the fog until they reached the deserted village and its shaky-looking dock. As soon as Chretienne reached the shore, Garion saddled him, then mounted and rode slowly back along the beach with Iron-grip's sword resting on the pommel of his saddle. After he had gone perhaps a mile and a half, he felt the familiar pull. He turned and rode back.

The others had also saddled their horses and led them to the edge of the fog-shrouded fishermen's village. Their ship was moving slowly out to sea, a dim shape in the fog with red and green lanterns marking her port and starboard sides and with a lone sailor astride her bowsprit blowing a melancholy foghorn to warn other ships away.

Garion dismounted and led his big gray stallion to where the others waited.

"Did you find it?" Ce'Nedra asked intently in a hushed little voice. Garion had noticed that for some reason, fog always made people speak quietly.

"Yes," he replied. Then he looked at his grandfather. "Well?" he asked. "Do we just ignore the trail and take the shortest route to Kell or what?"

Belgarath scratched at his beard and looked first at

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Bel din, then at Polgara. "What do you think?" he asked them.

"The trail was going inland, wasn't it?" Beldin asked Garion.

Garion nodded.

"Then we don't have to make the decision yet," the hunchback said. "As long as Z and ram as is going in the same direction we want to go, we can keep on following her. If she changes direction later on, then we can decide."

"It makes sense, father," Polgara agreed.

"All right, we'll do it that way, then." The old man looked around. "This fog should hide us just as well as darkness would. Let's go pick up the trail, and then Garion, Pol, and I can scout on ahead." He squinted up into the murky sky. "Can anybody make a guess about the time?"

"It's about midafternoon, Belgarath," Durnik told him after a momentary consultation with Toth.

"Let's go find out which way she's going, then."

They rode along the beach, following Chretienne's tracks until they reached the spot where Garion's sword swung in his hand to point inland.

"We should be able to gain some time on her," Sadi noted.

"Why's that?" Silk asked him.

"She came ashore in a small boat," the eunuch replied, "so she didn't have horses."

"That's no real problem for her, Sadi," Polgara told him. "She's a Grolim, and she can communicate with her underlings over long distances. I'm sure she was on horseback within an hour of the time her foot touched the sand.' *

The eunuch sighed. "I forget about that from time to : time," he admitted. "It's very convenient for us to have that advantage, but not nearly so convenient when the other side has it, too."

Belgarath swung down from his horse. "Come along, Garion. You, too, Pol. We might as well get started." He looked over at Durnik. "We'll stay in close touch," he told the smith. "This fog could make things a little tricky."

"Right," Durnik agreed.

Garion took Polgara's arm to help her through the soft

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sand and followed his grandfather up the beach to the line of driftwood at the high-water mark.

"This should do it," the old man decided. "Let's make the change here, and then Garion and I can scout on ahead. Pol, try to keep the others more or less in sight. I don't want them straying."

"Yes, father," she said even as she began to shimmer and change.

Garion formed the image in his mind, pulled in his will, and once again felt that curious melting sensation. He looked himself over carefully as he always did. On one occasion he'd made the change in a hurry and had forgotten his tail. A tail does not mean very much to a two-legged animal, but it is distinctly necessary for a four-legged one.

"Stop admiring yourself," he heard BelgarauYs voice in the silences of his mind. "We've got work to do."

"I was just making sure that I had everything, Grandfather."

"Let's go. You won't be able to see very much in the fog, so use your nose."

Polgara was perched sedately on a bone-white limb jutting up from a driftwood log. She was meticulously preening her snowy feathers with her hooked beak.

Belgarath and Garion effortlessly hurdled over the driftwood and loped off into the fog. "It's going to be a wet day," Garion noted soundlessly as he ran alongside the great silver wolf.

"Your fur won't melt."

"I know, but my paws get cold when they're wet."

"I'll have Durnik make you some little booties."

"That would be absolutely ridiculous, Grandfather," Garion said indignantly. Even though he had only recently made the change, the wolf's enormous sense of decorum and propriety had already begun to permeate his consciousness.

"There are some people just ahead," Belgarath said, sniffing at the air. "Tell your aunt."

They separated and moved off into the tall, fog-wet marsh grass. "Aunt Pol." Garion cast the words into the foggy silence around him.

"Yes, dear?"

"Tell Durnik and the others to rein in. There are some strangers up ahead."

"All right, Garion. Be careful."

Garion slunk low to the ground through the wet grass, setting each paw down carefully.

"Will it never lift?" he heard a voice somewhere off to his left demand irritably.

"The local people say that it's always foggy around here in the spring," another voice replied.

"It's not spring."

"It is here. We're south of the line. The seasons are reversed."

"That's a stupid sort of thing."

"It wasn't my idea. Talk to the Gods if you want to register a complaint."

There was a long silence. "Have the Hounds found anything yet?" the first voice asked.

"It's very hard to sniff out a trail after three days-even for the Hounds-and all the wet from this fog isn't making it any easier."

§ Garion froze. "Grandfather!" he hurled the thought into the fog.

"Don't shout."

"There are two men talking just up ahead. They have some of the Hounds with them. I think they're trying to find the trail, too."

"Pol." The old man's thought seemed to crackle. "Come up here."

"Yes, father."

It was no more than a few minutes, but it seemed like hours. Then in the murky fog overhead, Garion heard the single stroke of soft wings.

"There are some men over there to the left," Belgarath's voice reported. "I think they might be Grolims. Have a look, but be careful."

"All right," she replied. There was another soft wing beat in the fog. Again there was that interminable wait.

Then her voice came back quite clearly. "You're right,

ither," she said. "They're Chandim."

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A muttered oath came out of the stillness. "Urvon," Bel-garatn's voice said.

"And probably Nahaz as well," Polgara added.

"This complicates things," the old man said. "Let's go back and talk with the others. We might have to make the decision sooner than Beldin thought."

CHAPTER TEN

They gathered not far from the driftwood-littered beach. The fog had slipped imperceptibly from white to gray as evening settled slowly over this misty coast.

"That's it, then," Beldin said after Belgarath had told mem what lay ahead. "If the Chandim and the Hounds are out there trying to sniff out Zandramas' trail the same as we are, we're bound to run into them sooner or later."

"We've dealt with them before," Silk objected.

"I'll grant that," Beldin replied, "but why risk that sort of thing if we don't have to? The trail of Zandramas isn't really important to us now. What we really need to do at this point is to get to Kell."

Belgarath was pacing up and down. "Beldin's right," he said. "There's no point in taking risks over something that doesn't really matter any more."

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"But we're so close," Ce'Nedra protested.

"If we start running into Chandim-and Hounds-we won't stay very close," Beldin told her.

Sadi had put on a western-style traveler's cloak and had turned the hood up to ward off the dampness of the fog. The covering of his shaved scalp peculiarly altered his appearance. "What's Zandramas likely to do when she finds out that the Chandim are trailing her?" he asked.

"She'll put every Grolim and every soldier she can lay her hands on in their path," Polgara replied.

"And they'll just bring in more force to counter that, won't they?"

"That's the logical assumption," Durnik agreed.

"That sort of means that things are going to come to a head here fairly soon, wouldn't you say-even if neither side would particularly have chosen this place for a major confrontation?"

"What are you getting at, Sadi?" Silk asked him.

"If Urvon and Zandramas are concentrating on each other, they won't really pay that much attention to us, will they? About all we have to do is get out of this general vicinity, and then we should be able to make straight for Kell without much in the way of interference."

"What lies to the south of us?" Beldin asked Silk.

"Nothing major." Silk shrugged. "At least not until you get to Gandahar."

Beldin nodded. "But we've got a city just to the north of here, don't we?"

"Selda," Silk supplied.

"Urvon's probably there already, but if we go south, we should be able to avoid him-and Zandramas as well. Sadi's right. They'll be so busy with each other they won't have time to look for us."

"Anybody want to add anything?" Belgarath asked them.

"A fire maybe?" Durnik said.

"I don't quite follow you."

"We've got all this fog," Durnik explained, "and night's coming on. The Chandim are out there ahead of us, and we need something to distract their attention while we slip around them. There's all that driftwood along the upper edge of the beach. A bonfire on a foggy night lights up the whole

I sky. You can see it for miles. If we build a few fires, the

••Chandim are going to think that something serious is going on behind them and they'll all rush back to investigate. That fought to clear the way for us."

"{ Beldin grinned and clapped a gnarled hand on the smith's shoulder. "You made a good choice, Pol," he chortled. "This is a rare fellow here."

"Yes," she murmured. "I saw that almost immediately."

They rode back along the beach to the abandoned fishing village. "Do you want me to do it, Grandfather?" Garion coffered. "Set fire to the driftwood, I mean?"

"No," the old man replied, "I'll take care of it. You and Pol take the others on down along the shoreline. I'll catch up in a bit."

"Do you want these?" Durnik asked, offering the old iman his flint and steel.

V Belgarath shook his head. "I'll do it the other way," he f'said. "I want to give the Chandim some noise to listen to,

•f as well as the fire to watch. That should get their undivided X attention." He strode off into the fog, heading back up the beach.

"Come along, Garion," Polgara said, pushing back the (hood of her cloak. "We'll scout ahead again. I think we'll |want to move fairly fast."

The two of them walked a short distance down the beach and made the change once more. "Keep your mind awake as well as your ears and nose," Polgara's voice silently instructed. "With this fog, the Chandim will probably be Watching with their thoughts rather than their eyes." " "Yes, Aunt Pol," he replied, loping toward the upper end of the beach. Sand was different underfoot than grass or turf. It gave slightly under his paws and it slowed him a bit. He decided that he did not really like running in sand. He ran along for a couple of miles without any encounters, then ...He heard and felt a shockingly loud surge coming from somewhere behind him. He flinched and glanced back over shoulder. The fog was illuminated by a sooty orange. There was another surge that sounded almost like a detonation, then another, and another.

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"Tacky, father," he heard Polgara say disapprovingly. "Why are you being so ostentatious?"

"I just wanted to be sure they heard me, is all," the old man replied.

"They probably heard you in Mal Zeth. Are you coming back now?"

"Let me start a few more fires first. The Chandim have a limited attention span. Besides, the smoke should confuse the Hounds' sense of smell."

There were several more detonations.

"That should do it." Belgarath's thought had a note of self-satisfaction in it.

About twenty minutes later, the great silver wolf came out of the fog like a ghost. "Oh, there you are," Belgarath said to Garion in the way of wolves. "Let's spread out a bit and move right along. Durnik and the others are right behind us."

"Did the Chandim go back to the beach to see what was happening?"

"Oh, yes." Belgarath's tongue lolled out in the wolf's version of a grin. "They were definitely curious. There were quite a few of them. Shall we go?"

They ran along for about another hour before Garion's nostrils caught the scent of a horse and rider coming from somewhere ahead. He loped on through the fog, ranging back and forth until he pinpointed the man's location. Then he ran forward.

It was a solitary Temple Guardsman who was galloping northward toward the towering fires Belgarath had ignited. Garion rushed him, snarling terribly. The Guardsman's horse squealed in panic, rearing up onto his hind legs and dumping his startled rider into a bleached pile of driftwood. The horse fled, and the Guardsman groaned as he lay tangled up in the white logs and branches half-buried in the sand.

"Trouble?" Belgarath's thought came out of the fog.

"A Guardsman," Garion replied. "He fell off his horse. I think he may have broken some things."

"Was he alone?"

"Yes, Grandfather. Where are you?"

"Just a ways ahead of you. There are some woods up

here. This looks like as good a place as any to turn west. I don't think we need to go all the way down to Gandahar."

"I'll tell Aunt Pol to pass the word to Durnik."

The woods were quite extensive, and there was very little undergrowth. At one point, Garion passed the embers of a campfire still glowing in the foggy dark. The campsite, however, was deserted, and there were signs that whoever had been there had departed in some haste. The track of churned loam on the forest floor indicated that the people had galloped off toward the fires on the beach.

Garion ran on.

Near the edge of the woods, a faint breeze carried a sharp canine reek. Garion stopped. "Grandfather," he sent his thought out urgently, "I smell a dog up ahead."

"Only one?"

"I think so." He crept forward, his ears and nose alert. "I can only smell one," he reported.

"Stay put. I'll be right there."

Garion dropped to his haunches and waited. A few moments later, the silver wolf joined him.

"Is he moving around at all?" Belgarath asked.

"No, Grandfather. He seems to be just sitting in one place. Do you think we can slip around him?"

"You and I could, but I don't think that Durnik and the others would be able to. The Hounds can hear and smell almost as well as wolves can."

"Can we frighten him off?"

"I doubt it. He's bigger than we are. Even if we did, he'd just go for help-and we definitely don't want a pack of the Hounds on our trail. We're going to have to kill him."

"Grandfather!" Garion gasped. For some reason, the thought of deliberately killing another canine profoundly "shocked him.

"I know," Belgarath agreed. "The notion's repugnant, but we don't have any choice. He's blocking our way out of this area, and we have to be clear of here by daylight. Now listen carefully. The Hounds are big, but they're not very agile. They particularly aren't very good at turning around in a hurry. I'll confront him head-on. You run in behind him and hamstring him. You know how to do that?"

That knowledge was instinctive in wolves, and Garion

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found, almost with surprise, that he knew precisely what to do. "Yes," he replied. The speech of wolves is limited in its emotional range, so he could not indicate how uncomfortable this impending encounter made him.

"All right," Belgarath continued, "once you cut his hamstrings, get back out of the range of his teeth. He'll try to turn on you. That's instinctive, so he won't be able to stop himself. That's when I'll take his throat."

Garion shuddered at the deliberateness of the plan. Belgarath was proposing not a fight, but a cold-blooded killing. "Let's get it over with, Grandfather," he said unhappily.

"Don't whine, Garion," Belgarath's thought came to him. "He'll hear you."

"I don't like this," Garion thought back.

"Neither do I, but it's the only thing we can do. Let's

go-" They crept among the fog-dimmed tree trunks with the

smell of the Hound growing stronger in their nostrils. It was not a pleasant smell, since dogs will eat carrion, while wolves will not. Then Garion saw the Hound outlined black against the fog beyond the edge of the trees. Belgarath paused, indicating that he also saw their intended victim. Then the two wolves separated and moved in the slow, deliberate pace of the hunt, setting each paw carefully and noiselessly down on the damp forest loam.

It was over in a shockingly short time. The Hound screamed once when Garion's fangs ripped the tendons of his hind legs, but the scream died into a hideous rattling gurgle as Belgarath's jaws closed on his throat. The huge black body twitched a few times with its front paws scratching convulsively at the dirt. Then it shuddered and went limp. The dead Hound blurred peculiarly, and then there was a Grolim lying on the ground before them with his throat torn out.

"I didn't know they did that," Garion said, fighting down a surge of revulsion.

"Sometimes they do." Then Belgarath sent out his thought. "It's clear now, Pol. Tell Durnik to bring them on through."

As dawn turned the fog opalescent, they took shelter in a ruined village. There had been a wall around it, and part of

it was still standing. The houses had been made of stone. Some were still more or less intact-except for the roofs. Others had been tumbled into the narrow streets. In places, smoke still rose from the shattered debris.

"I think we can risk a fire," Durnik suggested, looking at the smoke.

Polgara looked around. "A hot breakfast wouldn't hurt," she agreed. "It might be some time before we get another chance for one. Over there, I think," she added, "in what's left of that house."

"In just a moment, Durnik," Belgarath said. "I'll need you to translate for me." * He looked at Toth. 'I assume you know how to get to Kell from here?' he asked the huge mute.

Toth shifted the unbleached wool blanket he wore draped over one shoulder and nodded.

"In Melcena, we heard that Kell has been sealed off," the old man continued. "Will they let us through?"

Toth made a series of those obscure gestures.

"He says that there won't be any problem-as long as Cyradis is still at Kell," Durnik translated. "She'll instruct the other seers to let us through."

"She's there, then?" Belgarath asked.

The gestures came more rapidly.

"I didn't quite follow that," Durnik told his friend.

Toth gestured again, slower this time.

Durnik frowned. "This is a little complicated, Belgarath," he said. "As closely as I can make out what he says, she's there and yet not there at the same time-sort of the way she was when we saw Zandramas that time. But she's also there and not there in several other places as well-and in several different times."

"That's a neat trick," Beldin said. "Did he tell you where these other places and times are?"

"No. I think he'd rather not."

"We can respect that," Belgarath said.

"It doesn't diminish the curiosity, though," Beldin said. He brushed a few twigs out of his beard, then pointed at the sky. "I'm going up there," he added. "I think we ought to know how far this fog extends and what we're likely to

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run into once we get past it." He stopped, spread his arms, shimmered, and swooped away.

Durnik led the way into the ruined house and built a small fire in the fireplace while Silk and Sadi prowled through the shattered village. After a short while they returned with a very thin Melcene in the brown robe of a bureaucrat. "He was hiding in a cellar," Silk reported.

The bureaucrat was trembling visibly, and his eyes were wild.

"What's your name?" Belgarath asked him.

The Melcene stared at the old man as if he didn't understand.

"I think he's had a bad time lately," Silk said. "We weren't able to get a word out of him."

"Can you give him something to calm his nerves?" Belgarath asked Sadi.

"I was just about to suggest that myself, Ancient One." Sadi went to his red leather case and took out a small glass vial filled with amber liquid. He took a tin cup from the table and poured some water into it. Then he carefully measured a few drops of the amber liquid into the water and swirled it around. "Why don't you drink this?" he said, handing the trembling Melcene the cup.

The fellow seized the cup gratefully and drained it in several noisy gulps.

"Give it a few moments to take effect," Sadi said quietly to Belgarath.

They watched the terrified man until his trembling subsided. "Are you feeling any better now, friend?" Sadi asked him.

"Y-yes," the thin fellow replied. He drew in a long shuddering breath. "Thank you," he said. "Have you any food? I'm very hungry."

Polgara gave him some bread and cheese. "This should tide you over until breakfast," she said.

"Thank you, Lady." He hungrily took the food and began to wolf it down.

"You look as if you've been through quite a lot lately," Silk said.

"And none of it pleasant," the bureaucrat told him. "What did you say your name was?"

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"Nabros. I'm with the Bureau of Roads."

"How long have you been in Peldane?"

"It seems like forever, but I suppose it's only been twenty years or so."

"What's going on here?" The rat-faced man gestured around at the shattered houses.

"Absolute chaos," Nabros replied. "Things have been in an upheaval for several years now, but last month Zan-dramas annexed Peldane."

"How did she do that? I'd heard that she was somewhere in the western part of the continent."

"So had I. Maybe she just got word back to her generals. Nobody's seen her for several years now."

"You seem to be fairly well informed, Nabros," Silk suggested.

Nabros shrugged. "It goes with being a member of the bureaucracy." He smiled a bit wanly. "Sometimes I think we spend more time gossiping than we do working."

"What have you heard about Zandramas lately?" Belgarath asked.

"Well," the fellow replied, rubbing at his unshaven cheek, "just before I fled the bureau offices in Selda, a friend of mine from the Bureau of Commerce came by. He said that there's supposed to be a coronation of some kind in Hemil-that's the capital of Darshiva, you know. My friend told me that they're going to crown some archduke from Melcena as Emperor of Malloreia."

"Malloreia's already got an emperor," Velvet objected.

"I think that may be part of the idea. My friend from Commerce is a fairly shrewd fellow, and he was speculating a bit after he told me what they were planning. Kal Zakath's been in Cthol Murgos for years now, but he recently returned to Mal Zeth. Most of his army is still in the west, however, so he can't put great masses of troops in the field. My friends seemed to think that Zandramas ordered this coronation in order to infuriate the Emperor to the point that he'll do something rash. It's my guess that she hopes to lure him out of Mal Zeth so her forces can fall on him. If she succeeds in killing him, this archduke from Melcena will actually be the emperor."

"What's the point of that?" Silk asked him.

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"You've heard of Urvon, haven't you?"

"The Disciple?"

"That's the one. He's been sitting for centuries in Mal Yaska, but what's been going on in this part of the world has finally lured him out. It's because of Zandramas, you see. She's a direct challenge to him. Anyway, he marched across Karanda gathering up an enormous army. The Kar-ands even believe he has demons aiding him. That's nonsense, of course, but Karands will believe anything. That's why Zandramas-or her people-have to get control of the imperial throne. She needs to bring the Mallorean army back from Cthol Murgos to match Urvon's forces. Otherwise, he'll destroy everything she's worked for." The suddenly talkative bureaucrat sighed deeply, and his head began to nod.

"I think he'll sleep now," Sadi murmured to Belgarath.

"That's all right," the old man replied. "I've got what I need."

"Not quite yet," Polgara said crisply from her cook-fire. "There are some things that I need as well." She carefully stepped across the littered floor of the half-ruined house and lightly touched one hand to the dozing bureaucrat's face. His eyes opened, and he looked at her a bit blankly. "How much do you know about Zandramas?" she asked him. "I think I'd like to hear the full story-if you know it. How did she gain so much power?"

"That's a long story, Lady."

"We have time."

The thin Melcene rubbed at his eyes and stifled a yawn. "Let me see," he said, half to himself, "where did it all start?" He sighed. "I came here to Peldane about twenty years ago. I was young and very enthusiastic. It was my first post, and I wanted very much to make good. Peldane's not such a bad place, really. We had Grolims here, naturally, but they were a long way from Urvon and Mal Yaska, and they didn't take their religion very seriously. Torak had been dormant for five hundred years, and Urvon wasn't interested in what was going on out here in the hinterlands.

"Over in Darshiva, though, things were different. There had been some kind of a schism in the Temple in Hemil, the capital, and it ended up in a bloodbath." He smiled

faintly. "One of the few times Grolims have ever put their knives to good use, I suppose. The upshot of the affair was that a new archpriest gained control of the Temple-a man named Naradas."

"Yes," Polgara said. "We've heard of him."

"I've never actually seen him, but I'm told he has very strange eyes. Anyway, among his followers there was a young Grolim priestess named Zandramas. She must have been about sixteen then, and very beautiful, I've heard. Naradas reintroduced the old forms of worship, and the altar in the Temple at Hemil ran with blood." He shuddered. "It seems that the young priestess was the most enthusiastic participant in the Grolim rite of sacrifice-either out of an excess of fanaticism, or innate cruelty, or because she knew that this was the

best way to attract the eye of the new archpriest. There are rumors that she attracted his eye in other ways as well. She'd unearthed a very obscure passage in the Book of Torak that seemed to say that the rite of sacrifice should be performed unclad. They say that Zandramas has a striking figure, and I guess the combination of blood and her nakedness completely inflamed Naradas. I've heard that things used to happen in the sanctum of the Temple during the rite that cannot be described in the presence of ladies."

"I think we can skip over that part, Nabros," Polgara told him primly, glancing at Eriond.

"Anyhow," Nabros continued, "all Grolims claim to be sorcerers, but from what I gather, the ones in Darshiva weren't very skilled. Naradas could manage a few things, but most of his followers resorted to charlatanism-sleight of hand and other forms of trickery, you understand.

"At any rate, not long after Naradas had consolidated his position, word reached us here that Torak had been killed. Naradas and his underlings went into absolute despair, but something rather profound seems to have happened to Zandramas. She walked out of the Temple at Hemil in a kind of daze. My friend from the Bureau of Commerce was there at the time and he saw her. He said that her eyes were and that she had an expression of inhuman ecstasy her face. When she reached the edge of the city, she took off her clothes and ran naked into the forest. We

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all assumed that she'd gone completely mad and that we'd seen the last of her.

"Once in a while, though, travelers would report having seen her in that wilderness near the border of Likandia. Sometimes, she'd run away from them, and other times, she'd stop them and speak to them in a language no one could understand. They listened, though-perhaps because she still hadn't managed to find any clothes.

"Then one day after a few years, she showed up at the gates of Hemil. She was wearing a black Grolim robe made of satin, and she seemed to be totally in control of herself. She went to the Temple and sought out Naradas. The arch-priest had given himself wholly over to the grossest kind of debauchery in his despair, but after he and Zandramas spoke together privately, he seems to have had a reconversion of some kind. Since that time, he's been the follower. He'll do anything Zandramas tells him to do.

"Zandramas spent a short time in the Temple, then she began to move about in Darshiva. At first she spoke only with Grolims, but in time she went out and talked with ordinary people as well. She always told them the same thing-that a new God of Angarak was coming. After a time, word of what she was doing got back to Mal Yaska, and Urvon sent some very powerful Grolims to Darshiva to stop her. I'm not sure what happened to her out there in that wilderness, but whatever it was seems to have filled her with enormous power. When Urvon's Grolims tried to stop her from preaching, she simply obliterated them."

"Obliterated?" Beigarath exclaimed in astonishment.

"That's about the only word I can use. Some of them she consumed with fire. Others were blasted to bits by bolts of lightning that shot down out of a cloudless sky. Once, she opened the earth, dropped five of them into a pit, and then closed the earth on them again. Urvon began to take her very seriously at that point, I guess. He sent more and more Grolims to Darshiva, but she destroyed them all. The Darshivan Grolims who chose to follow her were given real powers, so they didn't have to resort to trickery any more."

"And the ones who didn't?" Polgara asked.

'None of them survived. I understand that a few of them

tried deception-pretending to accept her message-but I guess she could see right through them and took appropriate steps. It probably wasn't really necessary, though. She spoke as if inspired, and no one could resist her message. Before long, all of Darshiva-Grolims and secular people alike-groveled at her feet.

"She moved north from Darshiva into Rengel and Voresebo, preaching as she went and converting whole multitudes. The archpriest Naradas followed her blindly and he was also enormously eloquent and appears to have only slightly less power than she does. For some reason, she never came across the River Magan into Peldane-until recently."

"All right," Polgara said, "she converted Rengel and Voresebo. Then what?"

"I really can't say." Nabros shrugged. "About three years ago, both she and Naradas disappeared. I think they went off to the west someplace, but I don't know for sure. About the last thing she told the crowds before she left was that she was going to be the bride of this new God she's been talking about. Then, a month ago, her forces came across the Magan and invaded Peldane. That's about all I know, really."

Polgara stepped back. "Thank you, Nabros," she said gently. "Why don't you see if you can get some sleep now? -I'll save some breakfast for you."

He sighed, and his eyelids began to droop. "Thank you, Lady," he said drowsily, and a moment later he was fast asleep. Polgara gently covered him with a blanket.

Beigarath motioned to them, and they all went back over to the fire again. "It's all beginning to fit together now, isn't it?" he said. "When Tbrak died, the Dark Spirit took over Zandramas and made her the Child of Dark. That's what that business in the wilderness was all about."

Ce'Nedra had been muttering to herself under her breath. Her eyes were dangerous and her face angry. "You'd better do something about this, old man," she said threateningly Jto Beigarath.

"About what?" He looked a little baffled.

"You heard what that man said. He told us that Zandra-plans to be the bride of this new God."

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"Yes," he said mildly, "I heard him."

"You're not going to let something like that happen, are you?"

"I hadn't planned to, no. What's got you so upset, Ce'Nedra?"

Her eyes flashed. "I will not have Zandramas for a daughter-in-law," she declared hotly, "no matter what happens."

He stared at her for a moment, then he began to laugh.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

By midafternoon the wan dish of the sun had begun to burn through the pervading mist, and Held in returned. "The fog's completely cleared away about a league west of here," he told them.

"Are there any signs of movement out there?" Belgarath asked him.

"Some," Beldin replied. "A few detachments of troops that are all headed north. Otherwise it's as empty as a merchant's soul. Sorry, Kheldar, it's just an old expression." "That's all right, Beldin," Silk forgave him grandly. These little slips of the tongue are common in the very Ifbiderly."

I/ Beldin gave him a hard look and then continued. "The ! villages up ahead all seem to be deserted and mostly in

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ruins. I'd say that the villagers have fled." He glanced at the sleeping Melcene. "Who's your guest?" he asked.

"He's with the Bureau of Roads," Belgarath replied. "Silk found him hiding in a cellar."

"Is he really all that sleepy?"

"Sadi gave him something to calm his nerves."

"I'd say it worked pretty good. He looks very calm."

"Would you like something to eat, uncle?" Polgara asked.

"Thanks all the same, Pol, but I had a fat rabbit an hour or so ago." He looked back at Belgarath. "I think we'll still want to travel at night," he advised. "You don't have whole regiments out there, but there are enough to give us trouble if they happen to surprise us."

"Any idea of whose troops they are?"

"I didn't see any Guardsmen or Karands. I'd guess that they belong to Zandramas-or to the King of Peldane. Whoever they are, they're going north toward that battle that's about to begin."

"All right," Belgarath said, "we'll travel at night, then- at least until we get past the soldiers."

They moved along at a fair rate of speed that night. They had passed the woods, and the watchfires of the soldiers encamped on the plain made them easy to avoid. Then, just before dawn, Belgarath and Garion stopped atop a low hill and looked down at a camp that seemed quite a bit larger than those they had passed earlier. "About a battalion, Grandfather," Garion surmised. "I think we've got a problem here. The country around here's awfully flat. This is the only hill we've seen for miles, and there isn't very much cover. No matter how we try to hide, their scouts are going to see us. It might be safer if we turned around and went back a ways."

Belgarath laid back his ears in irritation. "Let's go back and warn the others," he growled. He rose to his feet and led Garion back the way they had come.

"There's no point in taking chances, father," Polgara said after she had drifted in on silent wings. "The country was more broken a few miles back. We can go back there and find shelter."

"Were the cooks making breakfast?" Sadi asked.

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"Yes," Garion replied. "I could smell it-some kind of porridge and bacon."

"They're not likely to move or send out scouts until after they eat, are they?"

"No," Garion told him. "Troops get very surly if you make them start marching before you feed them."

"And were the sentries all wearing the standard military cloak-the ones that look more or less like these?" He plucked at the front of his traveler's cloak.

"The ones I saw were," Garion said.

"Why don't we pay them a visit, Prince Kheldar?" The eunuch suggested.

"What have you got in mind?" Silk asked suspiciously.

"Porridge is so bland, don't you think? I have a number of things in my case that can spice it up just a bit. We can walk through the encampment like a pair of sentries who've just been relieved and go directly to the cook-fires for a bite of breakfast. I shouldn't have much trouble seasoning the kettles with certain condiments."

Silk grinned at him.

"No poison," Belgarath said firmly.

"I hadn't considered poison, Ancient One," Sadi protested mildly. "'Not out of any sense of morality, mind you. It's just that soldiers tend to grow suspicious when their messmates turn black in the face and topple over. I have something much more pleasant in mind. The soldiers will all be deliriously happy for a short while, then they'll fall asleep."

"For how long?" Silk asked.

"Several days," Sadi shrugged. "A week at the very ••most." , Silk whistled. "Is it dangerous at all?"

"Only if one has a weak heart. I've used it on myself on occasion-when I was particularly tired. Shall we go, then?"

"Teaming those two together may have been a moral jjiunder," Belgarath mused as the two rogues walked off in darkness toward the twinkling watchfires.

It was about an hour later when the little Drasnian and eunuch returned. "It's safe now," Sadi reported. "We go on through their camp. There's a low range of hills

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a league or so farther on where we can take shelter until night."

"Any trouble at all?" Velvet asked.

"Not a bit," Silk smirked. "Sadi's very good at that sort of thing."

"Practice, my dear Kheldar," the eunuch said deprecatingly. "I've poisoned a fair number of people in my time." He grinned mirthlessly. "Once I gave a banquet for a group of my enemies. Not a single one of them saw me season the soup course, and Nyissans are very observant when it comes to that sort of thing."

"Didn't they get suspicious when you didn't eat any soup?" Velvet asked curiously.

"But I did, Liselle. I'd spent an entire week dosing myself with the antidote." He shuddered. "Vile-tasting stuff, as I recall. The poison itself was quite tasty. A number of my guests even complimented me on the soup before they left." He sighed. "Those were the good old days," he mourned.

"I think we can reminisce later on," Belgarath said. "Let's see if we can reach those hills before the sun gets much higher."

The soldiers' encampment was silent, except for an occasional snore. The troops were all smiling happily as they slept.

The following night was cloudy, and the air smelled strongly of incipient rain. Garion and Belgarath had no trouble finding the encampments of the soldiers in their path, and a few overheard snatches of conversation revealed the fact that these troops were members of the royal army of Peldane, and further that they were approaching the impending battle with a great deal of reluctance. About morning, Garion and his grandfather trotted back to rejoin the others with Polgara ghosting just above them on silent wings.

"A sound is still a sound," Durnik was saying stubbornly to Beldin. The two were riding side by side.

"But if there's nobody to hear it, how can we call it a sound?" Beldin argued.

Belgarath shook himself into his own form. "The noise

in the woods again, Beldin?" he said in a tone of profoundest disgust.

The hunchback shrugged. "You've got to start somewhere."

"Can't you think of anything new? After we argued the question for a thousand years, I thought you might have gotten tired of it."

"What's this?" Polgara asked, walking through the tall grass to join them in the shadowless light of dawn.

"Beldin and Durnik are discussing a very tired old philosophical question." Belgarath snorted. "If there's a noise in the woods, and there's nobody around to hear it, is it really a noise?"

"Of course it is," she replied calmly. "How did you reach that conclusion?" Beldin demanded. "Because there's no such thing as an empty place, uncle. There are always creatures around—wild animals, mice, insects, birds—and they can all hear."

"But what if there weren't? What if the woods are truly empty?"

"Why waste your time talking about an impossibility?" : He stared at her in frustration.

"Not only that," Ce'Nedra added just a bit smugly, "you're talking about woods, so there are trees there. Trees can hear, too, you know."

He glared at her. "Why are you all taking sides against me?"

"Because you're wrong, uncle." Polgara smiled. "Wrong, Polgara?" He spluttered. "Me?" "It happens to everybody once in a while. Why don't we all have some breakfast?"

The sun rose while they were eating, and Belgarath looked up, squinting into the morning rays. "We haven't seen any soldiers since midnight," he said, "and all we've seen so far are troops of the army of Peldane. They're not really anything to worry about, so I think it's safe to ride on a bit farther this morning." He looked at Silk. "How far is to the border of Darshiva?"

"Not really all that far, but we haven't been making very good time. It's spring, so the nights are getting shorter, and lose time when we have to circle around those troops."

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He frowned. "We might have a bit of a problem at the border, though. We're going to have to cross the River Magan, and if everyone has fled the area, we could have some trouble finding a boat."

"Is the Magan really as big as they say?" Sadi asked.

"It's the biggest river in the world. It runs for a thousand leagues and more, and it's so wide that you can't see the far shore."

Durnik rose to his feet. "I want to check over the horses before we go any farther," he said. "We've been riding them in the dark, and that's always a little dangerous. We don't want any of them pulling up lame."

Eriond and Toth also rose, and the three of them went through the tall grass to the place where the horses were picketed.

"I'll go on ahead," Beldin said. "Even if the troops are Peldanes, we still don't need any surprises." He changed form and flew off toward the west, spiraling up into the cloudless morning sky.

Garion stretched his legs out in front of him and leaned back on his elbows.

"You must be tired," Ce'Nedra said, sitting beside him and touching his face tenderly.

"Wolves don't really get that tired," he told her. "I get the feeling that I could run for a week if I really had to."

"Well, you don't have to, so don't even consider it."

"Yes, dear."

Sadi had risen to his feet with his red leather case in his hands. "As long as we're stopped, I think I'll find something to feed Zith," he said. A small frown touched his brow. "You know, Liselle," he said to Velvet, "I think you were right back in Zamad. She definitely looks as if she's gained a few ounces."

"Put her on a diet," the blond girl suggested.

"I'm not sure about that." He smiled. "It's very hard to explain to a snake why you're starving her, and I wouldn't want her to get cross with me."

They rode out not long afterward, following Toth's gestured directions.

"He says that we can probably find a village south of the big town on the river," Durnik told them.

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"Ferra," Silk supplied.

"I suppose so. I haven't looked at a map for a while. Anyway, he says that there are quite a few villages on this side where we might be able to hire a boat to get us across to Darshiva."

"That's assuming that they aren't all deserted," Silk added.

Durnik shrugged. "We'll never know until we get there."

It was a warm morning, and they rode across the rolling grasslands of southern Peldane under cloudless skies. About mid morning, Eriond rode forward and fell in beside Garion. "Do you think Polgara would mind if you and I took a little gallop?" he asked. "Maybe to that hill over there?" He pointed at a large knoll off to the north.

"She probably would," Garion said, "unless we can come up with a good reason."

"You don't think she'd accept the idea that Horse and Chretienne need to run once in a while?"

"Eriond, you've known her for a long time. Do you really think she'd listen if we tried to tell her that?"

Eriond sighed. "No, I suppose not."

Garion squinted at the hilltop. "We really ought to keep an eye out to the north, though," he said thoughtfully. "That's where the trouble's going to break out. We sort of need to know what's happening up there, don't we? That hilltop would be a perfect place to have a look."

"That's very true, Belgarion."

"It's not as if we'd actually be lying to her."

"I wouldn't dream of lying to her."

"Of course not. Neither would I."

The two young men grinned at each other. "I'll tell Bel-garath where we're going," Garion said. "We'll let him explain it to her."

"He's the perfect one to do it," Eriond agreed.

Garion dropped back and touched his half-dozing grandfather's shoulder. "Eriond and I are going to ride over to that hill," he said. "I want to see if there are any signs that the fighting's started yet."

"What? Oh, good idea." Belgarath yawned and closed his eyes again.

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Garion motioned to Eriond, and the two of them trotted off into the tall grass at the side of the trail.

"Garion," Polgara called, "where are you going?"

"Grandfather can explain it, Aunt Pol," he shouted back. "We'll catch up again in just a bit." He looked at Eriond. "Now let's get out of earshot in a hurry."

They went north, first at a gallop and then at a dead run with the grass whipping at their horses' legs. The chestnut and the gray matched stride for stride, plunging along with their heads thrust far forward and their hooves pounding on the thick turf. Garion leaned forward in his saddle, surrendering to the flow and surge of Chretienne's muscles. Both he and Eriond were laughing with delight when they reined in on the hilltop.

"That was good," Garion said, swinging down from his saddle. "We don't get the chance to do that very often any more, do we?"

"Not often enough," Eriond agreed, also dismounting. "You managed to arrange it very diplomatically, Belgarion."

"Of course. Diplomacy's what kings do best."

"Do you think we fooled her?"

"Us?" Garion laughed. "Fool Aunt Pol? Be serious, Eriond."

"I suppose you're right." Eriond made a wry face. "She'll probably scold us, won't she?"

"Inevitably, but the ride was worth a scolding, wasn't it?"

Eriond smiled. Then he looked around, and his smile faded. "Belgarion," he said sadly, pointing to the north.

Garion looked. Tall columns of black smoke rose along the horizon. "It looks as if it's started," he said bleakly.

"Yes." Eriond sighed. "Why do they have to do that?"

Garion crossed his arms on Chretienne's saddle and leaned his chin pensively on them. "Pride, I suppose," he replied, "and the hunger for power. Revenge, too, sometimes. I guess. Once in Arendia, Lelldorin said that very often it's because people just don't know how to stop it, once it's started."

"But it's all so senseless."

"Of course it is. Arends aren't the only stupid people on

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earth. Any time you have two people who both want the same thing badly enough, you're going to have a fight. If the two people have enough followers, they call it a war. If a couple of ordinary men have that kind of disagreement, there might be a broken nose and some missing teeth, but when you start getting armies involved, people get killed."

"Are you and Zakath going to have a war, then?"

It was a troubling question, and Garion wasn't sure he knew the answer. "I don't really know," he admitted.

"He wants to rule the world," Eriond pointed out, "and you don't want him to. Isn't that the sort of thing that starts a war?"

"It's awfully hard to say," Garion replied sadly. "Maybe if we hadn't left Mal Zeth when we did, I might have been able to bring him around. But we had to leave, so I lost the chance." He sighed. "I think it's finally going to be up to him. Maybe he's changed enough so that he'll abandon the whole idea-but then again, maybe he hasn't. You can never tell with a man like Zakath. I hope he's given up the notion. I don't want a war-not with anybody; but I'm not going to bow to him, either. The world wasn't meant to be ruled by one man-and certainly not by somebody like Zakath."

"But you like him, don't you?"

"Yes, I do. I wish I could have met him before Taur Urgas ruined his life." He paused, and his face grew set. "Now there's a man I'd have rather cheerfully gone to war with. He contaminated the whole world just by living in it."

"But it wasn't really his fault. He was insane, and that excuses him."

"You're a very forgiving young man, Eriond."

"Isn't it easier to forgive than to hate? Until we learn how to forgive, that sort of thing is going to keep on happening." He pointed at the tall pillars of smoke rising to the north. "Hate is a sterile thing, Belgarion."

"I know." Garion sighed. "I hated Torak, but in the end I guess I forgave him-more out of pity than anything else. I still had to kill him, though."

"What do you think the world would be like if people didn't kill each other any more?"

"Nicer, probably."

"Why don't we fix it that way then?"

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"You and I?" Garion laughed. "All by ourselves?"

"Why not?"

"Because it's impossible, Eriond."

"I thought you and Belgarath had settled the issue of impossible a long time ago."

Garion laughed again. "Yes, I suppose we did. All right, let's drop impossible. Would you accept extremely difficult instead?"

"Nothing that's really worthwhile should be easy, Bel-garion. If it's easy, we don't value it; but I'm certain we'll be able to find an answer." He said it with such shining confidence in his face that for a moment Garion actually believed that the wild notion might indeed be feasible.

Then he looked out at the ugly columns of smoke again, and the hope died. "I suppose we should go back and let the others know what's happening out there," he said.

It was about noon when Beldin returned. "There's another detachment of troops about a mile ahead," he told Belgarath. "A dozen or so."

"Are they going toward that battle to the north?"

"No, I'd say this particular group is running away from it. They look as if they were fairly well mauled recently."

"Could you tell which side they're on?"

"That doesn't really matter, Belgarath. A man gives up his allegiances when he deserts."

"Sometimes you're so clever you make me sick."

"Why don't you have Pol mix you up something to cure it?"

"How long has that been going on?" Velvet asked Pol-gara.

"Which was that, dear?"

"That constant wrangling between those two?"

Polgara closed her eyes and sighed. "You wouldn't believe it, Liselle. Sometimes I think it started at about the beginning of time."

The soldiers they encountered were wary, even frightened. They stood their ground, however, with their hands on their weapons. Silk made a quick motion to Garion, and the two of them rode forward at an unthreatening walk.

"Good day, gentlemen," Silk greeted them conversationally. "What in the world is happening around here?*"

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"You mean you haven't heard?" a wiry fellow with a bloody bandage around his head asked.

"I haven't found anybody to tell me," Silk replied. "What happened to all the people who used to live in this part of Peldane? We haven't seen a soul in the last four days."

"They all fled," the bandaged man told him. "The ones who were still alive did, at any rate."

"What were they fleeing from?"

"Zandramas," the fellow replied with a shudder. "Her army marched into Peldane about a month ago. We tried to stop them, but they had Grolims with them, and ordinary troops can't do much against Grolims."

"That's the truth, certainly. What's all that smoke up to the north?"

"There's a big battle going on." The soldier sat down on the ground and began to unwind the bloodstained bandage from around his head.

"It's not like any battle I've ever seen," another soldier supplied. His left arm was in a sling, and he looked as if he had just spent several days lying in the mud. "I've been in a few wars, but nothing like this. When you're a soldier, you takes your chances-swords and arrows and spears and the like, y'know-but when they starts throwing horrors at me, I begins to feel it's time to find another line of work."

"Horrors?" Silk asked him.

"They's got demons with 'em, friend-both sides of 'em has-monstrous big demons with snaky arms and fangs and claws and suchlike."

"You're not serious!"

"I seen 'em with my own eyes. You ever seen a man get et alive? Makes your hair stand on end, it does."

"I don't quite follow this," Silk confessed. "Who's involved in this battle? I mean, ordinary armies don't keep tame demons with them to help with the fighting."

"That's the honest truth," the muddy man agreed. "A ordinary soldier's likely to leave the service if they expect him to march alongside something mat looks at him as if he was something to eat. I never did get the straight of it, though." He looked at the man with the wounded head. "Did you ever find out who was fighting, Corporal?"

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The corporal was wrapping a clean bandage around his head. "The captain told us before he got killed," he said.

"Maybe you'd better start at the beginning," Silk said. "I'm a little confused about this."

"Like I told you," the corporal said, "about a month ago the Darshivans and their Grolims invaded Peldane. Me and my men are in the Royal Army of Peldane, so we tried to hold them back. We slowed them some on the east bank of the Magan, but then the Grolims come at us, and we had to retreat. Then we heard that there was another army coming down out of the north-Karands and soldiers in armor and more Grolims. We figured that we was really in for it at that point, but as it turns out, this new army isn't connected with the Darshivans. It seems that it's working for some High Grolim from way off to the west. Well, this Gro-lim, he sets up along the coast and don't come inland at all. It's like he's waiting for something. We had our hands full with the Darshivans, so we wasn't too interested in what it was he was waiting for. We was doing a lot of what our officers called 'maneuvering'-which is officer talk for running away."

"I take it that the Grolim finally decided to come inland after all," Silk observed.

"He surely did, friend. He surely did. It was just a few days ago when he struck inland just as straight as a tight string. Either he knew exactly where he was going or he was following something, I don't know exactly which. Anyway, the Darshivans, they stopped chasing us and rushed in to try to block his way, and that's when he called in the demons Vurk here was talking about. At first, the demons charged right through the Darshivans, but then their Grolims-or maybe it was Zandramas herself-they conjured up their demons, and that's when the big fight commenced. The demons, they went at each other for all they was worth and they trampled over anybody unlucky enough to get in the way. There we was, caught right in the middle of it all and getting trampled on by first one set of demons and then the other. That's when me and Vurk and these others put our heads together and decided to find out what the weather's like in Gandahar."

"Hot this time of year," Silk told him.

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"Not near as hot as it is north of here, friend. You ever see a demon breathe fire? I seen one of them armored soldiers get roasted alive right inside his chain mail. Then the demon picked him out of his armor piece by piece and et him while he was still smoking." The corporal knotted the ends of his fresh bandage. "That ought to hold it," he said, rising to his feet again. He looked up into the noon sky, squinting slightly. "We can make some more miles before the sun goes down, Vurk," he said to his muddy friend. "Get the

men ready to march. If that battle starts to spread out, we could get caught in the middle of it again, and none of us want that."

"I'll do 'er, Corporal," Vurk replied.

The corporal looked at Silk again, his eyes narrowed appraisingly. "You and your friends are welcome to come along," he offered. "A few men on horseback might be a help in case we run into trouble."

"Thanks all the same, Corporal," Silk declined, "but I think we'll ride over to the Magan and see if we can find a boat. We could be at the mouth of the river in a week or so."

"I'd advise riding hard, then, my friend. Demons can run awful fast when they're hungry."

Silk nodded. "Good luck in Gandahar, Corporal," he added.

"I think I'll stop being a corporal," the fellow said ruefully. "The pay wasn't bad, but the work's getting dangerous and dangerous, and all the pay in the world won't do a man much good once he takes up residence inside a demon." He turned to his friend. "Let's move out, Vurk," he ordered.

Silk wheeled his horse and rode back to where the others were waiting, Garion close behind him.

"It's more or less what we thought," the little man reported, dismounting. "The battle up north is between Ur-von and Zandramas, and both sides have demons now."

"She went that far?" Polgara asked incredulously.

"She didn't really have that much choice, Polgara," Silk told her. "Nahaz was leading his hordes of demons into the ranks of her troops, and her army was being decimated. She

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had to do something to stop him. Being captured by a demon is no joke-not even for the Child of Dark."

"All right," Durnik said soberly, "what do we do now?"

"The corporal in charge of those troops made an interesting suggestion," Silk told him.

"Oh? What was that?"

"He recommended that we get out of Peldane as fast as we possibly can."

"Corporals usually have good sense," Durnik noted. "Why don't we follow his advice?"

"I was hoping someone would say that," Silk agreed.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Vella was feeling melancholy. It was an unusual emotion for her, but she found that she rather liked it. There was much to be said for sweet, languorous sadness. She went with quiet dignity through the stately, marble-clad corridors of the palace in Boktor, and everyone gave way to her pensive expression. She chose not to consider the fact that her daggers may have played a certain part in this universal respect. In point of fact, Vella had not drawn a dagger on anyone for almost a week now-the last having been a slightly overfamiliar serving man who had mistaken her bluff camaraderie for an offer of a more intimate friendship. But she had not hurt him very much, and he had forgiven her almost before the bleeding had stopped.

Her destination that early morning was the sitting room of the Queen of Drasnia. In many ways Queen Porenn baffled her.

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fled Vella. She was petite and imperturbable. She carried no daggers and seldom raised her voice, but all of Drasnia and the other Alorn kingdoms held her in universal regard. Vella herself, not knowing exactly why, had acceded to the tiny queen's suggestion that she should customarily garb herself in gowns of lavender satin. A gown is a cumbersome thing that tangles up one's legs and confines one's bosom. Always before, Vella had preferred black leather trousers, boots, and a leather vest. The garb was comfortable and utilitarian. It was sturdy, and yet it provided opportunities for Vella to display her attributes to those whom she wished to impress. Then, on special occasions, she had customarily donned an easily discardable wool dress and a fine diaphanous undergown of rose-colored Mallorean silk that clung to her as she danced. Satin, on the other hand, rustled disturbingly, but felt good against her skin, and it made Vella uncomfortably aware of the fact that there was more to being a woman than a couple pair of daggers and a willingness to use them.

She tapped lightly on Porenn's door.

"Yes?" Porenn's voice came to her.

Did the woman never sleep?

"It's me, Porenn-Vella."

"Come in, child."

Vella set her teeth. She was not, after all, a child. She had been abroad in the world since her twelfth birthday. She had been sold-and bought-a half-dozen times, and she had been married for a brief, deliriously happy year to a lean Nadrak trapper named Tekk, whom she had loved to distraction. Porenn, however, seemed to prefer to look upon her as some half-gentled colt in sore need of training. In spite of herself, that thought softened Vella's resentment. The little blond Queen of Drasnia had in some strange way become the mother she had never known, and thoughts of daggers and of being bought and sold slid away under the influence of that wise, gentle voice.

"Good morning, Vella," Porenn said as the Nadrak girl entered her room. "Would you like some tea?" Although the queen always wore black in public, her dressing gown that morning was of the palest rose, and she looked somehow very vulnerable in that soft color.

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"Hullo, Porenn," Vella said. "No tea, thanks." She flung herself into a chair beside the blond queen's divan.

"Don't flop, Vella," Porenn told her. "Ladies don't flop."

"I'm not a lady."

"Not yet, perhaps, but I'm working on it."

"Why are you wasting your time on me, Porenn?"

"Nothing worthwhile is ever a waste of time."

"Me? Worthwhile?"

"More than you could possibly know. You're early this morning. Is something troubling you?"

"I haven't been able to sleep. I've been having the strangest dreams lately."

"Don't let dreams bother you, child. Dreams are sometimes the past, sometimes the future, but mostly they're only that-dreams."

"Please don't call me 'child,' Porenn," Vella objected. "I think if we got right down to it, I'm almost as old as you are."

"In years, perhaps, but years aren't the only way to measure time."

There was a discreet rap at the door.

"Yes?" Porenn replied.

"It's me, your Majesty," a familiar voice said.

"Come in, Margrave Khendon," the queen said.

Javelin had not changed since Vella had last seen him. He was still bone-thin and aristocratic and had a sardonically amused twist to his lips. He wore, as was his custom, a pearl-gray doublet and tight-fitting black hose. His skinny shanks were not shown to any particular advantage by the latter. He bowed rather extravagantly. "Your Majesty," he greeted the queen, "and my Lady Vella."

"Don't be insulting, Javelin," Vella retorted. "I don't have a title, so don't 'my Lady' me."

"Haven't you told her yet?" Javelin mildly asked the queen.

"I'm saving it for her birthday."

"What's this?" Vella demanded.

"Be patient, dear," Porenn told her. "You'll find out 'about your title all in due time."

"I don't need a Drasnian title."

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* 'Everybody needs a title, dear-even if it's only 'ma'am.' "

"Has she always been like this?" Vella bluntly asked the Chief of Drasnian Intelligence.

"She was a little more ingenuous when she still had her baby teeth," Javelin replied urbanely, "but she got to be more fun when she developed her fangs."

"Be nice, Khendon," Porenn told him. "How was Rak Urga?"

"Ugly-but then, most Murgo cities are."

"And how is King Urgit?"

"Newly married, your Majesty, and a little distracted by the novelty of it."

Porenn made a face. "I didn't send a gift," she fretted.

"I took the liberty of attending to that, your Majesty," Javelin said. "A rather nice silver service I picked up in Tol Honeth-at a bargain price, of course. I have this limited budget, you understand."

She gave him a long, unfriendly look.

"I left the bill with your chamberlain," he added with not even the faintest trace of embarrassment.

"How are the negotiations going?"

"Surprisingly well, my queen. The King of the Murgos seems not to have yet succumbed to the hereditary disorder of the House of Urga. He's very shrewd, actually."

"I somehow thought he might be," Porenn replied just a bit smugly.

"You're keeping secrets, Porenn," Javelin accused.

"Yes. Women do that from time to time. Are the Mal-lorean agents in the Drojim keeping abreast of things?"

"Oh, yes." Javelin smiled. "Sometimes we have to be a little obvious in order to make sure that they're getting the point, but they're more or less fully aware of the progress of the negotiations. We seem to be making them a bit apprehensive."

"You made good time on your return voyage."

Javelin shuddered slightly. "King Anheg put a ship at our disposal. Her captain is that pirate Gredlik-1 made the mistake of telling him I was in a hurry. The passage through the Bore was ghastly."

There was another polite knock on the door.

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"Yes?" Porenn answered.

A servant opened the door. "The Nadrak Yarblek is here again, your Majesty," he reported.

"Show him in, please."

Yarblek had a tight look on his face that Vella recognized all too well. Her owner was in many respects a transparent man. He pulled off his shabby fur cap. "Good morning, Porenn," he said without ceremony, tossing the cap into a corner. "Have you got anything to drink? I've been in the saddle for five days and I'm perishing of thirst."

"Over there." Porenn pointed at a sideboard near the window.

Yarblek grunted, crossed the room, and filled a large goblet from a crystal decanter. He took a long drink. "Javelin," he said then, "have you got any people in Yar Nadrak?"

"A few," Javelin admitted cautiously.

"You'd better have them keep an eye on Drosta. He's up to something."

"He's always up to something."

"That's no lie, but this might be a little more serious. He's reopened lines of communication with Mal Zeth. He and Zakath haven't been on speaking terms since he changed sides at Thull Mardu, but now they're talking again. I don't like the smell of it."

"Are you sure? None of my people have reported it."

"They're probably in the palace, then. Drosta doesn't conduct serious business there. Have them go to a riverside tavern in the thieves' quarter. It's called the One-Eyed Dog. Drosta goes there to amuse himself. The emissary from Mal Zeth's been meeting with him in an upstairs room there- that's when Drosta can drag himself away from the girls."

"I'll put some people on it right away. Could you get any idea at all of what they're discussing?"

Yarblek shook his head and dropped wearily into a chair.

"Drosta's ordered his guards to keep me out of the place."

He looked at Vella. "You're looking a little pecky this morning," he observed. "Did you drink too much last night?"

"I almost never get drunk any more," she told him. "I knew it was a mistake to leave you here in Boktor,"

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he said glumly. "Porenn's a corrupting influence. Did you get over your irritation with me yet?"

"I suppose so. It's not really your fault that you're stupid."

"Thanks." He looked her up and down appraisingly. "I like the dress," he told her. "It makes you look more like a woman, for a change."

"Did you ever have any doubts, Yarblek?" she asked him archly.

Adiss, the Chief Eunuch in the palace of Eternal Sal-missra, received the summons early that morning and he approached the throne room with fear and trembling. The queen had been in a peculiar mood of late, and Adiss painfully remembered the fate of his predecessor. He entered the dimly lit throne room and prostrated himself before the dais.

"The Chief Eunuch approaches the throne," the adoring chorus intoned in unison. Even though he himself had been until recently a member of that chorus, Adiss found their mouthing of the obvious irritating.

The queen dozed on her divan, her mottled coils moving restlessly with the dry hiss of scales rubbing against each other. She opened her soulless serpent's eyes and looked at him, her forked tongue flickering. "Well?" she said peevishly in the dusty whisper that always chilled his blood.

"Y-you summoned me, Divine Salmissra," he faltered.

"I'm aware of that, you idiot. Do not irritate me, Adiss. I'm on the verge of going into molt, and that always makes me short-tempered. I asked you to find out what the Alorns are up to. I am waiting for your report."

"I haven't been able to find out very much, my Queen."

"That is not the answer I wanted to hear, Adiss," she told him dangerously. "Is it possible that the duties of your office are beyond your capabilities?"

Adiss began to tremble violently. "I-I've sent for Drob-lek, your Majesty-the Drasnian Port Authority here in Sthiss Tor. I thought he might be able to shed some light on the situation."

"Perhaps so." Her tone was distant, and she gazed at her reflection in the mirror. "Summon the Tolnedran Ambassadors as well. Whatever the Alorns are doing in Cthol Mur-gos also involves Varana."

"Forgive me, Divine Salmissra," Adiss said, feeling a trifle confused, "but why should the activities of the Alorns and Tolnedrans concern us?"

She swung her head about slowly, her sinuous neck weaving in the air. "Are you a total incompetent, Adiss?" she asked him. "We may not like it, but Nyissa is a part of the world, and we must always know what our neighbors are doing-and why." She paused, her tongue nervously tasting the air. "There is a game of some kind afoot, and I want to find out exactly what it is before I decide whether or not to become involved in it." She paused again. "Have you ever found out what happened to that one-eyed fellow, Is-sus?"

"Yes, your Majesty. He was recruited by Drasnian intelligence. At last report, he was in Rak Urga with the Alorn negotiators."

"How very curious. I think this entire business is reaching the point where I must have detailed information-and very, very soon. Do not fail me, Adiss. Your position is not all that secure, you know. Now you may kiss me." She lowered her head, and he stumbled to the dais to touch his cringing lips to her cold forehead.

"Very well, Adiss," she said. "Leave now." And she went back to gazing at her reflection in the mirror.

King Nathel of Mishrak ac Thull was a slack-lipped, dull-eyed young man with lank, mud-colored hair and a profound lack of anything even remotely resembling intelligence. His royal robes were spotted and wrinkled, and his crown did not fit him. It rested atop his ears and quite often slid down over his eyes.

Agachak, the cadaverous Hierarch of Rak Urgo, could not stand the young King of the Thulls, but he forced himself to be civil to him during their current discussions. Civility was not one of Agachak's strong points. He much preferred peremptory commands backed up by threats of £ dreadful retribution for failure to comply, but a careful assessment of Nathel's personality had persuaded him that the Thull would collapse on the spot if he were suddenly

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given any kind of threat or ultimatum. And so it was that Agachak was forced to rely on cajolery and wheedling instead.

"The prophecy clearly states, your Majesty," he tried again, "that whichever king accompanies me to the place of the meeting will become Overking of all of Angarak."

"Does that mean I get Cthol Murges and Gar og Nadrak, too?" Nathel asked, a faint glimmer coming into his uncomprehending eyes.

"Absolutely, your Majesty," Agachak assured him, "and Mallorean as well."

"Won't that make Kal Zakath unhappy with me? I wouldn't want him to feel that way. He had my father flogged once, did you know that? He was going to crucify him, but there weren't any trees around."

"Yes, I'd heard about that, but you don't have to worry. Zakath would have to genuflect to you."

"Zakath genuflect-to me?" Nathel laughed. It was a sound frighteningly devoid of thought.

"He would have no choice, your Majesty. If he were to refuse, the New God would blast him to atoms on the spot."

"What's an atom?"

Agachak ground his teeth. "A very small piece, your Majesty," he explained.

"I wouldn't mind making Urgit and Drosta bow to me," Nathel confessed, "but I don't know about Zakath. Urgit and Drosta think they're so smart. I'd like to take them down a peg or two. Zakath, though-I don't know about that." His eyes brightened again. "That means I'd get all the gold in Cthol Murgos and Gar og Nadrak, doesn't it? And I could make them dig it out of the ground for me, too." His crown slipped down over his eyes again, and he tilted his head back so that he could peer out from under its rim.

"And you'd get all the gold in Mallorean, too, and the jewels, and the silks and carpets-and they'd even give you your own elephant to ride."

"What's an elephant?"

"It's a very large animal, your Majesty."

"Bigger than a horse, even?"

"Much bigger. Besides, you'd also get Tolnedra and you

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know how much money they've got. You'd be the king of the world."

"Even bigger than an ox? I've seen some awful big oxes sometimes."

"Ten times as big."

Nathel smiled happily. "I bet that would make people sit up and take notice."

"Absolutely, your Majesty."

"What is it I have to do again?"

"You must go with me to the Place Which Is No More."

"That's the part I don't understand. How can we go there if it's not there any more?"

"The prophecy will reveal that to us in time, your Majesty."

"Oh. I see. Have you got any idea about where it is?"

"The clues I've been getting indicate that it's somewhere in Mallorea."

Nathel's face suddenly fell. "Now that's a real shame," he said petulantly.

"I don't quite-"

"I'd really like to go with you, Agachak. Truly I would- what with all the gold and carpets and silks and stuff- and making Urgit and Drosta and maybe even Zakath bow down to me and all, but I just can't."

"I don't understand. Why not?"

"I'm not allowed to leave home. My mother'd punish me something awful if I did. You know how that goes. I couldn't even think of going as far away as Mallorea."

"But you're the king."

"That doesn't change a thing. I still do what mother says. She tells everybody that I'm the best boy ever when it comes to that."

Agachak resisted a powerful urge to change this half-wit into a toad or perhaps a jellyfish. "Why don't I talk with your mother?" he suggested. "I'm sure I can persuade her ;to give you her permission."

:-• "Why, that's a real, real good idea, Agachak. If mother nys it's all right, I'll go with you quick as lightning."
; "Good," Agachak said, turning.

"Oh, Agachak?" Nathel's voice sounded puzzled.

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"Yes?"

"What's a prophecy?"

They had gathered at Vo Mandor, far from the watchful eyes of their kings, to discuss something that was very private and very urgent. It was also just a trifle on the disobedient side, and there is a very ugly word men use to describe those who disobey their kings.

Barak was there, and also Hettar, Mandorallen, and Lell-dorin. Relg had just arrived from Maragor, and Barak's son Unrak sat on a high-backed bench by the window.

The Earl of Trellheim cleared his throat by way of calling them to order. They had gathered in the tower of Mandor-alien's keep, and the golden autumn sunlight streamed in through the arched window. Barak was huge and resplendent in a green velvet doublet. His red beard was combed, and his hair was braided. "All

right," he rumbled, "let's get started. Mandorallen, are you sure the stairway leading up here is guarded? I wouldn't want anybody to overhear us."

"Of a certainty, my Lord of Trelheim," the great knight replied earnestly. "I vouchsafe it upon my life to thee." Mandorallen wore mail and his silver-trimmed blue surcoat.

"A simple yes would have been enough, Mandorallen." Barak sighed. "Now," he continued briskly, "we've been forbidden to ride along with Garion and the others, right?"

"That's what Cyradis said at Rheon," Hettar replied softly. He wore his usual black horsehide, and his scalplock was caught in a silver ring. He lounged in a chair with his long legs thrust far out in front of him.

"All right, then," Barak continued. "We can't go with them, but there's nothing to stop us from going to Mallorean on business of our own, is there?"

"What kind of business?" Lelldorin asked blankly.

"We'll think of something. I've got a ship. We'll run on down to Tot Honeth and load her with a cargo of some kind. Then we'll go to Mallorean and do some trading."

"How do you plan to get the Seabird across to the Sea of the East?" Hettar asked. "That could be a long portage, don't you think?"

Barak winked broadly. "I've got a map," he said. "We

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can sail around the southern end of Cthol Murgos and right on into the eastern sea. From there to Mallorean is nothing at all."

"I thought the Murgos were very secretive about maps of their coastline," Lelldorin said, a frown creasing his open young face.

"They are," Barak grinned, "but Javelin's been in Rak Urga and he managed to steal one."

"How did you get it away from Javelin?" Hettar asked. "He's even more secretive than the Murgos."

"He sailed back to Boktor aboard Gredik's ship. Javelin's not a good sailor, so he wasn't feeling very well. Gredik pinched the map and had his cartographer make a copy. Javelin never even knew he'd been robbed."

"Thy plan is excellent, my Lord," Mandorallen said gravely, "but methinks I detect a flaw."

"Oh?"

"As all the world knows, Mallorean is a vast continent, thousands of leagues across and even more thousands from the south to the polar ice of the far north. It could well take us our lifetimes to locate our friends, for I perceive that to be the thrust of thy proposal."

Barak slyly laid one finger aside his nose. "I was just coming to that," he said. "When we were in Boktor, I got Yablek drunk. He's shrewd enough when he's sober, but once you get a half keg of ale into him, he gets talkative. I asked him a few questions about the operation of the business he and Silk are running in Mallorean, and I got some very useful answers. It seems that the two of them have offices in every major city in Mallorean, and those offices keep in constant touch with each other. No matter what else he's doing, Silk's

going to keep an eye on his business interests. Every time he gets near one of those offices, he'll find some excuse to stop by to see how many millions he's made in the past week."

"That's Silk, all right," Hettar agreed.

"All we have to do is drop anchor in some Mallorean seaport and look up the little thief's office. His people will know approximately where he is, and where Silk is, you're going to find the others."

"My Lord," Mandorallen apologized, "I have wronged

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thee. Canst thou forgive me for underestimating thy shrewdness?"

"Perfectly all right, Mandorallen," Barak replied magnanimously.

"But," Lelldorin protested, "we're still forbidden to join Garion and the others."

"Truly," Mandorallen agreed. "We may not approach them lest we doom their quest to failure."

"I think I've worked that part out, too," the big man said. "We can't ride along with them, but Cyradis didn't say anything about how far we have to stay away from them, did she? All we're going to be doing is minding our own business-a league or so away-or maybe a mile. We'll be close enough so that if they get into any kind of trouble, we'll be able to lend a hand and then be on our way again. There's nothing wrong with that, is there?"

Mandorallen's face came suddenly alight. "Tis a duty, my Lord," he exclaimed, "a moral obligation. The Gods look with great disfavor upon those who fail to come to the aid of travelers in peril."

"Somehow I knew you'd see it that way," Barak said, slapping his friend on the shoulder with one huge hand.

"Sophistry," Relg said with a note of finality in his harsh voice. The Ulgo zealot now wore a tunic that looked very much like the one Durnik customarily wore. His once-pale skin was now sun-browned, and he no longer wore a cloth across his eyes. The years of working out of doors near the house he had built for Taiba and their horde of children had gradually accustomed his skin and eyes to sunlight.

"What do you mean, sophistry?" Barak protested.

"Just what I said, Barak. The Gods look at our intent, not our clever excuses. You want to go to Malloreia to aid Belgarion-we all do-but don't try to fool the Gods with these trumped-up stories."

They all stared at the zealot helplessly.

"But it was such a good plan," Barak said plaintively.

"Very good," Relg agreed, "but it's disobedient, and disobedience of the Gods-and of prophecy-is sin."

"Sin again, Relg?" Barak said in disgust. "I thought you'd gotten over that."

"Not entirely, no."

Barak's son Unrak, who at fourteen was already as big as a grown man, rose to his feet. He wore a mail shirt and had a sword belted at his side. His hair was flaming red, and his downy beard had already begun to cover his cheeks. "Let's see if I've got this right," he said. Unrak's voice no longer cracked and warbled, but had settled into a resonant baritone. "We have to obey the prophecy, is that it?"

"To the letter," Relg said firmly.

"Then I have to go to Malloreia," Unrak said.

"That went by a little fast," his father said to him.

"It's not really all that complicated, father. I'm the hereditary protector of the heir to the Rivan Throne, aren't I?"

"He's got a point there," Hettar said. "Go ahead, Unrak. Tell us what you've got in mind."

"Well," the young man said, blushing slightly under the scrutiny of his elders, "if Prince Geran's in Malloreia and in danger, I have to go there. The prophecy says so. Now, I don't know where he is, so I'm going to have to follow King Belgarion until he finds his son so that I can protect him."

Barak grinned broadly at his son.

"But," Unrak added, "I'm a little inexperienced at this protection business, so I might need a little guidance. Do you suppose, father, that I might be able to persuade you and your friends to come with me? Just to keep me from making any mistakes, you understand."

Hettar rose and shook Barak's hand. "Congratulations," he said simply.

"Well, Relg," Barak said, "does that satisfy your sense of propriety?"

Relg considered it. "Why yes," he said, "as a matter of fact, I think it does." Then he grinned the first grin Barak had ever seen on his harsh face. "When do we leave?" he asked.

; His Imperial Majesty, Kal Zakath of Malloreia, stood at a window in a high tower in Maga Renn, looking out at the expanse of the great River Magan. A huge armada of craft of all sizes dotted the surface of the river up-of the city and moved down in orderly progression

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to the wharves where the imperial regiments waited to embark.

"Have you had any further news?" the Emperor asked.

"Things are a bit chaotic down there, your Imperial Majesty," Brador, the brown-robed Chief of the Bureau of Internal Affairs, reported, "but it appears that the major confrontation between Urvon and Zandramas is going to take place in Peldane. Urvon has been moving down from the north, and Zandramas annexed Peldane last month to put a buffer between him and Darshiva. She's been rushing her forces into Peldane to meet him."

"What's your assessment, Atesca?" Zakath asked.

General Atesca rose and went to the map hanging on the wall. He studied it for a moment, then stabbed one blunt finger at it. "Here, your Majesty," he said, "the town of Ferra. We move down in force and occupy that place. It's a logical forward base of operations. The River Magan is about fifteen miles wide at that point, and it shouldn't be too difficult to interdict any further movement across it from Darshiva. That will eliminate Zandramas' reinforcements. Urvon will have numerical superiority when they meet, and he'll crush her army. He'll take casualties, though. Both sides are fanatics, and they'll fight to the death. After he wipes out Zandramas' army, he'll stop to lick his wounds. That's when we should hit him. He'll be weakened, and his troops will be exhausted. Ours will be fresh. The outcome ought to be fairly predictable. Then we can cross the Magan and mop up in Darshiva."

"Excellent, Atesca," Zakath said, a faint smile touching his cold lips, "There's a certain ironic charm to your plan. First we have Urvon eliminate Zandramas for us, then we eliminate him. I like the idea of having the Disciple of Torak do my dirty work for me."

"With your Majesty's permission, I'd like to lead the forward elements and oversee the occupation of Ferra," the general said. "Zandramas will almost have to counterattack, since we'll have cut her army in two. We'll need to fortify the town. I'll also need to put out patrols on the river to keep her from trying to slip her troops into Peldane around our flanks. It's a fairly crucial part of the operation, and I'd like to supervise it myself."

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"By all means, Atesca," Zakath gave his consent, wouldn't really trust anyone else to do it anyway."

Atesca bowed. "Your Majesty is very kind," he said.

"If I may, your Imperial Majesty," Brador said, "we're getting some disturbing reports from Cthol Murgos. Our agents there report that there are some fairly serious negotiations going on between Urgit and the Alorns."

"The Murgos and the Alorns?" Zakath asked incredulously. "They've hated each other for eons."

"Perhaps they've found a common cause," Brador suggested delicately.

"Me, you mean?"

"It does seem logical, your Majesty." ; **We have to put a stop to that. I think we'll have to attack the Alorns. Give them something close to home to worry •bout so they won't have time for any adventures in Cthol Murgos."

Atesca cleared his throat. "May I speak bluntly, your Majesty?" he asked.

"I've never heard you speak any other way, Atesca. What's on your mind?"

"Only an idiot tries to fight a war on two fronts, and only ft madman tries to fight one on three. You have this war here in Peldane, another in Cthol Murgos, and now you're contemplating a third in Aloria. I advise against it in the strong-eat possible terms."

Zakath smiled wryly. "You're a brave man, Atesca," he said. "I can't recall the last time somebody called me an idiot and a madman in the same breath." ?; *I trust your Majesty will forgive my candor, but that's my honest opinion of the matter."

"That's all right, Atesca." Zakath waved one hand as if brushing it aside. "You're here to advise me, not to flatter "e, and your plain language definitely got my attention. 3§Sty well, we'll hold off on going to war with the Alorns !yJHal we finish up here. I'll go as far as idiocy; lunacy is ipmething else. The world had enough of

that with Taur ." He began to pace up and down. "Curse you, Bel->!" he burst out suddenly. "What are you up to?" 1-your Majesty," Brador interposed diffidently,

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"Belgarion isn't in the West. He was seen just last week in Melcena."

"What's he doing in Melcena?"

"We weren't able to determine that, your Majesty. It's fairly certain that he left the islands, however. We think that he's somewhere in this general vicinity."

"Adding to the confusion, no doubt. Keep an eye out for him, Atesca. I really want to have a long talk with that young man. He stalks through the world like a natural disaster."

"I'll make a point of trying to locate him for your Majesty," Atesca replied. "Now, with your Majesty's permission, I'd like to go supervise die loading of the troops."

"How long is it going to take you to get to Ferra?"

"Perhaps three or four days, your Majesty. I'll put the troops to manning the oars."

"They won't like that."

"They don't have to like it, your Majesty."

"All right, go ahead. I'll be along a few days behind you."

Atesca saluted and turned to go.

"Oh, by the way, Atesca," Zakath said as an afterthought, "why don't you take a kitten on your way out?" He pointed at a number of prowling, half-grown cats on the for side of the room. His own mackerel-striped tabby was perched high on the mantelpiece with a slightly harried expression on her face.

"Ah . . ." Atesca hesitated. "I'm overwhelmed with gratitude, your Majesty, but cat fur makes my eyes swell shut, and I think 1*11 need my eyes during die next few weeks."

Zakath sighed. "I understand, Atesca," he said. "That will be all."

The general bowed and left the room.

Zakath considered it. "Well," he said, "if he won't take a kitten, I suppose we'll have to give him a field marshal's baton instead-but only if this campaign of his is successful, you understand."

"Perfectly, your Majesty," Brador murmured.

unmitigated ass and he had to be led by the hand through -,the ceremony. When it was over, Zandramas installed him OH an ornate throne in the palace at Hemil and left instructions that he be flattered and fawned over. Then she quietly

tea.

Prince Geran was in the simple room Zandramas had chosen for herself in the temple. A middle-aged Grolim priestess had been watching over him. "He's been very good this morning, Holy Zandramas," the priestess advised.

"Good, bad-what difference does it make?" Zandramas shrugged. "You can go now."

"Yes, Holy Priestess." The middle-aged woman genuflected and left the room.

Prince Geran looked at Zandramas with a grave expression on his little face.

"You're quiet this morning, your Highness," Zandramas said ironically.

The child's expression did not change. Though they had been together for over a year, Geran had never shown the slightest sign of affection for her and, perhaps even more disturbing, he had never shown fear either. He held up one of his toys. "Ball," he said.

"Yes," she replied, "I suppose so." Then, perhaps because his penetrating gaze disturbed her, she crossed the room to stand before her mirror. She pushed back her hood and gazed intently at her reflection. It had not touched her yet. That was something at least. She looked with distaste at the whirling, sparkling lights beneath the skin of her lands. Then, quite deliberately, she opened the front of her robe and gazed at her nude reflection. It was spreading, of course could be no question about that. Her breasts and belly also underlaid with those selfsame whirling points of

Geran had come silently up to stand beside her. "Stars," he said, pointing at the mirror.

"Just go play, Geran," the Child of Dark told him, closing the robe.

The coronation of the Archduke Otrath as Emperor of Mallorean went off quite smoothly. Otrath, of course, was an

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As they rode west that afternoon, they could see a heavy, dark purple cloudbank building up ahead of them, rising higher and higher and blotting out the blue of the sky. Finally Durnik rode forward. "Toth says that we'd better find shelter," he told Belgarath. "These spring storms in this part of the world are savage,"

Belgarath shrugged. "I've been rained on before." "He says that the storm won't last long," Durnik said, "but it's going to be very intense. It should blow through by morning. I really think we should listen to him, Belgarath. It's not only the rain and wind. He says that there's usually hail as well, and the hailstones can be as big as apples."

Belgarath peered toward the blue-black clouds towering up into the western sky with lightning bolts staggering down

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from their centers. "All right," he decided. "We wouldn't be able to go much farther today anyway. Does he know of ; any shelter nearby?"

"There's a farm village a league or so ahead," Durnik told him. "If it's like the others we've passed, there won't be anybody there. We ought to be able to find a house with enough roof left to keep the hailstones off our heads."

"Let's aim for there then. That storm's moving fast. I'll call in Beldin and have him take a look." He lifted his face, and Garion could feel his thought reaching out.

They rode at a gallop into a mounting wind that whipped their cloaks about them and carried with it an unpleasant chill and vagrant spatters of cold rain.

When they crested the hill above the deserted village, they could see the storm front advancing like a wall across the open plain.

"It's going to be close," Belgarath shouted above the wind. "Let's make a run for it."

: They plunged down the hill through wildly tossing grass and then across a broad belt of plowed ground that encircled the village. The place was walled, but the gate was off its hinges, and many houses showed signs of recent fires. They clattered along a rubble-littered street with the wind screaming at them. Garion heard a loud pop. Then another. Then several more in a growing staccato. "Here comes the bail!" he shouted.

...: Velvet suddenly cried out and clutched at her shoulder. Silk, almost without thinking, it seemed, pulled his horse in beside hers and flipped his cloak over her, tenting it protectively with his arm.

>JKBeldin stood in the dooryard of a relatively intact house. "In here!" he called urgently. "The stable doors are open! Get the horses inside!"

-v; They swung out of their saddles and quickly led their mounts into a cavernlike stable. Then they pushed the doors

and dashed across the yard to the house. "Did you check the village for people?" Belgarath asked the hunchbacked sorcerer as they entered. "There's nobody here," Beldin told him, "unless there's

the bureaucrat hiding in a cellar somewhere." The banging sound outside grew louder until it became a

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steady rain. Garion looked out the door. Great chunks of ice were streaking out of the sky and smashing themselves to bits on the cobblestones. The chill grew more intense moment by moment. "I think we made it just in time," he said.

"Close the door, Garion," Polgara told him, "and let's get a fire going."

The room into which they had come showed signs of a hasty departure. The table and the chairs had been overturned, and there were broken dishes on the floor. Durnik looked around and picked up a stub of candle from the corner. He righted the table, set the candle on a piece of broken plate, and reached for his flint, steel, and tinder.

Toth went to the window and opened it. Then he reached out, pulled the shutters closed, and latched them.

Durnik's candle guttered a bit, then its flame grew steady, casting a golden glow through the room. The smith went to the fireplace. Despite the litter on the floor and the disarray of the furniture, the room was pleasant. The walls had been whitewashed, and the overhead beams were dark and had been neatly adzed square. The fireplace was large and it had an arched opening. A number of pothooks jutted from its back wall, and a pile of firewood was neatly stacked beside it. It was a friendly kind of place.

"All right, gentlemen," Polgara said to them. "Let's not just stand there. The furniture needs to be put right, and the floor needs to be swept. We'll need more candles, and I'll want to check the sleeping quarters."

The fire Durnik had built was catching hold. He gave it a critical look; satisfied, he rose to his feet. "I'd better see to the horses," he said. "Do you want the packs in here, Pol?"

4 "Just the food and the cooking things for now, dear. But don't you think you should wait until the hail lets up?"

"There's a sort of covered walkway along the side of the house," he replied. "I'd guess that the people who built the place knew about this sort of weather." He went out with Toth and Eriond close behind him.

Garion crossed the room to where Velvet sat on a rude bench with her hand laid protectively over her right shoulder. Her face was pale, and her brow was dewed with sweat.

"Are you all right?" he asked her.

"It surprised me, that's all," she replied. "It's nice of to ask, though."

"Nice my foot!" He was suddenly angry. "You're like a sister to me, Liselle, and if you let yourself get hurt, I'll take it as a personal insult."

"Yes, your Majesty," she said, her smile suddenly lighting up the room.

"Don't play with me, Velvet. Don't try to be brave. If /you're hurt, say so."

-. "It's only a little bruise, Belgarion," she protested. Her large brown eyes conveyed a world of sincerity, mostly feigned.

"I'll spank you," he threatened. "Now, that's an interesting notion." She laughed. He didn't even think about it. He simply leaned forward and kissed her on the forehead.

; She looked a little surprised. "Why, your majesty," she jftid in mock alarm. "What if Ce'Nedra had seen you do

"t?"

:-' "Ce'Nedra can cope with it. She loves you as much as I ;>do. I'll have Aunt Pol look at that shoulder." iA "It's really fine, Belgarion." ; ;/* "Do you want to argue about that with Aunt Pol?" She thought about it. "No," she said, "I don't really so. Why don't you send Kheldar over to hold my

"Anything else?"

"You could kiss me again, if you'd like."

a certain clinical detachment, Polgara opened the of Velvet's gray dress and carefully examined the large le bruise on the blond girl's shoulder. Velvet blushed modestly covered her more salient features.

**I don't think anything's broken," Polgara said, gently ing the bruised shoulder. "It's going to be very painful, gh-" "I noticed that almost immediately," Velvet said, winc-

"A11 right, Sadi," Polgara said briskly, "I need a good jesic. What would you suggest?"

**I have oret, Lady Polgara," the eunuch answered.

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She thought about it. "No," she said. "Oret would incapacitate her for the next two days. Do you have any mis-eth?"

He looked a bit startled. "Lady Polgara," he protested. "Miseth is an excellent painkiller, but-" He looked at the suffering Velvet. "There are those side effects, you know."

"We can control her if necessary."

"What side effects?" Silk demanded, hovering protectively over the blond girl.

"It tends to rouse a certain-ah, shall we say-ardor," Sadi replied delicately. "In Nyissa it's widely used for that purpose."

"Oh," Silk said, flushing slightly.

"One drop," Polgara said. "No. Make that two."

"Two?" Sadi exclaimed.

"I want it to last until the pain subsides."

"Two drops will do that, all right," Sadi said, "but you'll have to confine her until it wears off."

"I'll keep her asleep if I need to."

Dubiously, Sadi opened his red case and removed a vial of deep purple liquid. "This is against my better judgment, Lady Polgara," he said.

"Trust me."

"It always makes me nervous when somebody says that," Belgarath said to Beldin.

"A lot of things make you nervous. We can't go anywhere until the girl's better. Pol knows what she's doing."

"Maybe," Belgarath replied.

Sadi carefully measured two drops of the purple medication into a cup of water and stirred the mixture with his finger. Then he rather carefully dried his hand on a piece of cloth. He handed the cup to Velvet. "Drink it slowly," he instructed. "You'll begin to feel very strange almost immediately."

"Strange?" she asked suspiciously.

"We can talk about it later. All you need to know now is that it's going to make the pain go away."

Velvet sipped at the cup. "It doesn't taste bad," she observed.

"Of course not," the eunuch replied, "and you'll find

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t it tastes better and better as you get toward the bottom
the cup."

Velvet continued to take small sips of the liquid. Her face flushed. "My," she said, "isn't it warm in here all of sudden?"

Silk sat down on the bench beside her. "Is it helping at \$11?" he asked. " "Hmm?" ; "How's the shoulder?"

"Did you see my bruise, Kheldar?" She pulled her dress

-open to show it to him. She showed him-and everyone else jn the room-other things as well. "Oops," she said ab-

•ehtly, not bothering to cover herself.

"I think you'd better take those steps you mentioned, Lady Polgara," Sadi said. "The situation is likely to get ~\$ut of hand any minute now."

Polgara nodded and put one hand briefly on Velvet's brow. Garion felt a light surge.

"Suddenly I feel so very drowsy," Velvet said. "Is the i-ftjedicine doing that?"

? "In a manner of speaking," Polgara replied. ;;'; Velvet's head drooped forward, and she laid it on Silk's

"Bring her along, Silk," Polgara told the little man. 'Let's find a bed for her."

IT . 'Silk picked the sleeping girl up and carried her from the ;ipom with Polgara close beside him. * "Does that stuff always have that effect?" Ce'Nedra asked

"Miseth? Oh yes. It could arouse a stick." , "And does it work on men, too?" JP'Gender makes no difference, your Majesty."

*,/ , "How very interesting." She gave Garion a sly, sidelong |£ance. "Don't lose that little bottle, Sadi," she said.

*\$""Never mind," Garion told her.

%-;li took them perhaps a quarter of an hour to tidy up the i. Polgara was smiling when she and Silk returned. s'U sleep now," she said. "I looked into the other i, too. The woman of the house appears to have been y neat sort of person," she said. "This is the only that was seriously disturbed when the family left."

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She set her candle down and smoothed the front of her gray dress with a satisfied expression. "The house will do very nicely, uncle," she told Beldin.

"I'm glad you approve," he replied. He was sprawled on a high-backed bench by the window and was carefully re-tying the thong that held his ragged left sleeve in place.

"How far are we from the river?" Belgarath asked him.

"It's still a ways-a good day's hard riding at least. I can't be much more exact than that. When the wind came up, it almost blew off my feathers."

"Is the country on up ahead still empty?"

"It's hard to be sure. I was up fairly high, and if there are any people out there, they'd all have taken cover from this storm."

"We'll have to have a look in the morning." Belgarath leaned back in his chair and stretched his feet out toward the hearth. "That fire was a good idea," he said. "There's a definite chill in the air."

"That happens sometimes when you pile three or four inches of ice on the ground," Beldin told him. The ugly little man squinted thoughtfully. "If this sort of storm is a regular afternoon occurrence around here, we'll need to cross the Magan during the morning hours," he noted. "Getting caught in a hailstorm in an open boat isn't my idea of fun."

"Now you stop that!" Sadi said sharply to Zith's earthenware bottle.

"What's the trouble?" Ce'Nedra asked.

"She was making a funny little noise," Sadi replied. "I wanted to see if she was all right, and she hissed at me."

"She does that every now and then, doesn't she?"

"This was a bit different. She was actually warning me to stay away from her."

"Could she be ill?"

"I wouldn't think so. She's a fairly young snake, and I've been very careful about what I feed her."

"Perhaps she needs a tonic." Ce'Nedra looked question-ingly at Polgara.

Polgara laughed helplessly. "I'm sorry, Ce'Nedra," she said, "but I have no experience with the illnesses of reptiles."

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* "Do you suppose we could talk about something else?" k asked plaintively. "Zith is a nice enough little animal, ^suppose, but she's still a snake." \$V Ce'Nedra whirled on him, her eyes suddenly flashing.]\$*How can you say that?" she snapped angrily. "She's saved ^•11 our lives twice- once in Rak Uрга when she nipped that ij(c)rolim, Sorchak, and again at Ashaba when she bit Har-fakan. Without her, we wouldn't be here. You might show

at least a little bit of gratitude."

-""Well ..." he said a little uncertainly. "You could be fight, I suppose, but hang it all, Ce'Nedra, I can't abide

' "I don't even think of her as a snake. ' * ;'•-', "Ce'Nedra," he said patiently, "she's long and skinny, ipe wriggles, she doesn't have any arms or legs, and she's poisonous. By definition, she's a snake." :' "You're prejudiced," she accused.

"Well- yes, I suppose you could say that."

*Tm bitterly disappointed in you, Prince Kheldar. She's
sweet, loving, brave little creature, and you're insulting

He looked at her for a moment, then rose to his feet and floridly to the earthenware bottle. "I'm dreadfully t, dear Zith," he apologized. "I can't think what came me. Can you possibly find it in your cold little green ^;!^ to forgive me?"

Zith hissed at him, a hiss ending in a curious grunt. : "She says to leave her alone," Sadi told him. jt;*?Can you really understand what she's saying?" £flh a general sort of way, yes. Snakes have a very limited lary, so it's not all that difficult to pick up a few here and there." The eunuch frowned. "She's been ing a great deal lately, though, and that's not like her. usually a very ladylike little snake." can't believe I'm actually involved in this conversa-Silk said, shaking his head and going off down the rard the back of the house.

returned with Tom and Eriond. They were car-le packs containing Polgara's utensils and the food. looked critically at the fireplace and its facilities. been eating some rather sketchy meals lately," she

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noted. "We have a fairly adequate kitchen here, so why don't we take advantage of it?" She opened the food pack and rummaged through it. "I wish I had something besides travel rations to work with," she said half to herself.

"There's a hen roost out back, Pol," Beldin told her helpfully.

She smiled at him. "Durnik, dear," she said in an almost dreamy tone of voice.

"I'll see to it at once, Pol. Three, maybe?"

"Make it four. Then we'll be able to carry some cold chicken with us when we leave. Ce'Nedra, go with him and gather up all the eggs you can find."

Ce'Nedra stared at her in astonishment. "I've never gathered eggs before, Lady Polgara," she protested.

"It's not hard, dear. Just be careful not to break them, that's all."

"But-"

"I thought I'd make a cheese omelette for breakfast."

Ce'Nedra's eyes brightened. "I'll get a basket," she said quickly.

"Splendid idea, dear. Uncle, are there any other interesting things about this place?"

"There's a brewhouse at the back of the building." He shrugged. "I didn't have time to look into it."

Belgarath rose to his feet. "Why don't we do that right now?" he suggested.

"People in farm villages don't make very good beer, Belgarath."

"Maybe this one's an exception. We'll never know until we try it, will we?"

"You've got a point there."

The two old sorcerers went off toward the back of the house while Ehond piled more wood on the fire.

Ce'Nedra returned, frowning and a little angry. "They won't give me their eggs, Lady Polgara," she complained. "They're sitting on them."

"You have to reach under them and take the eggs, dear."

"Won't that make them angry?"

"Are you afraid of a chicken?"

The little queen's eyes hardened, and she left the room purposefully.

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A root cellar behind the house yielded a store of vegetables and Belgarath and Beldin brought a cask of beer in the brewhouse. While the chickens were roasting, Pol-rummaged through the canisters and bins in the n. She found flour and a number of other staples, and She rolled up her sleeves in a businesslike way, mixed up a large batch of dough, and began to knead it on a well-scrubbed cutting board near the fire. "We can have some biscuits tonight, I think," she said, "and I'll bake some fresh bread in the morning."

The supper was the best Garion had eaten in months. There had been banquets and adequate meals in inns sod the like, but there was a certain indefinable quality to his Aunt Pol's cooking that no other cook in the world could hope to match. After he had eaten more perhaps than was mally good for him, he pushed his plate away with a sigh and leaned back in his chair.

"I'm glad you decided to leave some for the rest of us," Ce'Nedra said in a slightly snippy tone.

"Are you cross with me for some reason?" he asked her.

**No, I suppose not, Garion. I'm just a little irritated, that's all."

"Why?"

"A chicken bit me." She pointed at the remains of a roasted hen lying on a large platter. "That one," she added. iShe reached out, wrenched a drumstick off the chicken and bit into it rather savagely with her small white teeth. 'There," she said in a vengeful tone. "How do you like

*?"

iVjGarion knew his wife, so he knew better than to laugh.

supper, they all lingered at the table in a kind of contentment as the storm outside abated, there was a light, almost diffident rap on the door, sprang to his feet, reaching over his shoulder for his

:!***! don't mean to disturb you," a querulous old voice from the other side of the door. "I just wanted to be you have everything you need." garath rose from his chair, went to the door, and nr.-d it. j4Holy Belgarath," the man outside said with a bow of

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the profoundest respect. He was very old, with snowy white hair and a thin, lined face.

He was also a Grolim.

Belgarath stared at him warily. "You know me?" he asked.

"Of course. I know you all. I've been waiting for you. May I come in?"

Wordlessly, Belgarath stepped aside for him, and the aged Grolim tottered into the room, aided by a twisted cane. He bowed to Polgara. "Lady Polgara," he murmured. Then he turned to Garion. "Your Majesty," he said, "may I beg your forgiveness?"

"Why?" Garion replied. "You've never done anything to me."

"Yes I have, your Majesty. When I heard about what had happened in the City of Endless Night, I hated you. Can you forgive that?"

"There's nothing to forgive. It was only natural for you to feel that way. You've had a change of heart, I take it?"

"It was changed for me, King Belgarion. The New God of Angarak will be a kindlier, gentler God than was Torak. I live now only to serve that God and I abide against the day of his coming."

"Sit down, my friend," Belgarath told him. "I assume you've had a religious experience of some kind?"

The old Grolim sank into a chair with a beatific smile on his lined face. "My heart has been touched, Holy Belgarath," he said simply. "I had devoted all of my life to the service of Torak in the temple in this village. I grieved more than you can know when I learned of His death, for I served Him without question. Now I have removed His likeness from the Temple wall and I decorate the altar with flowers instead of the blood of sacrificial victims. Bitterly I repent the times when I myself held the knife during the rite of sacrifice."

"And what was it that so changed you?" Polgara asked him.

"It was a voice that spoke to me in the silences of my soul, Lady Polgara, a voice that filled me with such joy that it seemed that all the world was bathed in light."

"And what did the voice say to you?"

t4 The old priest reached inside his black robe and withdrew t parchment sheet. "I took great care to inscribe the words itttaetly as the voice spoke them to me," he said, "for such W\$ the instruction I received. A man may misconstrue what jffe is told, or change it if it is not to his liking or if he fails lpjunderstand." He smiled gently. "What I have written is lor the benefit of others, though, for the words are engraved Bpon my heart far more indelibly than upon this sheet." He &fied the parchment and read from it in a quavering voice. '- **<'Behold:' " he read, " 'In the days which shall follow lJhe meeting of the Child of Light and the Child of Dark in the City of Endless Night shall a great despair fall over the Priests of the Dark God, for He shall have been laid low and shall come no more among His people. But lift up thine faeart, for thy despair is but the night which shall be ban-igfaed by the rising of a new sun. For verily I say to thee, Angarak shall have a new birth with the coming of her true ||Jpd--He who was purposed to lead her since the Beginning 'ofif Days. For lo, the Dark God was bora out of nothingness the instant of the EVENT which divided all creation, and was

not He who was foreordained to guide and protect garak. In the last meeting of the Child of Dark and the Id of Light shall the true God of Angarak be revealed, ye shall render up unto Him your hearts and your de->n.

'And the course which Angarak shall follow shall be "Artermined by the CHOICE, and once the CHOICE is made, not be unmade and shall prevail eternally for good ill. For harken, two shall stand in the Place Which Is More, but only one shall be chosen. And the Child of and the Child of Dark shall surrender up the burden spirits which guide them to the two who shall stand lopectation of the CHOICE. And should the CHOICE fall to tone hand, the world shall be drowned in darkness, but it fall to the other hand, shall all be bathed in light, that which was ordained since before the beginning of shall come to pass.

"Abide in hope, therefore, and treat thy fellow creatures and with love, for this is pleasing to the true God, should He prevail and be chosen, He shall bless thee lay but a gentle yoke upon thee.' " The old Grolim

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lowered the sheet and bowed his head prayerfully. "Thus spoke the voice which filled my heart with joy and banished my despair," he said simply.

"We're grateful that you shared this with us," Belgarath told him. "Might we offer you something to eat?"

The Grolim shook his head. "I do not eat meat any more," he said. "I would not offend my God. I have cast away my dagger and will shed no more blood for all the days of my life." He rose to his feet. "I will leave you now," he said. "I came but to reveal to you the words the voice spoke to me, and to assure you that one at least in all of Angarak shall pray for your success."

"We thank you," Belgarath said sincerely. He went to the door and held it open for the gentle old man.

"That was fairly specific, wasn't it?" Beldin said after the Grolim had left. "It's the first time I heard a prophecy that got straight to the point."

"You mean to say that he's really a prophet?" Silk asked.

"Of course he is. It's an almost classic case. He had all the symptoms-the ecstasy, the radical change of personality, all of it."

"There's something wrong here, though," Belgarath said, frowning. "I've spent eons reading prophecies, and what he said didn't have the same tone as any that I Ve ever come across-either ours or the others." He looked at Garion. "Can you get in touch with your friend?" he asked. "I need to talk with him."

"I can try," Garion replied. "He doesn't always come when I call, though."

"See if you can reach him. Tell him that it's important."

"I'll see what I can do, Grandfather." Garion sat down and closed his eyes. "Are you in there?" he asked.

"Please don't shout, Garion, " the voice responded in a pained tone. "It hurts my ears. "

' 'Sorry," Garion apologized. ' 7 didn 't realize I was talking so loud. Grandfather wants to talk with you."

"All right. Open your eyes, Garion. I can't see when they're closed. "

As had happened occasionally in the past, Garion felt himself shunted off into some quiet corner of his mind, and

dry voice took over. "All right, Belgarath," it said

Garion's lips. "What is it this time?" "I've got a couple of questions, " the old man replied. "There's nothing new about that. You've always got questions. "

"Did you hear what the Grolim said?" "Naturally." "Was it you? I mean, were you the voice that came to , "No, as a matter of fact, I wasn't. " "Then it was the other spirit?" "No. It wasn't him either. " "Then who was it?"

"Sometimes I can't believe that Aldur chose you as his first disciple. Are your brains packed in wool?"

"You don't have to be insulting. " Belgarath sounded a bit injured, but Beldin laughed an ugly, cackling kind of laugh.

"All right," the voice sighed, "I'll go through it carefully. Try not to miss too much. My counterpart and I came into existence when Destiny was divided. Have you got that

;/> "I knew that already. "

"And you even managed to remember it? Amazing. " "Thanks, " Belgarath said in a flat tone. "I'm working with Garion's vocabulary. He's a peasant, he can be a little blunt sometimes. Now, doesn't it seem that when Destiny is reunited, there should be a new My counterpart and I will have served our purpose, there won't be any further need for us. Millions of years

between us have warped our perceptions a bit. : Belgarath looked startled at that. "Think, old man," the voice told him. "I'm not suited to deal with a united universe. I've got too many questions. The new voice can start out fresh without any pre-conceptions. It's better that way, believe me." "I think I'm going to miss you. " "Don't get sentimental on me, Belgarath. I don't think I

bear that. "

"Wait a minute. This new voice will come into existence at the meeting, right?"

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"At the instant of the meeting, actually. "

"Then how did it speak to the old Grolim, if it's not in existence yet?"

"Time doesn't really mean that much to us, Belgarath. We can move backward and forward in it without any particular difficulty."

"You mean the voice was speaking to him from the future ?"

"Obviously. " Garion felt a faint, ironic smile cross his lips. "How do you know I'm not speaking to you from the past?"

Belgarath blinked.

' "Now we 've got you," Beldin said triumphantly. ' "We 're going to win, aren't we?"

"We can hope so, but there's no guarantee. "

' "The voice that spoke to the Grolim represents a kindlier God, doesn't it?"

"Yes. "

' "If the Child of Dark wins, the New God isn 't going to be very kindly, is he?"

"No. "

"Then the simple fact that the voice came to him from out of the future-after the choice-indicates that the Child of Light is going to win, doesn't it?"

The voice sighed. "Why do you always have to complicate things, Beldin? The voice that spoke to the Grolim is the possibility of the new spirit. It's simply reaching back in time to make certain preparations so that things will be ready in the eventuality that it comes out on top. The Choice still hasn 't been made yet, you know."

"Even the possibility of existence has that kind of power?"

' "Possibility has enormous power, Beldin-sometimes even more than actuality."

"And the possibility of the other spirit could be making its own preparations as well, couldn't it?"

' "I wouldn 't be at all surprised. You have an enormous grasp of the obvious."

' "Then we 're right back where we started from. We 're still going to have two spirits wrestling across time and the universe for dominance."

"--•• ' "No. The Choice will eliminate one of the possibilities once and for all. "

' "I don't understand," Beldin confessed. ; , "I didn 't think you would."

"What preparations was this new voice making?" Pol-gara asked suddenly.

"The Grolim who came to you here will be the prophet and the first Disciple of the New God-assuming that the Child of Light is chosen, of course. "

"A Grolim?"

"The decision wasn't mine to make. The new God will be a God of Angarak, though, so it does make sense, I suppose."

"That might take a bit of getting adjusted to. "

"You have as many prejudices as I do, Polgara," the

voice laughed, "but I think in the long run, you're more

\. adaptable-and certainly more so than these two stubborn
'(. old men are. You 'll come to accept it in time. Now, if there
weren't any more questions, I still have some things to attend
to-in another part of time."

And then the voice was gone.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The sun was just going down, staining the purple cloudbank to the west with a jaundiced yellow as it broke through an opening in the approaching storm. Garion crested a long hill and looked down into the next valley. There was a complex of buildings there, a complex so familiar that he dropped onto his haunches and stared at it in amazement for a moment. Then he rose on all fours again and moved cautiously through the tall grass toward the farmstead. He saw no smoke, and the large gate was open, but he didn't see any point in taking chances. Farmers have an automatic aversion to wolves, and Garion did not particularly want to dodge arrows shot at him from concealment.

He stopped at the edge of the cleared area surrounding the farm, dropped to his belly in the grass, and looked at the farm for quite some time. It seemed to be deserted. He

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Tan forward and slunk cautiously through the open gate. The ^compound was quite nearly as large as Faldor's farm, half ^a world away.

p He slipped through an open shed door and stood inside v with one forepaw slightly raised as his nose and ears in-| tently sought for any evidence that he was not alone. The | farmstead was silent, save for the complaining moan of an '- udder-heavy cow lowing to be milked in the barn across the

central yard. The smells of people were here, of course, but

they were all many days old.

: Garion slipped out of the shed and trotted cautiously from \$ door to door, opening each in turn by twisting the handle °; with his jaws. The place in many respects was so strikingly i familiar that it brought him a sharp pang of a homesickness [". he thought he had long since put behind him. The storage *£. rooms were all almost the same as at Faldor's. The smithy H was so like Durnik's that Garion could almost hear the steely paring of his friend's hammer on the anvil. He was quite cer-J Cain that he could close his eyes and pad unerringly across f; the yard to the kitchen.

;}; Methodically, he entered each room around the lower £ floor of the farmstead, then scrambled up the stairs leading £.-to the gallery with his toenails scratching at the wooden

All was deserted.

He returned to the yard and poked an inquiring nose into the barn. The cow bawled in panic, and Garion backed out through the door to avoid causing her further distress.

"Aunt Pol," he sent his thought out.

"Yes, dear?"

"There's nobody here, and it's a perfect place." , "Perfect is an extravagant word, Garion." . "Wait until you see it."

A few moments later, Belgarath trotted through the gateway, sniffed, looked around, and blurred into his own form. "It's like coming home, isn't it?" He grinned.

"I thought so myself," Garion replied. ;;; Beldin carae spiraling in. "It's about a league to the 'river," he said even as he changed. "If we move right along, we can make it by dark."

"Let's stay here instead," Belgarath said. "The river-

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banks might be patrolled, and there's no point in creeping around in the dark if we don't have to." The hunchback shrugged. "It's up to you." Then Polgara, as pale and silent as a ghost, drifted over the wall, settled on the tailgate of a two-wheeled cart in the center of the yard, and resumed her own form. "Oh, my," she murmured, stepping down and looking around. "You were right, Garion. It is perfect." She folded her cloak across her arm and crossed the yard to the kitchen door.

About five minutes later, Durnik led the others into the yard. He also looked around, then suddenly laughed. "You'd almost expect Faldor himself to come out that door," he said. "How's it possible for two places so far apart to look so much alike?"

"It's the most practical design for a farm, Durnik," Bel-garath told him, "and sooner or later, practical people the world over are going to arrive at it. Can you do something about that cow? We won't get much sleep if she bawls all night long."

"I'll milk her right away." The smith slid down from his saddle and led his horse toward the barn.

Belgarath looked after him with an affectionate expression. "We may have to drag him away from here in the morning," he noted.

"Where's Polgara?" Silk asked, looking around as he helped Velvet down from her horse.

"Where else?" Belgarath pointed toward the kitchen. * 'Getting her out of there may be even harder than dragging Durnik out of the smithy."

Velvet looked around with a slightly dreamy expression on her face. The drug Sadi had given her the previous night had not yet entirely worn off, and Garion surmised that Polgara was keeping her under rigid control. "Very nice," she said, leaning involuntarily toward Silk. "Sort of homey."

Silk's expression was wary, like that of a man about ready to bolt.

They ate well again that evening, sitting around a long table in the beamed kitchen with the golden light of wax candles filling the room and winking back from the polished copper bottoms of kettles hung on the wall. The room was

- snug and warm, even though the storm which had been

- .building up all afternoon raged outside, filling the night with thunder and wind and driving rain.

Garion felt oddly at peace, a peace he had not known for ' more than a year now, and he accepted this time of renewal gratefully, knowing that it would strengthen him in the cli-mactic months ahead.

"Oh, my goodness!" Sadi exclaimed. After he had finished eating, the eunuch had taken his red case to the far end of the kitchen and had been trying to coax Zith from her little home with a saucer of fresh, warm milk. ; "What is it, Sadi?" Velvet said, seeming to shake off the effects of the drug and Polgara's insistence that she remain calm.

"Zith had a little surprise for us," Sadi replied in a de-lighted tone. "Several little surprises, in fact."

Velvet went curiously to his side. "Oh," she said with a ; little catch in her voice, "aren't they adorable?" : "What is it?" Polgara asked.

"Our dear little Zith is a mother," Velvet said.

The rest of them rose and went to the other end of the room to look at the new arrivals. Like their mother, they were all bright green with the characteristic red stripe running from nose to tail. There were five of them, and they were no larger than angleworms. They all had their chins on the edge of the saucer and they were lapping up warm milk with their forked little tongues, purring all the while.

Zith hovered over them protectively, somehow managing to look demure.

"That would explain why she's been so bad-tempered lately," Sadi said. "Why didn't you tell me, Zith? I could 'veave helped you with the delivery."

"I'm not sure I'd want to be a midwife to a snake," Silk said. "Besides, I thought reptiles laid eggs."

"Most of them do," Sadi admitted. "Some kinds are ; live-bearers, though. Zith happens to be one of those Hands."

"And here I thought she was just getting fat," Velvet said, "and all the time she was pregnant." Durnik was frowning. "Something doesn't quite fit

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here," he said. "Isn't Nyissa the only place where her species is found?"

"Yes," Sadi said, "and they're very rare even in Nyissa."

"Then how ..." Duraik flushed slightly. "What I'm getting at is, how did this happen? We've been away from Nyissa for a long time. Where did she meet the father?"

Sadi blinked. "That's true, isn't it? This is impossible. Zith, what have you been up to?"

The little green snake ignored him.

"It's really not such a mystery, Sadi," Eriond told him, smiling slightly. "Don't you remember what Cyradis said to Zith at Ashaba?"

"Something about something being delayed. I didn't really pay that much attention. We were in the middle of something fairly distracting at the moment, if I remember right."

"She said, 'Be tranquil, little sister, for the purpose of all thy days is now accomplished, and that which was delayed may now come to pass.' This is what she was talking about. This is what was delayed."

"You know," Beldin said to Belgarath, "I think he's right. This isn't the first time the prophecy's tampered with things in order to get the job done. That business about the 'purpose of all her days' simply means that Zith was born for one thing-to bite Harakan. Once she'd done that, things went back to normal again." Then the hunchback looked at Eriond. "How is it that you remembered exactly what she said? We were all fairly excited there in Urvon's throne room."

"I always try to remember what people say," Eriond replied. "It may not always make sense at the time they say it, but sooner or later it always seems to fit together."

"This is a strange boy, Belgarath," Beldin said.

"We've noticed that on occasion."

"Is it really possible?" Sadi asked the old sorcerer. "That sort of intervention, I mean?"

"That's the wrong question to ask my grandfather." Gar-ion laughed. "He doesn't believe that anything's impossible."

Silk was standing a safe distance away from Zith and her new brood. His eyebrow was raised slightly. "Congratula-

tions, Zith," he said finally to the little green mother. Then he looked sternly at the others. "This is all very nice, I suppose," he added, "but if anybody calls them little nippers, I'll just scream."

They had bathed and gone to bed, but Ce'Nedra was restless, and she tossed and turned. Suddenly she sat up. "I wonder if that milk's still warm," she murmured. She tossed back the blanket and padded on little bare feet to the door. "Do you want some, too?" she asked Garion.

"No, thanks all the same, dear."

"It would help you sleep."

"I'm not the one who's having trouble sleeping."

She stuck her tongue out at him and went out into the hallway.

When she returned a few moments later with her glass of milk, she was stifling a naughty little giggle.

"What's so funny?" he asked her.

"I saw Silk."

"So?"

"He didn't see me, but I saw him. He was going into a bedroom."

"He can go in and out of his bedroom if he wants to."

She giggled again and hopped into bed. "That's the point, Garion," she said. "It wasn't his bedroom."

"Oh." Garion coughed in embarrassment. "Drink your milk."

"I listened at the door for a moment," she said. "Don't you want to hear what they were saying?"

"Not particularly, no."

She told him anyway.

The rain had passed on through, although there were still rumbles of thunder far to the west, and jagged sheets of lightning raked the western horizon. Garion awoke suddenly and sat upright in bed. There was a different kind of rumble outside, and it was occasionally accompanied by a shrill bellowing noise. He slipped softly out of bed and went out onto the balcony that encircled the farmyard. A long line of torches was slowly moving out there in the darkness, perhaps a half mile to the west. Garion peered out through the

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tag end of the storm, then began to form up the image of the wolf in his mind. This was definitely something that needed to be investigated.

The torches moved at a peculiarly slow pace; as Garion loped closer to them, he noticed that they seemed much higher than they would have been if the torchbearers were mounted on horses. The slow rumbling sound and the peculiar bellowing continued. Then he stopped beside a bramble thicket and sat down on his haunches to watch and listen. A long line of huge grey beasts was plodding through the night in a northeasterly direction. Garion had seen the image, at least, of an elephant on the Isle of Verkat in Cthol Murgos when his Aunt Pol had routed the mad hermit in the forest. An image of an elephant is one thing, however, but the reality is quite something else. They were enormous, far larger than any animal Garion had ever seen, and there was a kind of ponderous implacability about their steady pace. Their foreheads and flanks were covered with skirts of chain mail, and Garion shuddered inwardly at the thought of such vast weight, though the elephants moved as if the mail were as insubstantial as cobwebs. Their sail-like ears swayed as they walked, and their pendulous trunks drooped down before them. Occasionally, one of them would curl his trunk up, touching it to his forehead, and give vent to a shattering trumpet sound.

Men in crude body armor were mounted on the huge, plodding beasts. One, bearing a torch, sat cross-legged atop each huge neck. Those riding behind were armed with javelins, slings, and short-limbed bows. At the head of the column, riding astride the neck of a beast fully a yard taller than the ones in his wake, was a man wearing the black robe of a Grolim.

Garion rose and slunk closer, his careful paws making no sound in the rain-wet grass. Although he was certain that the elephants could easily catch his scent, he reasoned that beasts so large would pay little attention to a predator who posed no real threat to them. In the presence of such immensity, he felt small, even flealike. He did not particularly like the feeling. His own bulk approached two hundred pounds, but an elephant's weight was measured in tons, not in pounds.

He ranged on silent paws along the column, maintaining a distance of perhaps fifty yards and keeping his nose and eyes alert. His attention was concentrated on the black-robed OroHm astride the neck of the lead animal.

The elephants moved on, and Garion trotted alongside the column, maintaining his distance.

Then there appeared in the track ahead of the lead elephant a figure robed in shiny black satin that gleamed in the torchlight. The column halted, and Garion slunk closer. : The satin-robed figure pushed back her hood with a hand that seemed filled with swirling light. At Ashaba and again in Zamad, Garion had briefly seen the face of his son's abductor, but the confrontations with the Darshivan sorceress had been so charged with danger and dread that he had not really had time to let the features of the Child of Dark register on his memory. Now, slinking still closer, he looked upon her torchlit face.

, Her features were regular, even beautiful. Her hair was a lustrous black, and her skin was very nearly as pale as that of Garion's cousin Adara. The similarity ended there, however. Zandramas was a Grolim, and her dark eyes had that peculiar angularity common to all Angaraks. her nose was

•lightly aquiline, and her forehead was broad and unlined. IHer chin was pointed, which made her face seem oddly triangular.

**I have been awaiting thee, Naradas," she said in her harshly accented voice. "Where hast thou been?"

"Forgive me, mistress," the Grolim astride the neck of the massive lead bull apologized. "The herdsmen were farther south than we had been told." He pushed back his . His face was cruel, and his white eyes gleamed in the

•flickering torchlight. "How fares the struggle with die Disciple's minions?"

"Not well, Naradas," she replied. "His Guardsmen and bis Chandim and the rabble out of Karanda outnumber our ; forces."

"I have a regiment of elephant cavalry behind me, mis-1 Naradas informed her. "They will turn the tide of The grass of central Peldane will be well watered [with the blood of Urvon's Guardsmen, Chandim, and Kar-

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ands. We will roll them back and make Darshiva secure once and for all."

"I care nothing for Darshiva, Naradas. I seek the world, and die fate of one small principality on the eastern edge of Malloreia is a matter of sublime indifference to me. Let it stand or let it fall. I care not. It hath served its purpose, and now I am weary of it. How long will it take you to deliver your beasts to the field of battle?"

"Two days at most, mistress."

"Do so then. Put them under the command of my generals and then follow me to Kell. I will return to Hemil and gather up Otrath and Belgarion's brat. We will await thee in the shadow of the holy mountain of the seers."

"Is it true that Urvon brought the Demon Lord Nahaz and his hordes with him, mistress?"

"He did, but that no longer concerns us. Demons are not so difficult to raise, and Nahaz is not the only Demon Lord in Hell. Lord Mordja consented to aid us with his hordes. There hath long been enmity between Mordja and Nahaz. They do war upon each other now with no concern for ordinary forces."

"Mistress!" Naradas exclaimed. "Surely you would not consort with such creatures!"

"I would consort with the King of Hell himself in order to triumph in the Place Which Is No More. Mordja hath feigned flight and hath lured Nahaz away from the battlefield. Take thy beasts there so that they may destroy Urvon's hosts. Nahaz and his minions shall not be there to delay thee. Then come with all possible speed to Kell."

"I shall, mistress," Naradas promised submissively.

A slow rage had been building up in Garion. His son's abductor was no more than seconds away from him, and he knew that there was no way she could gather in her will before his fangs were into her flesh, and then it would be too late. He curled his lips back from his dreadful teeth and slunk closer, one step at a time, his hackles erect and his belly low to the ground. He thirsted for blood, and his hatred burned like a fire in his brain. Quivering in awful anticipation, he bunched his muscles, and a low, rumbling growl filled his throat.

It was that sound that ultimately brought him to his senses.

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thought that had seared his brain was the thought of a f, and it considered nothing beyond the immediate mo-If Zandramas indeed stood no more than a few bounds away, he could rend her flesh and scatter her blood in the tall grass beside the track upon which she stood before the echo of her shrieks had returned from nearby hillsides. But if the figure standing before white-eyed Naradas was but an insubstantial projection, he would clash his curved fangs on nothingness, and the Sorceress of Darshiva would escape his vengeance once again, even as she had at Ashaba.

It was perhaps the thought burning in his brain that alerted her; or perhaps, as Polgara had done so often, she had merely sampled the surrounding region with her mind and bad located the others. Whatever it was, the sorceress suddenly hissed in alarm. "Danger!" she snapped to her white-eyed underling. Then she smiled a cruel, mirthless smile. "-But I have a form immune to Alorn sorcery." She tensed herself, then blurred, and then the immense shape of the dragon appeared before the suddenly terrified elephants. She spread the vast sails of her wings and launched herself into the damp night air, filling the darkness with her shrieking bellow and her sooty red fire.

"Aunt Pol!" Garion's thought flew out. "The dragon's craning!"

"What?" her answering thought came back.

"Zandramas has changed form! She's flying toward you!"

"Come back here!" she commanded crisply. "Now!"

He spun, his claws digging into the damp turf, and ran toward the farmstead as fast as he could. Behind him he could hear the shrill, panicky trumpeting of the elephants, and overhead the shrieking bellow of the vast

dragon. He ran on desperately, knowing that Zandramas was immune to whatever countermeasures Polgara and the others might try, and that only the flaming sword of Iron-grip could drive her away.

It was not far, though the seconds seemed like hours as he bunched and stretched in the running gait of the wolf. Ahead of him he could see the dragon's fiery breath illuminating the storm clouds roiling overhead, a fire eerily accompanied by pale blue lightning that danced in jerky streaks down from the clouds. Then she folded her huge

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wings and plummeted down toward the farmstead with billows of fire preceding her.

Between bounds, Garion changed and ran on toward the gate with the sword of Iron-grip flaming in the air above his head.

At the last instant, the dragon extended her vast pinions and settled into the farmyard, still belching fire and smoke. She swung her snakelike neck around, sending incandescent billows of flame into the wooden structures surrounding the yard. The seasoned wood began to char and smoke, and here and there small blue flames began to flicker their way up the sides of the door frames.

Garion rushed into the yard, his burning sword aloft. Grimly, he began to flail at the dragon with it. "You may be immune to sorcery, Zandramas," he shouted at her, "but you're not immune to this!"

She shrieked, engulfing him in a sheet of flame, but he ignored it and continued to lash her with the blue flame of the Orb and the sword. Finally, unable to bear his relentless strokes any longer, she hurled herself into the air, flapping her great wings frantically. She clawed at the air and finally managed to clear the second-story roof of the farmstead. Then she settled to earth again and continued to bathe the structure in flame.

Garion dashed out through the gateway, fully intending to confront her again. But then he stopped. The dragon was not alone. Glowing with her peculiar nimbus, the blue wolf faced the altered form of the Sorceress of Darshiva. Then, even as Polgara had once expanded into immensity in Sthiss Tor to face the God Issa and as Garion himself had done in the City of Endless Night when he had come at last to his fated meeting with Torak, the blue wolf swelled into vastness.

The meeting of the two was the sort of thing nightmares are made of. The dragon fought with flame, and the wolf with her terrible fangs. Since the wolf was insubstantial—except for her teeth—the dragon's flame had no effect; and though the teeth of the wolf were very sharp, they could not penetrate the dragon's scaly hide. Back and forth they raged in titanic but inconclusive struggle. Then Garion thought he detected something. The light was not good. The sky over—

"bead was still obscured by the last tattered clouds of the evening's storm, and the sullen flickers of lightning seemed to obscure more than they revealed, but it appeared that at the time the wolf lunged, the dragon flinched visibly. Then it came to him. Though the wolf's teeth could not injure the

—dragon, her blue nimbus could. It seemed in some way to

.. be akin to the glow of the Orb and the fire of Iron-grip's

;s sword. Somehow the blue glow surrounding Poledra, when

"He assumed the shape of the wolf, partook of the power of

•feibe Orb, and Garion had discovered that even in the form

-•of the invincible dragon, Zandramas feared the Orb and

•-anything connected with it. Her flinching became more visible, and Poledra pressed her advantage with savage, snarl-;• ing lunges. Then, suddenly, they both stopped. A wordless ifc agreement seemed to pass between them and each blurred y back into her natural form. Their eyes flashing with implacable hatred, Zandramas and Poledra faced each other as two , women.

"I've warned you about this, Zandramas," Poledra said

a deadly voice. "Each time you try to thwart the purpose of the Destiny which controls us all, I will block you."

"And I have told thee, Poledra, that I do not fear thee," the sorceress retorted.

"Fine, then," Poledra almost purred. "Let us summon the seeress of Kell and let her make the choice here and now and based upon the outcome of this meeting."

"Thou art not the Child of Light, Poledra. Thou hast no part in the ordained meeting."

"I can stand in Belgarion's stead, if need be," Poledra replied, "for the meeting between you and him is not the .meeting upon which the fate of creation hinges. In that last oieeting you will no longer be the Child of Dark, and he will no longer be the Child of Light. Others are destined to take up those burdens, so let the meeting between you and me come now and in this place."

"Thou wilt turn all to chaos, Poledra," Zandramas screamed.

"Not all, I think. You have far more to lose than I. Bel-garion is the Child of Light and he will go from here to the Place Which Is No More. You are the Child of Dark, but if we have our meeting here and now, and if you are the one

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to fall, who will assume your burden? Urvon, perhaps, or Agachak? Or some other? You, however, will not be the exalted one, and I think that thought might be more than you can bear. Consider it, Zandramas, and then choose."

The two stood facing each other with the last flickers of lightning from the evening's storm playing luridly among the clouds to the west, bathing their faces in an eerie light.

"Well, Zandramas?"

"We will surely meet, Poledra, and all shall be decided- but not here. This is not the place of my choosing." Then the Child of Dark shimmered and vanished, and Garion heard and felt the rushing surge of her translocation.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

She walked toward him with a stately, unhurried step, golden eyes a mystery. "Put your sword away, Garion,"]"be told him. "There's no need for it now."

"Yes, Grandmother." He reached back over his shoulder and inserted the tip of his blade into the sheath and let it

fall to the ground of its own weight. "You heard, I suppose?" f. "Yes, Grandmother." s "Then you understand?" £; "Not entirely, no." ^ "I'm sure you will in time. Let's go inside. I need to talk

to my husband and my daughter." | "All right." Garion was not entirely sure about the proprieties and he was just a bit unsure of what his reaction might be should he attempt to assist her, only to dis-

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cover that she had no substance. Good manners, however, dictated that a gentleman help a lady across uneven ground, and so he set his teeth, reached out, and took her elbow.

She was as solid as he was. That made him feel better.

"Thank you, Garion." She smiled a bit whimsically at him. "Did you really think your hand would pass right through me?"

He flushed. "You knew what I was thinking."

"Of course." She laughed a low, warm laugh. "It's not really all that miraculous, Garion. You're a wolf in your other form, and wolves are very open about their thoughts. You were speaking them out loud in a hundred little moves and gestures you weren't even aware you were making."

"I didn't know that."

"There's a great deal of charm about it. Puppies do it all the time."

"Thanks," he said drily as the two of them passed through the gateway into the yard of the farmstead.

Durnik and Toth were extinguishing the last flickers of flame from the scorched wall of a first-floor shed with buckets full of water carried to them by Silk, Eriond, and Sadi. The dragon had not had enough time to ignite the structures fully with her searing breath, and so none of the fires were very serious.

Polgara crossed the yard gravely with Ce'Nedra and Velvet close behind her. "Mother," she said simply.

"You're looking well, Polgara," the tawny-haired woman replied as if they had spoken together only last week. 'Married life agrees with you.'

"I rather like it." Polgara smiled.

"I rather thought you might. Is he around? I need to talk with him as well as with you."

"He's in one of the upstairs rooms. You know how he feels about these meetings."

"Would you fetch him for me, Garion? I have only so much time, and there are things he has to know. He's going to have to put his feelings aside this time."

"Right away, Grandmother." He turned and went quickly

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the wooden steps to the second floor gallery and the door

Aunt Pol had indicated.

Belgarath sat on a rumpled cot. His elbows were on his "s, and his face was buried in his hands. "Grandfather," Garion said gently. "•What?"

"She wants to talk with you." Belgarath lifted his face. His expression was one of mute ring.

"I'm sorry, Grandfather, but she says it's very impor-it." Belgarath set his jaw, then sighed in resignation. "All it," he said, rising to his feet. "Let's go, then."

LS the two of them started down the steps, they saw Dur-bowing a bit awkwardly to Poledra. "Ma'am," she was saying. Garion suddenly realized that this was

ibably the first time the two had been formally intro-

"So stiff and proper, Durnik?" she replied. She reached and lightly touched his face with one hand. Then she embraced him. "You've made my daughter very happy, lik," she told him. "Thank you." Then she turned and >ked directly at Belgarath. "Well?" she said. There was Challenge in her voice. 1, "You haven't changed a bit," he said in a voice thick

emotion. "Oh, I've changed all right," she replied wryly, "in ways even you could imagine." "It doesn't show."

"It's nice of you to say so. Did you hear the little ex-phange between the witch and me?"

He nodded. "You were taking chances, Poledra. What if taken up your challenge?"

"Wolves enjoy taking chances." She shrugged. "It adds certain zest to their lives. It really wasn't all that risky, Ilfliough. Zandramas is the Child of Dark, and the Dark Spirit gradually taking over her body as well as her soul; it's going to gamble at this particular time. It takes too long train replacements, and there's not that much time left >re the final meeting. All right, let's get down to busi-". Zandramas has her Angarak king now."

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Belgarath nodded. "We'd heard about that."

"You always were good at ferreting out secrets. The coronation ceremony was fairly grotesque. Zandramas followed the ancient Angarak ritual. Torak was supposed to be present, but she worked her way around that.

It involved a certain amount of fakery, but the image of Him she conjured up was convincing enough to deceive the gullible." Poledra smiled. "It certainly persuaded Archduke Otrath," she added. "He fainted on three separate occasions during the ceremony. I think the oaf actually believes that he really is the emperor now-a delusion Kal Zakath's headsman will relieve him of shortly if Otrath is unlucky enough to fall into his cousin's hands. At any rate, Zandramas has only one more major task."

"Oh?" Belgarath said. "What's that?"

"The same as yours. She has to find out where the meeting's supposed to take place. Don't dally on your way to Kell. You've still got a long way to go. Time's getting short, and you have to get across the Magan before Zakath gets here."

"Zakath?" He sounded startled.

"You mean you didn't know? He moved his army into place around Maga Renn some weeks back. He sent out advance elements a few days ago, and he left Maga Renn with the bulk of his army just yesterday. He plans to blockade the river from the northern end of the Dalasian Mountains to the jungles of Gandahar. If he gets that blockade in place, you might have some difficulty getting across the river." Then she looked at Beldin. "You haven't changed much, my crooked friend," she noted.

"Did you expect me to, Poledra?" He grinned at her.

"I thought you might at least have changed that disreputable old tunic-or that it might have rotted off your back by now."

"I patch it from time to time." He shrugged. "Then I replace the patches when they wear out. It's a comfortable tunic and it fits me. The original is probably only a memory, though. Is there anything else you think we need to know? Or are we going to stand around discussing my wardrobe?"

She laughed. "I've missed you," she told him. "Oh, one

of the hierarchs of Cthol Mtirgos has landed at Finda on the west coast of the Dalasian Protectorates."

"Which one?"

"Agachak,"

"Does he have an Angarak king with him?" Silk asked eagerly.

"Yes."

"Urgit-the King of the Murgos?"

She shook her head. "No. Apparently Urgit defied Agachak and refused to make the journey."

"Urgit defied Agachak? Are you sure? Urgit's afraid of his own shadow."

"Not any more, it seems. Your brother's changed quite a bit since you last saw him, Kheldar. His new wife may have had something to do with that. She's a very determined young woman, and she's making him over to fit her conception of him."

"That's terribly depressing," Silk mourned.

"Agachak brought the new king of the Thulls instead-a cretin named Nathel." Poledra looked at her husband. "Be very careful when you get to Dalasia," she told him. "Zandramas, Urvon, and Agachak will all be

converging on you. They hate each other, but they all know that you're the common enemy. They may decide to put aside their feelings in order to join forces against you."

"When you add Zakath and the whole Malloreal army to that, the Place Which Is No More might be just a little crowded when we get there," Silk observed wryly.

"Numbers will mean absolutely nothing in that place, Kheldar. There will only be three who matter there-the Child of Light, the Child of Dark, and the Seeress of Kell, who will make the choice." She looked at Eriond then. "Do you know what it is you have to do?" she asked him.

"Yes," he replied simply. "It's not such a difficult thing, really."

"Perhaps not," Poledra told him, "but you're the only one who can do it."

"I'll be ready when the time comes, Poledra."

Then the tawny-haired woman looked again at Belgarath. "Now I think it's finally time for you and me to have that

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little talk you've been avoiding since our daughters were born," she said very firmly.

The old man started.

"In private," she added. "Come with me."

"Yes, Poledra," he replied meekly.

Purposefully she walked toward the gate of the farmstead with Belgarath trailing behind her like a schoolboy anticipating a scolding-or worse.

"At last," Polgara sighed with relief.

"What's going on, Lady Polgara?" Ce'Nedra asked in a baffled little voice.

"My mother and father are going to be reconciled," Polgara replied happily. "'My mother died-or perhaps didn't- when my sister Beldaran and I were born. My father always blamed himself because he wasn't there to help her. He and Bear-shoulders and the others had gone to Cthol Mishrak to steal the Orb back from Torak. Mother never blamed him because she knew how important what they were doing was. Father doesn't forgive himself that easily, however, and he's been punishing himself about it for all these centuries. Mother's finally gotten tired of it, so she's going to take steps to correct the situation."

"Oh," Ce'Nedra said with that odd little catch in her voice. "That's just beautiful." Her eyes filled with sudden tears.

Wordlessly, Velvet drew a flimsy little bit of a handkerchief from her sleeve, dabbed at her own eyes, then passed it to Ce'Nedra.

It was perhaps an hour later when Belgarath returned. He was alone, but there was a gentle smile on his face and a youthful twinkle in his eye. No one saw fit to ask him any questions. "What time of night would you say it is?" he asked Durnik.

The smith squinted up at the sky where the last remnants of cloud were being swept off to the east by the prevailing wind to reveal the stars. "I'd guess about two hours until first light, Belgarath," he replied. "The breeze has come up, and it sort of smells like morning."

"I don't think we'll get any more sleep tonight," the old man said. "Why don't we load the packs and saddle the horses while Pol fixes some of those eggs for breakfast?"

Polgara looked at him with a slightly raised eyebrow.

"You weren't planning to let us leave without feeding us 4\$rst, were you, Pol?" he asked her roguishly.

"No, father," she said, "as a matter of fact, I wasn't."

"I didn't think so." Then he laughed and threw his arms about her. "Oh, my Pol," he said exuberantly. ; Ce'Nedra's eyes filled with tears again, and Velvet leached for her handkerchief once more.

"Between them, they're going to wear that little thing .out," Silk noted clinically.

"That's all right," Garion replied. "I've got a couple of

ares in my pack." Then he remembered something.

**Grandfather," he said, "in all the excitement, I almost forgot something. Before she changed into the dragon, I heard Zandramas talking with Naradas."

"Oh?"

"He's been in Gandahar and he's taking a regiment of lephant cavalry to the battlefield."

"That won't matter very much to the demons."

"The demons aren't there any more. Zandramas raised another Demon Lord-Mordja, his name is-and he's man-

•ged to lure Nahaz away from the battlefield. They've gone |pff someplace else to fight."

Belgarath scratched at one bearded cheek. "Just how is that elephant cavalry out of Gandahar?" he asked

"Pretty close to invincible," Silk replied. "They drape them in chain mail, and they trample wide paths through opposing armies. If the demons have left the field, Urvon's , army hasn't got a chance."

"There are too many people involved in this race anyway," Belgarath grunted. "Let's get across the Magan and leave all these armies to their own devices."

They ate breakfast and rode out from the farmstead as the first light of dawn began to creep slowly up out of the eastern horizon. Oddly, Garion felt no particular weariness despite a night significantly short on sleep. A great deal had happened since the sun had gone down, and he had much to think about.

The sun had risen when they reached the great River Magan. Then, following Toth's gestured directions, they rode

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slowly southward, looking for a village where they might find a boat large enough to carry them across to Darshiva. The day was warm, and the grass and trees had all been washed clean by the previous night's storm.

They came to a small settlement of mud-smeared shacks standing on stilts, with rickety docks thrusting out into the river. A lone fisherman sat at the end of one of the docks negligently holding a long cane pole.

"Talk to him, Durnik," Belgarath said. "See if he knows where we can hire a boat."

The smith nodded and reined his horse around. On an impulse, Garion followed him. They dismounted at the landward end of the dock and walked out toward the fisherman.

He was a stumpy-looking little fellow, dressed in a homespun tunic and with muddy, baglike shoes on his feet. His bare legs were laced with knotty, purple veins, and they were not very clean. His face was tanned, and he was not so much bearded as unshaven.

"Any luck?" Durnik asked him.

"See fer yerself," the fisherman said, pointing at the wooden tub at his side. He did not turn, but rather kept his eyes intently on the floating red stick to which his line was attached and which dangled his baited hook down into the murky water of the river. The tub was half-full of water, and several foot-long trout swam in circles in it. The fish had angry-looking eyes and jutting lower jaws.

Durnik squatted down beside the fisherman, his hands on his knees. "Nice-looking fish," he observed.

"A fish is a fish." The stumpy fellow shrugged. "They look better on the plate than they do in the tub."

"That's why we catch them," Durnik agreed. "What are you using for bait?"

"Tried angleworms earlier," the fellow replied laconically. "Didn't seem to interest 'em, so I switched over to fish roe."

"I don't think I've ever tried that," Durnik admitted. "How does it work?"

"Caught them five in the last half hour. Sometimes it makes 'em so excited, you got to go behind a tree to bait

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your hook to keep 'em from chasin' you right up onto the

"I'll have to try it," Durnik said, eyeing the water wistfully. "Have you got any idea of where we might be able to hire a boat? We've got to go across the river." The fisherman turned and stared at the smith incredulously. "To the Darshiva side?" he exclaimed. "Man, are you out of your mind?" "Is there some trouble over there?" "Trouble? That don't even begin to describe what's happenin' over there. You ever hear tell of what they call a demon?"

A few times." "You ever seen one?" "Once, I think."

There's no think about it, friend. If you seen one, you'd know." The fellow shuddered. "They're just plain awful. Well, sir, the whole of Darshiva's just crawlin' with 'em. There's this Grolim, he come down from the north with a pack of 'em snappin' an' growlin' at his heels. Then there's this other Grolim—a woman, if you can believe that—

idramas, her name is, an' she stepped back an' cast a ill an* hauled some of her own out of wherever it is they ie from, an' them demons is fightin' each other over ;re in Darshiva."

"We'd heard that there was fighting to the north of here fePeldane."

"Those are just ordinary troops, and what they're fightin' it an ordinary war with swords an' axes an' burnin' pitch |*n* all. The demons, they all went across the river lookin' Jer fresh ground to tear up an* fresh people to eat. They do it, y' know-demons I mean. They eat folks-alive, most the time."

"I'm afraid we still have to go over there," Durnik told him.

':;; "I hope yer a good swimmer then. Yer gonna have no :k at all findin' a boat. Ever*body from here jumped on lythin' as would float an* headed downriver t'ward Gan-lar. Guess they figgered them wild elephants down there

a whole lot preferable to demons." "I think you're getting a bite," Durnik said politely,

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pointing at the floating stick on the stumpy man's line. The stick was submerging and popping back to the surface again.

The fisherman jerked his pole straight up into the air and then swore. "Missed 'im," he said.

"You can't catch them all," Durnik said philosophically.

"You can sure try, though." The fellow laughed, pulling in his line and rebaiting his hook with a dripping gobbet of fish roe he took from an earthenware bowl at his side.

"I'd try under the dock, myself," Durnik advised. "Trout always seem to like shade."

"That's the good thing about usin' fish roe fer bait," the fisherman said sagely. "They kin smell it, an' they'll go fer it even if they gotta climb a fence to get there." He cast his line out again and absently wiped his hand on the front of his tunic.

"How is it that you stayed behind?" Durnik asked. "I mean, if there's so much trouble around here, why didn't you go to Gandahar with the other people who left here?"

"I never lost nothin' in Gandahar. Them folks is all crazy down there. They spend all their time chasin' elephants. I mean, what y' gonna do with a elephant once y' catch 'im? An' the fish down there aren't worth the bait. Besides, this is the first time I've had this dock all to myself in the last five years. Most of the time I can't even get my line in the water, there's so many out here."

"Well," Durnik said, rising to his feet a little regretfully, "I suppose we'd better push on. We're going to have to find a boat somewhere."

"I'd sure advise stayin' away from the Darshiva side, friend," the fisherman said seriously. "You'd be better off t* cut yerself a pole an' sit right here with me until all the trouble blows over."

"I certainly wish I could," Durnik sighed. "Good luck, friend."

"Just bein' here with my line in the water is the best luck in the world." The fellow shrugged, turning his eyes back to the floating stick on his line. "If you go over to the Darshiva side, try not t' get et by demons."

"I'll make a special point of it," Durnik promised. As Garion and his friend walked back along the rickety ;k to where their horses were tethered, Durnik smiled. y talk differently in this part of the world, don't

.t,*y?"

y: "Yes," Ganon agreed, remembering the gabby old man pod his pig in the wayside tavern above the plains of Vore-sebo.

'• "I sort of like it, though," Durnik admitted. "It's kind free and relaxed and easy, somehow." "I wouldn't necessarily try to imitate it, though, if I were i," Garion advised. "Aunt Pol might wash your mouth with soap if you did."

"Oh," Durnik smiled, "I don't think she'd really do that, ion."

^; Garion shrugged. "She's your wife-and it's your iouth." "Belgarath was waiting for them atop the grassy hill rising

the village on the riverbank. "Well?" he asked. uThe fish are biting," Durnik told him seriously. r, Belgarath stared at him for a moment, then rolled his eyes avenward and groaned. "I meant in Darshiva," he said

between clenched teeth.

"I couldn't really say for sure about that, Belgarath, but they're biting on this side, it only stands to reason that r'd be biting over there, too, doesn't it?" Durnik's face f\$was very sincere, and his tone was earnest. fj.. Belgarath turned and stamped away, muttering to him-

;|| When they rejoined the others, Garion briefly repeated |J|ie information he and Durnik had gleaned from the solitary man at the end of the dock.

That puts a whole new complexion on things, doesn't Silk said. "Now what?"

If you don't mind a suggestion, Ancient One," Sadi id to Belgarath. "I think we might be wise to follow the ple of the villagers Belgarion mentioned and go on river to Gandahar and find a boat there. It might take little longer, but we'll avoid the demons." Toth shook his head. The huge mute's usually impassive

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face had a worried frown on it. He made a quick series of those obscure gestures to Durnik.

"He says we don't have time," die smith translated.

"Is there some kind of special time when we have to get to Kell?" Silk asked.

Tom gestured again, his big hands moving rapidly.

"He says that Kell has been sealed off from the rest of Dalasia," Durnik told them. "Cyradis has made arrangements for us to get through, but once she leaves, the other seers will seal it off again."

"Leaves?" Belgarath said with some surprise. "Where's she going?"

Durnik looked inquiringly at Toth, and the mute gestured some more.

"Oh," Durnik said, "I see." He turned back to Belgarath. "She needs to go to the place of the meeting soon. She has to be there when it happens so that she can make the choice."

"Couldn't she just travel with us?" Velvet asked.

Toth shook his head again, and his gestures became more emphatic.

"I'm not sure I got all that," Durnik confessed. "Tell me if I make any mistakes." He turned once more. "He says that something's supposed to happen before we get to Kell, but if it doesn't, she'll have to travel alone."

"Did he say what this something is going to be?" Polgara asked her husband.

"The way I understand it, he doesn't know, Pol."

"Does he know where it's going to happen?" Belgarath asked intently.

Toth spread his hands.

"That young lady's really beginning to irritate me." The old man looked at Beldin. "What do you think?"

"I don't see that we have much choice, Belgarath. If this event's supposed to happen in Darshiva and we avoid the place, it might not happen at all, and the whole business could hinge on that."

"All right," Belgarath said. "We go to Darshiva then. We've dodged demons before. The main thing right now is to get across the river before Zakath gets here."

"We're going to need a boat," Durnik said.

"I'll go see if I can find one," Beldin said, crouching and spreading his arms.

"You don't have to be too selective," Belgarath said. "Anything that floats should do it."

"I'll keep that in mind," Beldin replied and soared away.

Part Three

DARSHIM

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

It was not really a boat. In point of fact, it was a river barge, and its long, trailing rope gave evidence that it had broken its moorings somewhere upriver and had drifted downstream with the current. It would serve, however. The only real drawback Garion could see was the fact that it was lying in about eight feet of water with its starboard bow staved in.

"What do you think, Belgarath?" Beldin asked.

**A boat that's already been sunk once doesn't inspire much confidence,* the old man said.

"How would you like to try swimming? There's not even a raft for ten miles in either direction."

Durnik stood squinting down into the cloudy water of the river. "It might be all right," he said.

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"Durnik," Silk objected, "it's got a big hole in the front of it."

"I can fix that-provided it hasn't been down there long enough to start rotting." He pulled off his rust-colored tunic and his boots. "Well," he said, "there's one way to find out." He waded out into the river, sank beneath the surface, and swam down to the wreck. He went hand over hand down one side, stopping every few feet to dig at the wood with his knife. After what seemed an eternity, he came up for air.

"Well?" Belgarath called to him.

"That side seems all right," Durnik replied. "Let me check the other." He dove down again through the greenish water and went up along the other side. He came up briefly, then went back down to look over the interior of the barge. Then he inspected the gaping hole in the bow. He was breathing hard when he came back up. "It's sound," he reported as he came dripping out of the river, "and whatever it ran into didn't damage anything major. I think I can fix it well enough to get us across the river. We'll have to unload it first, though."

"Oh?" Silk's nose twitched with curiosity. "What kind of cargo was it carrying?"

"Beans," Durnik replied, "bags of them. Most of the bags burst when the beans swelled up, though."

Silk groaned.

"Maybe they belonged to someone else, Kheldar," Velvet said consolingly.

"Are you trying to be funny?"

"I'll help you, Durnik," Garion offered, starting to pull off his plain tunic.

"Ah . . ." Durnik hesitated. "Thanks all the same, Gar-ion, but I've seen you swim. You'd better stay on the bank. Toth and I can manage."

"How do you plan to get it out of the water?" Sadi asked.

"We have all these horses." Durnik shrugged. "Once we swing it around, they should be able to pull it up on the bank."

"Why swing it around?"

"Because the hole's in the bow. We want the water to

drain out as we pull it up onto the beach. A whole herd of horses couldn't move it if we left it full of water."

"Oh. I guess I didn't think of that."

Toth laid aside his staff, pulled off the blanket he wore across one shoulder, and waded out into the river.

Eriond started to remove his tunic.

"Where do you think you're going, young man?" Polgara asked him.

"I'm going to help unload the boat, Polgara," he replied earnestly. "I swim very well. I've had lots of practice, remember?" Then he, too, waded out into the water.

"I'm not sure I caught the significance of that," Velvet admitted.

Polgara sighed ruefully. "When he was a little boy, he lived with Durnik and me in the Vale. There was a river nearby, and he used to fall into it regularly."

"Oh. That explains it, I guess."

"All right," Belgarath said crisply. "They're going to need lumber to patch that hole. We passed a shed about a half mile upstream. Let's go back and tear it apart."

It was well after sundown by the time Durnik got the foundered barge up onto the beach. For once, nature cooperated, and there was no hailstorm that evening. They built a fire on the beach to provide light, and the smith, Toth, and Eriond got down to work.

Silk walked mournfully around the barge. "It's mine, all right," he sighed.

"You keep well-equipped barges, Silk," Durnik said, carefully measuring a board. "This one had everything I need right in the bow-nails, a barrel of tar, and even a fairly good saw. We'll have it afloat before morning."

"I'm glad you approve," Silk said sourly. He made a wry face. "This is unnatural," he complained.

"What's the problem, Kheldar?" Velvet asked him.

"Usually, when I want a boat, I steal one. Using one of my own seems immoral somehow."

She laughed gaily and patted his cheek. "Poor, poor dear," she said. "It must be terrible to be burdened with so delicate a conscience."

"All right, ladies," Polgara said then, "let's see to supper."

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While Durnik, Toth, and Eriond worked on the patch and Polgara, Ce'Nedra, and Velvet prepared supper, Garion and the others fetched more lumber and began to fashion crude oars. They continued to work, even as they ate. Somehow, everything seemed right to Garion. All his friends were around him and they were all busy. Although the repairing of the boat was of vital importance, the simple chores involved seemed almost mundane, and Garion could lose himself in the tasks at hand with no sense of the urgency which had attended the things he had been forced to do lately. It was almost soothing.

After the ladies had finished with supper, they carried canvas buckets of water from the river and heated the water with hot rocks. Then they retired behind a screen of tenting to bathe.

About midnight, Garion went down to the water's edge to dip his sore hands into the river. Ce'Nedra sat not far away, idly letting handfuls of sand trickle out from between her fingers. "Why don't you see if you can get some sleep, Ce'Nedra?" Garion asked her.

"I can stay awake as long as you can," she replied.

"I'm sure you can, but why?"

"Don't patronize me, Garion. I'm not a child."

"You know," he said slyly, "I've noticed that myself on any number of occasions."

"Garion!" she gasped, and then she suddenly blushed.

He laughed, rose to his feet, and went over and kissed her soundly. "Go get some sleep, dear," he told her.

"What are you doing over there?" she asked, looking up the beach to where the others still worked.

"We're making oars. If we just push that barge out into the river, the current's going to take us all the way down into Gandahar. *"

"Oh. Ail right then. Have a pleasant night." She stretched and yawned. "Why don't you get me a blanket before you go back to building oars?"

It took Durnik and Toth most of the night to nail a rough, tar-smeared patch over the hole in the bow, while the others fashioned crude oars fixed on long poles. Several hours before daylight, fog began to rise in misty tendrils from the surface of the river. After Durnik had liberally applied hot

tar to the inside and the outside of the patch, he stepped back and critically examined his handiwork.

"I think it's going to leak," Silk predicted.

"All boats leak." Durnik shrugged. "We can bail the water out."

It took a great deal of effort and some fairly exotic rigging to get the barge back into the river again. Durnik leaped aboard and went forward with a torch to examine the patch. "A little trickle is all," he said with some satisfaction. "It's nothing we can't keep ahead of."

The fog grew steadily thicker as they loaded their packs aboard the barge. It was spring in this part of the world, and frogs sang lustily of love in the rushes at the river's edge just upstream. It was a pleasant, drowsy sound. Durnik scouted several hundred yards downstream and found a shallow bank where the current had cut away the soil. He fashioned a ramp from the remaining lumber. They towed the barge down to the cut bank and loaded the horses on board.

"Let's wait until we have a little more light," the smith suggested. "Fog's bad enough, but when you add darkness to it, it's almost impossible to see where you're going. Rowing this thing isn't going to be so enjoyable that we need to paddle around in circles just for the entertainment of it."

"Couldn't we rig a sail of some sort?" Silk asked hopefully.

"Easily," Durnik replied. He wet one finger with his tongue and held it up. "I'll do that just as soon as you work out a way to make the wind blow."

Silk's face fell.

"While you're doing that, I need to go talk with Ce'Nedra." He went back up the beach and gently shook Garion's sleeping wife awake.

"You know? Sometimes he has a very warped sense of humor," Silk observed.

When the first light of day began to tinge the misty eastern horizon, they pushed out into the fog and took their places at the oars.

"I don't want to seem critical, Goodman," Sadi said to Durnik, who stood in the stern with his hands gripping the tiller, "but I've seen a lot of fog in Nyissa, and, once it's

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fully daylight, you won't have the faintest idea of where the sun is. How do you plan to keep your course?"

"Ce'Nedra's taking care of that," the smith replied, pointing toward the bow.

The Rivan Queen was leaning over the portside intently watching a floating piece of wood attached to a long cord. "What's she doing?" Sadi asked, sounding a bit perplexed.

"She's watching the current. We'll be quartering it, but as long as that cord stays at the same angle from the boat, we'll be right on course. I put a mark on the rail to show her what the angle ought to be."

"You think of everything, don't you?" Sadi said, continuing to pull his oar.

"I try. You can usually avoid problems if you think your way completely through a job."

Ce'Nedra raised one arm and pointed imperiously to starboard. She seemed to be taking her job very seriously. Dur-nik obediently moved the tiller.

Once the eastern shore of the great river vanished in the fog, it seemed to Garion that time had stopped entirely. There was no real sense of motion, though he bent his back over his oar with monotonous regularity. "Tiresome, isn't it?" Silk said. "Rowing always is," Garion replied. Silk looked around, then spoke quietly. "Do you notice a change in Durnik?" he asked. "No. Not really."

"What I'm getting at is that usually he's so self-effacing that you almost forget that he's around, but back there on the beach, he just son of took charge."

"He's always been like that, Silk. When we're doing something he doesn't know all that much about, he just follows along and keeps his eyes open; but when we come to something he knows about, he steps in and does what has to be done." Garion smiled affectionately back over his shoulder at his old friend. Then he looked slyly at Silk. "He also learns very fast. By now, he's probably at least as good a spy as you are, and he watched you very closely while you were manipulating the bean market back there in Mel-cena. If he ever decides to go into business, I think you and

Yarblek had better start keeping a close count of your tail feathers."

Silk looked a bit worried. "He wouldn't really do that, would he?"

"He might. You never really know about Durnik, do you?"

As the sun rose higher, the fog diffused its light, and the world around them became a monochrome-white fog and black water with no hint at all that they were making any progress or, if they were, that it was in the right direction. Garion felt a bit strange, knowing that they were entirely at Ce'Nedra's mercy. It was only her eyes on that cord lightly lying across an angled mark on the rail that kept them on course. He loved her, but he knew that she was sometimes flighty, and her judgment was not always the best. Her insistent little gestures to port or to starboard, however, showed no sign of hesitancy or lack of certainty, and Durnik obeyed them implicitly. Garion sighed and kept on rowing.

About midmorning, the fog began to thin, and Beldin drew in his oar. "Can you manage here without me?" he asked Belgarath. "I think we ought to know just exactly what we're running into. There's all sorts of unpleasantness going on in Darshiva, and I don't think we'll want to come ashore right in the middle of it."

"And you're getting tired of rowing, right?" the old man replied sarcastically.

"I could row all the way around the world if I wanted to," the gnarled-looking little hunchback replied, flexing his oak-stump arms, "but this might be more important. Do you really want to beach this tub and find Nahaz waiting for you on the sand?"

"Do whatever you think is right."

"I always do, Belgarath-even if it makes you unhappy sometimes." The grimy little gnome went forward toward the bow. "Excuse me, me little darlin'," he said to Ce'Nedra in an exaggerated brogue, "but I must be off now."

"I need you at that oar," she objected. "How can I keep the course if everybody runs away?"

"I'm sure y' kin manage, me little darlin'," he said,

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patting her cheek; then, leaving a ghostly laugh behind him, he disappeared into the fog.

"You come back here!" she shouted after him, but he was already gone.

There was the faintest touch of a breeze then. Garion could feel it brushing across the back of his sweaty neck as he rowed. The fog eddied and swirled slightly, thinning even more.

And men there were looming black shapes all around diem.

"Garion!" Ce'Nedra exclaimed.

A number of triumphant shouts came out of the rapidly dissipating fog. They were surrounded by ships that moved purposefully to block them.

"Do we make a run for it?" Silk asked in a tense, hoarse whisper.

Belgarath looked at the ships moving to surround them, his eyes like flint. "Run?" he said. "In this tub? Don't be ridiculous."

A boat had moved directly in front of them, and, as they drifted closer, Garion could see the oarsmen. "Mallolean soldiers," he noted quietly. "Zakath's army."

Belgarath muttered a few choice oaths. "Let's sit tight for a bit. They may not know who we are. Silk, see if you can talk us out of this."

The little man rose and went to the bow of their barge. "We're certainly glad to see imperial troops in this region, Captain," he said to the officer commanding the boat blocking their path. "Maybe you can put a stop to all the insanity that's been going on around here."

"I'll need your name," the officer replied.

"Of course," Silk said, slapping his forehead. "How stupid of me. My name is Vetter. I work for Prince Kheldar. Perhaps you've heard of him?"

"The name's familiar. Where are you going?"

"Actually, we're bound for Balasa down in the Dalasian Protectorates. Prince Kheldar has interests there—that's assuming we can make our way across Darshiva. Things are in turmoil there." He paused. "I wonder, Captain, do you suppose you could spare us a few soldiers to act as an escort? I'm authorized to pay quite handsomely."

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"We'll see," the officer said.

Then an even larger ship emerged from the fog and moved alongside their patched and leaky vessel. A familiar face looked over the rail. "It's been quite some time, hasn't it, King Belgarion?" General Atesca said in a pleasant, conversational tone. "We really ought to try to stay in touch." Atesca wore his customary scarlet cloak and a burnished steel helmet embossed with gold.

Garion's heart sank. Subterfuge was quite out of the question now. "You knew we were out here," he said accusingly.

"Of course. I had people watching you on the Peldane side." The red-clad general sounded a bit smug about that.

"I felt no presence," Polgara declared, pulling her blue cloak about her.

"I'd have been very surprised if you had, my Lady," Atesca replied. "The men who were watching you are imbeciles. Their minds are as vacant as the minds of mushrooms." He looked distastefully out across the river. "You have no idea of how long it took me to explain to them what they were supposed to do. Every army has a few men like that. We try to weed them out, but even gross stupidity has its uses, I suppose."

"You're very clever, General Atesca," she said in a tight voice.

"No, Lady Polgara," he disagreed. "I'm just a plain soldier. No officer is more clever than his intelligence service. Brador's the clever one. He's been gathering information about your peculiar gifts from various Grolims since the battle of Thull Mardu. Grolims pay very close attention to your exploits, my Lady, and over the years they've amassed a great deal of information about your abilities. As I understand it—although I'm certainly no expert—the more acute a mind is, the more easily you can detect its presence. That's why I sent those human turnips out to watch you." He looked critically at their boat. "That's really a wretched tiling, you know. Are you keeping it afloat by sorcery?"

"No," Durnik told him in a flat, angry tone of voice, "by skill."

"I bow to your skill, Goodman Durnik," Atesca said a bit extravagantly. "You could probably work out a way to

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make a rock float-if you really wanted to." He paused and looked at Belgarath. "I assume we're going to be civilized about this, Ancient One?" he asked.

"I'm willing to listen," Belgarath replied warily.

"His Imperial Majesty feels a strong need to discuss certain matters with you and your companions, Holy Belgarath," Atesca said, "and I think I should advise you that you're paddling this wreck of yours directly into the middle of a hornet's nest. Sensible people are avoiding Darshiva right now."

"I've never pretended to be sensible."

Atesca laughed ruefully. "I haven't either," he admitted. "At the moment, I'm trying to map out a military campaign to invade that most insensible region. May I offer you gentlemen-and your ladies-the hospitality of my ship?" He paused. "I think I'll have to insist," he added regretfully. "Orders, you understand. Besides, we might want to pool our information while we await the arrival of his Imperial Majesty."

"Is Zakath coming here?" Garion asked.

"I doubt that he's more than a day behind me, your Majesty," Atesca replied, "and he's aflame with the desire to have a long, long talk with you."

-What do we do, Grandfather?-Garion's fingers asked.

-/ don't think we 've got much choice at the moment. Beldin 's out there somewhere. I'll let him know what's happening. He'll come up with something.-"All right, General," he said aloud. "I was getting a little tired of rowing anyway."-Pass the word to the others-He motioned to Garion.-Let's seem to go along-at least until we get to the Darshiva side. -

Atesca's ship, while not opulent, was comfortable. They gathered in the forward cabin, a room littered with maps and various-sized bits and pieces of parchment. As always, General Atesca was polite, but firm. "Have you had break-iast yet?" he inquired.

"We were a little rushed," Belgarath told him.

"I'll send word to the cook, then," Atesca said. He went to the door and spoke with one of the red-garbed guards posted outside. Then he came back. "While we're waiting, why don't we share that information I was talking about?"

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I'd heard that you were going to Ashaba when you left Mal Zeth. Then you suddenly surface in Melcena, and now you're halfway across the Magan to Darshiva. You people certainly move around."

-He already knows what we 're doing. -Silk's fingers said to Belgarath.-There's no point in trying to hide it.-

"Please, Prince Kheldar," Atesca said in a pained tone, "don't do that. It's very impolite, you know."

Silk laughed. "Either your eyes are very sharp, General, or advancing age is making my fingers clumsy. In point of fact, I was merely suggesting to Belgarath that we'd made no secret of our reason for coming to Mallorean. Kal Zakath knew why we were here, so there's no point in being coy about it." He gave Belgarath an inquiring look, and the old man nodded. Silk's face grew serious, even bleak. "We went to Ashaba in pursuit of Zandramas-and King Belgarion's son. Then we followed her across Karanda and on down to Jarot in northern Celanta. Her trail led to Melcena, so we followed her there. Then we came back to the continent."

"And you're still on her trail?" Atesca asked intently.

"More or less," Silk lied smoothly. Then he sidestepped the issue. "We discovered at Ashaba that Urvon is totally mad now. I'm sure Kal Zakath will be interested in that. Anyhow, Urvon's under the control of a Demon Lord named Nahaz. Zandramas has raised another Demon Lord named Mordja, and the two are fighting each other in Darshiva. I'd think a long time before I invaded that region, General. Nahaz and Mordja might prefer not to be interrupted."

"What happened to Mengha?" Atesca asked suddenly. "I thought he was the one who was raising demons."

Silk smiled wryly. "Mengha was actually a Chandim priest named Harakan. He was Urvon's underling for centuries."

"Was?"

"I'm afraid he's no longer with us. He met a little green snake named Zith and he lost interest in things shortly after that."

Atesca threw back his head and laughed. "I'd heard about your pet, your Excellency," he said to Sadi. "Do you suppose she'd accept a medal-Heroine of the Empire or something?"

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"I don't think she'd really be interested, General Atesca," Sadi replied coolly. "Besides, if somebody tried to pin a medal to her, she might misunderstand."

"You've got a point there," Atesca said. He looked around a little nervously. "You do have her confined, don't you?"

"Of course, General," Velvet assured him with a dimpled smile. "At the moment, she's taking care of her babies. They're absolutely adorable. Why don't you show them to the General, Sadi?"

"Ah . . ." Atesca hesitated. "Some other time, perhaps."

"All right, General Atesca," Belgarath said, "we've told you what we've been doing. Now I think it's time for you to share a bit of information with us."

"We haven't really made a secret of our activities either, Ancient Belgarath. The Emperor's forces moved out of Mal Zeth, and we used Maga Renn as a staging area. I was instructed to lead the advance elements of the army down the Magan and to occupy Ferra. The idea was to cut off Zandramas' reinforcements out of

Darshiva so that Urvon's army could annihilate the troops she had in Peldane. Then we planned to fall on Urvon-heavily. After that, we were going to cross the river and deal with whatever force Zandramas had left."

"Good plan," Silk said.

"Unfortunately, it didn't work. We've got Darshiva cut off, but one of Zandramas' underlings went down into Gan-dahar and hired a sizable body of elephant cavalry." Atesca frowned. "I think I'll speak with his Imperial Majesty about that. I don't really object to mercenaries, but the elephant herders of Gandahar are just a bit unselective when it comes to hiring themselves out. At any rate, there was a battle in central Peldane yesterday, and elephants did what elephants usually do. Urvon's army fled, but instead of running back toward Celanta, they outflanked the elephants and the rest of the Darshivan army, and they're driving straight toward the Magan. If they get across into Darshiva, I'll have my work cut out for me. I'll have demons and Grolims and Chandim and Hounds and elephants and Karands and the whole army of Darshiva to deal with." He sighed mourn-

fully. "This is not, I'm afraid, going to be the short, easy campaign I'd anticipated."

"Why not just let Urvon and Zandramas fight it out?" Silk suggested.

"Policy, Prince Kheldar. The Emperor does not want to appear timid-or powerless-and he most certainly doesn't want any army in Mallorea except his own to win any kind of a victory. It sets a bad precedent and it might give others certain ideas. Mallorea is not as monolithic a society as it might appear from the outside. Overwhelming imperial force is the only thing that holds us together."

"I approve of the reasoning," Silk agreed. "Stability is good for business."

"Speaking of that," Atesca said. "One of these days you and I are going to have to have a long talk about beans."

"Are you buying or selling, General Atesca?" Silk asked impudently.

"Let's get down to cases, gentlemen," Polgara said. "General Atesca, what are the Emperor's plans concerning us?"

"That's for him to decide, my Lady," Atesca replied. "His Majesty doesn't always confide in me. He was, however, quite distressed about the way you chose to abuse his hospitality in Mal Zeth."

"He knew where we were going," Garion said flatly, "and why."

"That's likely to be one of the things he'll want to discuss with your Majesty. It's possible that the two of you might be able to work out an accommodation of some kind."

"Possible, but not very probable."

"That's up to his Imperial Majesty, isn't it?"

The fog had lifted, but the sky over Darshiva was heavily overcast. As Garion stood in the bow of Atesca's ship, he caught a scent that was hauntingly familiar. It was a compound of damp rust, stagnant water, and the musty smell of fungus. He peered ahead and saw a forest composed of dead white snags. His heart sank.

Atesca quietly joined him. "I hope your Majesty isn't offended with me," he said. "I seem to be making a habit of apprehending you and your friends."

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"You're only following orders, General," Garion said shortly. "My quarrel is with your Emperor, not with you."

"You're a very tolerant man, your Majesty."

"Not really, General, but I don't waste my time holding grudges against people who are only doing what they're told to do."

Atesca looked toward the Darshivan shore, less than a mile away. "I expect that overcast will burn off by noon," he said, smoothly changing the subject.

"I wouldn't count on it, Atesca," Garion said somberly. "Did you ever visit Cthol Mishrak?"

"Military people don't have much reason to visit uninhabited ruins, your Majesty."

"Cthol Mishrak wasn't uninhabited," Garion told him. "The Chandim were there, and the Hounds, and other things I can't even put names to."

"Religious fanatics," Atesca shrugged. "They do things for strange reasons. I'm told it was an unhealthy sort of place."

Garion pointed at the Darshivan shore. "You're looking at another one, I'm afraid. I know that Melcenese are almost as skeptical as Tolnedrans, so I don't know how much you'll believe of what I'm going to tell you. Do you smell that peculiar odor in the air?"

Atesca sniffed, then wrinkled his nose. "Not very pleasant, is it?"

"Cthol Mishrak smelled exactly the same way. I'd guess that the cloud cover over Darshiva has been there for a dozen years at least."

"I find that a bit hard to accept."

"Look at those trees," Garion pointed at the snags. "What do you think it would take to kill a whole forest?"

"Some kind of disease, I suppose."

"No, General. Seedlings would have sprouted by now, and there's not even any undergrowth there. The trees died from lack of sunlight. The only thing growing out there now is fungus. It rains from time to time, and the rain water collects in pools. The sun doesn't come out to evaporate the water, so it just lies there and stagnates. That's a part of what you're smelling."

"I seem to smell rust, too. Where's that coming from?"

"I really don't know. At Cthol Mishrak it came from the ruins of Torak's iron tower. Darshiva's shrouded in perpetual gloom because it's the home of the Child of Dark."

"I've heard the term before. Who is this Child of Dark?"

"Zandramas—at least for the time being. Are you really sure you want to land your troops there?"

"I have my orders, King Belgarion. My troops are well trained. They'll build a fortified enclave on that shore whether the sun shines or not. Then we'll wait for the Emperor. He has a number of decisions to make-not the least of which is what he's going to do about you."

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

They waited on board Atesca's ship while the soldiers went ashore and began to build the enclave. The Mallolean troops were quite nearly as efficient as the legions of Imperial Tolnedra, and in a very short period of time, they had cleared several acres of ground and erected a neat, orderly city of tents. It was surrounded on the inland side by breastworks, catapults, and a deep ditch bristling with sharpened stakes. A palisade of sharpened poles lined the river's edge, and a number of floating docks extended out into the water.

It was midafternoon when Garion and the others disembarked and were escorted to a large, guarded pavilion in the center of the enclave and politely, but firmly, asked to remain inside.

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"Have you been able to contact Beldin?" Silk asked Bel-garath in a whisper.

The old man nodded. "He's working on something."

"I hope he doesn't take too long," the little man said. "I expect that once Zakath gets here, he'll decide that we need slightly more secure quarters-probably a place involving stout walls and locked doors." He made a sour face. "I hate jails."

"Don't you think you're exaggerating, Prince Kheldar?" Ce'Nedra asked. "Zakath's always behaved like a perfect gentleman."

"Oh, of course," he replied with heavy sarcasm. "Why don't you tell that to all those Murgos he crucified on the plains of Hagga? He can be polite when it doesn't inconvenience him too much, but we've seriously irritated him. If we're not gone by the time he gets here, I expect he'll show us just how irritated he really is."

"You're wrong, Prince Kheldar," Eriond said gravely. "He just doesn't know what he's supposed to do yet, that's all."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Back in Cthol Murgos, Cyradis told him that he was going to come to a crossroads in his life. This is it, I think. Once he makes the right choice, we can be friends again."

"Just like that?"

"More or less, yes."

"Polgara, would you please make him stop that?"

The tent was familiar. It was a Mallolean officer's pavilion with the usual red carpeting, and furniture which could be easily disassembled. They had been housed in this same kind of pavilion many times in the past. Garion looked around without much interest, then he sprawled on a bench.

"What's the matter, Garion?" Ce'Nedra asked, coming over to sit beside him.

"Isn't it obvious? Why don't they just leave us alone?"

"I think you worry too much," she told him. She reached out and touched his forehead with one little finger. "Your friend in there isn't going to let anything happen that's not supposed to happen, so stop brooding about this. We're supposed to go to Kell, and Zakath couldn't stop us, even if he

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brought his whole army back from Cthol Murgos and piled them in our path."

"You're taking this all awfully calmly."

"I have to believe, Garion," she replied with a little sigh. "If I didn't, I'd go insane." She leaned forward and kissed him. "Now get that grumpy look off your face. You're starting to look exactly like Belgarath."

"Of course I am. He's my grandfather, after all."

"The resemblance shouldn't start to show up for several thousand years yet, though," she said tartly.

Two soldiers brought them a supper consisting of standard military rations. Silk opened one of the metal pots and looked inside. He sighed. "I was afraid of that."

"What's the trouble, Kheldar?" Sadi asked him.

"Beans," Silk replied, pointing at the pot.

"I thought you liked beans."

"Not to eat, I don't."

Because they had not slept the previous night, they retired early. Garion tossed restlessly for a while and then finally dropped off.

The following morning they all slept late, and Garion emerged from the curtained-off compartment he shared with Ce'Nedra to find Silk pacing up and down restlessly. "Finally," the little man said with some relief. "I thought everybody was going to sleep till noon."

"What's your problem?" Garion asked him.

"I need somebody to talk to, that's all."

"Lonesome?"

"No. Edgy. Zakath's probably going to show up today. Do you suppose we ought to wake Belgarath?"

"Why?"

"To find out if Beidin's come up with a way to get us out of here, naturally."

"You worry too much."

"My, aren't we complacent this morning?" Silk snapped.

"Not really, but there's not much point in chewing off all our fingernails over something that's out of our hands, is there?"

"Garion, why don't you go back to bed?"

"I thought you were lonesome."

"Not that lonesome."

"Has Atesca come by this morning?"

"No. He's probably fairly busy. He's going to have some sort of campaign mapped out by the time Zakath gets here." The little man flung himself into one of the folding chairs. "No matter what Beldin comes up with, we're very likely to have at least a regiment hot on our heels when we ride out of here," he predicted, "and I hate being chased."

"We've had people chasing us ever since the night we left Faldor's farm. You should be used to it by now."

"Oh, I am, Garion. I still don't like it, though."

Perhaps an hour or so later, the others began to wake up, and not long after that, the same red-garbed soldiers brought them breakfast. The two men were the only people they had seen since they had been confined in the pavilion.

They spent the rest of the morning in desultory conversation. By unspoken agreement, no one mentioned their present situation.

About noon, General Atesca entered the tent. "His Imperial Majesty will arrive shortly," he announced. "His ships are approaching the docks."

"Thank you, General," Belgarath replied.

Atesca bowed stiffly and went back out.

Polgara rose to her feet. "Come along, ladies," she said to Ce'Nedra and Velvet. "Let's go make ourselves presentable."

Sadi looked down at his plain tunic and hose. "Hardly suitable for an imperial audience," he said. "Do you think we ought to change?"

"Why bother?" Belgarath shrugged. "Let's not give Zakath the impression that we take him seriously."

"Don't we?"

"Maybe, but we don't need to let him know about it."

Not much later, the Emperor of Mallorean entered with General Atesca and the Chief of the Bureau of Internal Affairs. As was his custom, Zakath wore a plain linen robe, but he had a scarlet military cape draped across his shoulders. His eyes were once again melancholy, and his pallid lips expressionless. "Good day, your Majesty," he said to Garion in a flat, emotionless tone. "You've been well, I trust?"

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"Tolerably, your Majesty," Garion replied. If Zakath wanted formality, Garion would give him formality.

"Your extensive travels must have been fatiguing," Zakath said in that same flat tone, "particularly for the ladies. I'll see to it that your return journey to Mal Zeth is made in easy stages."

"Your Majesty is very kind, but we're not going back to Mal Zeth."

"You're wrong, Belgarion. You are going back to Mal Zeth."

"Sorry. I've got a pressing engagement elsewhere."

"I'll convey your regrets to Zandramas when I see her."

"I'm sure she'd be overjoyed to hear that I'm not coming."

"Not for very long, she won't. I fully intend to have her burned as a witch."

"Good luck, your Majesty, but I don't think you'll find that she's very combustible."

"Aren't you gentlemen being just a little silly?" Polgara asked then. She had changed into a blue dress and she sat at a table, calmly mending a pair of Eriond's socks.

"Silly?" Zakath snapped, his eyes suddenly flashing.

"You're still friends and you both know it. Now stop behaving like a couple of schoolboys."

"I think you go too far, Lady Polgara," Zakath told her in a frigid tone.

"Really?" she replied. "I thought I'd described the situation rather accurately. You're not going to put Garion in chains, and he's not going to turn you into a radish, so stop trying to bully each other."

"I think we can continue this discussion some other time," Zakath said curtly. He bowed slightly to Polgara and left the tent.

"Wasn't that perhaps a trifle abrupt, Lady Polgara?" Sadi asked her.

"I don't think so," she replied. "It cut through a lot of nonsense." She carefully folded the socks she had been mending. "Eriond, I think it's time for you to trim your toenails again. You're cutting your way out of your socks faster than I can mend them."

"He's gone back to being the way he was before, hasn't he?" Garion said sadly. "Zakath, I mean."

"Not entirely," Polgara disagreed. "Most of that was a pose to conceal his real feelings." She looked at Belgarath. "Well, father, has Uncle Beldin come up with anything yet?"

"He was working on something this morning. I can't talk to him right now because he's chasing a rabbit. We'll get back in touch after he finishes his lunch."

"Can't he concentrate on business?"

"Oh, come now, Pol. I've known you to go out of your way for a fat rabbit on occasion."

"You don't!" Ce'Nedra gasped to Polgara, her eyes wide with sudden horror.

"I really don't think you'd understand, dear," Polgara told her. "Why don't you bring me your gray dress? I noticed a rip in the hem and I've already got my sewing box out."

They waited out the remainder of the afternoon; after supper, they sat around talking quietly.

Silk squinted toward the door of the tent, beyond which the guards were posted. "Any luck with Beldin yet?" he whispered to Belgarath.

"He's working on something-something fairly exotic, I'd imagine, knowing Beldin. He's still hammering out the details. He'll tell me the whole thing once he gets it put together. "

"Wouldn't it be better if the two of you worked on it together?"

"He knows what he has to do. I'd just get in his way if I tried to stick my oar in, too." The old man stretched and yawned. Then he stood up. "I don't know about the rest of you," he said, "but I think I'll go to bed."

The next morning, Garion rose quietly, dressed, and slipped out of the curtained-off chamber, leaving Ce'Nedra still asleep.

Durnik and Toth were seated at the table in the main part of the pavilion with Belgarath.

"Don't ask me how he did it," Belgarath was saying. "All he told me was that Cyradis agreed to come here when Toth summoned her."

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Durnik and Toth exchanged a few gestures. "He says he can do that," the smith translated. "Do you want her to come here now?"

Belgarath shook his head. "No, let's wait until Zakath is in here with us. I know how much it tires her to project her image over long distances." He made a face. "Beldin suggests that we let the conversation get to a climax before we send for her, Beldin has urges in the direction of melodrama sometimes. We've all talked to him about it over the years, but he backslides from time to time. Good morning, Gar-ion."

Garion nodded briefly to each of them, then sat at the table. "What's Cyradis going to be able to do that we can't?" he asked.

"I'm not sure," Belgarath replied. "We all know that she has a peculiar effect on Zakath, though. He tends to lose his grip on things every time he sees her. Beldin wouldn't tell me exactly what he's got in mind, but he sounded disgustingly pleased with himself. Do you feel up to some theatricality this morning?"

"Not really, but I suppose I can manage something."

"You're supposed to goad Zakath a little-not too much, mind, but push him into making some threats. That's when we're supposed to call Cyradis. Don't be too obvious about it. Sort of lead him into it gradually." The old man looked at Toth. "Keep your eyes on me when Garion and Zakath start arguing," he instructed. "I'll cover my mouth and cough. That's when we'll need your mistress."

Toth nodded.

"Are we going to tell the others?" Garion asked.

Belgarath squinted. "No," he decided. "Their reactions might be more natural if they don't know what's going on."

Durnik smiled slightly. "I'd say that Beldin isn't the only one with a flair for the dramatic."

"I used to be a professional storyteller, Durnik," Belgarath reminded him. "I can play an audience like a lute."

After the others had awakened and breakfast had been served, General Atesca came into the tent. "His Imperial Majesty instructs that you make ready. You'll be departing for Mal Zeth within the hour."

Garion moved quickly to head that off. "Tell his Imperial

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Majesty that we're not going anyplace until we finish the conversation we started yesterday."

Atesca looked momentarily startled, then recovered. "People do not speak so to the Emperor, your Majesty," he declared.

"He might find it refreshing, then."

Atesca drew himself up. "The Emperor is otherwise occupied at the moment."

Garion leaned back in his chair and crossed his legs. "We'll wait," he said flatly. "That will be all, General."

Atesca's face grew tight, then he bowed stiffly, turned, and went out without another word.

"Garion!" Ce'Nedra gasped, "We're at Zakath's mercy, and you were being deliberately rude."

"He hasn't been overly polite to me." Garion shrugged. "I told him we weren't going back to Mal Zeth, and he ignored me. It appears that sometimes it takes a bit to get his attention."

Polgara was looking narrowly at Garion. Then she turned to Belgarath. "What are you two up to, father?" she asked.

He winked at her, but did not reply.

It took Kal Zakath approximately two minutes to arrive. He burst into the tent with his eyes wild and his face beet-red. "What do you mean?" he almost screamed at Garion.

"What do you mean, what do I mean?"

"I gave you an imperial command!"

"So? I'm not one of your subjects."

"This is intolerable!"

"You'll get used to it. You should know by now that I always do what I set out to do. I thought I'd made that point when we left Mal Zeth. I told you we were going to Ashaba, and that's exactly what we did."

With some effort, the Emperor got himself under control. "I was trying to protect you and your friends, you idiot," he said from between clenched teeth. "You were riding directly into Mengha's path."

"We didn't have any particular problem with Mengha."

"Atesca told me that you'd killed him. I didn't get the details, though." Zakath seemed to have recovered his composure to some degree.

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"Actually, I'm not the one who did it. Margravine Liselle killed him."

Zakath looked with one raised eyebrow at the dimpled Velvet.

"His Majesty is perhaps overgenerous," she murmured with a little curtsy. "I had some help."

"Help? From whom?"

"Zith, actually. Mengha was very surprised."

"Will someone please tell me what happened without all this clever repartee?"

"It was really fairly simple, your Majesty," Silk said smoothly. "We were having a little disagreement with the Chandim and some others in Torak's old throne room at Ashaba. Mengha was shouting orders to his men, and Liselle pulled Zith out of her bodice and threw the little green darling right into his face. Zith nipped him a few times, he stiffened up like a plank, and he was dead before he hit the floor."

"You don't actually carry that snake down the front of your dress, do you?" Zakath asked Velvet incredulously. "How can you?"

"It took a bit of getting used to," she admitted, placing one modest hand on her bodice.

"It didn't really happen that way, did it?"

"Prince Kheldar's description of what took place was fairly accurate, your Imperial Majesty," Sadi assured him. "Zith was very put out. I think she was asleep when the Margravine threw her at Mengha, and being awakened suddenly always makes her cross."

"As it turns out, Zakath," Belgarath said, "Mengha was really one of the Chandim and Urvon's chief underling."

"Yes, so Atesca told me. That puts Urvon behind what was going on in Karanda, doesn't it?"

"Only marginally," Belgarath replied. "Urvon isn't sane enough to be behind much of anything. He's completely under the domination of a Demon Lord named Nahaz, and consorting with demons usually unhinges a man's mind. Urvon's totally convinced that he's a God now."

"If he's that mad, who's running his campaign here? Atesca said that his outflanking of the Darshivan army and their elephant cavalry was a stroke of tactical genius."

"It's my guess that Nahaz is more or less in command, and Demon Lords pay very little attention to casualties. They also have ways of making people run very fast."

"I've never gone to war with a Demon Lord before," Zakath mused. "What's his objective?"

"The Sardion," Garion replied. "Everybody wants to get his hands on it-me included."

"To raise a new God over Angarak?"

"That's its purpose, I suppose."

"I don't think I'd like that. You liberated us from Torak, and I don't propose to see his replacement enthroned at either Mal Zeth or Mal Yaska. Angarak doesn't need a God. It has me. Who's your candidate?"

"I don't know yet. They haven't told me."

"What am I going to do with you, Belgarion?" Zakath sighed.

"You're going to let us go so we can do what we're supposed to do. You might not like the idea of a New God, but I think you'll find my choice a lot more preferable to anything Zandramas or Urvon or Agacnak might come up with."

"Agachak?"

"The Hierarchy of Rak Urga. He's here in Mallorean as well."

"I'll deal with him, too, then. That still leaves you, I'm afraid."

"I just told you what to do about me."

A faint smile touched Zakath's lips. "I don't think I really like your proposal. You're a little undependable."

"What's your goal in all this?" Belgarath asked him.

"I'm going to restore order in Mallorean, even if I have to depopulate whole districts to do it. Since the Sardion is the : tiling that's got everyone so agitated, I'd guess that my best course would be to find it and destroy it."

"Good," Garion said, rising to his feet. "Let's go, then."

"Oh, no, your Majesty." Zakath's tone was once again coldly imperial. "I don't trust you any more. I made that mistake once already. I can eliminate at least one of the people trying to reach the Sardion by sending you and your friends back to Mal Zeth under heavy guard. Then I can concentrate on looking for the Sardion myself."

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"Where do you plan to start looking?" Garion asked him bluntly. The conversation, he decided, had moved around to the point where the goading Belgarath had suggested seemed to be in order. "You don't even know what you're looking for and you haven't got the faintest idea of where to start. You're just floundering around."

"I don't think I care for that, Belgarion."

"That's too bad. The truth is sometimes painful, isn't it?"

"And I suppose you do know where it is?"

"I can find out."

"If you can, so can I, and I'm sure you'll give me a few clues."

"Not a chance."

"You'll grow more cooperative once I put a few of your friends on the rack. I'll even let you watch."

"You'd better hire an expendable torturer, then. Haven't you realized yet just what I'm capable of? And all this time I thought you were intelligent."

"I think that's quite enough, Belgarion," Zakath snapped. "Make ready. You're leaving for Mat Zeth; and to make sure you behave yourself, I'm going to separate all of you people. That should give me plenty of hostages in the event you decide to do something rash. I think that covers everything. This conversation is concluded."

Belgarath covered his mouth with one hand and coughed. Toth nodded and lowered his head.

Zakath stepped back in startled amazement as a shimmering apparition suddenly appeared directly in front of him. He glared at Garion. "Is this some kind of trick?" he demanded.

"No tricks, Zakath," Garion replied. "She has some things to tell you. I suggest that you listen."

"Wilt thou hear my words, Zakath?" the glowing form of the blindfolded Seeress of Kelt asked him.

Zakath's face was still taut with suspicion. "What is it, Cyradis?" he asked bluntly.

"My time with thee must needs be short, Emperor of Mallorea. I spoke to thee once concerning a crossroad in thy life. Thou hast reached that point now. Put aside thine

imperious manner and submit willingly to the task which I must lay upon thee. Thou hast spoken here of hostages."

He drew himself up. "A custom, Cyradis," he told her. "It's a simple means of insuring good behavior."

"Dost thou indeed feel so feeble that thou must threaten the innocent to impose thy will upon others?" Her tone was lightly touched with scorn.

"Feeble? Me?"

"Why else wouldst thou choose so cowardly a course? But hear me well, Kal Zakath, for thy life hangs in the balance. In the instant that thou dost raise thy hand against the Child of Light or any of his companions, thy heart shall burst, and thou shalt die between two breaths."

"So be it then. I rule in Mallorea, and to change or falter because of any threat—even yours—is to become as nothing in my own eyes, and I will not do that."

"Then shalt thou surely die, and in thy death shall thy mighty empire crumble into dust." She said it with a dreadful finality.

He stared at her, his pale face growing even more livid.

"Thou wilt not hear my warnings, Emperor of Malloreia, so I will make thee an offer instead. If thou dost require a hostage, / will be thy hostage. The Child of Light doth know that should I depart from this life ere my task is complete, his quest will surely fail. What better restraint canst thou place upon him?"

"I will not threaten you, Holy Seeress," he said, sounding a bit less sure of himself.

"And why not, mighty Zakath?"

"It would not be appropriate," he said shortly. "Was that all you had to say to me? I have certain duties to attend to."

"They are of no moment. Thine only true duties are to me and to the task which I shall lay upon thee. The completion of that task is the purpose of thy life. It was for that and for that only that thou wast born. Shouldst thou refuse it, thou wilt not live to see another winter."

"That's the second time you've threatened my life since you arrived, Cyradis. Do you hate me so much?"

"I do not hate thee, Zakath, and I made no threats. I merely revealed unto thee that which fate has in store for thee. Wilt thou accept thy task?"

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"Not until I know a little more about it."

"Very well, then. I will reveal unto thee the first part of thy task. Thou must come to me at Kell, where I shall submit to thee. I shall be thy hostage, but thou art also surely mine. Come thou then to Kell with die Child of Light and his other chosen companions; for, as hath been foretold since the beginning of days, thou art of their company."

"But-"

She held up one slim hand. "Leave behind thee thy retinue and thine army and thy symbols of power. They will be of no use to thee." She paused. "Or art thou fearful, O mighty Zakath, to go about in thy vast realm without thy soldiers clustered about thee to compel the stubborn knee to bend and to coerce the rebellious to submit to thy will?"

Zakath flushed angrily. "I fear nothing, Holy Seeress," he replied in a cold voice, "not even death."

"Death is a small thing, Kal Zakath. Methinks it is life which thou dost fear. As I have said, thou art my hostage, and I command thee to come to me at Kell and there to take up thy burden."

The Emperor of Malloreia began to tremble. Garion knew this man and he knew that Zakath would normally reject Cyradis' imperious command instantly, but he appeared seized by some overpowering compulsion. His trembling grew more violent, and his pale face broke out in a sweat.

Cyradis, despite her blindfolded eyes, seemed to be aware of the turmoil which had seized her "hostage." "Thy choice is well made, Kal Zakath," she declared. "Thou wilt submit to me willingly-or with reluctance-but thou must submit, for it is thy destiny." She drew herself up. "Speak now, Emperor of Malloreia, for thy fete requires thine acceptance of it. Wilt thou come to me at Kell?"

He seemed to choke on it. "I will come," he croaked.

"So be it then. Take thy foreordained place at Belgarion's side and come to the Holy City. There shall I instruct thee further in thy task and tell thee why it is not merely thy life which doth hinge upon it, but the life of all this world." She turned slightly so that her blindfolded eyes seemed to be looking at Garion. "Bring him to me, Child of Light," she told him, "for all of this is a part of what must come to pass ere the final meeting."

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She stretched out her hand to Toth in a gesture of longing.

And then she vanished.

"And now we are twelve," Sadi murmured.

The most recent recruit to their company, however, stood ashen-faced in the center of the tent, and Garion was astonished to see unshed tears standing in the eyes of the Emperor of Mallorean.

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"The Empty One," Eriond said with a slight note of satisfaction in his voice. "It's almost complete now."

"I don't quite follow you," Sadi confessed.

"Cyradis came to us at Rheon," the young man explained. "She told us who would come with us to the Place Which Is No More. I've been wondering who the Empty One would be. Now I know."

"And how did she describe me?" the eunuch asked.

"Are you really sure you want to know?"

"I have a certain curiosity about it, yes."

"She called you the Man Who Is No Man."

Sadi winced. "That's direct enough, isn't it?"

"You did ask."

Sadi sighed. "It's all right, Eriond," he said. "The procedure took place when I was a baby, so I've never known

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what it might be like to be different. Actually, I find all this interest in that particular function slightly amusing. Mine is a much less complicated way of life."

"Why did they do it to you?"

Sadi shrugged, rubbing his hand over his shaved scalp. "My mother was poor," he replied. "It was the only gift she could give me."

"Gift?"

"It gave me the chance for employment in Queen Sal-missra's palace. Otherwise, I'd have probably been a street beggar like the rest of my family."

"Are you all right?" Garion asked the ashen-faced Zak-ath.

"Just leave me alone, Garion," Zakath muttered.

"Why don't you let me deal with it, dear?" Polgara suggested to Garion. "This is very difficult for him."

"I can understand that. It didn't come too easily for me, either."

"And we broke it to you gently. Cyradis didn't have time to be gentle. I'll talk with him."

"All right, Aunt Pol." Garion walked away and left her alone with the shaken Zakath. This particular turn of events gave him some misgivings. Although he liked the Malloreal Emperor personally, he could foresee any number of difficulties arising from the inclusion of this man in their party. Quite often in the past, their very survival had depended entirely upon the absolute oneness of purpose of every member of the group, and Zakath's motives were never really clear.

"Garion," the voice in his mind said wearily, "don't tamper with things you don't understand. Zakath has to go with you, so you might as well get used to the idea."

"But--"

"No huts. Just do it. "

Garion muttered a few oaths under his breath.

' 'And don't swear at me, either. "

"This is an absurdity!" Zakath burst out, slumping into a chair.

"No," Polgara disagreed. "You just have to get used to looking at the world in a different way, that's all. For most

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people, that's not necessary. You're a member of a very select group now, and different rules apply."

"Rules have never applied to me, Lady Polgara. I make my own rules."

"Not any more."

"Why me?" Zakath demanded.

"That's always the first question they ask," Belgarath said drily to Silk.

"Has anybody ever answered it?"

"Not to my knowledge, no."

"We can instruct you as we go along," Polgara assured Zakath. "The only important thing right now is whether or not you intend to honor your commitment to Cyradis."

"Of course I do. I gave my word. I don't like it, but I don't have any choice. How can she possibly manipulate me the way she does?"

"She has very strange powers."

"She does it by sorcery, you mean?"

"No. By truth."

' 'Did you understand any of that gibberish she was speaking?"

"Some of it, but certainly not all. I told you that we look at the world in a different way. The seers look at it in yet another. No one who does not share their vision can fully understand it."

Zakath stared at the floor. "I suddenly feel very helpless," he admitted, "and I don't like the feeling. I've been rather effectively dethroned, you know. This morning I was the Emperor of the largest nation on earth; this afternoon, I'm going to be a vagabond."

"You might find it refreshing," Silk told him lightly.

"Shut up, Kheldar," Zakath said almost absently. He looked back at Polgara. "You know something rather peculiar?"

"What's that?"

"Even if I hadn't given my word, I'd still have to go to Kell. It's almost like a compulsion. I feel as if I'm being driven, and my driver is a blindfolded girl who's hardly more than a child."

"There are rewards," she told him.

"Such as what?"

"Who knows? Happiness, perhaps."

He laughed ironically. "Happiness has never been a driving ambition of mine, Lady Polgara, not for a long time now."

"You may have to accept it anyway." She smiled. "We aren't allowed to choose our rewards any more than we are our tasks. Those decisions are made for us."

"Are you happy?"

"Why, yes, as a matter of fact, I am."

He sighed.

"And why so great a sigh, Kal Zakath?"

He held up his thumb and forefinger spread an inch or so apart. "I was that close to becoming the master of the entire world."

"Why would you want to be?"

He shrugged. "No one's ever done it before, and power has its satisfactions."

"You'll find other satisfactions, I'm sure," she smiled, laying one hand on his shoulder.

"It's settled?" Belgarath asked the Mallorean.

"Nothing is ever really settled, Belgarath," Zakath replied. "Not until we're in our graves; but yes, I'll go to feell with you."

"Why don't you send for Atesca, then? You'll need to tell him where you're going, so he can at least cover our rear. I don't like having people sneak up behind me. Has Urvon made it across the Magan as yet?"

"That's very hard to say. Have you looked outside today, Belgarath?"

"The tent door is guarded, and Atesca's soldiers don't encourage sight-seeing."

"The fog's so thick you could walk on it. Urvon could be anyplace out there."

Polgara rose and quickly crossed to the tent flap. She opened it, and one of the guards outside said something to her sharply.

"Oh, don't be silly," she told him. Then she took several deep breaths and closed the flap. "It's not natural, father," "he said soberly. "It doesn't smell right."

"Grolims?"

"I think so, yes. Probably Chandim trying to conceal

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Urvon's forces from Atesca's patrol boats. They should be able to cross the Magan without much difficulty."

"Once they get across, the trip to Kell might just turn into a horse race."

"I'll talk to Atesca," Zakath said. "He might be able to delay them a bit." He looked speculatively at the old man. "I know why I'm going to Kell," he said, "but why are you!"

"I have to read the Mallorean Gospels to find out what our ultimate destination is."

"You mean you don't know?"

"Not yet, no. I know what it's called, though. They keep calling it the Place Which Is No More."

"Belgarath, that's pure gibberish."

"I didn't come up with the name, so don't blame me,"

"Why didn't you say something back at Mat Zeth? I have a copy of the Gospels in my library."

"In the first place, I didn't know about it when I was at Mal Zeth. I only found out recently. In the second place, your copy wouldn't have done me any good. They're all different, I'm told, and the only one that contains the passage I need is at Kell."

"It all sounds very complicated."

"It is. These things usually are."

Zakath went to the door of the tent and spoke briefly with one of the guards posted there. Then he came back. "I've sent for Atesca and Brador," he said. He smiled a bit ruefully. "I wouldn't be surprised if they objected rather violently to this whole thing."

"Don't give them time to object," Garion advised.

"They're both Melcenes, Garion," Zakath pointed out. "Melcenes object to things out of habit." He frowned. "Speaking of that, why did you go to Melcena? Wasn't it a bit out of your way?"

"We were following Zandramas," Garion replied.

"Why did she go there?"

"She had to pick up your cousin, Archduke Otrath."

"That silly ass? What for?"

"She took him to Hemil and crowned him Emperor of Mallorea."

"She did what?" Zakath's eyes bulged.

"She needs an Angarak king with her when she gets to the Place Which Is No More. As I understand it, the coronation ceremony had a certain validity."

"Not after I get my hands on Otrath, it won't!" Zakath's face was scarlet with anger.

**There was another reason for our going to Melcena- although we didn't know it at the time," Belgarath said. "There was an un mutilated copy of the Ashabine Oracles there. I had to read that in order to find out that our next Step is the trip to Kell. I'm following a trail that was laid down for me thousands of years ago." '. Atesca and Brador entered. "You sent for us, your Majesty?" Atesca said with a crisp salute.

"Yes," Zakath replied. He looked at the two of them speculatively. "Please listen carefully," he instructed, "and try not to argue with me." Oddly he said it not so much in the tone of imperial command, but rather as a man appealing to two old friends. "There's been a change of plans," ^Ss went on. "Certain information has come into my pos-session, and it's absolutely imperative that we not interfere with Belgarion and his friends. Their mission is vital to the security of Mallorea."

Brador's eyes came alight with curiosity. "Shouldn't I

perhaps be briefed on this matter, your Imperial Majesty?"

; jpe asked. "State security is my responsibility, after all."*

"Ah-no, Brador," Zakath said regretfully, "I'm afraid

. aot. It might require too great an adjustment in your think-

v ing. You're not ready for that. As a matter of fact, I'm not

f sure I am, either. At any rate, Belgarion and these others

; . absolutely must go to Dalasia." He paused. "Oh, one other

thing," he added. "I'll be going with them." ... Atesca stared incredulously at his Emperor. Then, with some effort, he got himself under control. "I'll notify the commander of the Imperial Guard, your Majesty," he said stiffly. "They'll be ready to leave within the hour."

"Don't bother," Zakath told him. "They won't be going with us. I'll be going with Belgarion alone." .;..' "Alone?" Atesca exclaimed. "Your Majesty, that's un-heardof."

i Zakath smiled wanly. "You see," he said to Garion. "What did I tell you?"

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"General," Belgarath said to Atesca, "Kal Zakath is simply following orders. I'm sure you can understand that. He was told not to bring any troops along. Troops wouldn't do him any good where we're going anyway."

"Orders?" Atesca said in amazement. "Who has the authority to give his Majesty orders?"

"It's a long story, Atesca," the old man told him, "and we're pressed for time."

"Ah-your Imperial Majesty," Brador said diffidently, "if you're going to Dalasia, that means you'll have to cross the whole of Darshiva. Might I remind you that Darshiva is hostile territory at the moment? Is it wise to risk the imperial person under such circumstances? Might not an escort at least as far as the border be prudent?"

Zakath looked at Belgarath.

The old man shook his head. "Let's just do it the way we were told to," he said.

"Sorry, Brador," Zakath said. "We can't take an escort with us. I think I'll need some armor, though, and a sword."

"Your Majesty has not held a sword for years," Atesca objected.

"Belgarion can give me some instruction." Zakath shrugged. "I'm sure I'll pick it up again. Now then, Urvon's going to cross the Magan. I have it on very good authority that there won't be very much we can do to stop him. I imagine that the Darshivan Army won't be very far behind him, and they have elephant cavalry with them. I want you to keep all those people off my back. Delay Urvon long enough for the Darshivans to catch up with him. After that, they can annihilate each other, for all I care. Once those two armies are fully engaged, pull back your forces. Don't get any more of my soldiers killed than you absolutely have to."

Atesca frowned. "Then the policy we discussed at Maga Renn is no longer in force?" he asked.

Zakath shrugged. "Policy changes from time to time," he said. "At this point, I'm militantly indifferent about who wins an unimportant battle in this corner of the world. That may give you some idea of just how vital Belgarion's mis-

sion is." He looked at Garion. "Does that cover everything?"

"Except for the demons," Garion replied. "They're here in Darshiva, too."

Zakath frowned. "I'd forgotten about them. They'll come to Urvon's aid, won't they?"

"Nahaz will," Belgarath told him. "Mordja will help the Darshivans."

"You're going a little fast for me."

"When Urvon showed up with Nahaz in tow, Zandramas raised a Demon Lord of her own," the old man explained. "She went a little far afield for him, actually. Mordja is Lord over the demons in Morindland. He and Nahaz are evenly matched, and they've hated each other for all eternity."

"Then it still appears to be a stalemate. Both sides have an army and they both have demons."

"Demons are grossly unselective in their choice of victims, Zakath," Polgara said. "They'll kill anything that moves, and your own army's here in Darshiva."

"I hadn't thought of that," he conceded. He looked around. "Any suggestions?"

Belgarath and Polgara exchanged a long look. "I suppose

• v H's worth a try," the old sorcerer shrugged. "He's not fond

>r of Angaraks, but He's even less fond of demons. I think we'll have better luck with Him if we go outside the camp, though."

"Exactly who are we talking about?" Zakath asked curiously.

'-, "Aldur," Belgarath replied. He scratched at his cheek.

5 "Would it be safe to tell Him that you'd be very reluctant

•v to go with us if your army was in danger?" he asked.

-. "I think you could say that, yes." Zakath's eyes widened. "Are you trying to say you can actually summon a God?" he asked incredulously.

-.: "I'm not sure if summon is exactly the right word. We

can talk with Him, though. We'll see what He says," 0, "You're not really going to try subterfuge, are you, fa-g tiler?" Polgara asked the old man.

% "Aldur knows what I'm doing," he replied. "I couldn't £: deceive Him if I tried. Zakath's reluctance just gives us a

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starting point for the conversation. Aldur's reasonable, but He's always liked a good argument. You should know that, Pol. He helped to educate you, after all. Let's see if we can talk with Him."

"Would it be all right if I came along?" Eriond asked. "I need to talk with Him, too."

Belgarath looked a bit surprised at that. He looked for a moment as if he were about to refuse, but then he seemed to change his mind. "Suit yourself," he shrugged. "Atesca, could you have your guards escort us as far as that ditch around the outside of the camp? We'll go on from there alone."

Atesca spoke with the guards at the door of the tent, and the three were allowed to leave without challenge.

"I'd give a great deal to witness this meeting," Brador murmured. "Have you ever seen Aldur, Prince Kheldar?"

"A couple of times, yes," Silk replied in an offhand manner. "Once in the Vale and then again at Cthol Mishrak when He and the other Gods came to claim the body of Torak after Garion killed Him."

"I'd imagine that He took a certain satisfaction in that," Zakath said. "Aldur and Tbrak were sworn enemies."

"No," Garion disagreed sadly. "No one took any pleasure in the death of Torak. He and Aldur were brothers. I think UL grieved the most, though. Torak was His son, after all."

"There seem to be some fairly huge gaps in Angarak theology," Zakath mused. "I don't think the Grolims even admit the existence of UL."

"They would if they ever saw Him," Silk said.

"Is He really that impressive-looking?" Brador asked.

"It's not so much the way He looks," Silk shrugged. "It's the sense of His presence. It's overwhelming."

"He was very nice to me," Ce'Nedra objected.

"Everybody's nice to you, Ce'Nedra," Silk told her. "You have that effect on people."

"Most of the time," Garion corrected.

"I suppose we'd better start packing," Durnik suggested. "I think Belgarath's going to want to leave just as soon as he gets back." He looked at Atesca. "Do you suppose we could get a few things from your stores?" he asked. "It's a

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long way to Kell, and I don't think we'll be able to pick up much in the way of supplies here in Darshiva."

"Of course, Goodman Durnik," the general replied.

"I'll make out a list of the things we'll need, then."

As Durnik sat down at the table to draw up his list, Atesca gave Silk a penetrating look. "We never did get the chance to talk about your recent venture in the commodities market, did we, your Highness?" he said.

"Are you considering a second career, Atesca?" Zakath asked him.

"Hardly, your Majesty. I'm quite happy as a soldier. Prince Kheldar recently did a bit of speculation in this year's bean crop. The Bureau of Military Procurement went into a state of anguished consternation when they found out his asking price."

Brador suddenly chuckled. "Good for you, Kheldar," he said.

"That's a peculiar attitude, Brador," Zakath reproved him. "How would you like it if I took Prince Kheldar's excess profits out of your budget?"

"Actually, your Majesty, Kheldar's venture didn't cost your treasury a thing. The members of the Bureau of Military Procurement are the greatest unchanged scoundrels in the empire. Some years ago, while you were busy in Cthol Murgos, they sent you a rather innocuous-looking document having to do with standardizing the prices of all the items they purchase for the army."

"I remember it-vaguely. Their argument seemed to be that it would provide a basis for long-range planning."

"That was on the surface, your Majesty. In actuality, fixing those prices provided them with a golden opportunity to line their own pockets. They could buy at below the fixed price, sell to the army at the legal rate, and keep the difference for themselves."

"What is the fixed rate on beans?"

"Ten half-crowns per hundredweight, your Majesty."

"That doesn't seem unreasonable."

"When they're buying at three half-crowns?"

Zakath stared at him.

Brador held up one hand. "However," he said, "by law, they have to sell to the army at ten-no matter what price

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they have to pay, so they have to make up the difference out of their own pockets. That might account for the anguish General Atesca mentioned."

Zakath suddenly grinned a wolfish sort of grin. "What price were you asking, Kheldar?" he asked.

"I sold out to the Melcene Consortium at fifteen." The little man shrugged, buffing his nails on the front of his tunic. "I'd imagine that they added a few points to that-reasonable profit, you understand."

"And you controlled the entire bean crop?"

"I certainly tried."

"I feel fairly sure that your Majesty will receive several letters of resignation from members of the Bureau," Brador said. "I'd advise not accepting them until after all accounts are settled."

"I'll keep that in mind, Brador." Zakath looked speculatively at Silk. "Tell me, Kheldar," he said, "how much would you take to suspend operations here in Mallorean?"

"I don't really believe your Majesty's treasury has that much money," Silk replied blandly. "Besides, I've become a sort of necessity. The Mallolean economy was stagnant until I got here. You could almost say that I'm working for you."

"Did that make any sense?" Zakath asked Brador.

"Yes, your Majesty," Brador sighed. "In a peculiar way, it does. Our tax revenues have been rising steadily since Kheldar and his scruffy-looking partner began doing business here in the empire. If we were to expel him, it's entirely possible that the economy would collapse."

"Then I'm at his mercy?"

"To some degree, yes, your Majesty."

Zakath sighed mournfully. "I wish I hadn't gotten out of bed this morning," he said.

Both Belgarath and Polgara looked troubled when they returned with Eriond close behind them. The blond young man, however, looked as unconcerned as always.

"What did He say?" Garion asked.

"He didn't like it too much," Belgarath said, "but He finally agreed. General Atesca, how many troops do you have here in Darshiva?"

"Several hundred thousand. They're in enclaves like this

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one up and down the east bank of the Magan. The bulk of our forces are across the river in Peldane. We can summon them on short notice."

"Leave them where they are. Once you've delayed Urvon long enough to allow the Darshivan army to catch up with him, withdraw all your men to this enclave."

"It's hardly big enough for that many men, Ancient One," Atesca pointed out.

"You'd better expand it, then. Aldur has agreed to protect this enclave. He didn't say anything about any of the others. Bring your men here. He'll keep the demons away."

"How?" Brador asked curiously.

"Demons can't bear the presence of a God. Neither Na-haz nor Mordja will come within ten leagues of this place."

"He's actually going to be here?"

"Only in a rather peculiar sense of the word. Once the enclave is expanded, that ditch of yours is going to be filled with a kind of blue light. Tell your men to stay out of it. Aldur's still not fond of Angaraks, and peculiar things might happen to any soldier who strays into that light." The old man suddenly grinned at Zakath. "You might find it interesting to know that your whole army here in Darshiva will be at least nominally subject to Aldur for a while," he said. "He's never had an army before, so it's a little hard to say what he might decide to do with one."

"Is your grandfather always like this?" Zakath asked Garion.

"Usually, yes." Garion stood up, moving his fingers slightly. Then he crossed to the far side of the tent. Belgarath followed him. "What happened out there, Grand-lather?" Garion whispered.

Belgarath shrugged. "We talked with Aldur, and He promised to protect Zakath's army."

Garion shook his head. "No," he said, "something else happened, too. Both you and Aunt Pol were looking very strange when you came back-and why did Eriond go with you?"

"It's a long story," the old man replied evasively.

"I've got time. I think I'd better know what's going on."

"No, as a matter of fact, you'd better not. Aldur was

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quite emphatic about that. If you know what's happening, it might interfere with what you have to do."

"I thought we'd exhausted that tired old excuse a long time ago. I'm grown now. You don't have to try to keep me stupid."

"I'll tell you what, Garion. Since you're the Child of Light, why don't you go talk with Aldur yourself? He might even decide to tell you, but that's up to Him. He told me to keep my mouth shut, and I'm not going to disobey my Master, whether you like it or not." And he turned and went back to rejoin the others.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

"I still don't understand why I have to look so shabby," Zakath said as he reentered the pavilion. He wore a battered breastplate over a mail shirt and a rust-splotched helmet devoid of any kind of decoration. A patched brown cloak was draped over his shoulders, and a plain, leather-bound sword hung at his side.

"Explain it to him, Silk," Belgarath said. "You're the expert at this sort of thing."

"It's really not all that complicated," Silk told the Emperor. "It's fairly standard practice for travelers to hire a few mercenary soldiers to act as armed guards. Mercenaries don't usually spend all that much time taking care of their equipment, so we had to make you look a bit down at the heels. All you and Garion have to do is wear armor and ride tn front looking dangerous."

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A faint smile touched the Mallorean's pallid features. "I didn't think anonymity would require such pains."

Silk grinned at him. "Actually, it's harder to be anonymous than it is to be a grand duke. Now, please don't be offended, Zakath, but we're all going to forget we know how to say 'your Majesty.' Someone might make a slip at the wrong time."

"That's perfectly all right, Kheldar," Zakath replied. "All the 'Majesties' grate on my ears sometimes anyway."

Silk looked closely at their newest recruit's face. "You really ought to spend more time outside, you know. You're as pale as a sheet."

"I can take care of that, Silk," Polgara said. "I'll mix up something to make him look suitably weather-beaten."

"Oh, one other thing," Silk added. "Your face is on every coin in Mallorean, isn't it?"

"You should know. You've got most of them, haven't you?"

"Well, I've picked up a few here and there," Silk said modestly. "Let's cover up that famous face with whiskers. Stop shaving."

"Kheldar, I haven't shaved my own face since my beard sprouted. I wouldn't even know how to hold a razor."

"You let somebody else near your throat with a razor? isn't that a trifle imprudent?"

"Does that more or less cover everything?" Belgarath asked the little Drasnian.

"That covers the basics," Silk replied. "I can coach him on the finer details as we go along."

"All right, then." The old man looked around at them. "We're likely to encounter people out there. Some of them might be hostile, but most of them will probably just be trying to stay out of harm's way, so they won't bother a group of ordinary travelers," He looked directly at Zakath. "Silk should be able to talk us out of most situations, but if we get into any serious confrontations, I want you to fall back a bit and let the rest of us handle things. You're out of practice with your weapons, and I didn't go to all the trouble of finding you to lose you in some meaningless skirmish."

"I can still carry my own weight, Belgarath."

"I'm sure you can, but let's not risk it right at first. Cy-radis might be very unhappy if we don't have you with us in one piece when we get to Kell."

Zakath shrugged, walked over, and sat on the bench beside Garion. Hie Rivan King was dressed in his mail shirt and he was sliding the snug-fitting leather sleeve over the hilt of Iron-grip's sword. Zakath was actually grinning, and the unaccustomed expression made him look ten years younger. Garion was uncomfortably reminded of Lelldorin. "I think you're actually enjoying this, aren't you?" he asked.

"For some reason, I feel almost like a young man again," Zakath replied. "Is it always like this-subterfuge and a little danger and this wild sense of exhilaration?"

"More or less," Garion replied. "Sometimes there's more than just a little danger, though."

"I can live with that. My life's been tediously secure so far."

"Even when Naradas poisoned you back in Cthol Mur-gos?"

"I was too sick to know what was going on," Zakath said. "I envy you, Garion. You've had a wildly exciting life." He frowned slightly. "Something rather peculiar is happening to me," he confessed. "Ever since I agreed to meet Cyradis at Kell, I've felt as if some vast weight had been lifted off me. The whole world looks

fresh and new BOW. I have absolutely no control over my life, and yet I'm as happy as a fish in deep water. It's irrational, but I can't help it."

Garion looked rather closely at him. "Don't misunderstand," he said. "I'm not deliberately trying to be mystical about this, but you're probably happy because you're doing what you're supposed to do. It happens to all of us. It's a part of that different way of looking at things Aunt Pol mentioned earlier, and it's one of the rewards she talked about."

"That's a little obscure for me," Zakath admitted.

"Give it some time," Garion told him. "It comes to you gradually."

General Atesca entered the tent with Brador close behind him. "The horses are ready, your Majesty," he reported in

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a neutral tone. Garion could tell by Atesca's expression that he still strongly disapproved of this whole business. The General turned to Durnik. "I've added a few more pack animals, Goodman," he said. "Yours were fairly well loaded down."

"Thank you, General," Durnik replied.

"I'm going to be out of touch, Atesca," Zakath said, "so I'm leaving you in charge here. I'll try to get word to you from time to time, but there may be long periods when you won't hear from me."

"Yes, your Majesty," Atesca replied.

"You know what to do, though. Let Brador handle civil matters, and you deal with the military situation. Get the troops back here to this enclave as soon as Urvon and the Darshivans are engaged. And keep in touch with Mal Zeth." He tugged a large signet ring off his finger. "Use this if you need to seal any official documents."

"Such documents require your Majesty's signature," Atesca reminded him.

"Brador can forge it. He writes my name better than I do myself-" *

"Your Majesty!" Brador protested.

"Don't play innocent with me, Brador. I've known about your experiments in penmanship. Take care of my cat while I'm gone, and see if you can find homes for the rest of those kittens."

"Yes, your Majesty."

"Anything else that needs my attention before I leave?"

"Ah-one thing, your Majesty," Atesca said. "A disciplinary matter."

"Can't you take care of it?" Zakath asked a bit irritably. He was obviously impatient to be off.

"I can, your Majesty," Atesca said, "but you've sort of placed the man under your personal protection, so I thought I'd consult with you before I took action."

"Whom am I protecting?" Zakath looked puzzled.

"It's a corporal from the Mal Zeth garrison, your Majesty-a man named Actas. He was drunk on duty."

"Actas? I don't recall-"

"It was that corporal who'd been demoted just before we arrived in Mal Zeth," Ce'Nedra reminded him. "The one whose wife was making such a scene in that side street."

"Oh, yes," Zakath said. "Now I remember. Drunk, you say? He's not supposed to drink any more."

"I doubt if he could drink any more, your Majesty," Atesca said with a faint smile, "at least not right now. He's as drunk as a lord."

"Is he nearby?"

"Just outside, your Majesty."

Zakath sighed. "I guess you'd better bring him in," he said. He looked at Belgarath. "This should only take a moment or two," he apologized.

Garion remembered the scrawny corporal as soon as the fellow staggered into the tent. The corporal tried to come to attention, without much success. Then he attempted to bang his breastplate in a salute, but hit himself in the nose with his fist instead. "Yer Imperrl Majeshy," he slurred.

"What am I going to do with you, Actas," Zakath said wearily.

* *I Ve made a beash of myshelf, yer Majeshy," Actas confessed, "an absholute beash."

"Yes," Zakath agreed, "you have." He turned his head away. "Please don't breathe on me, Actas. Your mouth smells like a reopened grave. Take him out and sober him op, Atesca."

"I'll personally throw him in the river, your Majesty." Atesca was trying to suppress a grin.

"You're enjoying this, aren't you?"

"Me, your Majesty?"

Zakath's eyes narrowed slyly. "Well, Ce'Nedra?" he said. "He's your responsibility, too. What do we do with him?"

She waved one little hand negligently. "Hang him," she said in an indifferent tone. She looked more closely at her hand. "Great Nedra!" she exclaimed. "I've broken another fingernail!"

Corporal Actas' eyes were bulging and his mouth was suddenly agape. Trembling violently, he fell to his knees. "Please, your Majesty," he begged, suddenly cold sober. "Please!"

Zakath squinted at the Rivan Queen, who sat mourning the broken nail. "Take him outside, Atesca," he said. "I'll give you orders for his final disposition in a moment.¹"

Atesca saluted and hauled the blubbing Actas to his feet.

"You weren't really serious, were you, Ce'Nedra?" Zakath asked after the two men had left.

"Oh, of course not," she said. "I'm not a monster, Zakath. Clean him up and send him back to his wife." She tapped one finger thoughtfully on her chin. "But erect a gibbet in the street in front of his house. Give him something to think about the next time he gets thirsty."

"You actually married this woman?" Zakath exclaimed to Garion.

"It was sort of arranged by our families," Garion replied with aplomb. "We didn't have much to say about it."

"Now, be nice, Garion," Ce'Nedra said with unruffled calm.

They mounted their horses outside the pavilion and rode through the camp to the drawbridge spanning the deep, stake-studded ditch that formed a part of the outer fortifications. When they reached the far side of the ditch, Zakath let out an explosive breath of relief.

"What is it?" Garion asked him.

"I was half afraid that somebody might have found a way to keep me there." He glanced a bit apprehensively back over his shoulder. "Do you think we could possibly gallop for a ways?" he asked. "I'd hate to have them catch up with me."

Garion began to have misgivings at that point. "Are you sure you're all right?" he asked suspiciously.

"I've never felt better-or more free-in my entire life," Zakath declared.

"I was afraid of that," Garion muttered.

"What?"

"Just keep moving at a canter, Zakath. There's something I need to discuss with Belgarath. I'll be right back." He reined Chretienne in and rode back to where his grandfather and his aunt rode side by side, deep in conversation. "He's absolutely out of control," he told them. "What's happened to him?"

"It's the first time in his entire life that he hasn't had the weight of half the world on his shoulders, Garion," Polgara replied calmly. "He'll settle down. Just give him a day or

so."

"Do we have a day or so? He's acting exactly the way LeHdoran would-or maybe even Mandorallen. Can we afford that?"

"Talk to him," Belgarath suggested. "Just keep talking. Recite the Book of Atom to him if you have to."

"But I don't know the Book of Alorn, Grandfather," Garion objected.

"Yes, you do. It's in your blood. You could have recited it letter-perfect in your cradle. Now get back up there before he gets completely out of hand."

Garion swore and rode back to rejoin Zakath.

"Trouble?" Silk asked him.

"I don't want to talk about it."

Beldin was waiting for them around the next bend in the road. "Well," the grotesque little hunchback said. "It seems to have worked, but why did you bring him along?"

"Cyradis persuaded him to come with us," Belgarath replied. "What gave you the idea of going to her?"

"It was worth a try. Pol told me about a few of the things she said to him back in Cthol Murgos. She seems to have some sort of interest in him. I didn't really think he was 'supposed to join us, though. What did she say to him?"

"She told him that he'd die if he didn't come with us."

"I imagine that got his attention. Hello, Zakath."

"Do we know each other?"

"I know you-by sight, anyway. I've seen you parading through the streets of Mal Zeth a few times."

"This is my brother Beldin," Belgarath introduced the misshapen dwarf.

"I didn't know you had any brothers."

"The relationship's a bit obscure, but we serve the same Master, so that makes us brothers in a peculiar sort of way. There used to be seven of us, but there are only four of us left now."

Zakath frowned slightly. "Your name rings a bell, Master Beldin," he said. "Aren't you the one whose picture is

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posted on every tree for six leagues in any direction from Mal Yaska?"

"I believe that's me, all right. I make Urvon a little nervous. He seems to think that I want to split him up the middle."

"Do you?"

"I've thought about it a time or two. I think what I'd really like to do, though, is yank out his guts, hang them on a thornbush, and invite in some vultures. I'm sure he'd find watching them eat very entertaining."

Zakath blanched slightly.

"Vultures have to eat, too." The hunchback shrugged. "Oh, speaking of eating. Pol, do you have anything decent around? All I've had in the last few days was a very scrawny rat and a nest full of crow's eggs. I don't think there's a rabbit or a pigeon left in the whole of Darshiva."

"This is a very unusual fellow," Zakath said to Garion.

"He gets more unusual the more you get to know him." Garion smiled slightly. "He frightened Urvon almost into sanity at Ashaba."

"He was exaggerating, wasn't he-about the vultures, I mean?"

"Probably not. He fully intends to gut Torak's last Disciple like a butchered hog."

Zakath's eyes grew bright. "You think he might want some help?" he asked eagerly.

"Were any of your ancestors possibly Arendish?" Garion asked suspiciously.

"I don't understand the question."

"Nevermind." Garion sighed.

Beldin squatted in the dirt at the roadside, tearing at the carcass of a cold roast chicken. "You burnt it, Pol," he accused.

"I didn't cook it, uncle," she replied primly.

"Why not? Did you forget how?"

"I have a wonderful recipe for boiled dwarf," she told him. "I'm almost sure I could find someone willing to eat that sort of thing."

"You're losing your edge again, Pol," he said, wiping his greasy fingers on the front of his ragged tunic. "Your mind's getting as flabby as your bottom."

Garion restrained Zakath with one hand when the Mal-lorean Emperor's face grew outraged. "It's a personal thing," he cautioned. "I wouldn't interfere. They've been insulting each other for thousands of years. It's a peculiar kind of love, I think."

"Love?"

"Listen," Garion suggested. "You might learn something. Alorns aren't like Angaraks. We don't bow very often and we sometimes hide our feelings with jokes."

"Polgara is an Alorn?" Zakath sounded surprised.

"Use your eyes, man. Her hair's dark, I'll grant you, but her twin sister was as blond as a wheat field. Look at her cheekbones and her jaw. I rule a kingdom of Alorns and I know what they look like. She and Liselle could be sisters."

"Now that you mention it, they do look a bit alike, don't they? How is it I never saw that before?"

"You hired Brador to be your eyes," Garion replied, > shifting his mail shirt. "I don't trust other peoples' eyes all vthat much."

"Is Beldin an Alorn, too?"

"Nobody knows what Beldin is. He's so deformed that you can't put a name to him." ;. "Poor fellow."

[- "Don't waste your pity on Beldin," Garion replied. "He's ""x thousand years old and he could turn you into a frog if he felt like it. He can make it snow or rain, and he's far, far smarter than Belgarath."

;• "But he's so grubby," Zakath said, eyeing the filthy dwarf.

"He's grubby because he doesn't care," Garion said. v "This is the form he uses to go among us. It's ugly, so he doesn't waste time on it. His other form is so magnificent it would blind you."

"Other form?"

"It's a peculiarity of ours. Sometimes a human form isn't practical for some of the things we have to do. Beldin likes to fly, so he spends most of his time as a blue-banded hawk."

"I'm a falconer, Garion. I don't believe there is such a bird."

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"Tell him that." Garion pointed at the ugly dwarf ripping the chicken apart with his teeth by the roadside.

"You could have cut it up first, uncle," Polgara said.

"Why?" He took another huge bite.

"It's more polite."

"Pol, I taught you how to fly and how to hunt. Don't you try to teach me how to eat."

"I don't think 'eat' is the right word, uncle. You're not an eater; you're a ravener."

"We all do it our own way, Pol." He belched. "You do it with a silver fork off a porcelain plate, and I do it with my talons and beak in a ditch beside the road. It all gets to the same place no matter how you do it." He raked a patch of burned skin off the chicken leg he was holding in one hand. "This isn't too bad," he conceded, "at least not after you get down to the real meat."

"Anything up ahead?" Belgarath asked him.

"A few troops, some terrified civilians, and a Grolim now and then. That's about it."

"Any demons?"

"I didn't see any. Of course that doesn't mean they're not lurking around somewhere. You know how it is with demons. Are you going to travel at night again?"

Belgarath thought about it. "I don't think so," he decided. "It takes too long to do it that way, and time's running out on us. Let's just make a run for it."

"Suit yourself." Beldin discarded the remains of the chicken and stood up. "I'll keep an eye out up ahead and let you know when you're about to run into trouble." The hunchback bent, spread his arms, and soared up into the murky sky.

"Torak's teeth!" Zakath exclaimed. "He is a blue-banded hawk!"

"He invented it himself," Belgarath said. "He didn't like the regular colors. Let's move along."

Although it was nearly summer, there was a dreary chill hanging over Darshiva. Garion could not be certain if it was the result of the prevailing overcast or if it derived from some other, more ominous, source. The white snags of dead trees lined the road, and the air was thick with the reek of fungus, decay, and stagnant water. They passed long-

deserted villages tumbled now into ruins. A roadside temple seemed to huddle mournfully with fungus creeping up its walls like some loathsome disease. Its doors gaped open, and the polished steel mask of the face of Torak, which should have surmounted them, was gone. Belgarath reined in his horse and dismounted. "I'll be right back," he said. He went up the steps of the temple and looked inside. Then he turned and came back. "I thought they might have done that," he said.

"Done what, father?" Aunt Pol asked him.

"They've taken Torak's face down from the wall behind the altar. There's a blank mask there now. They're waiting to see what the New God looks like."

They took shelter for the night beside the half-tumbled wall of a ruined village. They built no fire and traded off standing watch. At first light the next morning, they pushed on. The countryside grew more bleak and foreboding with each passing mile.

About midmorning, Beldin swooped in, flared his wings, and settled to earth. He shimmered into his own form and stood waiting for them. "There are some troops blocking the road about a mile ahead," he announced.

"Any chance of getting around them?" Belgarath asked.

"I doubt it. The country's pretty flat there, and all the vegetation's been dead for years."

"How many are there?" Silk asked.

"Fifteen or so. They've got a Grolim with them."

"Any idea which side they're on?" Belgarath said.

"They're not that distinctive."

"Do you want me to see if I can talk our way past them?" Silk offered.

Belgarath looked at Beldin. "Are they deliberately blocking the road, or are they just camped on it?"

"They've built a barricade out of dead logs."

"That answers that, then. Talk isn't going to do us any good." He mulled it over.

"We could wait until dark and then slip around them," Velvet suggested.

"We'd lose a whole day that way," Belgarath replied. "I don't see any help for it. We're going to have to go through

them. Try not to kill any more of them than you absolutely have to."

"That gets right to the point, doesn't it?" Zakath said wryly to Garion.

"There's no sense in trying to surprise them, I suppose?" Belgarath asked Beldin.

The dwarf shook his head. "They'll see you coming for at least a half a mile." He went to the side of the road, wrenched a half-rotten stump out of the ground, and pounded it against a rock until all the decayed wood had been knocked loose. The gnarled taproot made a fearsome-looking cudgel.

"Well, I guess we'd better go have a look," Belgarath said bleakly.

They rode on to the crest of the hill and looked down the road toward the barricade and the troops standing behind it. Zakath peered at them. "Darshivans," he said.

"How can you tell from this distance?" Silk asked him.

"By the shape of their helmets." The Mallorean narrowed his eyes. "Darshivan soldiers are not notoriously brave and they get very little in the way of training. Do you think there might be some way we can lure them out from behind that barricade?"

Garion looked down at the soldiers crouched behind their logs. "I'd say they've been told not to let anybody past," he said. "What if we charge them and then at the last minute swing out and around them? They'll run for their horses. Then we turn around and charge back at them. They'll be confused and milling around, and we'll be able to pin them up against their own barricade. It shouldn't be too hard to put a fair number of them on the ground. The rest should run at that point."

"That's not a bad plan, Garion. You're quite a tactician. Have you had any formal military training?"

"No. I just picked it up."

In a land of brittle, dead trees, a lance was quite out of the question, so Garion strapped his shield to his left arm and drew his sword.

"All right," Belgarath said, "let's give it a try. It might hold down the casualties."

"One other thing," Silk added. "I think we should make a special point of not letting any of them get on a horse. A man on foot can't go for help very fast. If we run off their horses, we can be out of the area before they can bring in reinforcements."

"I'll take care of that," Belgarath said. "All right. Let's

go-" They urged their horses into a gallop and charged down

the road toward the barricade, brandishing their weapons. As they pounded down the hill, Garion saw Zakath pulling a curious-looking leather half-glove clad with steel onto his right hand.

Just before they reached the barricade and the alarmed soldiers standing behind it, they veered sharply to the left, then galloped around the obstruction and back onto the road.

"After them!" a black-robed Grolim screamed at the startled troops. "Don't let them escape!"

Garion rode on past the soldiers' picketed horses, then wheeled Chretienne around. He charged back with the others close on his heels and rode full into the face of the confused Darshivans. He did not really want to kill any of them, so he laid about him with the flat of the blade rather than the edge. He put three of them down as he crashed through their ranks; behind him he could hear the sound of blows and cries of pain. The Grolim rose before him, and he could feel the black-robed man drawing in his will. He did not falter, but simply rode the priest down. Then he wheeled again. Toth was laying about him with his heavy staff, and Durnik was busily caving in helmets with the butt of his axe. Zakath, however, was leaned far over in his saddle. He had no weapon in his hand but rather was smashing his metal-clad fist into the faces of the Darshivan soldiers. The glove appeared to be quite effective.

Then, from where the soldiers' horses were picketed, there came a blood-curdling howl. The great silver wolf was snapping and snarling at the horses. They lunged back in panic, the picket rope snapped, and they fled.

"Let's go!" Garion shouted to his friends, and they galloped once again through the center of the Darshivans and on down the road to rejoin Polgara, Ce'Nedra, Velvet, and

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Eriond. Belgarath loped after them, then changed into his own form and walked back to his horse.

"It seems to have worked more or less the way we'd planned," Zakath noted. He was panting, and his forehead was dewed with sweat. "I seem to be a bit out of condition, though," he added.

"Too much sitting down," Silk said. "What's that thing you've got on your hand?"

"It's called a cestus," the Mallorean replied, pulling it off. "I'm a little rusty with my sword, so I thought this might work just as well-particularly since Belgarath wanted to keep down the fatalities."

"Did we kill anybody?" Durnik asked.

"Two," Sadi admitted. He held up his small dagger. "It's a little hard to unpoison a knife."

"And one other," Silk told the smith. "He was running up behind you with a spear, so I threw a knife at him."

"It couldn't be helped," Belgarath said. "Now let's get out of here."

They continued at a gallop for several miles, then slowed back to a canter again.

They took shelter that night in a sizable stand of dead trees. Durnik and Toth dug a shallow pit and built a small fire in it. After the tents were pitched, Gahon and Zakath walked to the edge of the trees to keep watch on the road.

"Is it always like this?" Zakath asked quietly.

"Like what?"

"All this sneaking and hiding?"

"Usually. Belgarath tries to avoid trouble whenever he can. He doesn't like to risk people in random skirmishes. Most of the time we're able to avoid the kind of thing that happened this morning. Silk-and Sadi, too, for that matter-have lied us out of some very tight spots." He smiled faintly. "Up in Voresebo, Silk bribed our way past a group of soldiers with a pouchful of brass Malloreal halfpennies."

"But they're virtually worthless."

"That's what Silk said, but we were quite a ways past the soldiers before they opened the pouch."

Then they heard a chilling howl.

"A wolf?" Zakath asked. "Belgarath again?"

"No. That wasn't a wolf. Let's go back. I think Urvon's managed to outflank General Atesca." "What makes you think so?" "That was a Hound."

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They walked carefully through the forest of dead snags, avoiding as best they could the litter of fallen limbs and twigs on the ground. The faint glow from Duraik's sunken fire guided them, and Garion knew it would serve as a dim beacon for the Hounds as well. Zakath's euphoria seemed to have evaporated. His expression now was wary, and he walked with his hand on his sword hilt.

They entered the small clearing where the others were seated around the fire pit. "There's a Hound out there," Garion said quietly. "It howled once."

"Could you make out what it was saying?" Belgarath asked, his voice tense.

"I don't speak its language, Grandfather. It seemed to be some kind of a call, though."

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"Probably to the rest of the pack," the old man grunted. "The Hounds don't hunt alone very often."

"The glow from our fire is fairly visible," Garion pointed out.

"I'll take care of that right away," Durnik said, starting to shovel dirt into the fire pit.

"Could you pinpoint the Hound's location at all?" Belgarath asked.

"It was some distance away," Garion replied. "I think it's out there on the road." / "Following our trail?" Silk asked.

"It's following something. I could pick up that much." "If the Hound is following us, I can divert it with some of that powder I used back at Ashaba," Sadi suggested. "What do you think?" Belgarath asked Beldin. The dwarf squatted on the ground, absently scratching an Obscure diagram in the dirt with a broken stick. "It wouldn't k work," he said finally. "The Hounds aren't entirely dogs, f .so they're not going to just blindly follow the one in the 3; lead. Once they pinpoint our location, they'll spread out and !;come at us from all sides. We're going to have to come up ?: with something else."

:f "Fairly soon, I'd think," Silk added, looking around nervously.

'•\$••' Polgara removed her blue cloak and handed it to Durnik. "; "I'll deal with it," she said calmly. '& "What have you got in mind, Pol?" Belgarath asked suspiciously. £ "I haven't decided yet, Old Wolf. Maybe I'll just make

*Jt up as I go along-the way you do sometimes." She drew

H herself up, and the air around her shimmered with an odd

^luminescence. She was winging her way off among the dead

x' white trees even before the light had faded.

\; "I hate it when she does that," Belgarath muttered.

j "You do it all the time," Beldin said.

| "That's different."

•3|£ Zakath was staring at the ghostly shape of the disappear-|jng white owl. "That's uncanny," he shuddered. Then he Jpooked at Garion. "I can't say that I understand all this concern," he confessed. "You people-at least some of

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you-are sorcerers. Can't you just . . . ?" He left it hanging.

"No," Garion shook his head.

"Why not?"

"It makes too much noise. Not the sort of noise ordinary people can hear-but we can hear it, and so can the Gro-lims. If we tried to do it that way, we'd have every Grolim in this part of Darshiva down our necks. Sorcery's an overrated thing, Zakath. I'll grant you we can do things that other people can't, but there are so many restrictions on us that sometimes it's not worth the trouble-unless you're in a hurry.' *

"I didn't know that," Zakath admitted. "Are the Hounds as big as they say they are?"

"Probably even bigger," Silk replied. "They're about the size of small horses."

"You're a droll fellow, Kheldar," Zakath said, "so I think I'd have to see that to believe it."

"You'd better hope that you don't get that close."

Belgarath looked narrowly at the Mallorean. "You don't believe in very much, do you?" he asked.

"What I can see." Zakath shrugged. "I've had most of the belief washed out of me over the years."

"That could prove to be a problem," the old man said, scratching at his cheek. "A time might come when we'll have to do something in a hurry and we won't have time for explanations-and you won't have time to stand around gaping in astonishment. I think this might be a good time to fill you in on a few things."

"I'll listen to you," Zakath said. "I don't promise to believe everything you say, though. Go ahead."

"I'll let Garion do it. I want to keep in touch with Pol. Why don't you two go back to the edge of the woods and keep watch? Garion can fill you in there. Try not to be skeptical just on principle."

"We'll see," Zakath replied.

During the next hour, as Garion and Zakath crouched behind a fallen tree at the edge of the woods, the Emperor of Malloreia had his credulity stretched to the limits. Garion spoke in a half whisper even as he kept his eyes and ears alert. He began by briefly sketching in the Book of Atom,

went on to a few salient points from the Mrin Codex. /Then, so far as he knew it, he described the early life of Belgarath the sorcerer. And then he got down to business. He explained the possibilities and the limitations of the Will •md the Word, covering such matters as projections, trans-f location, shape-change, and so on. He covered the myste-:" tious sound that accompanies the use of what common | people call sorcery, the exhaustion that conies over a sorcerer after its use, and the single absolute prohibition- that of unmaking. "That's what happened to Ctuchik," he con-" eluded. "He was so afraid of what would happen if I got my hands on the Orb that he forgot he was stepping over IVfte line when he tried to destroy it." \- Out in die darkness, the Hound howled again, and there f/^ras an answering howl from a different direction. "They're ^getting closer," Garion whispered. "I hope Aunt Pol hur-

i Zakath, however, was still mulling over the things Gar-

rkm had told him. "Are you trying to tell me that it was

the Orb that killed Ctuchik and not Belgarath?" he whis-

No. It wasn't the Orb. It was the universe. Do you really

to get into theology?" "I'm even more skeptical in that direction." "That's the one thing you can't afford, Zakath," Garion seriously. "You have to believe. Otherwise, we'll fail, , if we fail, the world fails- forever. " H The Hound howled again, even closer this time. f "Keep your voice down," Garion warned in a tense whis-:|jper. "The Hounds have very sharp ears."

1^ "I'm not afraid of a dog, Garion, no matter how big it

\$VT-£" * *

5l18'

•." "That could be a mistake. Being afraid is one of the

things that keeps us alive. All right. As closely as I un-[demand it, this is the way it went. UL created the uni-

verse."

M "I thought it was just spun out of nothingness." p "It was, but UL was the spinner. Then he joined his ^ thought with the awareness of the universe, and the Seven IfGods were born."

"The Grolims say it was Torak who made everything."

"That's what Torak wanted them to believe. That's one of the reasons I had to kill him. He thought he owned the universe and that he was more powerful than UL. He was wrong, and nobody owns the universe. She owns herself, and she makes the rules."

"She?"

"Of course. She's the mother of everything-you, me, that rock, and even this dead tree we're hiding behind. We're all related, I suppose, and the universe won't permit unmaking." Garion pulled off his helmet and scratched at his sweaty hair. He sighed. "I'm awfully sorry, Zakath. I know this is coming at you very fast, but we don't have time for subtlety. For some reason, we're caught up in this-you and I." He smiled wryly. "We're both woefully unsuited for the task, I'm afraid, but our mother needs us. Are you up to it?"

"I'm up to most things, I suppose," Zakath replied in an indifferent tone. "Regardless of what Cyradis said back there, I don't really expect to come out of this alive anyway."

"Are you sure you're not Arendish?" Garion asked suspiciously. "The whole idea is to live, Zakath, not to die. Dying defeats the purpose. Don't do it. I might need you later on. The voice told me that you're supposed to be a part of this. I think we're walking directly into the ultimate horror. You might have to hold me up when we get there."

"Voice?"

"It's in here," Garion tapped his forehead. "I'll explain that later. You've got enough to think about for now."

"You hear voices? There's a name for people who hear voices, you know."

Garion smiled. "I'm not really crazy, Zakath," he said. "I get a little distracted once in a while, but I've still got a fairly firm grip on reality."

There was a sudden, shocking sound that echoed through Garion's head like an explosion.

"What was that?" Zakath exclaimed.

"You heard it, too?" Garion was amazed. "You shouldn't have been able to hear it!"

"It shook the earth, Garion. Look there." Zakath pointed off toward the north where a huge pillar of fire was soaring up toward the murky, starless sky. "What is it?"

"Aunt Pol did something. She's never that clumsy. Listen!"

The baying of the Hound, which had been coming closer and closer as they had been speaking, had broken off into a series of pained yelps. "It probably hurt his ears," Garion said. "I know it hurt mine."

The Hound took up his baying again, and his howls were soon joined by others. The sound began to fade off toward the north and the boiling column of fire.

"Let's go back," Garion said. "I don't think we need to keep watch here any more."

Belgarath and Beldin were both pale and shaken, and even Durnik seemed awed.

"She hasn't done anything that noisy since she was about [sixteen," Beldin said, blinking in astonishment. He looked suspiciously at Durnik. "Have you gone and got her pregnant?"

Even in the faint light from the overcast sky Garion could * his friend blushing furiously.

"What would that have to do with it?" Belgarath asked.

"It's only a theory of mine," Beldin said. "I can't prove it, because Polgara's the only sorceress I know right now, and she's never been in that condition."

"I'm sure you'll get around to explaining it-eventually."

"It's not that complicated, Belgarath. A woman's body gets a little confused when she's carrying a child. It does some peculiar things to her emotions and her thought processes. Focusing the Will takes control and concentration. A pregnant woman might just lose her grip on that sort of thing. You see-" He went on at some length to describe the physical, emotional, and intellectual changes involved in pregnancy. He spoke in matter-of-fact, even graphic, terms. After a moment, Ce'Nedra and Velvet withdrew, firmly taking Eriond with them. A moment later, Durnik ; joined them.

"Did you work this out all by yourself?" Belgarath asked.

"It gave me something to speculate about while I was watching the cave where Zedar had hidden Torak."

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"It took you five hundred years, then?"

"I wanted to be sure I'd covered all the possibilities." Beldin shrugged.

"Why didn't you just ask Pol? She could have told you immediately."

Beldin blinked. "I never thought of that," he admitted.

Belgarath walked away, shaking his head.

Some time later, they heard a sudden, screeching bellow coming from the west through the murky sky.

"Everybody get down!" Belgarath hissed. "And keep quiet!"

"What is it?" Zakath exclaimed.

"Be still!" Beldin snapped. "She'll hear you!"

From overhead there came the flap of vast wings and a sooty orange billow of fire. Then the huge beast flew on, screeching and belching out flames.

"What was it?" Zakath repeated.

"Zandramas," Garion whispered. "Keep your voice down. She might come back."

They waited.

"She seems to be going toward all the noise Pol kicked up," Belgarath said in a low voice.

"At least she's not looking for us," Silk said with some relief.

"Not yet, anyway."

"That wasn't actually a dragon, was it?" Zakath asked the old man.

"No, not really. Garion was right. It was Zandramas. That's her other form."

"Isn't it just a bit ostentatious?"

"Zandramas seems to have urges in that direction. She can only go for so long without doing something spectacular. It might have something to do with the fact that she's a woman."

"I heard that, Belgarath," Ce'Nedra's voice came threateningly from the far side of the clearing.

"Maybe it didn't come out exactly the way I'd intended," he half apologized.

The snowy owl came drifting through the forest of dead trees. She hovered for a moment near the fire, then shimmered back into her own form.

"What did you do out there, Pol?" Belgarath asked her.

"I found a dormant volcano," she replied, taking her cloak from Durnik and wrapping it around her shoulders. "I reignited it. Did the Hounds go off to investigate?"

"Almost immediately," Garion assured her.

"So did Zandramas," Silk added.

"Yes, I saw her." She smiled faintly. "It worked out rather well, actually. When she gets there, she'll probably find the Hounds slinking around and decide to do something about them. I don't think they'll be bothering us any more, and I 'm sure Zandramas would be filled with chagrin if she found out that she's helping us."

"Were you that clumsy on purpose, Pol?" Beldin asked her.

"Of course. I wanted to make enough noise to draw off the Hounds-and any Grolims who might be in the area. Zandramas was just a bonus. Could you build up the fire again, dear?" she said to Durnik. "I think it's safe now to start thinking about supper."

They broke camp early the next morning. Polgara's Volcano was still belching smoke and ash high into the air, where they mingled with the pervading overcast to cause a sullen kind of gloom. The murky air reeked of sulfur.

"Flying in that isn't going to be very enjoyable," Beldin said sourly.

"We need to know what's ahead," Belgarath told him.

"I know that," Beldin replied. "I'm not stupid, you know. I was just making an observation." He bent slightly, changed form, and drove himself into the air with powerful strokes of his wings.

"I'd pay a fortune to have a hawk like that," Zakath said wistfully.

"You might have trouble training him," Belgarath said. "He's not the most tractable bird in the world."

"And the first time you tried to hood him, he'd probably rip off one of your fingers," Polgara added.

It was nearly noon when Beldin returned, flying hard. "Get ready!" he shouted almost before he had completed the change. "Temple Guardsmen-about ten-just over that

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rise! They're coming this way and they've got a Hound with them!"

Garion reached for his sword, and he heard Zakath's blade come whistling out of its sheath. "No!" he said sharply to the Mallorean. "Stay out of it!"

"Not a chance," Zakath replied.

"I'll take care of the dog," Sadi said, reaching into the pouch at his belt for some of the powder he had used so effectively in Karanda.

They spread out with their weapons in their hands as Eriond led the women to the rear.

The Hound came over the hill first, and it stopped when it saw them. Then it wheeled and loped back.

"That's it," Belgarath said. "They know we're here now."

The Guardsmen came over the top of the hill at a rolling trot. Garion noticed that they weren't carrying lances, but each mail-clad man held a sword and wore a shield. They paused for a moment to assess the situation, then they charged. The Hound came first, running smoothly and with his lips peeled back from his teeth in a fearful snarl. Sadi spurred forward to meet him, holding a fistful of the powder. When the Hound reared up on his hind legs to drag the eunuch from his saddle, Sadi coolly hurled the powder full into the animal's face. The Hound shook his massive head, trying to clear his eyes. Then he sneezed once. His eyes grew wide, and his snarl turned into a terrified whimper. He shrieked suddenly, a dreadful, half-human sound. Then he turned and fled, howling in terror.

"Let's go!" Garion barked, and he charged toward the oncoming Guardsmen. These were more serious opponents than the Darshivan soldiers had been, so the choices in dealing with them were greatly reduced. One, somewhat larger than his fellows and astride a heavy-bodied warhorse, was leading the charge, and Garion cut him out of his saddle with a single stroke of Iron-grip's great sword.

Garion heard the sound of steel on steel off to his left, but he dared not take his eyes off the still-charging Guardsmen. He chopped two more from their saddles, and Chretienne crashed into the horse of a third, sending the rider

and his mount tumbling. Then Garion was through the ranks of their enemies, and he wheeled around.

Zakath was being hard pressed by two mailed men. He had, it appeared, already felled a third; but then the other two had come at him, one from either side. Garion kicked at Chretienne's flanks, intending to go to his

friend's aid, but Toth was already there. With one huge hand he plucked one of Zakath's attackers from his saddle and hurled him headfirst at a large boulder at the side of the road. Zakath turned on his other enemy, deftly parried a couple of strokes, then smoothly ran the man through.

Silk's daggers were already doing their deadly work. One Guardsman was aimlessly riding around in a circle, doubled over in his saddle and clutching at the dagger hilt protruding from his stomach. The acrobatic little Dras-nian then leaped from his horse and landed behind the saddle of a confused Guardsman. With a wide sweep of his arm, Silk drove a dagger into the side of the man's neck. Blood gushed from the Guardsman's mouth as he fell to the ground.

The remaining two armored men tried to flee, but Durnik and Beldin were already on them, clubbing at them with cudgel and axe. They tumbled senselessly from their horses and lay twitching in the dirt of the road.

"Are you all right?" Garion asked Zakath.

"I'm fine, Garion." The Mallorean was breathing hard, though.

"Your training seems to be coming back to you."

"I had a certain amount of incentive." Zakath looked critically at the bodies littering the road. "When this is all over, I think I'll order this organization disbanded," he said. "The notion of private armies offends me for some reason."

"Did any of them get away?" Silk asked, looking around.

"Not a one," Durnik told him.

"Good. We wouldn't want somebody going for help." Silk frowned. "What were they doing this far south?" he asked.

"Probably trying to stir up enough trouble to draw the Darshivan troops away from Urvon's main body," Belgarath replied. "I think we'll have to be alert from now on. This

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whole area could be crawling with soldiers at any time now." He looked at Beldin. "Why don't you have a look around?" he said. "See if you can find out what Urvon's up to and where the Darshivans are. We don't want to get caught between them."

"It's going to take a while," the hunchback replied. "Darshiva's a fairly large place."

"You'd better get started, then, hadn't you?"

They took shelter that night in the ruins of another village. Belgarath and Garion scouted the surrounding region, but found it to be deserted. The following morning, the two wolves ranged out ahead of the rest of the party, but again they encountered no one.

It was almost evening when Beldin returned. "Urvon outflanked your army," he told Zakath. "He's got at least one general who knows what he's doing. His troops are in the Dalasian Mountains now, and they're coming south at a forced march. Atesca had to stay near the coast to meet the Darshivans and their elephants."

"Did you see Urvon?" Belgarath asked him.

Beldin cackled an ugly little laugh. "Oh, yes. He's absolutely mad now. He's got two dozen soldiers carrying him on a throne and he's doing parlor tricks to demonstrate his divinity. I doubt if he could focus enough of his will right now to wilt a flower."

"Is Nahaz with him?"

Beldin nodded. "Right beside him, whispering in his ear. I'd say he needs to keep a tight grip on his plaything. If Urvon starts giving the wrong orders, his army could wind up wandering around in those mountains for a generation."

Belgarath frowned. "This doesn't exactly fit," he said. "Every bit of information we picked up pointed to the probability that Nahaz and Mordja were concentrating on each other."

"Maybe they've already had it out," the hunchback shrugged, "and Mordja lost."

"I doubt it. That sort of thing would have made a lot of noise, and we'd have heard it."

"Who knows why demons do anything?" Beldin scowled, scratching at his matted hair. "Let's face it, Belgarath," he

said. "Zandramas knows that she has to go to Kell, and so does Nahaz. I think this is turning into a race. We're all trying to be the first one to get to Cyradis."

"I get the feeling that I'm overlooking something," Belgarath said. "Something important."

"You'll think of it. It might take you a couple of months, but you'll think of it."

Belgarath ignored that.

The heavy pall of smoke and ash began to subside as evening drew on, but the prevailing gloom of thick overcast remained. Darshiva was still a land of dead trees, fungus, and stagnant water. Increasingly, that last became a problem. The supplies of water they had carried with them from the Mallorean camp on the shores of the Magan had long since been exhausted. As night fell, the others continued along the road, and Belgarath and Garion ranged ahead as wolves again, searching this time not so much for trouble as for fresh water. Their sharp noses easily detected the stale reek of long-standing pools, and they passed them without slowing.

It was in a blasted forest of long-dead trees that Garion encountered another wolf. She was gaunt and bedraggled, and she limped painfully on her left front paw. She looked at him warily, baring her teeth in warning.

He sat down on his haunches to show his peaceable intent.

"What is it you do here?" she asked him in the language of wolves.

"I am going from one place to another place," he replied politely. "I have no intention to hunt in the place which is yours. I seek only clean water to drink."

"Clean water comes from the ground on the other side of that high place." She glanced toward a hill deeper in the forest. "Drink your fill."

"I have others with me as weH," he told her.

"Your pack?" She came cautiously closer to him and sniffed. "You have the scent of the man-things about you," she accused.

"Some of those in my pack are man-things," he admitted. "Where is your pack?"

"Gone," she told him. "When there were no longer

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creatures to hunt in this place, they went into the mountains.* She licked at her injured foot. "I could not follow."

*"Where is your mate?"

"He no longer runs or hunts. I visit his bones sometimes." She said it with such simple dignity that a lump caught in Gar-ion's throat.

"How do you hunt with that hurt in your paw?"

"I lie in wait for unwary things. Ail are very small. I have not eaten my fill for many seasons."

"Grandfather," Garion sent his thought out. "I need you."

"Trouble?" the old man's thought came back.

"Not that kind. Oh, I found water, by the way, but don't come in here running. You'll frighten her."

"Her?"

"You'll understand when you get here."

"To whom were you speaking?" she asked.

"You heard?" He was startled.

"No, but your manner was that of one who was speaking."

"We can talk of that after some time has passed. My pack-leader is coming to this place. He must make the decisions."

"That is only proper." She lay down on her belly and continued to lick at her paw.

"How did you come to be hurt?"

"The man-things conceal things beneath the leaves. I stepped on one of those things, and it bit my paw. Its jaws were very strong."

Belgarath came trotting through the dead forest. He stopped and dropped to his haunches, his tongue lolling out.

The she-wolf laid her muzzle submissively on the ground in a gesture of respect.

"What's the problem?" Belgarath's thought came to Gar-ion.

"She caught her foot in a trap. Her pack left her behind, and her mate died. She's crippled and starving."

"It happens sometimes."

"I'm not going to leave her behind to die."

Belgarath gave him a long, steady look. "No," he replied. "I don't imagine you would-and I'd think less of you if you did." He approached the she-wolf. "How is it with you, little sister?" he asked in the language of wolves, sniffing at her.

"Not well, revered leader," she sighed. "I will not hunt much longer, I think."

"You will join my pack, and we will see to your hurt. We will bring you such meat as you require. Where are your young? I can smell them on your fur."

Garion gave a startled little whine.

"There is but one remaining," the she-wolf replied, "and he is very weak."

"Take us to him. We will make him strong again."

"As you decide, revered leader," she said with automatic obedience.

"Pol," Belgarath sent out his thought. "Come here. Take your mother's form." The note of command in his voice was incisive and far more wolflike than human.

There was a startled silence. "Yes, father," Polgara replied. When she arrived a few moments later, Garion recognized her from the characteristic white streak above her left brow. "What is it, father?" she asked.

"Our little sister here is hurt," he replied. "It's her left front paw. Can you fix it?"

She approached the she-wolf and sniffed at the paw. "It's ulcerated," she said with her thought. "Nothing seems to be broken. Several days with a poultice ought to do it."

"Fix it, then. She also has a puppy. We'll need to find him as well."

She looked at him, a question in her golden eyes.

"She and her puppy are joining our pack. They'll be going with us." Then he sent his thought to her. "It's Garion's idea, actually. He refuses to leave her behind."

"It's very noble, but is it practical?"

"Probably not, but it's his decision. He thinks it's the right thing to do, and I more or less agree with him. You're going to have to explain some things to her, though. She doesn't have much reason to trust man, and I don't want

her to go into a panic when the others catch up with us." He turned to the she-wolf. "Everything will be well again, little sister," he told her. "Now, let us go find your young one."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The half-grown pup was so emaciated that it could not stand, so Polgara resorted to the simple expedient of picking it up by the scruff of its neck between her jaws and carrying it out of the den.

"Go meet the others," she instructed Garion. "Don't let them get too close until I've had time to talk with our little sister here. Bring back food, though. Put as much as you can carry in a sack and come right back."

"Yes, Aunt Pol." He loped back toward the road, changed into his own form, and waited for his friends.

"We've got a little bit of a problem," he told them when they arrived. "We've found an injured female just up ahead in those woods. She's starving, and she has a young one as well."

"A baby?" Ce'Nedra exclaimed.

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"Not exactly," he said, going to one of the food packs and beginning to load a stout canvas bag with meat and cheese.

"But you just said--"

"It's a puppy, Ce'Nedra. The female is a she-wolf."

"What?"

"It's a wolf. She got her paw caught in a trap. She can't run, so she can't hunt. She'll be coming with us--at least until her paw heals."

"But--"

"No buts. She's coming with us. Durnik, can you work out some way we can carry her without having the horses go wild?"

"I'll think of something," the smith replied.

"Under the circumstances, don't you think this altruism might be misplaced?" Sadi asked mildly.

"No," Garion said, tying the top of the sack shut, "I don't. There's a hill in the middle of those woods. Stay on this side of it until we can persuade her that we don't mean to harm her. There's water there, but it's too close to her den. We'll have to wait a bit before we can water the horses."

"What's got you so angry?" Silk asked him.

"If I had the time, I'd look up the man who set that trap and break his leg in several places. I've got to go back now. She and the puppy are very hungry." He slung the sack over his shoulder and stalked off. His anger was, he knew, irrational, and there had not really been any excuse for being surly with Ce'Nedra and

the others, but he could not have helped himself. The wolf's calm acceptance of death and her mourning for her lost mate had torn at his heart, and anger kept the tears out of his eyes.

The sack was awkward to carry, once he had changed form, and it kept throwing him off balance, but he stumbled on with his head high to keep his burden from dragging on the ground.

Polgara and Belgarath were talking with the she-wolf when he reached the den again. The injured wolf had a skeptical expression in her eyes as she listened.

"She can't accept it," Polgara said.

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"Does she think you're lying?" Garion asked, dropping the sack.

"Wolves don't understand the meaning of that word. She thinks we're mistaken. We're going to have to show her. She met you first, so she might trust you a little more. Change back. You'll need your hands to untie the knot in that sack, anyway."

"All right." He drew his own image in his imagination and changed.

"How remarkable," the she-wolf said in amazement.

Belgarath looked at her sharply. "Why did you say that?" he asked her.

"Did you not find it so?"

"I am accustomed to it. Why did you choose those particular words?"

"They came to me. I am no pack-leader, and I have no need to choose my word with care in order to protect my dignity."

Garion had opened the sack and he laid meat and cheese on the ground in front of her. She began to eat ravenously. He knelt beside the starving pup and began to feed him, being careful to keep his fingers away from the needle-sharp teeth.

"A little bit at a time," Polgara cautioned. "Don't make him sick."

When the she-wolf had eaten her fill, she limped to the spring which came bubbling out from between two rocks and drank. Garion picked up the puppy and carried him to the spring so that he could also drink.

"You are not like the other man-things," the she-wolf observed.

"No," he agreed. "Not entirely."

"Are you mated?" she asked.

"Yes."

"To a wolf or to one of the shes of the man-things?"

"To one of the shes of this kind." He tapped his own chest.

"Ah. And does she hunt with you?"

"Our shes do not usually hunt."

"What useless things they must be." The wolf sniffed disdainfully.

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"Not altogether."

"Durnik and the others are coming,*" Polgara said. Then she looked at the she-wolf. "The others of our pack are coming to this place, little sister," she said. "They are the man-things of which I spoke. Do not be afraid of them, for they are like this one." She pointed her nose at Garion. "Our leader here and I will now also change our forms. The presence of wolves alarms the beasts we have with us, and they must drink from your water. If it please you, will you go with this one who fed you, so that our beasts may drink?"

"It shall be as you say," the she-wolf replied.

Garion led the limping wolf away from the spring, carrying the now drowsy puppy in his arms. The puppy raised his muzzle, licked Canon's face once, and then fell asleep.

Durnik and Toth set up their camp near the spring, while Eriond and Silk watered the horses and then took them back to picket them in the woods.

After a while, Garion led the now wary she-wolf toward the fire. "It is time for you to meet the other members of our pack," he told her, "for they are now your pack-mates as well."

"This is not a natural thing," she said nervously as she limped along at his side.

"They will not harm you," he assured her. Then he spoke to the others. "Please stand very still," he told them. "She'll want to smell each of you so that she can recognize you later. Don't try to touch her and, when you speak, do it quietly. She's very nervous right now." He led the wolf around the fire, allowing her to sniff at each of his companions.

"What's her name?" Ce'Nedra asked as the she-wolf sniffed at her little hand.

"Wolves don't need names."

"We have to call her something, Garion. May I hold the puppy?"

"I think she'd rather you didn't just yet. Let her get used to you first."

"This one is your mate," the she-wolf said. "I can smell your scent on her."

"Yes," Garion agreed.

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"She's very small. I see now why she can't hunt. Is she fully grown?"

"Yes, she is."

"Has she had her first litter yet?"

"Yes."

"How many puppies?"

"One."

"One only?" The wolf sniffed. "I have had as many as six. You should have chosen a larger mate. I'm sure she was the runt of her litter."

"What's she saying?" Ce'Nedra asked.

"It wouldn't translate," Garion lied.

After the wolf had grown a little more at ease, Polgara boiled a number of herbs in a small pot, mixed them with a paste of soap and sugar, and applied the poultice to the wolf's injured paw. Then she wrapped the paw in a clean white cloth. "Try not to lick this or chew it off, little sister," she instructed. "It will not taste good and it needs to stay where it is to heal your hurt."

"One is grateful," the wolf replied. She looked into the dancing flames of the fire. "That is a comforting thing, is it not?" she observed.

"We find it so," Polgara said.

"You man-things are very clever with your forepaws."

"They're useful," Polgara agreed. She took the sleeping puppy from Garion's arms and nestled him beside his mother.

"I will sleep now," the wolf decided. She laid her muzzle protectively on her puppy's flank and closed her eyes.

Durnik motioned to Garion and led him aside. "I think I've come up with a way to bring her along without frightening the horses," he said. "I can make a sort of sled for her to ride in. I'll put a long enough towrope on it to keep her smell away from them, and I'll cover her and her puppy with an old horse blanket. She might make them a little jumpy at first, but they'll get used to her." The smith looked gravely at his friend. "Why are we doing this, Garion?" he asked.

"I couldn't bear the thought of just leaving the two of them here. They'd have both died before the week was out."

"You're a good man," Durnik said simply, putting his

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hand on Garion's shoulder. "You're decent as well as brave."

"I'm a Sendar." Garion shrugged. "We're all like that."

"But you're not actually a Sendar, you know."

"That's how I was raised, and that's all that matters, isn't it?"

The sled Durnik contrived for the wolf and her puppy the next morning had wide-set runners and was built low to the ground so there was little chance of its overturning. "It might be better if it had wheels," he admitted, "but I don't have any wheels to work with, and it would take too long to make some."

"I'll ransack the next village we come to," Silk told him. "Maybe I can find a cart of some kind."

They rode out, slowly at first until they saw that the sled ran smoothly on the damp earth of the road, and then they moved on at their usual canter.

Silk was checking a map as he rode along. "There's a fair-sized town just up ahead," he told Belgarath, "I think we could use some up-to-date information about now, don't you?"

"Why is it that you absolutely have to go into every town we pass?" Belgarath asked him.

"I'm a city dweller, Belgarath," the little man replied in an offhand manner. "I get edgy if I can't walk on cobblestones every so often. Besides, we need supplies. Garion's wolf eats a great deal. Why don't the rest of you go out in a wide circle around the place, and we'll catch up with you on the other side?"

"We?" Garion asked him.

"You're coming along, aren't you?"

Garion sighed. "I guess so," he said. "You always seem to get into trouble if we let you go off alone."

"Trouble?" Silk said innocently. "Me?"

Zakath rubbed at his stubbled chin. "I'll come, too," he said. "I don't look that much like the coins any more." He glared briefly at Belgarath. "How can you stand this?" he demanded, scratching vigorously at his face. "The itching is about to drive me wild."

"You get used to it," Belgarath told him. "I wouldn't feel right if my face didn't itch."

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The place appeared to be a market town that had at some time in the past been fortified. It crouched atop a hill and it was surrounded by a thick stone wall with watchtowers at each corner. The pervading overcast that seemed to cover all of Darshiva made the town look gray and dismal. The gate was unguarded, and Silk, Garion, and Zakath clattered on through into what appeared to be a deserted street.

"Let's see if we can find somebody," Silk said. "If not, we can at least ransack a few shops for the food we'll need." *

"Don't you ever pay for anything, Kheldar?" Zakath asked with some asperity.

"Not if I don't have to. No honest merchant ever passes up an opportunity to steal. Let's push on, shall we?"

"This is a very corrupt little man; do you know that?" Zakath said to Garion.

"We've noticed that from time to time."

They rounded a corner and saw a group of men in canvas smocks loading a wagon under the direction of a sweating fat man.

Silk reined in his horse. "Where are all the people, friend?" he called to the fat man.

"Gone. Fled to either Gandahar or Dalasia."

"Fled? What for?"

"Where have you been, man? Urvon's coming."

"Really? I hadn't heard that."

"Everybody in Darshiva knows it."

"Zandramas will stop him," Silk said confidently.

"Zandramas isn't here." The fat man suddenly bawled at one of his workers. "Be careful with that box!" he shouted. "The things in there are breakable!"

Silk led the others closer. "Where did she go? Zandramas, I mean?"

"Who knows? Who cares? There's been nothing but trouble in Darshiva ever since she gained control of the country." The fat man mopped at his face with a soiled kerchief.

"You'd better not let the Grolims hear you talking like that."

"Grolims," the fat man snorted. "They were the first ones to run. Urvon's army uses Darshivan Grolims for firewood."

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"Why would Zandramas leave when her country's being invaded?"

"Who knows why she does anything?" The fat fellow looked around nervously, then spoke in a quiet voice. "Just between you and me, friend, I think she's mad. She held some kind of ceremony at Hemil. She stuck a crown on the head of some archduke from Melcena and said that he's the Emperor of Mallorean. He'll be a head shorter when Kal Zakath catches up with him, I'll wager."

"I'd like to put some money on the same proposition," Zakath agreed quietly.

"Then she gave a speech in the temple at Hemil," the fat man went on. "She said that the day is at hand." He sneered. "Grolims of every stripe have been saying that the day is at hand for as long as I can remember. Every one of them seems to be talking about a different day, though. Anyway, she came through here a few days ago and told us all that she was going to the place where the New God of Angarak will be chosen. She held up her hand and said, 'And this is a sign to you that I shall prevail.' It gave me quite a turn at first, let me tell you. There were swirling lights under her skin. I thought for a while that there was really something significant about it, but my friend, the apothecary who keeps the shop next to mine, he told me that she's a sorceress and she can make people see anything she wants them to see. That explains it, I guess."

"Did she say anything else?" Silk asked him intently.

"Only that this New God of hers will appear before the summer is gone."

"Let's hope she's right," Silk said. "That might put an end to all this turmoil."

"I doubt it," the fat man said moodily. "I think we're in for a long siege of trouble."

"Was she alone?" Garion asked him.

"No. She had her bogus emperor with her and that white-eyed Grolim from the temple at Hemil-the one who follows her around like a tame ape."

"Anyone else?"

"Only a little boy. I don't know where she picked him up. Just before she left, she told us that the army of Urvon the Disciple was coming and she ordered the whole popu-

lace to go out and block his path. Then she left, going that way." He pointed off toward the west. "Well, my friends and I, we all sort of looked at each other for a while, and then everybody grabbed up whatever he could carry and bolted. We're not stupid enough to throw ourselves in the path of an advancing army, no matter who orders us to."

"How is it that you stayed behind?" Silk asked him curiously.

"This is my shop," the fat man replied in a plaintive tone. "I've worked all my life to build it up. I wasn't going to run off and let the riffraff from the gutters loot it. Now they're all gone, so it's safe for me to make a run for it with whatever I can salvage. A lot of what I'll have to leave behind won't keep anyway, so I'm not losing very much."

"Oh," Silk said, his pointed nose twitching with interest. "What is it you deal in, friend?"

"General merchandise." The fat man looked critically at his workmen. "Stack those boxes closer together!" he shouted. "There's still a lot left to go in that wagon!"

"What sort of general merchandise?" Silk pressed.

"Household goods, tools, bolts of cloth, foodstuffs-that sort of thing."

"Well, now," Silk said, his nose twitching even more violently. "Maybe you and I can do some business. My friends and I have a long way to go, and we're running a little short of supplies. You mentioned foodstuffs. What sort of foodstuffs?"

The merchant's eyes narrowed. "Bread, cheese, butter, dried fruit, hams. I've even got a fresh side of beef. I warn you, though, those things are going to cost you very dearly. Food's scarce in this part of Darshiva."

"Oh," Silk said blandly, "I don't think they'll cost all that much-unless you plan to wait here to greet Urvon when he arrives."

The merchant stared at him in consternation.

"You see, my friend," Silk continued, "you have to leave-and very soon, I think. That wagon of yours won't carry everything you've got in your shop, and your team isn't going to be able to move very fast-not the way you're loading the wagon. My friends and I have fast horses, though, so we can afford to wait a little longer. After you

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leave, we might just browse through your shop for the things we need."

The merchant's face went suddenly very pale. "That's robbery," he gasped.

"Why, yes," Silk admitted blandly, "I believe some people do call it that." He paused for a moment to allow the merchant time to understand the situation fully. The fat man's face grew anguished. Then Silk sighed. "Unfortunately, I'm cursed with a delicate conscience. I can't bear the thought of cheating an honest man—unless I absolutely have to." He lifted a pouch from his belt, opened it, and peered inside. "I seem to have eight or ten silver half-crowns in here," he said. "What would you say to five of them for everything my friends and I can carry?"

"That's outrageous!" the merchant spluttered.

With some show of regret, Silk closed the pouch and tucked it back under his belt. "I guess we'll just have to wait, then. Do you think you and your men will be much longer?"

"You're robbing me!" the merchant wailed.

"No, not really. The way I see it, what we have here is a buyer's market. That's my offer, friend—five silver half-crowns. Take it or leave it. We'll wait over there across the street while you decide." He turned his horse and led Gar-ion and Zakath toward a large house on the other side of the street.

Zakath was trying very hard to stifle a laugh as they dismounted.

"We're not quite done yet," Silk muttered. "It needs just one more little touch." He went up to the locked door of the house, reached into his boot, and took out a long, pointed needle. He probed at the lock for a moment, and it snapped open with a solid-sounding click. "We'll need a table and three chairs," he told them. "Bring them out and set them up in front of the house. I'll rummage around and find the other things we'll need." He went into the house.

Garion and Zakath went into the kitchen and carried out a fair-sized table. Then they went back for chairs.

"What's he up to?" Zakath asked with a look of bafflement on his face.

"He's playing," Garion said with a certain disgust. "He does that from time to time during his business dealings."

They carried out the chairs and found Silk waiting for them. Several bottles of wine and four goblets sat on the table. "All right, gentlemen," the little Drasnian said. "Seat yourselves and have some wine. I'll be right back. I want to check something I saw at the side of the house." He went around the corner and came back after a few minutes with a broad smirk on his face. He sat, poured himself a goblet of wine, leaned back in his chair, and put his feet up on the table with the air of a man planning to make a long stay of it. "I give him about five minutes," he said.

"Who?" Garion asked.

"The merchant." Silk shrugged. "He'll only be able to watch us sitting here for so long and then he'll start to see things my way."

"You're a cruel, cruel man, Prince Kheldar." Zakath laughed.

"Business is business," Silk replied, taking a sip of his wine. "This really isn't bad, you know," he said, holding up his goblet to admire the color of the wine.

"What were you doing around at the side?" Garion asked him.

"There's a carriage house there-with a large lock on the door. You don't flee a town and lock a door unless there's something valuable behind it, do you? Besides, locked doors always pique ray curiosity."

"So? What was inside?"

"Rather a nice little cabriolet, actually."

"What's a cabriolet?"

"A two-wheeled carriage."

"And you're going to steal it."

"Of course. I told the merchant over there that we'd take only what we could carry. I didn't tell him how we were going to carry it. Besides, Durnik wanted wheels to make something to carry your wolf in. That little carriage could save him all the trouble of building things. Friends should always help their friends, right?"

As Silk had predicted, the merchant could only bear watching the three of them lounging at the table across from his shop for just so long. As his men finished loading the

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wagon, he came across the street. "All right," he said sullenly, "five half-crowns-but only so much as you can carry, mind."

"Trust me," Silk told him, counting out the coins on the table. "Would you care for a glass of wine? It's really quite good."

The merchant snatched up the coins and turned without answering.

"We'll lock up for you when we leave," Silk called after him.

The fat man did not look back.

After the merchant and his men had ridden off down the street, Silk led his horse around to the side of the house while Garion and Zakath crossed the street to plunder the fat man's shop.

The little two-wheeled carriage had a folding top and a large leather-covered box across its back. Silk's saddle horse looked a bit uncomfortable between the shafts of the carriage, and the sense of being followed by the wheeled thing definitely made him nervous.

The box across the back of the cabriolet held an astonishing amount of supplies. They filled it with cheeses, rolls of butter, hams, slabs of bacon, and several bags of beans. Then they filled up the empty spaces with

loaves of bread. When Garion picked up a large bag of meal, however, Silk firmly shook his head. "No," he said adamantly.

"Why not?"

"You know what Polgara makes with ground meal. I'm not deliberately going to volunteer to eat gruel for breakfast every morning for the next month. Let's get that side of beef instead."

"We won't be able to eat all that before it goes bad," Garion objected.

"We have these two new mouths to feed, remember? I've seen your wolf and her puppy eat. The meat won't have time to go bad, believe me."

They rode out of town with Silk idly lounging in the seat of the little carriage with the reins held negligently in his left hand. In his right, he held a wine bottle. "Now this is more like it," he said happily, taking a long drink.

"I'm glad you're enjoying yourself," Garion said a little tartly.

"Oh, I am," Silk replied. "But after all, Garion, fair is fair. I stole it, so I get to ride in it."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The others were clustered in the yard of an abandoned farmstead a league or so beyond the town. "I see you've been busy," Belgarath observed as Silk drove the little carriage up and stopped.

"We needed something to carry the supplies in," Silk replied glibly.

"Of course."

"I hope you were able to find something beside beans," Sadi said. "Soldiers' rations tend to grow monotonous after awhile."

"Silk swindled a shopkeeper," Garion said, opening the leather-covered box at the back of the carriage. "We did rather well, actually."

"Swindled?" Silk protested. 338

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"Didn't you?" Garion moved the side of beef so that Polgara could look into the box.

"Well-I suppose so," Silk admitted, "but swindled is such an awkward way to sum up."

"It's perfectly all right, Prince Kheldar." Polgara almost purred as she took a mental inventory of the items in the box. "To be honest with you, I don't care how you came by all this."

He bowed. "My pleasure, Polgara," he said grandly.

"Yes," she said absently, "I'm sure you enjoyed it."

"What did you find out?" Beldin asked Garion.

"Well, for one thing, Zandramas is ahead of us again," Garion replied. "She went through here a few days ago. She knows that Urvon's army is coming down through the mountains. He might be moving a little faster than we thought, though, because she's ordering the civilian population to delay him. They're more or less ignoring her."

"Wise decision." Beldin grunted. "Anything else?"

"She told them that this is all going to be settled before the summer's over."

"That agrees with what Cyradis told us at Ashaba," Belgarath said. "All right, then. We all know when the meeting's going to happen. The only thing that's left to find out is where."

"That's why we're all in such a hurry to get to Kell," Beldin said. "Cyradis is sitting on that information like a mother hen on a clutch of eggs."

"What is it?" Belgarath burst out irritably.

"What's what?"

"I'm missing something. It's something important and it's something you told me."

"I've told you lots of things, Belgarath. You don't usually listen, though."

"This was a while back. It seems to me we were sitting in my tower, talking."

"We've done that from time to time over the last several thousand years."

"No. This was more recent. Eriond was there and he was just a boy."

"That would put it at about ten years or so ago, then."

"Right."

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"What were we doing ten years ago?" Belgarath began to pace up and down, scowling. "I'd been helping Durnik. We were making Poledra's cottage livable. You'd been here in Mallorea,"

Beldin scratched reflectively at his stomach. "I think I remember the time. We were sharing a cask of ale you'd stolen from the twins, and Eriond was scrubbing the floor."

"What were you telling me?"

Beldin shrugged. "I'd just come back from Mallorea. I was describing conditions here and telling you about the Sardion-although we didn't know very much about it at that point."

"No," Belgarath shook his head. "That wasn't it. You said something about Kell."

Beldin frowned, thinking back. "It must not have been very important, because neither of us seems to be able to remember it."

"It seems to me it was just something you said in passing."

"I say a lot of things in passing. They help to fill up the blank spaces in a conversation. Are you certain it was all that important? "

Belgarath nodded. "I'm sure of it."

"All right. Let's see if we can track it down."

"Won't this wait, father?" Polgara asked.

"No, Pol. I don't think so. We're right on the edge of it, and I don't want to lose it again."

"Let's see," Beldin said, his ugly face creased with thought. "I came in, and you and Eriond were cleaning. You offered me some of the ale you'd stolen from the twins. You asked me what I'd been doing since Belgarion's wedding, and I told you I'd been keeping an eye on the Angar-aks."

"Yes," Belgarath agreed. "I remember that part."

"I told you that the Murgos were in general despair about the death of Taur Urgas, and that the western Grolims had gone to pieces over the death of Torak."

"Then you told me about Zakath's campaign in Cthol Murgos and about how he'd added the Kal to his name."

"That actually wasn't my idea," Zakath said with a slightly pained look. "Brador came up with it-as a means of unifying Mallorea society." He made a wry face. "It didn't really work all that well, I guess."

"Things do seem a bit disorganized here," Silk agreed.

"What did we talk about then?" Belgarath asked.

"Well," Beldin replied, "as I remember it, we told Eriond the story of Vo Mimbire, and then you asked me what was going on in Mallorea. I told you that things were all pretty much the same-that the bureaucracy's the glue that holds everything together, that there were plots and intrigues in Melcena and Mal Zeth, that Karanda and Dar-shiva and Gandahar were on the verge of open rebellion, and that the Grolims-" He stopped, his eyes suddenly going very wide.

"Are still afraid to go near Kell!" Belgarath completed it in a shout of triumph. "That's it!"

Beldin smacked his forehead with his open palm. "How could I have been so stupid?" he exclaimed. Then he fell over on his back, howling with laughter and kicking at the ground in sheer delight. "We've got her, Belgarath!" he roared. "We've got them all-Zandramas, Urvon, even Agachak! They can't go to Kell!"

Belgarath was also laughing uproariously. "How did we miss it?"

"Father," Polgara said ominously. "This is beginning to make me cross. Will one of you please explain all this hysteria?"

Beldin and Belgarath were capering hand in hand in a grotesque little dance of glee.

"Will you two stop that?" Polgara snapped.

"Oh, this is just too rare, Pol," Beldin gasped, catching her in a bear hug.

"Don't do that! Just talk!"

"All right, Pol," he said, wiping the tears of mirth from his eyes. "Kell is the holy place of the Dais. It's the center of their whole culture."

"Yes, uncle. I know that."

"When the Angaraks overran Dalasia, the Grolims came in to erase the Dalasian religion and to replace it with the worship of Torak-the same way they did in Karanda. When they found out the significance of Kell, they moved to destroy it. The Dais had to prevent that, so they put their

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wizards to work on the problem. The wizards laid curses on the entire region around Kell." He frowned.

"Maybe curses isn't the right word," he admitted. "Enchantments might be closer, but it amounts to the same thing. Anyway, since the Grolims were the real danger to Kell, the enchantments were directed at them. Any Grolim who tries to approach Kell is struck blind."

"Why didn't you tell us about this earlier?" she asked him tartly.

"I've never really paid that much attention to it. I probably even forgot about it. I don't bother to go into Dalasia because the Dais are all mystics, and mysticism has always irritated me. The seers all talk in riddles, and necromancy seems like a waste of time to me. I wasn't even sure if the enchantments really worked. Grolims are very gullible sometimes. A suggestion of a curse would probably work just as well as a real one."

"You know," Belgarath mused, "I think the reason we missed it was because we've been concentrating on the fact that Urvon, Zandramas, and Agachak are all sorcerers. We kept overlooking the fact that they're also Grolims."

"Is this curse-or whatever you call it-aimed specifically at the Grolims," Garion asked, "or would it affect us, too?"

Beldin scratched at his beard. "It's a good question, Belgarath," he said. "That's not the sort of thing you'd want to risk lightly."

"Senji!" Belgarath snapped his fingers.

"I didn't quite follow that."

"Senji went to Kell, remember? And even as inept as he is, he's still a sorcerer."

"That's it, then?" Beldin grinned. "We can go to Kell, and they can't. They'll have to follow us for a change."

"What about the demons?" Dumik asked soberly. "Na-haz is already marching toward Kell, and as far as we know, Zandramas has Mordja with her. Would they be able to go to Kell? What I'm getting at is that even if Urvon and Zandramas can't go there, couldn't they just send the demons instead to get the information for them?"

Beldin shook his head. "It wouldn't do them any good. Cyradis won't let a demon anywhere near her copy of the

Maforean Gospels. No matter what other faults they have, the seers refuse to have anything to do with the agents of chaos."

"Could she prevent either of the demons from just taking what they want, though?" Durnik looked worried. "Let's face it, Beldin. A demon is a fairly awful thing."

"She can take care of herself," Beldin replied. "Don't worry about Cyradis."

"Master Beldin," Zakath objected, "she's little more than a child, and with her eyes bound like that, she's utterly /helpless."

Beldin laughed coarsely. "Helpless? Cyradis? Man, are you out of your mind? She could probably stop the sun if die needed to. We can't even begin to make guesses about how much power she has."

"I don't understand." Zakath looked baffled.

"Cyradis is the focus of all the power of her race, Zakath," Polgara explained. "Not only the power of the Dais who are presently alive, but also that of all of them who have ever lived."

"Or who might live in the future, for all we know," Belgarath added.

"That's an interesting idea," Beldin said. "We might want to discuss it someday. Anyway," he continued to Zakath, "Cyradis can do just about anything she has to do to make sure the final meeting takes place at the correct time and the correct place. Demons aren't a part of that meeting, so she'll probably just ignore them; and if they get too troublesome, she'll just send them back where they came from."

"Can you do that?"

Beldin shook his head.

"But she can?"

"I think so, yes."

"I'm having a little trouble with all this," Silk admitted. "If none of the Grolims can go to Kell without going blind, and if the demons aren't going to find out anything, even if they do go there, why are they all running toward it? What good's it going to do them?"

"They're putting themselves into a position where they can follow us when we come out," Belgarath replied. "They know we can go there and that we'll find out where the

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meeting is going to take place. They probably plan to tag along behind when we leave."

"That's going to make it very nervous when we leave Kell, isn't it? We'll have half the Grolims in the world right behind us."*

"Everything will work out, Silk," Belgarath replied confidently.

"Fatalism does not fill me with confidence at this point, old man," Silk said acidly.

Belgarath's expression became almost beatific. "Trust me," he said.

Silk glared at him, threw his arms in the air, and then stamped away, swearing under his breath.

"You know, I've been wanting to do that to him for years!" the old man chuckled, his blue eyes twinkling. "I think it was actually worth the wait. All right. Let's get things together again and move on."

They transferred some of the supplies from the box across the back of the little carriage to the packhorses, and then Duraik stood considering the vehicle thoughtfully. "It's not going to work," he said.

"What's wrong with it?" Silk asked him a bit defensively.

"The horse has to be hitched between those shafts. If we put the wolf on the seat, she'll be right behind him. He'll bolt at that point. Nothing could stop him."

"I suppose I didn't think of that," Silk said glumly.

"It's the smell of the wolf mat sends horses into such a panic, isn't it?" Velvet asked.

"That and the snapping and snarling," Duraik replied.

"Belgarion can persuade her not to snap and snarl."

"What about the smell?" Silk asked.

"I'll take care of that." She went to one of the packs and removed a small glass bottle. "I expect you to buy me some more of this, Prince Kheldar," she said firmly. "You stole the wrong kind of carriage, so it's up to you to replace what I have to use to smooth over your blunder."

"What is it?" he asked suspiciously.

"Perfume, Kheldar, and it's dreadfully expensive." She looked at Garion, her smile dimpling her cheeks. "I'll need

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you to translate for me," she said. "I wouldn't want the wolf to misunderstand when I start to sprinkle this on her."

"Of course."

When the two of them returned from the sledlike contraption the wolf and her puppy were riding in, they found Ce'Nedra firmly ensconced on the front seat of the smart little carriage. "This will do very nicely, Prince Kheldar," she said brightly. "Thank you ever so much."

"But--"

"Was there something?" she asked, her eyes wide.

Silk's expression grew surly, and he wandered away muttering to himself.

"His morning has taken a turn for the worse, hasn't it?" Zakath observed to Garion.

"He's doing all right," Garion replied. "He got all the entertainment out of cheating that merchant and stealing the carriage. He gets unbearable if he has too many successes in a row. Ce'Nedra and Liselle usually manage to let the air out of him, though."

"You mean they cooked all that up between them?"

"They didn't have to. They've been doing it for so long now that they don't even have to discuss it any more."

"Do you think Liselle's perfume will work?"

"There's one way to find out," Garion said.

They transferred the injured wolf from the sled to the front seat of the two-wheeled carriage and dabbed some perfume on the bridge of the horse's nose. Then they stepped back and looked closely at the horse while Ce'Nedra held the reins tightly. The horse looked a bit suspicious, but did not panic. Garion went back for the puppy and deposited him in Ce'Nedra's lap. She smiled, patted the she-wolf on the head, and shook the reins gently.

"That's really unfair," Silk complained to Garion as they all moved out in the Rivan Queen's wake.

"Did you want to share that seat with the she-wolf?" Garion asked him.

Silk frowned. "I hadn't thought of that, I guess," he admitted. "She wouldn't really bite me, though, would she?"

"I don't think so, but then, you never know with wolves."

"I think I'll stay where I am, then."

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"That might be a good idea."

"*Aren't you just a little worried about Ce'Nedra? That wolf could eat her in two bites."

"No. She won't do that. She knows that Ce'Nedra's my mate and she sort of likes me."

"Ce'Nedra's your wife." Silk shrugged. "If the wolf bites her in two, I suppose Polgara could put her back together again."

As they started out, a thought came to Garion. He rode forward and fell in beside Zakath. "You're the Emperor of Mallorean, right?"

"How nice of you to notice finally," Zakath replied dryly.

"Then how is it that you didn't know about that curse Be Id in was talking about?"

"As you may have noticed, Garion, I pay very little attention to the Grolims. I knew that most of them wouldn't go there, but I thought it was just a superstition of some kind."

"A good ruler tries to know everything he can about his kingdom," Garion said, then realized how priggish that sounded. "Sorry, Zakath," he apologized. "That didn't come out exactly the way I'd intended it to."

"Garion," Zakath said patiently, "your kingdom's a small island. I'd imagine you know most of your subjects personally."

"Well, a lot of them-by sight, anyway."

"I thought you might. You know their problems, their dreams, and their hopes, and you take a personal interest in them."

"Well, yes, I suppose I do."

"You're a good king-probably one of the best in the world-but it's very easy to be a good king when your kingdom is so small. You've seen my empire, though-part of it anyway-and I'm sure you have at least some idea of how many people live here. It would be utterly impossible for me to be a good king. That's why I'm an emperor instead."

"And a God?" Garion asked slyly.

"No. I'll leave that particular delusion to Urvon and Zan-dramas. People's wits seem to slip a bit when they aspire to divinity, and, believe me, I need all my wits about me. I

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found that out after I'd wasted half my life trying to destroy Taur Urgas."

"Garion, dear," Ce'Nedra called from the carriage.

"Yes?"

"Could you come back here a moment? The wolf is whimpering a little, and I don't know how to ask her what the trouble is."

"I'll be right back," Garion said to Zakath, turning Chretienne around and trotting back to the carriage.

Ce'Nedra sat in the carriage with the wolf pup in her lap. The little creature lay blissfully on his back with all four paws in the air while she scratched his furry tummy.

The she-wolf lay on the seat beside her. The wolf's ears were twitching and her eyes were mournful.

"Are you in pain?" Garion asked her.

"Does this she of yours always talk this much?" she whined.

It was impossible to lie, and evasion was almost as much out of the question. "Yes," he admitted.

"Can you make her stop?"

"I can try." He looked at Ce'Nedra. "The wolf is very tired," he told her. "She wants to go to sleep."

"I'm not stopping her."

"You've been talking to her," he pointed out gently.

"I was only trying to make friends with her, Garion."

"You're already friends. She likes you. Now let her go to sleep."

Ce'Nedra pouted. "I won't bother her," she said, sounding a bit injured. "I'll talk to the puppy instead."

"He's tired, too."

"How can they be so tired in the daytime?"

"Wolves usually hunt at night. This is their normal sleeping time."

"Oh. I didn't know that. All right, Garion. Tell her that I'll be quiet while they sleep."

"Little sister," he said to the wolf, "she promises not to talk to you if your eyes are closed."

The wolf gave him a puzzled look.

"She will think you're sleeping."

The wolf managed to look shocked. "Is it possible in the language of the man-things to say that which is not truth?"

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"Sometimes."

"How remarkable. Very well," she said. "If it is the rule of the pack, I will do this. It is, however, very unnatural."

"Yes. I know."

"I will close my eyes," the wolf said. "I will keep them closed all day if it will keep her from chattering at me." She let out a long sigh and closed her eyes.

"Is she asleep?" Ce'Nedra whispered.

"I think so," Garion whispered back. Then he turned and rode back to the head of the column.

The countryside grew more hilly and broken as they rode west. Although the overcast continued to be as heavy as before, there appeared to be some hint of light along the western horizon as afternoon progressed.

They clattered across a stone bridge that arched over a tumbling stream. "It smells clean, Belgarath," Durnik said. "I think it's coming down out of the mountains."

Belgarath squinted up the gully from which the stream emerged. "Why don't you have a look?" he suggested. "See if there's a place to make camp. Good water has been hard to find, so let's not pass any up."

"I was thinking the same thing myself." Then the smith and his towering mute friend rode off upstream.

They set up camp for the night several hundred yards up the gully where a bend in the stream had opened out a kind of curved gravel bench. After they had watered the horses and set up the tents, Polgara began cooking supper. She cut steaks from the side of beef and made a thick soup of dried peas, seasoned with chunks of ham. Then she set a large loaf of dark peasant bread near the fire to warm, humming to herself all the while. As always, cooking seemed to satisfy some deep-seated need in her.

The supper which came from her fire that evening was of near-banquet proportions, and evening was settling in as they finished eating and leaned back contentedly.

"Very good, Pol." Beldin belched. "I guess you haven't lost your touch after all."

"Thank you, uncle." She smiled. Then she looked at Eriond. "Don't get too comfortable," she told him. "At least not until you've finished helping with the dishes."

Eriond sighed and took a bucket down to the stream for water.

"That used to be my job," Garion told Zakath. "I'm glad there's someone younger along this time." ~If Isn't mat women's work?"

"Would you like to tell her that?"

"Ah-now that you mention it, perhaps not."

"You learn very fast, Zakath."

"I don't believe I *ve ever washed a dish-not in my entire life."

"I've washed enough for both of us, and I wouldn't say that too loudly. She might decide that it's time for you to learn how." Garion gave Polgara a speculative sidelong glance. "Let's go feed the wolf and her puppy," he suggested. "Idleness in others irritates Aunt Pol for some reason, and she can almost always think of things for people to do."

"Garion, dear," Polgara said sweetly as they rose. "After die dishes are done, we'll need water for bathing."

"Yes, Aunt Pol," he said automatically. "You see?" he muttered to the Emperor of Mallorean, "I knew we hadn't moved quite fast enough."

"Do you always do what she asks? And does she mean me, too?"

Garion sighed. "Yes," he replied, "on both counts."

They rose early the next morning, and Beldin soared off to scout on ahead while the rest ate breakfast, struck camp, and saddled their horses. The damp, sullen chill which had hovered over this desolate countryside was now edged with a drier kind of cold as the prevailing wind swept down from the summits of the Dalasian mountains. Garion pulled his cloak about him and rode on. They had gone only a league or so when Beldin s pi ruled down out of the overcast sky. ' 'I think you'd better turn south," he advised. "Urvon's just ahead, and his whole army's right behind him."

Belgarath swore.

"There's more," the hunchback told him. "The Darshi-vans managed to get past Atesca-or through him. They're coming up from behind. The elephants are leading the inarch. We're right between two armies here."

"How far ahead of us is Urvon?" Belgarath asked him.

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"Six or eight leagues. He's in the foothills of the mountains."

"And how far behind us are the elephants?"

"About five leagues. It looks to me as if they're going to try to cut Urvon's column off. There's no help for it, Bel-garath. We're going to have to run. We have to get out of the middle of this before the fighting starts."

"Is Atesca pursuing Zandramas' army?" Zakath asked intently.

"No. I think he followed your orders and pulled back to that enclave on the bank of the Magan."

Belgarath was still swearing. "How did Urvon get this far south so fast?" he muttered.

"He's killing his troops by the score," Beldin replied. "He's making them run, and Nahaz has demons whipping them along."

"I guess we don't have any choice," Belgarath said. "We'll have to go south. Toth, will you be able to lead us to Kell if we go into the mountains down near the border of Gandahar?"

The big mute nodded, then gestured to Durnik.

"It's going to be more difficult, though," the smith translated. "The mountains are very rugged down there, and there's still a lot of snow at the higher elevations."

"We'll lose a lot of time, Grandfather," Garion said.

"Not as much as we'll lose if we get caught in the middle of a battle. All right. Let's go south."

"In a moment, father," Polgara said. "Ce'Nedra," she called, "come up here."

Ce'Nedra shook her reins and drove her carriage up to where they stood.

Polgara quickly explained the situation to her. "Now then," she said, "we need to know exactly what they're doing and what they're planning to do-both armies. I think it's time for you to use my sister's amulet."

"Why didn't I think of that?" Belgarath said, sounding a bit embarrassed.

"You were too busy trying to remember all the swearwords you've ever heard," Beldin suggested.

"Can you do that and drive the carriage at the same time?" Polgara asked the little queen.

"I can try, Lady Polgara." Ce'Nedra sounded a little dubious. She lifted the sleeping puppy out of her lap and laid him beside his mother. "Let's move out," Belgarath said.

They turned off the road and jolted across an open field through long-dead grass. After they had gone a short distance, Ce'Nedra called to Polgara. "It's not working, Lady Polgara," she said. "I need both hands on the reins on this rough ground."

They reined in.

"It's not that big a problem," Velvet said. "I'll lead the carriage horse, and Ce'Nedra can concentrate on what she's doing."

"It's a little dangerous, Liselle," Belgarath objected. "If that carriage horse shies, he'll jerk you out of the saddle and the carriage will run right over you."

"Have you ever seen me fall off a horse, Ancient One? Don't worry, I'll be perfectly fine." She rode over to the carriage horse and took hold of his reins. They started out slowly and then gradually picked up speed. Polgara rode beside the carriage, and Ce'Nedra, a little frown of concentration on her face, kept her hand on the amulet chained about her throat.

"Anything?" Polgara asked.

"I'm hearing a lot of random conversation, Lady Polgara," the little queen replied. "There are great numbers of people out there. Wait a minute," she said, "I think I've pinpointed Nahaz. That's not the sort of voice you forget." She frowned. "I think he's talking to Urvon's generals. They've had the Hounds out, so they know the elephants are coming."

"Will you be able to come back to them?" Belgarath asked her.

"I think so. Once I find somebody, I can usually locate him again fairly quickly."

"Good. See if you can find out if the Darshivan generals know that Urvon's just ahead of them. If there's going to be a battle, I want to know exactly where it's going to happen."

Ce'Nedra turned slightly, her amulet clenched tightly in

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her fist. She closed her eyes. After a moment, she opened them. "I do wish they'd be still," she fretted.

"Who?" Silk asked her.

"The elephant herders. They babble worse than old women. Wait. There they are. I've got them now." She listened for a few moments as the carriage jolted along over the rough ground. "The Darshivan officers are very worried," she reported. "They know that Urvon's army is somewhere in the mountains, but they don't know his exact location. None of their scouts came back to report."

"The Hounds are probably seeing to that," Silk said.

"What are the Darshivans planning?" Belgarath asked.

"They're undecided. They're going to push on cautiously and send out more scouts."

"All right. Now see if you can go back to Nahaz."

"I'll try." She closed her eyes again. "Oh, that's revolting!" she exclaimed after a moment.

"What is it, dear?" Polgara asked her.

"The Karands have found a narrow gorge. They're going to lure the elephants into it and then roll boulders and burning bushes down on them from the top." She listened for a few moments longer. "Once they've eliminated the elephants, the whole army is going to charge down out of the foothills and attack the rest of the Darshivans."

"Is Urvon there?" Beldin asked, his eyes intent.

"No. He's off to the side someplace. He's raving."

"I think you'd better go find that gorge," Belgarath told the dwarf. "That's where the battle's going to be, and I want to be sure it's behind us and not on up ahead somewhere."

"Right," Beldin agreed, crouching and spreading his arms. "Keep in touch," he suggested even as he began to change form.

They rode along at a careful walk, and Garion buckled on his shield.

"Do you really think that's going to help if we run into an entire army?" Zakath asked him.

"It may not help much, but it won't hurt."

Belgarath rode now with his face lifted toward the murky sky. Garion could feel the old man's thought reaching out.

"Not so loud, father," Polgara cautioned. "WeVe got Grolims all around us."

"Good," he replied. "None of them will be able to tell | who's making the noise. They'll all think it's just another Grolim."

jThey rode on slowly with all of them watching the old sqrcerer. "North!" he exploded finally. "Beldin's found the gorge where the ambush is. It's behind us. A little hard riding now and we'll be completely clear of both armies." "Why don't we just sort of step right along, then?" Silk suggested.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

They galloped south through the desolate countryside of western Darshiva with Velvet once again leading Ce'Nedra's horse. The little queen clung to the side of the carriage with one hand and kept the other on her amulet. "The Darshivans still don't know that Urvon's waiting in ambush for them," she called.

"I'd imagine they'll find out before too long," Silk called back.

"How far is it to the border of Gandahar?" Garion asked Zakath.

"I'd guess about twenty leagues."

"Grandfather," Garion said, "do we really have to go that far south?"

"Probably not," the old man replied. "Beldin's on up ahead. As soon as we're well past Urvon's scouts, he'll lead

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us up into the mountains. I don't have any particular urge to explore Gandahar, do you?"

"Not really, no."

They rode on.

The overcast grew perceptibly thicker, and Garion felt the first drops of a chill rain striking his face.

They crested a hill, and Belgarath rose in his stirrups the better to see what lay ahead. "There," he said, pointing. "He's circling."

Garion peered out across the shallow valley on the far side of the hill. A solitary bird, hardly more than a minuscule black speck in the distance, swung almost lazily in the air. They plunged down the hill, and the bird veered and flew off toward the west with slow strokes of his wings. They turned and followed.

The intermittent rain turned to a chilly drizzle, obscuring the surrounding countryside with its filmy haze.

"Don't you just love to ride in the rain?" Silk said with heavy irony.

"Under the circumstances, yes," Sadi replied. "Rain's not quite as good as fog, but it does cut down the visibility, and there are all manner of people looking for us."

"You've got a point there," Silk admitted, pulling his cloak tighter about him.

The terrain grew increasingly rugged with outcroppings of weathered stone jutting up out of the ground. After about a half-hour of hard riding, Beldin led them into a shallow gully. They rode on, and the gully walls grew progressively steeper and higher. Soon they were riding up a narrow, rocky ravine.

It was midafternoon by now, and they were all thoroughly soaked. Garion wiped his face and peered ahead. The sky to the west appeared to be growing lighter, giving promise of clearing. He had perhaps not even been aware of how much the prevailing gloom hanging over Darshiva had depressed him. He urged Chretienne into a run. Somehow he seemed to feel that once they reached the sunlight again, they would be safe.

He rounded a bend in the ravine and saw Beldin standing in the trail ahead of them. The dwarfs matted hair hung in scraggly wet strands about his shoulders, and his beard was

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dripping. "You'd better slow down," he growled at them. "I could hear you coming for a mile, and we're not alone in these foothills."

Regretfully, Garion reined Chretienne in.

"Exactly where does this ravine lead?" Belgarath asked the hunchback.

"It twists and turns a lot, but eventually it opens out onto a ridge top. The ridge runs north and south. If we follow it north, we'll come to the main caravan route. That's the fastest way down into Dalasia."

"Everybody else knows that, too."

"That's all right. We'll be at least a day ahead of them. They still have a battle to fight."

"Are you going to scout ahead again?"

"Not until the rain lets up. My feathers are wet. It'd take a derrick to get me off the ground again. Oh, one other thing. When we get to that ridge, we're going to have to be careful. A couple leagues north, it runs just a few miles above the spot where Nahaz has his ambush set up."

"Your choice of a route leaves a lot to be desired," Belgarath said. "If someone down there happens to look up, we'll have half of Urvon's army all over us."

"Not unless they can fly. An earthquake went through here a few thousand years ago and it sliced off the side of that ridge. It's a very steep cliff now."

"How high?"

"High enough-a thousand feet or so."

"How far is it to the caravan route?"

"About fifteen leagues from the place where we'll come out on the ridge."

"North of Urvon's army, then?"

"Quite a bit north, yes."

"Why did Nahaz pass it by? Why didn't he just turn west?"

"He probably didn't want the Darshivans and their elephants coming up behind him. Besides, he's a demon. I'd guess he just couldn't bring himself to pass up the chance for a mass slaughter."

"Maybe. Do you think the battle's going to start this afternoon?"

"I doubt it. Elephants don't move all that fast, and the

Darshivans are moving cautiously. They'll stop for the night soon. First thing tomorrow morning, though, things are going to start getting noisy."

"Maybe we can get past the place where the ambush is set up during the night."

"I wouldn't advise it. You won't be able to light any torches, and that cliff's a sheer drop. If you ride off the edge of it, you'll bounce all the way back to the Magan."

Belgarath grunted. "Are you sure you can't fly?"

"Not a chance. Right now you couldn't get me into the air with a catapult."

"Why don't you change into a duck?"

"Why don't you mind your own business?"

"All right, Garion," Belgarath said with some resignation, "I guess it's up to us, then." He slid down out of his saddle and walked on up the ravine. Garion sighed, dismounted, and followed him.

They ranged out ahead, searching the soggy terrain with their ears and noses. It was almost evening when the walls of the ravine began to fan out, and they could see the line of the ridge top ahead. They reached it and loped north through the gradually diminishing drizzle.

"Grandfather," Garion said, "I think that's a cave over there." He pointed with his muzzle at an opening in the rock.

"Let's look."

The opening of the cave was narrow, not much more than a wide crack, and the cavern did not open up noticeably inside. It was deep, however, running far back into the rock. It seemed more like a long corridor than a room.

"What do you think?" Garion asked as the two of them stood at the entrance peering back into the darkness.

"It's a place to get in out of the weather, and it's a good place to hide for the night. Go get the others, and I'll see if I can get a fire started."

Garion turned and loped back down the ridge. The rain was definitely slacking off now, but the wind was coming up, and it was getting colder.

The others were coming warily up out of the ravine when Garion reached them.

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"Another cave?" Silk said plaintively when Garion told them what he and Belgarath had found.

"I'll hold your hand, Kheldar," Velvet offered.

"I appreciate the gesture, Liselle, but I don't think it's going to help very much. I loathe caves."

"Someday you'll have to tell me why."

"No. I don't think so. I don't like to talk about it. I don't even like to think about it."

Garion led them to the narrow track atop the ridge. Ce'Nedra's carriage jolted over the rocky ground. The smug look that had come over her face when she had expropriated the vehicle had evaporated, and she rode with resignation, wincing at every bump.

"That's not much of a cave," Beldin said critically when they reached the opening in the rock.

"Feel free to sleep outside," Belgarath told him.

"We're going to have to put blinders on the horses to get them inside/" Durnik noted. "They'll take one look at that opening and flatly refuse even to try it."

"I feel much the same way myself," Silk said. "Sometimes it's surprising just how intelligent horses really are."

"We're not going to be able to get the carriage inside," Sadi said.

"We can cover it with tent canvas and sprinkle dirt over it," Durnik said. "It won't be really visible-at least not in the dark."

"Let's get started," Belgarath said. "I think we want to be inside before it gets much darker."

It took the better part of half an hour to get the balky horses into the narrow cave. Then Durnik covered the entrance with tent canvas and went back outside to help Eriond and Toth conceal the carriage.

The she-wolf had limped into the cave, followed by her frolicsome pup. Now that he was being fed regularly, the previously listless animal had turned playful. His mother, too, Garion noted, had begun to fill out again, and her fur was glossy and less matted. "An excellent den," she observed. "Will we hunt from here?"

"No, little sister," Polgara replied, stirring the small pot of simmering herbs on the fire. "We have things that must be done in another place. Let me have a look at your hurt."

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Obediently, the wolf lay down by the fire and extended her injured paw. Polgara gently unwrapped it and examined the ulcers. "Much better," she said. "It's nearly healed. Does it still cause you pain?"

"Pain is to be endured," the wolf replied indifferently. "It is of no moment."

"The amount of pain, however, tells us how much longer it will be until the hurt is gone."

"That is true," the wolf admitted. "I have observed the same thing myself in times past. The pain is less now. The hurt is going away, I think."

Polgara bathed the injured paw in the pungent juice from her pot, then mixed the pulped herbs with soap and sugar again, packed it over the wound, and replaced the bandage. "We will not have to do this again, little sister," she told her patient. "The hurt is nearly gone."

"I am grateful," the wolf said simply. "Will I be able to walk when it grows light again? The thing which runs on round feet is most uncomfortable to sit in, and the she who makes it run talks much."

"Sit in it one more time while it is light," Polgara advised. "Give the hurt that much more time to go away."

The wolf sighed and laid her chin on her paws.

They carried water from a nearby spring, and Polgara cooked supper. After they had eaten, Belgarath rose to his feet. "Let's have a look around," he said to Garion. "I want to get an idea of what we're dealing with."

Garion nodded and stood up. The two of them went outside the cave, carrying Silk's supper out to him. The little man had volunteered, enthusiastically, Garion thought, to stand watch. "Where are you going?" he asked, sitting down on a rock to eat.

"We're going to nose around a bit," Belgarath replied.

"Good idea. You want me to come along?"

"No. You'd better stay here and keep your eyes open. Warn the others if anybody comes up the ridge." Then the old man led Garion a few hundred feet up the ridge line, and the two of them made the change into their

other forms. Garion had changed back and forth so many times in the past few months that at times the distinction between the two shapes had begun to blur and, oftentimes, even when

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he was in his human form, he found himself thinking in the language of wolves. He loped along behind the great silver wolf, considering this peculiar loss of identity.

Belgarath stopped. "Keep your mind on what we're doing," he said. "Your ears and nose won't be much good to us if you're wool-gathering."

"Yes, revered pack-leader," Garion replied, feeling very embarrassed. Wolves seldom needed reprimanding and they were covered with shame when it happened.

When they reached the spot where the side of the ridge had been sheared away by the earthquake, they stopped. The foothills that sloped down toward the plain were dark. Urvon's army was obviously under orders to build no fires. Out on the plain itself, however, the watch fires twinkled in profusion like small orange stars.

"Zandramas has a big army," Garion sent his thought quietly to his grandfather.

"Yes," the old man agreed. "That battle tomorrow morning might take quite a while. Even Nahaz's demons are going to need a lot of time to kill that many people."

"The longer the better. They can take all week, if they want to. We could be halfway to Kell by then."

Belgarath looked around. "Let's go on up the ridge a ways and have a look."

"All right."

Despite Beldin's warning that there might be scouts from the two armies here in the higher foothills, the two wolves encountered no one. "They probably went back to report," Garion heard Belgarath's voice speaking in his mind. "They'll be out again first thing in the morning, most likely. Let's go on back to the cave and get some sleep."

They rose early the following morning, long before first light. They were all subdued as they ate breakfast. Although the two armies facing each other below them were composed entirely of enemies, none of them took any particular pleasure in the prospect of the bloodshed the day would bring. After breakfast, they carried out the packs and their saddles and, last of all, they led out the horses.

"You're quiet this morning, Garion," Zakath said as the two were saddling their mounts.

* 'I was just wondering if mere might be some way to stop ;what's going to happen today.'

"Not really," Zakath told him. "Their positions are too firmly fixed. It's too late to turn it back now. The Darshivans will advance, and Urvon's army will ambush them. I Ve organized enough battles to know that at a certain point tilings become inevitable."

"The way Thull Mardu was?"

"Thull Mardu was a blunder," Zakath admitted. "I should have gone around Ce'Nedra's army instead of trying to go through it. The Grolims had me convinced that they could hold that fog in place all day. I should have known better than to believe them. And I definitely shouldn't have underestimated the Asturian bowmen. How can they possibly shoot arrows that fast?"

"There's a knack to it. Lelldorin showed me how it's done."

"Lelldorin?"

"An Asturian friend of mine."

"We've always been told that Arends are stupid to the point of imbecility."

"They're not overly bright," Garion admitted. "Maybe that's what makes them such good soldiers. They don't have enough imagination to be afraid." He smiled in the darkness. "Mendorallen can't even conceive of the possibility that he could lose a fight. He'd attack your whole army-all by himself."

"The Baron of Vo Mendor? I know his reputation." Zakath laughed wryly. "It's entirely possible that he'd win, you

know. * *

"Don't ever tell him that. He has enough problems as it is." Garion sighed. "I wish he were here, though-and Barak and Hettar and even Relg."

"Relg?" L , "

"He's an Ulgo mystic. He walks through rock.

Zakath stared at him.

"I don't know how, so don't ask me. I saw him stick a Grolim into a large boulder once. Then he just left him there with only his hands sticking out."

Zakath shuddered.

They mounted and rode slowly up the ravine with

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Ce'Nedra's carriage jolting along behind them. The sky gradually grew lighter overhead, and Garion saw that they were approaching the edge of the cliff that overlooked the site of the impending battle.

"Belgarath," Zakath said quietly, "would you mind a suggestion?"

"I'll always listen to suggestions."

"This is probably the only place where we'll be able to see what's going on down below. Wouldn't it be a good idea to stop and make sure that the armies down there are fully engaged before we move on? If the

Darshivans outflank Ur-von's ambush, we'll have them no more than a few leagues behind us. We'll need to run at that point."

Belgarath frowned. "You might be right," he conceded. "It never hurts to know the whole situation." He reined in. "All right," he said, "we'll stop here and go ahead on foot. There's cover enough at the edge of that cliff so that we can watch without being seen." He swung down from his horse.

"The ladies and I will wait here, father," Polgara told him. "We've seen battles before. I don't think we need to watch another one." She glanced at Eriond. "You stay with us, too," she told him.

"Yes, Polgara."

The rest of them moved forward at a crouch and took cover behind the few boulders at the edge of the cliff. The gloomy overcast that hung perpetually over Darshiva covered the blasted and decaying plain below with a sullen twilight. Out on the plain, Garion could make out tiny-appearing figures moving forward at what seemed no more than a crawl.

"I think I've detected a flaw in what was otherwise an excellent plan," Zakath said wryly. "They're too far away to make out any details."

"I can take care of that," Beldin growled. "A hawk's eyes are about ten times more acute than a man's. I can circle over them at a few hundred feet and pick out every detail."

"Are you sure your feathers are dry?" Belgarath asked.

"That's why I slept near the fire last night."

"All right. Keep me advised."

"Naturally," The grim hunchback crouched and blurred. With an agile leap the hawk settled atop a boulder, his fierce eyes looking out over the plain. Then he spread his wings and dropped headlong off the cliff.

"You people always take that so casually," Zakath noted.

"It's not really that," Sadi murmured, rubbing his scalp. "It's just that we're numb. The first time I saw him do it, my hair stood on end, and for me that's a neat trick."

"Urvon's army's hiding in shallow pits along the ridge tops on either side of that long gorge," Belgarath repeated the silent words of the hawk soaring through the murky air for below them, "and the elephants are moving directly toward the same gorge."

Zakath leaned out over the edge and looked down.

"Careful," Garion said, catching the Mallorean's arm with one hand.

"It is a long way down," Zakath agreed. "All right then," he said. "Now I see why the Darshivans are making for that gorge. It branches at the foot of this cliff, and one branch goes north. It probably connects with the main caravan route." He thought about it. "It's actually a good strategy. If Nahaz hadn't driven his troops so hard, the Darshivans would have reached the caravan route first, and they could have set up an ambush of their own." He pulled back away from the edge of the cliff. "That's one of the reasons I always hate to operate in rough terrain. I got a number of very nasty surprises in Cthol Murgos."

"The elephants are starting to form up into a column,** Belgarath reported, "and the rest of the Darshivans are strung out behind them."

"Are they putting out scouts?" Zakath asked.

"Yes, but they're only scouting along the floor of the gorge. A few of them went up to the ridge tops, but the Hounds eliminated those."

They waited as Beldin circled above the two armies.

"They're committed now," Belgarath said sadly. "The elephants are starting into the gorge."

"I feel a little sorry for the elephants," Durnik said. "They didn't volunteer for this. I wish they didn't plan to me fire on them."

"It's fairly standard, Goodman," Zakath said calmly.

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"Fire's the only thing elephants are really afraid of. They'll stampede back down the gorge."

"Right through the Darshivans," Silk added in a slightly sick voice. "Nahaz should get his fill of blood today."

"Do we really have to watch this?" Durnik asked.

"We have to wait until it gets started," Belgarath replied.

"I think I'll go back and wait with Pol," the smith said, edging back from the cliff top. Then he and Toth went on down the ridge.

"He's a very gentle person, isn't he?" Zakath said.

"Usually," Garion replied. "When it's necessary, though, he can do what needs doing."

"You remember the time he chased that Murgo into a quicksand bog," Silk said with a shudder, "and then watched him sink?"

"It shouldn't be too long now," Belgarath said tensely. "The last of the elephants just entered the gorge."

They waited. For some reason, Garion felt suddenly cold.

Then, even though what was happening was more than a league away, they heard a thunderous rumbling sound as Urvon's troops began to roll huge boulders down on the advancing elephants. Faintly they could hear the agonized screams of the huge beasts. Then, smoke and flame began to boil up out of the gorge as the brutish Karands rained huge piles of burning brush down on the helpless animals.

"I think I've seen enough," Sadi said. He rose and went back down the ridge.

The surviving elephants, looking almost like ants in the distance, wheeled and fled in panic back down the gorge, and the agonized squeals of the animals were suddenly accompanied by human screams as the great beasts crushed their way through rank after rank of Darshivan soldiers.

Beldin came soaring up from below and settled back on the boulder from which he had started.

"What's that?" Silk exclaimed. "There at the mouth of the gorge."

There seemed to be some vast disturbance in the murky air at the edge of the plain, a sort of shimmering filled with flickering, rainbow-hued light and sullen flashes of heat lightning. Then, quite suddenly, the disturbance coalesced into a nightmare.

"Belar!" Silk swore. "It's as big as a barn!"

The thing was hideous. It had a dozen or more snakelike arms that writhed and lashed at the air. It had three blazing eyes and a vast muzzle filled with great fangs. It towered over the elephants and kicked them aside contemptuously with huge, clawed feet. Then with thunderous stride, it started up the gorge, walking indifferently through the flames and paying no more attention to the boulders bouncing off its shoulders than it might have to snowflakes.

"What is that thing?" Zakath asked in a shaken voice.

"That's Mordja," Belgarath told him. "I've seen him before-in Morindland-and that's not the sort of face one forgets."

The demon in the gorge was reaching out with his many arms now, catching whole platoons of Karands in his clawed hands and almost casually hurling them with terrific force against the surrounding rocks.

"It looks to me as if the tide of battle just turned," Silk said. "What's our general feeling about leaving-along about right now?"

The Demon Lord Mordja raised his huge muzzle and thundered something in a language too hideous for human comprehension.

"Stay put!" Belgarath ordered, catching Silk's arm. "This isn't played out yet. That was a challenge, and Nahaz won't be able to refuse it."

Another of those flickering disturbances appeared in the air above the upper end of the gorge, and another towering form appeared out of its center. Garion could not see its face, a fact for which he was profoundly grateful, but it, too, had snaky arms growing in profusion from its vast shoulders. "Thou darest to face me, Mordja?" it roared in a voice which shook the nearby mountains.

"I do not fear thee, Nahaz," Mordja bellowed back.

"Our enmity hath endured for a thousand thousand years.

..Let it end here. I shall carry word of thy death back to the

{'-King of Hell and bear thy head with me as proof of my

Swords."

"My head is thine," Nahaz said with a chilling laugh. "Come and take it-if thou canst."

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"And thou wouldst bestow the stone of power on the mad Disciple of maimed Torak?" Mordja sneered.

"Thy sojourn in the land of the Morindim hath bereft thee of thy wits, Mordja. The stone of power shall be mine, and I shall rule these ants that creep upon the face of this world. I will raise them like cattle and feed upon them when I hunger. **"

"How wilt thou feed, Nahaz-without thy head? It is I who will rule and feed here, for the stone of power shall lie in my hand."

"That we will soon discover, Mordja. Come. Let us contend for a head and for the stone we both desire." Suddenly Nahaz spun about, his baleful eyes searching the top of the cliff where Garion and his friends lay hidden. A volcanic hiss burst from the demon's distorted lips. "The Child of Light!" he roared. "Praise the name of the King of Hell, who hath brought him within my reach. I will rend him asunder and seize the stone which he carries. Thou art doomed, Mordja. That stone in my hand shall be thy undoing." With hideous speed the Demon Lord Nahaz clambered over the tumbled rocks at the foot of the cliff and reached out with his dozens of clawed hands at the sheer rock face. His vast shoulders heaved.

"He's climbing straight up the rock!" Silk exclaimed in a strangled voice. "Let's get out of here!"

The Demon Lord Mordja stood for a moment in stunned chagrin, then he, too, ran forward and began to claw his way up the face of the cliff.

Garion rose to his feet, looking down at the two vast monsters clambering up the sheer rock. He felt a peculiar detachment as he reached back over his shoulder and drew his sword. He untied the leather sleeve covering the hilt and slipped it off. The Orb glowed, and when he took the sword in both hands, the familiar blue flame ran up the blade.

"Garion!" Zakath exclaimed.

"They want the Orb," Garion said grimly. "Well, they're going to have to take it, and I may have something to say about that."

But then Durnik was there. His face was calm, and he was stripped to the waist. In his right hand he carried an awesome sledgehammer that glowed as blue as Garion's

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sword. "Excuse me, Garion," he said in a matter-of-fact tone, "but this is my task."

Polgara had come with him, and her face showed no fear. She had drawn her blue cloak about her, and the snowy lock at her brow glowed.

"What's happening here?" Belgarath demanded.

"Stay out of it, father," Polgara told him. "This is something that has to happen."

Durnik advanced to the edge of the cliff and looked down at the two horrors struggling up the sheer face toward him. "**I abjure ye," he said to them in a great voice, "return to the place from whence ye came, lest ye die." Overlaying his voice was another voice, calm, almost gentle, but with a power in it that shook Garion as a tree is shaken by a hurricane. He knew that voice.

"Begone!" Durnik commanded, emphasizing that word with a dreadful blow of his sledge that shattered a boulder into fragments.

The demons clawing their way up the cliff hesitated.

At first it was barely perceptible. At first it seemed that Durnik was only swelling his chest and shoulders in preparation for an impossible struggle. Then Garion saw his oldest friend begin to grow. At ten feet, the smith was awesome. At twenty, he was beyond belief. The great hammer in his hand grew with him, and the blue nimbus about it grew more intense as he expanded and grew, thrusting the sullen air aside with his massive shoulders. The very rocks seemed to cringe back from him as, with long sweeps of his dreadful, glowing hammer, he loosened his arm.

The Demon Lord Mordja paused, clinging to the rock. His bestial face suddenly showed fear. Again Durnik destroyed whole square yards of rock with a single ringing blow.

Nahaz, however, his eyes ablaze and empty of thought, continued to slather and claw his way up the rock face, screeching imprecations in that dreadful language which only demons know.

r; "So be it, then," Durnik said, and the voice in which he
{ spoke was not his own, but that other, more profound voice,
which rang in Garion's ears like the very crack of doom.

The Demon Lord Mordja looked up, his terrible face filled

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with terror. Then suddenly he released his grip on the face of the rock cliff to topple and tumble to the rocks below. Howling, and with his multitudinous arms covering his scabrous head, he fled,

Nahaz, however, his blazing eyes filled with madness, continued to sink his claws into naked rock and to haul his vast body up the cliff.

Almost politely, it seemed, Durnik stepped back from the awful brink and wrapped both enormous hands about the glowing handle of his sledge.

"Durnik!" Silk cried. "No! Don't let him get his feet under him!"

Durnik did not reply, but a faint smile touched his honest face. Again he tested his vast hammer, swinging it in both hands. The sound of its passage through the air was not a whistle, but a roar.

Nahaz clambered up over the edge of the cliff and rose enormously, clawing at the sky and roaring insanely in the hideous language of the demons.

Durnik spat on his left hand; then on his right. He twisted his huge hands on the handle of his sledge to set them in place, then he swung a vast, overhand blow that took the Demon Lord full in the chest. "Begone!" the smith roared in a voice louder than thunder. The sledge struck fiery sparks from the demon's body, sullen orange sparks that sizzled and jumped on the ground like burning roaches.

Nahaz screamed, clutching at his chest.

Unperturbed, Durnik swung again.

And again.

Garion recognized the rhythm of his friend's strokes. Durnik was not fighting; he was hammering with the age-old precision of a man whose tools are but an extension of his arms. Again and again the glowing hammer crashed into the body of the Demon Lord. With each blow, the sparks flew. Nahaz cringed, trying to shield his body from those awful, shattering strokes. Each time Durnik struck, he roared, "Begone!" Gradually, like a man splitting a huge rock, he began to hammer Nahaz into pieces. Pythonlike arms fell writhing into the abyss, and great, craterlike holes appeared in the demon's chest.

Unable to watch the dreadful work any longer, Garion

averted his eyes. Far below, he saw Urvon's throne. The two dozen bearers who had carried it had fled, and the mad Disciple capered on the rocks howling insanely.

Durnik struck again. "Begone!" "•And again. "Begone!"

And again. "Begone!"

Beaten beyond endurance, the Demon Lord Nahaz flinched back, missed his footing, and toppled off the cliff with a howl of rage and despair. Down and down he plunged, glowing with green fire like a streaking comet. As he drove into the earth, one snakelike arm lashed out and caught the last Disciple of Torak in a deathly grip. Urvon, shrieking, was pulled along as Nahaz sank into the earth like a stick into water.

When Garion looked back, Durnik had resumed his normal size. His chest and arms were covered with sweat, and he was breathing hard from his exertions. He held his glowing sledge out at arm's length, and its fire grew brighter and brighter until it was incandescent. Then the fire gradually faded, and the smith was holding a silver amulet in his hand with its chain draped across the backs of his fingers.

The voice which had overlain Durnik's during his awful encounter with the Demon Lord now spoke in no more than a whisper. "Know that this good man is also my beloved Disciple, since he was best suited of all of ye for this task."

Belgarath bowed in the direction the voice was coming from. "It shall be as You say, Master," he said in a voice thick with emotion. "We welcome him as a brother."

Polgara came forward with a look of wonder on her face and gently took the amulet from Durnik's hand. "How very appropriate," she said softly, looking at the silver disc. She lovingly hung the chain around her husband's neck, then she kissed him and held him to her tightly.

"Please, Pol," he objected with flaming cheeks, "we're not alone, you know."

She laughed her warm, rich laugh and held him even tighter.

Beldin was grinning crookedly. "Nice job, brother mine," he said to Durnik. "Hot work though, I'd imagine." He reached out his hand and took a foaming tankard out of the air and handed it to Aldur's newest Disciple.

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Durnik drank gratefully.

Belgarath clapped him on the shoulder. "It's been a long, long time since we last had a new brother," he said. Then he quickly embraced Durnik.

"Oh," Ce'Nedra said with a little catch in her voice, "that's just beautiful."

Wordlessly, Velvet handed her the wispy little handkerchief. "What is that on his amulet?" the blond girl asked, sounding just a bit awed.

"It's a hammer," Belgarath told her. "What else could it be?"

"If I might make a suggestion, Ancient One," Sadi said diffidently, "the armies down there on the plain seem to be in a state of total confusion. Wouldn't this be an excellent time to depart-before they regain their wits?"

"My thought exactly," Silk approved, putting his hand on the eunuch's shoulder.

"They're right, Belgarath," Beldin agreed. "We've done what we were sent here to do-or Durnik has, at least." The hunchback sighed and looked over the edge of the cliff. "I really wanted to kill Urvon myself," he said, "but I suppose this is even better. I hope he enjoys his sojourn in Hell."

A shrill laugh suddenly came from the top of the ridge, a laugh of triumph. Garion whirled, then stopped, frozen with surprise. Atop the ridge stood the black-robed figure of the Sorceress of Darshiva. Beside her stood a blond little boy. Geran's features had changed in the year and more since he had been abducted, but Garion knew him instantly. "Ye have done my work well," Zandramas declared. "I myself could not have found a more fitting end for Torak's last Disciple. Now, Child of Light, only thou standest between me and Cthrag Sardius. I will await thy coming in the Place Which Is No More. There shall thou be a witness when I raise up a New God over Angorak, whose dominion over all the world shall endure until the end of days!"

Geran reached out his hand imploringly to Ce'Nedra, but then he and Zandramas vanished.

"How remarkable," the she-wolf said in surprise.

DAVID EDDINGS

Here ends Book IV of The Malloreon. Book V, The Seeress of Kell, will take up the final result of the War of Destinies and of the people involved.

PROLOGUE

Excerpts from The Book of Ages, Book One of THE MALLO-REAN GOSPELS:

Now These are the Ages of Man:

In the First Age was man created, and he awoke in puzzlement and wonder as he beheld the world about him. And those that had made him considered him and selected from his number those that pleased them, and the rest were cast out and driven away. And some went in search of the Spirit known as UL, and they left us and passed into the west, and we saw them no more. And some denied the Gods, and they went into the far north to wrestle with demons. And some turned to worldly matters, and they went away into the east and built mighty cities there.

But we despaired, and we sat us down upon the earth in the shadow of the mountains of Korim, and in bitterness we bewailed our fate that we had been made and then cast out.

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And it came to pass that in the midst of our grief a woman of our people was seized by a rapture, and it was as if she had been shaken by a mighty hand. And she arose from the earth upon which she sat, and she bound her eyes with a cloth, signifying that she had seen that which no mortal had seen before, for lo, she was the first seeress in all the world. And with the touch of her vision still upon her, she spake unto us, saying:

"Behold! A feast hath been set before Those who made us, and this feast shall ye call the Feast of Life. And Those who made us have chosen that which pleased Them, and that which pleased Them not was not chosen.

"Now we are the Feast of Life, and ye sorrow that no Guest at the feast hath chosen ye. Despair not, however, for one Guest hath not yet arrived at the feast. The other Guests have taken their fill, but this great Feast of Life awaiteth still the Beloved Guest who cometh late, and I say unto all the people that it is He who will choose us. Abide therefore against His coming, for it is certain. Put aside thy grief and turn thy face to the sky and to the earth that thou mayest read the signs written there, for this I say unto all the people. It is upon ye that His coming rests. For behold, He may not choose ye unless ye choose Him. And this is the Fate for which we were made. Rise up, therefore, and sit no more upon the earth in vain and foolish lamentation. Take up the task which lies before ye and prepare the way for Him who will surely come."

Much we marveled at these words, and we considered them most carefully. We questioned the seeress, but her answers were dark and obscure. And so it was that we turned our faces to the sky and bent our ears to the whispers which came from the earth that we might see and hear and learn. And as we learned to read the book of the skies and to hear the whispers within the rocks, we found myriad warnings that two spirits would come to us and that the one was good and the other evil. Long we labored, but still were sorely troubled, for we could not determine which spirit was the true one and which the

false. For truly, evil is disguised as good in the book of the heavens and in the speech of the earth, and no man is wise enough to choose between them.

Pondering this, we went out from beneath the shadow of the mountains of Korim and into the lands beyond, where we abode. And we put aside the concerns of man and bent all our efforts to the task that lay before us. Our witches and our seers sought the aid of the spirit world, our necromancers took counsel with

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the dead, and our diviners sought advice from the earth. But lo, none of these knew more than we.

Then gathered we at last upon a fertile plain to bring together all that we had learned. And these are the truths that we have learned from the stars, from the rocks, from the hearts of men and from the minds of the spirits:

Know ye that all adown the endless avenues of time hath division marred all that is—for there is division at the very heart of creation. And some have said that this is natural and will persist until the end of days, but it is not so. Were the division destined to be eternal, then the purpose of creation would be to contain it. But the stars and the spirits and the voices within the rocks speak of the day when the division will end and all will be made one again, for creation itself knows that the day will come.

Know ye further that two spirits contend with each other at the very center of time, and these spirits are the two sides of that which hath divided creation. And in a certain time shall those spirits meet upon this world, and then will come the time of the Choice. And if the Choice be not made, then shall this world vanish, and the Beloved Guest of whom the seeress spoke will never come. For it is this which she meant when she said to us: "Behold, He may not choose ye unless ye choose Him." And the Choice that we must make is the choice between good and evil, and the division between good and evil, and the reality that will exist after we have made the choice will be a reality of good or a reality of evil, and it will prevail so until the end of

Behold also this truth: the rocks of this world and of all other worlds murmur continually of the two stones that lie at the center of the division. Once these stones were one, and they stood at the very center of all of creation, but, like all else, they were divided, and in the instant of division they were rent apart with a force that destroyed whole suns. And where these stones come into the presence of each other again, there surely will be the fast confrontation between the two spirits. Now the day will come when all will be made one again, except that the division between the two stones is so great that they can never be rejoined. And in the day when the division ends shall one of the Atones cease forever to exist, and in that day also shall one of Ij&C spirits forever vanish. --"fliese then were the truths that we had gathered, and it was

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our discovery of these truths that marked the end of the First Age.

Now the Second Age of man began hi thunder and earthquake, for lo, the earth herself split apart, and the sea rushed in to divide the lands of men even as creation itself is divided. And the mountains of Korim shuddered and groaned and heaved as the sea swallowed them. And we knew that this would come to pass, for our seers had warned us that it would be so. We went our way, therefore, and found safety before the world was cracked and the sea first rushed away and then rushed back and never departed more.

And in the days that followed the rushing in of the sea, the children of the Dragon God fled from the waters, and they abode to the north of us beyond the mountains. Now our seers told us that the children of the Dragon God would one day come among us as conquerors. And we took counsel with each other and considered how we might least offend the children of the Dragon God when they should come so that they would not interrupt our studies. In the end we concluded that our warlike neighbors would be least apprehensive about simple tillers of the soil living in rude communities on the land, and we so ordered our lives. We pulled down our cities and carried away the stones and we betook ourselves back to the land so that we might not alarm our neighbors nor arouse their envy.

And the years passed and became centuries, and the centuries passed and became eons. And as we had known they would, the children of Angarak came down amongst us and established their overlordship. And they called the lands in which we dwelt Dalasia, and we did what they wished us to do and continued our studies.

Now at about this time it came to pass in the far north that a disciple of the God Aldur came with certain others to reclaim a thing that the Dragon God had stolen from Aldur. And that act was so important that when it was done, the Second Age ended, and the Third Age began.

Now it was in the Third Age that the priests of Angarak, which men call Grolims, came to speak to us of the Dragon God and of His hunger for our love, and we considered what they said even as we considered all things men told us. And we consulted the book of the heavens and confirmed that Tbrak was the incarnate God-aspect of one of the spirits which contend at the center of tune. But where was the other? How might men choose when but one of the spirits came to them? Then it was that we

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perceived our dreadful responsibility. The spirits would come to us, each in its own time, and each would proclaim that it was good and the other was evil. It was man, however, who would choose. And we took counsel among ourselves, and we concluded that we might accept the forms of the worship that the Grolims so urgently pressed upon us. This would give us the opportunity to examine the nature of the Dragon God and make us better prepared to choose when the other God appeared.

In time the events of the world intruded upon us. The An-garaks allied themselves by marriage with the great city-builders of the

east, who called themselves Melcene, and between them they built an empire that bestrode the continent. Now the An-garaks were doers of deeds, but the Melcenes were performers of tasks. A deed once done is done forever, but a task returns every day, and the Melcenes came among us to seek out those who might aid them in their endless tasks. Now as it chanced to happen, one of our kinsmen who aided the Melcenes had occasion to journey to the north in performance of one of those tasks. And he came to a place called Ashaba and sought shelter there from a storm that had overtaken him. And the Master of me house at Ashaba was neither Grolim nor Angarak nor any other man. Our kinsman had come unaware upon the house of Torak. Now, Torak was curious about our people, and He sent for the traveler, and our kinsman went in to behold the Dragon God. And in the instant that he looked upon die face of Torak, the Third Age ended, and the Fourth Age began. For lo, the Dragon God of Angarak was not one of the Gods for whom we waited. The signs that were upon Him did not lead beyond Him, and our kinsman saw in an instant that Torak was doomed, and that which He was would die with Him.

And men we perceived our error, and we marveled at what we had not seen—that even a God might be but the tool of destiny. For behold, Torak was of one of the two fates, but he was not the entire fate.

Now it happened that on the far side of the world a king was slain, and all his family with him—save one. And this king had been die keeper of one of th& two stones of power, and when wonl of mis was brought to Torak, He exulted, for He believed that an ancient foe was no more. Then it was that He began His preparations to do war upon the kingdoms of the west. But the signs in the heavens and the whispers in the rocks told us that it was not as Torak believed. The stone was still guarded, and the

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line of the guardian remained unbroken. Torak's war would bring Him to grief.

The preparations of the Dragon God were long, and the tasks He laid upon his people were the tasks of generations. And even as we, Torak watched the heavens to read there the signs that would tell Him when to move against the west. But Torak watched only for the signs He wished to see and He did not read the entire message written in the sky. Reading thus but a small part of the signs, He set His forces in motion on the worst possible day.

And, as we had known it must, disaster befell the armies of Tbrak on a broad plain lying before the city of Vb Mimbire in the far west. And the Dragon God was bound in sleep to await the coming of His enemy.

And then it was that a whisper began to reach us with yet another name. The whisper of that name became clearer to us, and upon the day of his birth the whisper of his name became a great shout. Belgarion the Godslayer had come at last.

And now the pace of events quickened, and the rush toward the awful meeting became so swift that the pages of the book of the heavens became as a blur. And then upon the day that men celebrate as the day the world was made, the stone of power was delivered up to Belgarion;

and in the instant that his hand closed upon it, the book of the heavens filled with a great light, and the sound of Belgarion's name rang from the farthest star.

And then we felt Belgarion moving toward Malioarea bearing the stone of power, and we could feel Torak stirring as his sleep grew fitful. And finally there came that dreadful night. As we watched helplessly, the vast pages of the book of the heavens moved so rapidly that we could not read them. And then the book stopped, and we read one terrible line, "Tbrak is slain," and the book shuddered, and all the light in all of creation went out. And in that awful instant of darkness and silence, the Fourth Age ended, and the Fifth Age began.

And as the Fifth Age began, we found a mystery in the book of the heavens. Before, all had moved toward the meeting between Belgarion and Torak, but now events moved toward a different meeting. There were signs among the stars which told us that the fates had selected yet other aspects for their final encounter, and we could feel the movements of those presences, but we knew not who or what they might be, for the pages of the great book were dark and obscure. Yet we felt a presence shrouded and veiled in darkness, and it moved through the af-

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fairs of men, and the moon spoke most clearly, advising us that this dark presence was a woman.

One thing we saw in all the vast confusion that now clouded the book of the heavens. The Ages of man grew shorter as each one passed, and the Events that were the meetings between the two fates were growing closer and closer together. The time for leisurely contemplation had passed, and now we must hasten lest the last Event come upon us all unaware.

We decided that we must goad or deceive the participants in that final Event so that they should both come to the appointed place at the destined time.

And we sent the similitude of She Who Must Make the Choice to the veiled and hooded presence of dark and to Belgarion the Godslayer, and she set them upon the path that would lead them at last to the place of our choosing.

And then we all turned to our preparations, for much remained to be done, and we knew that this Event would be the last. The division of creation had endured for too long; and in this meeting between the two fates the division would end and all would be made one again.

Part One

KELL

CHAPTER ONE

The air was thin and cool and richly scented with the odor of trees that shed no leaves but stood dark green and resinous from one end of their lives to the other. The sunlight on the snowfields above them

was dazzling, and the sound of tumbling water seething down and down rocky streambeds to feed rivers leagues below on the plains of Darshiva and Gandahar was constantly in their ears. That tumble and roar of waters rushing to their destined meeting with the great River Magan was accompanied by the soft, melancholy sighing of an endless wind passing through the deep-green forest of pine and fir and spruce which clad hills that reached toward the sky in a kind of unthinking yearning. The caravan route Garion and his friends followed rose up and up, winding along streambeds and mounting the sides of ridges. From atop each ridge they could see yet another, and looming over all was the spine of the continent where peaks beyond imagining soared upward to touch the very

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vault of heaven, peaks pure and pristine in their mantle of eternal snow. Garion had spent time in mountains before, but never had he seen such enormous peaks. He knew that those colossal spires were leagues and leagues away, but the mountain air was so clear that it seemed he could almost reach out and touch them.

There was an abiding peace here, a peace that washed away the turmoil and anxiety that had beset them all on the plains below and somehow erased care and even thought. Each turn and each ridgetop brought new vistas, each filled with more splendor than the last until they could only ride in silence and wonder. The works of man shrank into insignificance here. Man would never, could never, touch these eternal mountains.

It was summer, and the days were long and filled with sunlight. Birds sang from the trees beside the winding track, and the smell of sun-warmed evergreens was touched lightly with the delicate odors of the acre upon acre of wildflowers carpeting the steep meadows. Occasionally the wild, shrill cry of an eagle echoed from the rocks. "Have you ever considered moving your capital?" Garion asked the Emperor of Mallorea, who rode beside him. His tone was hushed. To speak in a louder voice would somehow profane what lay around them.

"No, not really, Garion," Zakath replied. "My government wouldn't function here. The bureaucracy is largely Melcene. Melcenese appear to be prosaic people, but actually they aren't. I'm afraid my officials would spend about half their time looking at the scenery and the other half writing bad poetry. Nobody would get any work done. Besides, you have no idea what it's like up here in the winter."

"Snow?"

Zakath nodded. "People up here don't bother to measure it in inches. They measure it in feet."

"Are there people up here? I haven't seen-any."

"There are a few-fur trappers, gold hunters, that sort of thing.' * Zakath smiled faintly. "I think it's just an excuse, really. Some people prefer solitude."

"This is a good place for it."

The Emperor of Mallorean had changed since they had left Atesca's enclave on the banks of the Magan. He was leaner now, and the dead look was gone from his eyes. Like Garion and all the rest, he rode warily, his eyes and ears constantly alert. It was not so much his outward aspect that marked the change in him, however. Zakath had always been a pensive, even melancholy man, given often to periods of black depression, but filled

at the same time with a cold ambition. Garion had often felt that fee Mallorean's ambition and his apparent hunger for power were not so much a driving need in him as they had been a kind of continual testing of himself, and, at perhaps a deeper level, deriving from an urge toward self-destruction. It had seemed almost that Zakath had hurled himself and all the resources of his empire into impossible struggles in the secret hope that eventually he would encounter someone strong enough to kill him and thereby relieve him of the burden of a life that was barely tolerable to him.

Such was no longer the case. His meeting with Cyradis on the banks of the Magan had forever changed him. A world that had always been flat and stale now seemed to be all new to him. At times, Garion even thought he detected a faint touch of hope in his friend's face, and hope had never been a part of Zakath's makeup.

As they rounded a wide bend in the track, Garion saw the she-wolf he had found in the dead forest back in Darshiva. She sat patiently on her haunches waiting for them. Increasingly, the behavior of the wolf puzzled him. Now that her injured paw was healed, she made sporadic sweeps through the surrounding forests in search of her pack, but always returned, seemingly unconcerned about her failure to locate them. It was as if she were perfectly content to remain with them as a member of their most unusual pack. So long as they were in forests and uninhabited mountains, this peculiarity of hers caused no particular problems, but they would not always be in the wilderness, and the appearance of an untamed and probably nervous wolf on the busy street of a populous city would be likely to attract attention, to say the very least.

"How is it with you, little sister?" he asked her politely in the language of wolves.

"It is well," she replied.

"Did you find any traces of your pack?"

"There are many other wolves about, but they are not of my kindred. One will remain with you for yet a while longer. Where is the young one?"

Garion glanced back over his shoulder at the little two-wheeled

carriage trundling along behind them. "He sits beside my mate in the thing with round feet."

The wolf sighed. "If he sits much longer, he will no longer be able to run or hunt," she said disapprovingly, "and if your

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mate continues to feed him so much, she will stretch his belly, and he will not survive a lean season when there is little food."

"One will speak with her about it."

"Will she listen?"

"Probably not, but one will speak with her all the same. She is fond of the young one and takes pleasure in having him near her."

"Soon one will need to teach him how to hunt."

"Yes. One knows. One will explain that to one's mate."

"One is grateful." She paused, looking about a bit warily. "Proceed with some caution," she warned. "There is a creature who dwells here. One has caught his scent several times, though one has not seen him. He is quite large, however."

"How large?"

"Larger than the beast upon which you sit." She looked pointedly at Chretienne. Familiarity had made the big gray stallion less nervous in the presence of the she-wolf, though Garion suspected that he would be much happier if she did not come quite so close.

"One will tell the pack-leader of what you have said," Garion promised. For some reason, the she-wolf avoided Belgarath. Garion surmised that her behavior might reflect some obscure facet of wolfly etiquette of which he was not aware.

"One will continue one's search then," she said, rising to her feet. "It may happen that one will come upon this beast, and then we will know him." She paused. "His scent tells one that he is dangerous, however. He feeds on all things—even on things that we would shun." Then she turned and loped off into the forest, moving swiftly and silently.

"That's really uncanny, you know," Zakath observed. "I've heard men talk to animals before, but never in their own language."

"It's a family peculiarity." Garion smiled. "At first I didn't believe it either. Birds used to come and talk to Aunt Pol all the time—usually about their eggs. Birds are awfully fond of talking

about their eggs, I understand. They can be very silly at times. Wolves are much more dignified." He paused a moment. "You don't necessarily have to tell Aunt Pol I said that," he added.

"Subterfuge, Garion?" Zakath laughed.

"Prudence," Garion corrected. "I have to go talk with Belgarath. Keep your eyes open. The wolf says that there's some kind of animal out there somewhere. She says it's bigger than a

horse and very dangerous. She hinted at the fact that it's a man-eater."

"What does it look like?"

"She hasn't seen it. She's smelled it, though, and seen its tracks."

"I'll watch for it."

"Good idea." Garion turned and rode back to where Belgarath and Aunt Pol were deep in a discussion.

"Durnik needs a tower somewhere in the Vale," Belgarath was saying.

"I don't see why, father," Polgara replied.

"All of Aldur's disciples have towers, Pol. It's the custom."

"Old customs persist—even when there's no longer any need for them."

"He's going to need to study, Pol. How can he possibly study with you underfoot all the time?"

She gave him a long, chilly stare.

"Maybe I should rephrase that."

"Take as long as you need, father. I'm willing to wait."

"Grandfather," Garion said, reining in. "I was just talking with the wolf, and she says there's a very large animal out in the forest."

"A bear maybe?"

"I don't think so. She's caught its scent a few times, and she'd probably recognize the smell of a bear, wouldn't she?"

"I'd think so, yes."

"She didn't say it exactly, but I got the impression that it's not too selective about what it eats." He paused. "Is it my imagination, or is she a very strange wolf?"

"How do you mean, exactly?"

"She stretches the language about as far as it will go, and I get the feeling that she still has more to say."

"She's intelligent, that's all. It's an uncommon trait in females, but it's not unheard of."

"What a fascinating turn this conversation has taken," Polgara observed.

"Oh," the old man said blandly, "are you still here, Pol? I thought you'd have found something else to do by now."

Her gaze was icy, but Belgarath seemed totally unperturbed. "Iftw'd better warn the others," he told Garion. "A wolf would P»8s an ordinary animal without comment. Whatever this thing is, it's unusual, and unusual usually means dangerous. Tell Cc'Nedra to get up here among the rest of us. She's a bit vul-

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nerable trailing along behind the way she is." He considered it. "Don't say anything to alarm her, but have Liseile ride in the carriage with her."

"Liseile?"

"The blond girl. The one with the dimples."

"I know who she is, Grandfather. Wouldn't Durnik—or maybe Toth—be a better idea?"

"No. If either of them got in the carriage with Ce'Nedra, she'd know something was wrong, and that might frighten her. An animal who's hunting can smell fear. Let's not expose her to that kind of danger. Liselle's very well trained, and she's probably got two or three daggers hidden in various places." He grinned slyly. "I'd imagine Silk could tell you where they are," he added.

"Father!" Polgara gasped.

"You mean you didn't know, Pol? My goodness, how unobservant of you."

"One for your side," Garion noted.

"I'm glad you liked it." Belgarath smirked at Polgara.

Garion turned Chretienne so that his aunt would not see his smile.

They took a bit more care setting up camp that night, choosing a small grove of aspens backed by a steep cliff and with a deep mountain river at its front. As the sun sank into the eternal snowfields above them and twilight filled the ravines and gorges with azure shadows, Beldin returned from his wide-ranging vigil. "Isn't it a bit early to be stopping?" he rasped after he had shimmered and changed.

"The horses are tired," Belgarath replied, casting a sidelong glance at Ce'Nedra. "This is a very sleep trail."

"Wait a bit," Beldin told him, limping toward the fire. "It gets steeper on up ahead."

"What happened to your foot?"

"I had a little disagreement with an eagle—stupid birds, eagles. He couldn't tell the difference between a hawk and a pigeon. I had to educate him. He bit me while I was tearing out a sizable number of his wing feathers."

"Uncle," Polgara said reproachfully.

"He started it."

"Are there any soldiers coming up behind us?" Belgarath asked him.

' 'Some Darshivans. They're two or three days behind, though.

Urvon's army is retreating. Now that he and Nahaz are gone, there's not much point in their staying."

"That gets at least some of the troops off our backs," Silk said.

"Don't be too quick to start gloating," Beldin told him. "With the Guardsmen and the Karands gone, the Darshivans are free to concentrate on us."

"That's true, I suppose. Do you think they know we're here?"

"Zandramas does, and I don't think she'd hide the information from her soldiers. You'll probably hit snow sometime late tomorrow. You might want to be thinking about some way to hide your tracks." He looked around. "Where's your wolf?" he asked Garion.

' 'Hunting. She's been looking for signs of her pack.'

"That brings something up," Belgarath said quietly, looking around to make sure that Ce'Nedra was out of earshot. ' The wolf told Garion that there's a large animal of some kind in this area. Pol's going to go out and take a look around tonight, but it might not hurt if you nosed around tomorrow, as well. I'm not in the mood for any surprises.'

"I'll see what I can find."

Sadi and Velvet sat on the far side of the fire. They had placed the little earthenware bottle on its side and were trying to coax Zith and her children out with morsels of cheese. "I wish we had some milk," Sadi said in his contralto voice. "Milk is very good for young snakes. It strengthens their teeth."

"I'll remember that," Velvet said.

"Were you planning a career as a snakeherdess, Margravine?"

"They're nice little creatures," she replied. "They're clean and quiet, and they don't eat very much. Besides, they're very useful in emergencies."

He smiled at her affectionately. "We'll make a Nyissan of youyrt, Liselle."

"Not if/can help it," Silk muttered darkly to Garion.

They had broiled trout for supper that evening. After Durnik and Tb(h had finished setting up their encampment, they had adjourned to the riverbank with their poles and lures. Durnik's recent elevation to disciplehood had changed him in some ways, but had not lessened his appetite for his favorite pastime. It was no longer necessary for him and his mute friend even to discuss Ifcese excursions. Any time they camped in the vicinity of a lake or stream, their reaction was automatic.

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After supper, Polgara flew off into the shadowy forest, but when she returned, she reported having seen no sign of the large beast the she-wolf had warned them about.

It was cold the following morning, and there was a trace of frost in the air. The horses' breath steamed in the mountain air as they set out, and Garion and the others rode with their cloaks wrapped tightly about them.

As Beldin had predicted, they reached the snow line late that afternoon. The first windrows of white in the wagon ruts were thin and crusty, but farther on ahead they could see deeper drifts. They made camp below the snow and set out again early the following morning. Silk had devised a sort of yoke for one of the packhorses, and trailing on ropes behind the yoke were a dozen or so head-size round rocks. The little man critically examined the tracks the rocks made in the snow as they started up the track into the world of perpetual white. "Good enough," he said in a self-congratulatory tone.

"I don't quite see the purpose of your contrivance, Prince Kheldar," Sadi confessed.

"The rocks leave trails that look about the same as wagon tracks," Silk explained. "Horse tracks by themselves might make the soldiers coming up behind us suspicious. Wagon tracks on a caravan route aren't going to look all that remarkable."

"Clever," the eunuch said, "but why not just cut bushes and drag them behind us?"

Silk shook his head. "If you brush out all the tracks in the snow, it looks even more suspicious. This is a fairly well-traveled route."

"You think of everything, don't you?"

"Sneaking was his major field of study at the academy," Velvet said from the little carriage she shared with Ce'Nedra and the wolf pup. "Sometimes he sneaks just to keep in practice."

"I don't know if I'd go that far, Liselle," the little man objected in a pained tone.

"Don't you?"

"Well, yes, I suppose so, but you don't have to come right out and say it—and 'sneak' has such an ugly ring to it."

"Can you think of a better term?"

"Well, 'evasion' sounds a bit nicer, doesn't it?"

"Since it means the same thing, why quibble over terminology?" She smiled winsomely at him, her cheeks dimpling.

"It's a question of style, Liselle."

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The caravan track grew steeper, and the snow had piled in deeper and deeper drifts along the sides. Miles-long plumes of snow blew from the mountaintops ahead, and the wind grew stronger with a biting, arid chill to it.

About noon, the peaks ahead were suddenly obscured by an ominous-looking cloudbank rolling in from the west, and the die-wolf came loping down the track to meet them. "One advises that you seek shelter for the pack and your beasts," she said with a peculiar kind of urgency.

"Have you found the creature who dwells here?" Garion asked.

"No. This is more dangerous." She looked meaningfully back over her shoulder at the approaching cloud.

"One will tell the pack-leader."

"That is proper." She pointed her muzzle at Zakath. "Have this one follow me. There are trees a short way ahead. He and I will find a suitable place."

"She wants you to go with her," Garion told the Mallorean. "We've got bad weather coming, and she thinks we should take shelter in some trees just ahead. Find a place, and I'll go warn the others."

"A blizzard?" Zakath asked.

"I'd guess so. It takes something fairly serious in the way of weather to make a wolf nervous." Garion wheeled Chretienne and rode back down to alert the others. The steep, slippery track made haste difficult, and the chill wind was whipping stinging pellets of snow

about them by the time they reached the thicket to which the wolf had led Zakath. The trees were slender pine saplings, and they grew very close together. At some time in the not too distant past an avalanche had cut a swath through the thicket and had piled a jumble of limbs and broken trunks against the face of a steep rock cliff. Durnik andloth went to work immediately even as the wind picked up and the snow grew thicker. Garion and the others joined in, and before long they had erected a latticed frame for a long lean-to against the cliff face. They covered the frame with tent canvas, tying it securely in place and weighting it down with logs. Then they cleared away the interior and led the horses into the lower end of the rode shelter just as the full force of the storm hit.

The wind shrieked insanely, and the thicket seemed to vanish in: the swirling snow.

~'Is Beldin going to be all right?" Durnik asked, looking worried.

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"You don't have to worry about Beldin," Belgarath said, "He's ridden out storms before. He'll either go above it or change back and bury himself in a snowdrift until it passes."

"He'll freeze to death!" Ce'Nedra exclaimed,

"Not under the snow, he won't," Belgarath assured her. "Beldin tends to ignore weather." He looked at the she-wolf, who sat on her haunches at the opening of the lean-to staring out at the swirling snow. "One is grateful for your warning, little sister," he said formally.

"One is a member of your pack now, revered leader," she replied with equal formality. "The well-being of all is the responsibility of all."

"Wisely said, little sister."

She wagged her tail but said nothing else.

The blizzard continued for the rest of the day and then on into the night while Garion and the others sat around the fire Durnik had built. Then, about midnight, the wind died as quickly as it had come. The snow continued to sift down among the trees until morning, and then it, too, abated. It had done its work, however. The snow outside the lean-to reached above Garion's knees. "We're going to have to break a trail, I'm afraid," Durnik said soberly. 'It's a quarter of a mile back up to that caravan track, and there are all sorts of things hidden under this fresh snow. This is not a good time-or place-to start breaking the

horses' legs."

"What about my carriage?" Ce'Nedra asked him.

"I'm afraid we'll have to leave it behind, Ce'Nedra. The snow's just too deep. Even if we could get it back up onto the road, the carriage horse wouldn't be able to drag it through the drifts."

She sighed. "It was such a nice carriage, too." Then she looked at Silk with a perfectly straight face. "I certainly want to thank you for lending it to me, Prince Kheldar," she told him. "I've finished with it now, so you can have it back."

It was Toth who broke the initial trail up the steep slope to the caravan track. The others followed behind him, trampling the trail wider and searching for hidden logs and branches with their feet. It took nearly two hours to plow out the trail back to the caravan track, and they were all panting from the exertion at this high altitude.

They started back down toward the lean-to where the ladies waited with the horses, but about halfway down, the wolf suddenly laid back her ears and snarled.

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"What is it?" Garion said.

"The creature," she growled. "He hunts."

"Get ready!" Garion shouted to the others. "That animal is out there!" He reached back over his shoulder and drew Iron-grip's sword.

It came out of the thicket on the far side of the avalanche track. Its shaggy coat was clotted with snow, and it shuffled along in a brutish half crouch. Its face was hideous and chillingly familiar. It had piglike eyes sunk beneath heavy brow ridges. Its lower jaw jutted out, and two massive yellow tusks curved up over its cheeks. It opened its mouth and roared, pounding on its vast chest with its fists and rising to its full height. It was almost eight feet tall.

"That's impossible!" Belgarath exclaimed.

"What is it?" Sadi demanded.

"It's an Eldrak," Belgarath said, "and the only place the Bdrakyn live is in Ulgoland."

"I think you're wrong, Belgarath," Zakath disagreed. "That's what's called an ape-bear. There are a few of them in these mountains."

"Do you gentlemen suppose we could discuss its exact species some other time?" Silk suggested. "The main question now is whether we fight or run."

"We can't run in this snow," Garion said grimly. "We're going to have to fight it."

"I was afraid you might say that,"

"The main thing is to keep it away from the ladies," Durnik said. He looked at the eunuch. "Sadi, would the poison on your dagger kill it?"

Sadi looked dubiously at the shaggy beast. "I'm sure it would," he said, "but that tiling is awfully large. It would take awhile for the poison to work."

"That's it, then," Belgarath decided. "The rest of us will keep its attention and give Sadi time to get around behind it. After he stabs it, we'll fall back and give the poison time to take effect. Spread out, and don't take any chances." He blurred into the form of a wolf.

They moved into a rough half circle, their weapons at the ready as the monster continued to roar and pound on its chest at the edge of the trees, working itself up into a frenzy. Then it lumbered forward with the snow spraying out from its huge feet. Sadi edged his way uphill, his small dagger held low even as

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Belgarath and the she-wolf darted in to tear at the beast with their fangs.

Garion's mind was working very clearly as he advanced through the deep snow, swinging his sword threateningly. He saw that this creature was not as quick as Grul the Eldrak had been. It was not able to respond to the sudden darting attacks of the wolves, and the snow around it was soon spotted with its blood. It roared in frustration and rage and made a desperate rush at Durnik. Toth, however, stepped in and drove the tip of his heavy staff squarely into the beast's face. It howled in pain and spread its huge arms wide to catch the big mute in a crushing embrace, but Garion slashed it across one shoulder with his sword even as Zakath ducked under the other shaggy arm and gashed it across the chest and belly with whiplike sword strokes.

The creature bellowed, and its blood spurted from its wounds.

"Any time now, Sadi," Silk said urgently, ducking and feinting and trying to get a clean throw with one of his heavy daggers.

The wolves continued their harrying attacks on the animal's flanks and legs as Sadi cautiously advanced on the raging beast's back. Desperately the creature flailed about with its huge arms, trying to keep its attackers away.

Then, with almost surgical precision, the she-wolf lunged in and ripped the heavy muscle at the back of the beast's left knee with her fangs.

The agonized shriek was dreadful—all the more so because it was strangely human. The shaggy beast toppled backward, clutching at its maimed leg.

Garion reversed his great sword, grasping the crosspiece of the hilt, bestrode the writhing body and raised the weapon, intending to drive the point full into the shaggy chest.

"Please!" it cried, its brutish face twisted in agony and terror.
"Please don't kill me!"

CHAPTER TWO

It was a Grolim. The huge beast lying in the bloodstained snow blurred and changed even as Garion's friends moved m with their weapons ready to deliver the last fatal strokes.

"Wait!" Durnik said sharply. "It's a man!" They stopped, staring at the dreadfully wounded priest Ivine in the snow J &

Garion bleakly set the point of his sword under the Grolim's chin. He was terribly angry. "All right," he said in a cold voice, Ttfk—and I think you'd better be very convincing. Who out you up to this?" e F

"It was Naradas," the Grolirn groaned, "archpriest of the tenpleatHemil."

"The henchman of Zandramas?" Garion demanded. "The «ne with white eyes?"

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"Yes. I was only doing what he commanded. Please don't
kill me."

"Why did he tell you to attack us?"

"I was supposed to kill one of you."

"Which one?"

"He didn't care. He just said to make sure that one of you
died."

"They're still playing that tired old game," Silk noted, sheathing his daggers. "Grolims are so unimaginative."

Sadi looked inquiringly at Garion, holding up his slim little knife suggestively.

"No!" Eriond said sharply.

Garion hesitated. "He's right, Sadi," he said finally. "We can't just kill him in cold blood."

"Alorns." Sadi sighed, rolling his eyes up toward the clearing sky. "You do know, of course, that if we leave him here in this condition, he'll die anyway. And if we try to take him along, he'll delay us—not

to mention the fact that he's hardly the sort to be trusted."

"Eriond," Garion said, "why don't you go get Aunt Pol? We'd better get those wounds of his tended before he bleeds to death." He looked at Belgarath, who had changed form again. "Any objections?" he asked.

"I didn't say anything."

"I appreciate that."

' ' You should have killed him before he changed form on you,' ' a familiar harsh voice came from the thicket behind them. Beldin was sitting on a log, gnawing at something that was uncooked and still had a few feathers clinging to it.

"I suppose it didn't occur to you to give us a hand?" Belgarath asked acidly.

*'You were doing all right." The dwarf shrugged. He belched and tossed the remains of his breakfast to the she-wolf.

"One is grateful," she said politely as her jaws crunched into the half-eaten carcass. Garion could not be sure that Beldin understood, though he guessed that the gnarled little man probably did.

"What's an Etdrak doing here in Mallorean?" Belgarath asked.

"It's not exactly an Eldrak, Belgarath," Beldin replied, spitting out a few soggy feathers.

"All right, but how did a Mallorean Grolim even know what an Eldrak looks like?"

"You weren't listening, old man. There are a few of those

things up here in these mountains. They're distantly related to the Eldrakyn, but they're not the same. They're not as big, for one thing, and they're not as smart."

"I thought all the monsters lived in Ulgoland."

"Use your head, Belgarath. There are Trolls in Cherek, Al-groths range down into Arendia, and the Dryads live in southern Tblnedra. Then there's that dragon. Nobody knows for sure where she lives. There are monsters scattered all over. They're just a little more concentrated in Ulgo, that's all."

"I suppose you're right," Belgarath conceded. He looked at Zakath. "What did you call the thing?"

"An ape-bear. It's probably not too accurate, but the people who live up here aren't very sophisticated."

"Where's Naradas right now?" Silk asked the injured Grolim.

"I saw him at Balasa," the Grolim replied. "I don't know where he went from there."

"Was Zandramas with him?"

"I didn't see her, but that doesn't mean she wasn't there. The Holy Sorceress doesn't show herself very often anymore."

"Because of the lights under her skin?" the weasel-faced little man asked shrewdly.

The Grolim's face grew even more pale. "We're forbidden to discuss that— even among ourselves, ' ' he replied in a frightened tone of voice.

"That's all right, friend." Silk smiled at him and drew one of his daggers. "You have my permission."

The Grolim swallowed hard and then nodded.

"Stout fellow." Silk patted him on the shoulder. "When did those lights start to appear? ' ' "

"I can't say for sure. Zandramas was off in the west with Naradas for a long time. The lights had started to appear when die came back. One of the priests at Hemil used to gossip a great deal. He said it was some kind of plague."

"Used to?"

"She found out about what he'd said and had his heart cut out."

"That's the Zandramas we've come to know and love, all

Aunt Pol came up along the path trampled through the snow, followed by Ce'Nedra and Velvet. She tended the Grolim's wounds without comment while Dumik and Torn went back to the lean-to and led out the horses. Then they untied the tent

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canvas and broke down the frame. When they led the horses up to the place where the wounded Grolim lay, Sadi went to hi saddle and opened the red leather case. "Just to be on the safe side," he muttered to Garion, taking out a little vial, Garion raised one eyebrow.

"It won't hurt him," the eunuch assured him. "It'll make him tractable, though. Besides, since you're in this humanitarian mood, it should also numb the pain of his wounds."

"You don't approve, do you?" Garion said. "That we didn't kill him, I mean?"

"I think it's imprudent, Belgarion," Sadi said seriously. "Dead enemies are safe enemies. Live ones can come back to haunt you. It's your decision, though."

"I'll make a concession," Garion said. "Stay close to him. If he starts getting out of hand, do whatever seems appropriate.'" Sadi

smiled faintly. "Much better," he approved. "We'll teach you the rudiments of practical politics yet."

They led the horses up the steep hill to the caravan route and mounted. The howling wind that had accompanied the blizzard had scoured most of the snow from the track, although there were deep drifts in sheltered places where the road curved behind bands of trees and rock outcroppings. They made good time when the road was in the open, but it was slow going when they came to the drifts. Now that the storm had passed, the sunlight on the new snow was dazzling, and even though he squinted his eyes nearly shut, Garion found that after about an hour he was beginning to develop a splitting headache.

Silk reined in. "I think it's time for a precaution or two," he announced. He took a light scarf from inside his cloak and bound it across his eyes. Garion was suddenly reminded of Relg and the way the cave-born zealot had always covered his eyes when out in the open.

"A blindfold?" Sadi asked. "Have you suddenly become a seer, Prince Kheldar?"

"I'm not the sort to have visions, Sadi," Silk replied. "The scarf is thin enough so that I can see through it. The idea is to protect the eyes from the glare of sunlight on the snow." "It is rather bright, isn't it?" Sadi agreed. "It is indeed, and if you look at it long enough, it can blind you—at least temporarily." Silk adjusted the covering on his eyes. "This is a trick the reindeer herders in northern Drasnia came up with. It works fairly well."

"Let's not take any chances," Belgarath said, also covering

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his eyes with a piece of cloth. He smiled. "Maybe this is how the Dalasian wizards struck the Grolims blind when they tried to gotoKell."

"I'd be terribly disappointed if it was that simple," Velvet said, tying a scarf across her eyes. "I like to have my magic nice and inexplicable. Snow blindness would be such a prosaic thing."

They plowed on through the drifts, climbing now toward a high pass between two towering peaks. It was midafternoon when they reached the pass. The track wound up between massive boulders, but straightened out when they reached the summit. They stopped to rest the horses and to look out over the vast wilderness that lay beyond the pass.

loth unbound his eyes and gestured to Durnik. The smith pulled down his protective scarf, and the big mute pointed. Durnik's face was suddenly filled with awe. "Look!" he said in a half-choked whisper.

The rest of them also uncovered their eyes.

"Belar!" Silk gasped. "Nothing can be that big!"

The peaks around them that had seemed so enormous shrank into

insignificance. Standing quite alone in solitary splendor rose a mountain so huge and high that the mind could not comprehend it. It was perfectly symmetrical, a steep, white cone with sharply sloping sides. Its base was enormous, and its summit soared thousands of feet above nearby peaks. An absolute calm seemed to surround it, as if, having achieved everything that any mountain could, it simply existed.

' 'It's the highest peak in the world,' Zakath said very quietly. "The scholars at the University of Melcene have calculated its height and compared that with the heights of peaks on the western continent. It's thousands of feet higher than any other mountain."

"Please, Zakath," Silk said with a pained look, "don't tell me how high."

Zakath looked puzzled.

* * As you may have noticed, I 'm not really a very large person. Immensity depresses me. I 'll admit that your mountain is bigger than I am. I just don't want to know how much bigger."

Tbth was gesturing to Durnik again.

"He says that Kell lies in the shadow of that mountain," the unith said.

"That's a little unspecific, Goodman," Sadi said wryly. "I'd

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guess that about half the continent lies in the shadow of that thing."

Beldin came soaring in again. 'Big, isn't it?' he said, squinting at the huge white peak looming into the sky.

"We noticed," Belgarath replied. "What's on up ahead?"

"A fair amount of downhill going—at least until you get to the slopes of that monster there."

"I can see that from here."

"Congratulations. I found a place where you can get rid of your Grolim. Several places, actually."

"Exactly how do you mean 'get rid of,' uncle?" Polgara asked suspiciously.

"There are quite a few high cliffs alongside this track on the way down," he replied blandly. "Accidents do happen, you know."

"Out of the question. I didn't treat his wounds just to keep him

going until you found time to throw him off a cliff.'

"Polgara, you're interfering with the practice of my religion."

She raised one eyebrow.

"I thought you knew. It's an article of the faith: 'Kill every Grolim you come across.' "

"I might even consider converting to that religion," Zakath said.

"Are you absolutely certain you're not Arendish?" Garion said to him.

Beldin sighed. "Since you're going to be such a spoilsport for this, Pol, I found a group of shephenders below the snow line."

"Shepherds, uncle," she corrected.

"It means the same thing. If you really look at it, it's even the same word,"

"Shepherd sounds nicer."

"Nicer." He snorted. "Sheep are stupid, they smell bad, and they taste worse. Anybody who spends his life tending them is either defective or degenerate."

"You're in rare form this afternoon," Belgarath congratulated him.

"It's been a great day for flying," Beldin explained with a broad grin. 'Do you have any idea of how much warm air comes up off new snow when the sun hits it? I flew up so high once that I started getting spots in front of my eyes.'1

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"That's stupid, uncle," Polgara snapped. "You should never go up where the air's that thin."

"We're all entitled to a little stupidity now and then." He shrugged. "And the dive from that height is unbelievable. Why don't you join me, and I'll show you."

"Will you never grow up?"

"I doubt it, and I certainly hope not." He looked at Belgarath. "I think you'd better go down a mile or so and make camp."

"It's early yet."

"No. Actually it's late. That afternoon sun is quite warm—even up here. All this snow's starting to get soft. I've seen three avalanches already. If you make a wrong guess up here, you might get down a lot quicker than you want to."

"Interesting point there. We'll get down out of this pass and set up for the night."

"I'll go on ahead." Beldin crouched and spread his arms. "Are you sure you don't want to come along, Pol?"

"Don't be silly."

He left a ghostly chuckle behind him as he soared away.

They set up for the night on a ridge line. Although it exposed them to the constant wind, it was free from the danger of avalanche. Garion slept poorly that night. The wind that raked the exposed ridge set the taut canvas of the tent he shared with Ce'Nedra to thrumming, and the noise intruded itself upon him as he tried again and again to drift off. He shifted restlessly.

"Can't you sleep either?" Ce'Nedra said in the chill darkness.

"It's the wind," he replied.

"Try not to think about it."

"I don't have to think about it. It's like trying to sleep inside a big drum."

"You were very brave this morning, Garion. I was terrified when I heard about that monster."

"We've dealt with monsters before. After a while, you get used to it." • "My, aren't we getting blase?"

"It's an occupational trait. All of us mighty heroes have it. ; Fighting a monster or two before breakfast helps to sharpen the ^appetite."

'A*-. "YouVechanged, Garion." •f.V "Not really."

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"Yes, you have. When I first met you, you'd never have said anything like that."

"When you first met me, I took everything very seriously." "Don't you take what we're doing seriously?" She said it almost accusingly.

' 'Of course I do. It's the little incidental things along the way I sort of shrug off. There's not much point in worrying about something after it's already over, is there?"

"Well, as long as neither of us can sleep anyway—" And she drew him to her and kissed him rather seriously.

The temperature plunged that night, and when they arose, the snow, which had been dangerously soft the previous afternoon, had frozen,

and they were able to proceed with little danger of avalanche. Because this side of the summit had taken the full force of the wind during the blizzard, the caravan track had little snow on it, and they made good time going down. By midafter-noon they passed the last of the snow and rode down into a world of spring. The meadows were steep and lush and speckled with wildflowers bending in the mountain breeze. Brooks, which came directly out of the faces of glaciers, purled and danced over gleaming stones, and soft-eyed deer watched in gentle astonishment as Garion and the others rode by.

A few miles below the snow line, they began to see herds of sheep grazing with witless concentration, consuming grass and wildflowers with indiscriminate appetite. The shepherds who watched them all wore simple white smocks, and they sat on hillocks or rocks in dreamy contemplation while their dogs did all the work.

The she-wolf trotted sedately beside Chretienne. Her ears twitched occasionally, however, and she watched the sheep, her tawny eyes intent.

"One advises against it, little sister," Garion said to her in the language of wolves.

"One was not really considering it," she replied. "One has encountered these beasts before--and the man-things and dog-things that guard them. It is not difficult to take one of them, but the dog-things grow excited when one does, and their barking disturbs one's meal.'" Her tongue lolled out in a wolfish sort of grin. "One could make the beasts run, however. All things should know to whom the forest belongs."

"The pack-leader would disapprove, one is afraid." "Ah," she agreed. "Perhaps the pack-leader takes himself too seriously. One has observed that quality in him."

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"What did she say?" Zakath asked curiously.

"She was thinking about chasing the sheep," Garion replied, "not necessarily to kill any of them but just to make them run. I think it amuses her."

"Amuses? That's an odd thing to say about a wolf."

"Not really. Wolves play a great deal, and they have a very refined sense of humor."

Zakath's face grew thoughtful. "You know something, Gar-ion?" he said. "Man thinks he owns the world, but we share it with all sorts of creatures who are indifferent to our overlord-ship. They have their own societies, and I suppose even their own cultures. They don't even pay any attention to us, do they?"

"Only when we inconvenience them."

"That's a crushing blow to the ego of an emperor." Zakath smiled wryly. "We're the two most powerful men on earth, and wolves look upon us as no more than a minor inconvenience."

"It teaches us humility," Garion agreed. "Humility is good for the soul."

"Perhaps."

It was evening when they reached the shepherds' encampment. Since a sheep camp is a more or less permanent thing, it is usually more well organized than the hasty encampments of travelers. The tents were larger, for one thing, and they were stretched over pole frames. The tents lined either side of a street made of logs laid tightly side by side. The corrals for the shepherds' horses were at the lower end of the street, and a log dam had backed up a mountain brook to form a sparkling little pond that provided water for the sheep and horses. The shadows of evening were settling over the little valley where the camp lay, and blue columns of smoke rose straight up from the cookfires into the calm and windless air.

A tall, lean fellow with a deeply tanned face, snowy white hair, and the simple white smock that seemed to be the common garb of these shepherds came out of one of the tents as Garion and Zakath reined in just outside the camp. "We have been advised of your coming," he said. His voice was very deep and quiet. "Will you share our evening meal with us?" Garion looked at him closely, noting his resemblance to Yard, the man whom they had met on the Isle of Verkat, half a world away. There could be no question now that the Dais and the slave race in Cthol Murgos were related.

"We would be honored," Zakath responded to the invitation. "We do not wish to impose, however."

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"It is no imposition. I am Burk. I will have some of my men care for your mounts."

The others rode up and stopped.

"Welcome all," Burk greeted them. "Will you step down? The evening meal is almost ready, and we have set aside a tent for your use." He looked gravely at the she-wolf and inclined his head to her. It was evident that her presence did not alarm him.

"Your courtesy is most becoming," Polgara said, dismounting, "and your hospitality is quite unexpected this far from civilization."

"Man carries his civilization with him, Lady," Burk replied.

"We have an injured man with us," Sadi told him, "a poor traveler we came across on our way over the mountain- We gave him what aid we could, but our business is pressing, and I'm afraid our pace is aggravating his injuries."

"You may leave him with us, and we will care for him." Burk looked critically at the drugged priest slumped in his saddle. "AGrolim," denoted. "Is your destination perhaps Kell?"

"We have to stop there," Belgarath said cautiously.

"This Grolim would not be able to go with you then."

"We've heard about that," Silk said, swinging down from his horse. 'Do they really go blind when they try to go to Kell? "

"In a manner of speaking, yes. We have such a one here in our camp with us now. We found him wandering in the forest when we were bringing the sheep up to summer pasture."

Belgarath's eyes narrowed slightly. "Do you suppose I might be able to talk with him?" he asked. "I've made a study of such things, and I'm always eager to get additional information."

"Of course," Burk agreed. "He's in the last tent on the right."

"Garion, Pot, come along," die old man said tersely and started along the log street. Oddly, the she-wolf accompanied them.

"Why the sudden curiosity, father?" Polgara asked when they were out of earshot.

"I want to find out just how effective this curse the Dais have laid around Kell really is. If it's something that can be overcome, we might run into Zandramas when we get there after all."

They found the Grolim sitting on the floor in his tent. The harsh angularity of his face had softened, and his sightless eyes had lost the burning fanaticism common to all Grolims. His face instead was filled with a kind of wonder.

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"How is it with you, friend?" Belgarath asked him gently.

"I am content," the Grolim replied. The word seemed peculiar coming from the mouth of a priest of Torak.

"Why is it that you tried to approach Kell? Didn't you know about the curse?"

"It is not a curse. It is a blessing."

"A blessing?"

"I was ordered by the Sorceress Zandramas to try to reach the holy city of the Dais," the Grolim continued. "She told me that I would be exalted should I be successful." He smiled gently. "It was in her mind, I think, to test the strength of the enchantment to determine if it might be safe for her to attempt the journey."

"I gather that it wouldn't be."

"That is difficult to say. Great benefit might come to her if she tried."

"I'd hardly call going blind a benefit."

"But I am not blind."

"I thought that's what the enchantment was all about."

"Oh, no. I cannot see the world around me, but that is because I see something else—something that fills my heart with

joy."

"Oh? What's that?"

"I see the face of God, my friend, and will until the end of my days."

CHAPTER THREE

It was always there. Even when they were in deep, cool forests they could feel it looming over them, still and white and serene. The mountain filled their eyes, their thoughts, and even their dreams. Silk grew increasingly irritable as they rode day after day toward that gleaming white enormity. "How can anyone possibly get anything done in this part of the world with that thing there filling up half the sky?" he burst out one sunny afternoon.

"Perhaps they ignore it, Kheldar," Velvet said sweetly.

"How can you ignore something that big?" he retorted. "I wonder if it knows how ostentatious—and even vulgar—it is."

"You're being irrational," she said. "The mountain doesn't care how we feel about it. It's going to be there long after we're all gone." She paused. "Is that what bothers you, Kheldar? Coming across something permanent in the middle of a transient life?"

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"The stars are permanent," he pointed out— "So's dirt, for that matter, but they don't intrude the way that beast does." He looked at Zakath. "Has anybody ever climbed to the top of it?" he asked.

"Why would anybody want to?"

"To beat it. To reduce it." Silk laughed. "That's even more irrational, isn't it?"

Zakath, however, was looking speculatively at the looming presence that filled the southern sky. "I don't know, Kheldar," he said. "I've

never considered the possibility of fighting a mountain before. It's easy to beat men. To beat a mountain, though--now that's something else.'

"Would it care?" Eriond asked. The young man so seldom spoke that he seemed at times to be as mute as Toth. He had of late, however, seemed even more withdrawn. "The mountain might even welcome you." He smiled gently. "I'd imagine it gets lonesome. It could even want to share what it sees with anyone brave enough to go up there and look."

Zakath and Silk exchanged a long, almost hungry look. "You'd need ropes," Silk said in a neutral sort of tone.

"And probably certain kinds of tools, as well," Zakath added. "Things that would dig into the ice and hold you while you climbed up higher.'

"Durnik could figure those out for us."

' 'Will you two stop that?' Polgara said tartly. 'We have other things to think about right now.'

"Just speculation, Polgara," Silk said lightly. "This business of ours won't last forever, and when it's over--well, who knows?"

They were all subtly changed by the mountain. Speech seemed less and less necessary, and they all thought long thoughts, which, during quiet times around the campfire at night, they tried to share with each other. It became somehow a time of cleansing and healing, and they all grew closer together as they approached that solitary immensity.

One night Garion awoke with a light as bright as day in his eyes. He slipped out from under the blankets and turned back the flap of the tent. A full moon had arisen, and it filled the world with a pale luminescence. The mountain stood stark and white against the starry blackness of the night sky, glowing with a cool incandescence that seemed almost alive.

A movement caught his eye. Aunt Pol emerged from the tent she shared with Durnik. She wore a white robe that seemed

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almost a reflection of the moon-washed mountain. She stood for a moment in silent contemplation, then turned slightly. "Durnik," she murmured softly, "come and look."

Durnik emerged from the tent. He was bare-chested, and his silver amulet glittered in the moonlight. He put his arm about Polgara's shoulders, and the two of them stood drinking in the beauty of this most perfect of nights.

Garion was about to call out to them, but something stayed his tongue. The moment they were sharing was too private to be intruded upon. After quite some time, Aunt Pol whispered something to her husband, and, smiling, the two of them turned and went hand in hand back into their tent.

Quietly Garion let the tent flap drop and went back to his blankets.

Slowly, as they continued in a generally southwesterly direction, the forest changed. When they were still in the mountains, the trees had been evergreens interspersed here and there with aspens. As they approached the lowlands at the base of the huge mountain, they increasingly came across groves of beech and elm. And then at last they entered a forest of ancient oaks.

As they rode beneath the spreading branches in sun-dappled shade, Garion was sharply reminded of the Wood of the Dryads in southern Tolnedra. One glance at his little wife's face revealed that the similarity was not lost on her either. A kind of dreamy contentment came over her, and she seemed to be listening to voices that only she could hear.

It was about noon on a splendid summer day that they overtook another traveler, a white-bearded man dressed in clothing made from deerskin. The handles of the tools protruding from the lumpy bundle on the back of his pack mule proclaimed him to be a gold hunter, one of those vagrant hermits who haunt wildernesses the world over. He was riding a shaggy mountain pony so stumpy that its rider's feet nearly touched the ground on either side. "I thought I heard somebody coming up from behind," the gold hunter said as Garion and Zakath, both in their mail shirts and helmets, drew alongside him. "Don't see many in these woods—what with the curse and all."

"I thought the curse only worked on Grolims," Garion said.

"Most believe it doesn't pay to take chances. Where are you bound?"

"To Kell," Garion replied. There was no real point in making a secret of it.

"I hope you've been invited. The folk at Kell don't welcome strangers who just take it upon themselves to go there."

"They know we're coming."

"Oh. It's all right then. Strange place, Kell, and strange people. Of course living right under that mountain the way they do would make anybody strange after a while. If it's all right, I'll ride along with you as far as the tumoff to Balasa a couple miles on up ahead."

"Feel free," Zakath told him. "Aren't you missing a good time to be looking for gold, though?"

"I got myself caught up in the mountains last winter," the old fellow replied. "Supplies ran out on me. Besides, I get hungry for talk now and then. The pony and the mule listen pretty good, but they don't answer very well, and the wolves up there move around so much that

you can't hardly get a conversation started with them." He looked at the she-wolf and then astonishingly spoke to her in her own language. "How is it with you, mother?" he asked. His accent was abominable, and he spoke haltingly, but his speech was undeniably that of a wolf.

"How remarkable," she said with some surprise. Then she responded to the ritual greeting. "One is content."

"One is pleased to hear that. How is it that you go with the man-things?"

"One has joined their pack for a certain time."

"Ah."

"How did you manage to learn the language of wolves?" Garion asked in some amazement.

"You recognized it, then." The old fellow sounded pleased about that for some reason. He leaned back in his saddle. "Spent most of my life up there where the wolves are," he explained. "It's only polite to learn the language of your neighbors." He grinned. "Ib be honest about it, though, at first I couldn't make much out of it, but if you listen hard enough, it starts to come to you. Spent a winter in a den with a pack of them about five years back. That helped quite a bit."

"They actually let you live with diem?" Zakath asked.

"It took them awhile to get used tome," the old man admitted, "but I made myself useful, so they sort of accepted me."

"Useful?"

"The den was a little crowded, and I got them there tools."

He jerked his thumb at his pack mule. "I dug the den out some larger, and they seemed to appreciate it. Then, after a while, I ; took to watching over the pups while the rest was out hunting.

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Good pups they was, too. Playful as kittens. Some time later I tried to make up to a bear. Never had much luck with that. Bears arc a standoffish bunch. They keep to theirselves most of the time, and deer are just too skittish to try to make friends with. Give me wolves every time."

The old gold hunter's pony did not move very fast, so the others soon caught up with them.

"Any luck?" Silk asked the old gold hunter, his nose twitching with interest.

"Some," the white-bearded man answered evasively.

"Sorry," Silk apologized. "I didn't mean to pry."

"That's all right, friend. I can see that you're an honest man."

Velvet muffled a slightly derisive chuckle.

"It's just a habit I picked up," the fellow continued. "It's not really too smart to go around telling everybody how much gold you've managed to pick up."

"I can certainly understand that."

"I don't usually carry that much with me when I come down into the low country, though—only to pay for what I need. I leave the rest of it hid back up there in the mountains."

"Why do you do it then?" Dumik asked. "Spend all your time looking for gold, I mean? You don't spend it, so why bother?"

"It's something to do." The fellow shrugged. "And it gives me an excuse to be up there in the mountains. A man feels sort of frivolous if he does that without no reason." He grinned again. "Then, too, there's a certain kind of excitement that comes with finding a pocket of gold in a streambed. Like some say, finding is more fun than spending, and gold's sort of pretty to look at."

"Oh, it is indeed," Silk agreed fervently.

The old gold hunter glanced at the she-wolf and then looked at Belgarath. "I can see by the way she's acting that you're the leader of this group," he noted.

Belgarath looked a bit startled at that.

"He's learned the language," Garion explained.

"How remarkable," Belgarath said, unconsciously echoing the comment of the wolf.

"I was going to pass on some advice to these two young fellows, but you're the one who probably ought to hear it."

"I'll certainly listen."

"The Dais are a peculiar sort, friend, and they've got some peculiar superstitions. I won't go so far as to say they think of

these woods as sacred, but they do feel pretty strongly about them. I wouldn't advise cutting any trees—and don't, whatever you do, kill anything or anybody here.'" He pointed at the wolf. "She knows about that already. You've probably noticed that she won't hunt here. The Dais don't want this forest profaned with blood. I'd respect that, if I were you. The Dais can be helpful, but if you offend their beliefs,

they can make things mighty difficult for you."

"I appreciate the information," Belgarath told him.

"It never hurts a man to pass on things he's picked up," the old fellow said. He looked up the track. "Well," he said. "This is as far as I go. That's the road to Balasa just on up ahead. It's been nice talking with you." He doffed his shabby hat politely to Polgara, then looked at the wolf. "Be well, mother," he said, then he thumped his heels against his pony's flanks. The pony broke into an ambling sort of trot and jolted around a bend in the road to Balasa and out of sight.

"What a delightful old man," Ce'Nedra said.

"Useful, too," Polgara added. "You'd better get in touch with Uncle Beldin, father," she said to Belgarath. "Tell him to leave the rabbits and pigeons alone while we're in this forest."

"I'd forgotten about that," he said. "I'll take care of it right now." He lifted his face and closed his eyes.

"Can that old fellow really talk with wolves?" Silk asked Garion.

"He knows the language," Garion replied. "He doesn't speak it very well, but he knows it."

"One is sure he understands better than he speaks," the she-wolf said.

Garion stared at her, slightly startled that she had understood the conversation.

"The language of the man-things is not difficult to learn," - she said. "As the man-thing with the white fur on his face said, one can learn rapidly if one takes the trouble to listen. One would not care to speak your language, however," she added critically. "The speech of the man-things would place one's tongue in much danger of being bitten."

A sudden thought came to Garion then, accompanied by an absolute certainty that the thought was entirely accurate. "Grandfather," he said.

"Not now, Garion. I'm busy."

"I'll wait."

"Is it important?"

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"I think so, yes."

Belgarath opened his eyes curiously. "What is it?" he asked.

"Do you remember that conversation we had in Tol Honeth— the morning it was snowing?"

"I think so."

"We were talking about the way everything that happened seemed to have happened before.'"

"Yes, now I remember."

"You said that when the two prophecies got separated, things sort of stopped—that the future can't happen until they get back together again. Then you said that until they do, we'd all have to keep going through the same series of events over and over again."

"Did I really say that?" The old man looked a bit pleased. "That's sort of profound, isn't it? What's the point of this, though? Why are you bringing it up now?*"

"Because I think it just happened again." Garion looked at Silk. "Do you remember that old gold hunter we met in Gar og Nadrak when the three of us were on our way to Cthol Mish-rak?"

Silk nodded a bit dubiously.

"Wasn't the old fellow we just talked with almost exactly the same?"

"Now that you mention it. . ." Silk's eyes narrowed. "All right, Belgarath, what does it mean?"

Belgarath squinted up at the leafy branches overhead. "Let me think about it for a minute," he said. "There are some similarities, all right," he admitted. "The two of them are the same kind of people, and they both warned us about something. I think I'd better get Beldin back here. This might be very important.'"

It was no more than a quarter of an hour later when the blue-banded hawk settled out of the sky and blurred into the misshapen sorcerer. "What's got you so excited?" he demanded crossly.

"We just met somebody," Belgarath replied.

* 'Congratulations. *'

"I think this is serious, Beldin." Belgarath quickly explained his theory of recurring events.

"It's a little rudimentary," Beldin growled, "but there's nothing remarkable about that. Your hypotheses usually are." He squinted. "It's probably fairly accurate though—as far as it goes."

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"Thanks," Belgarath said dryly. Then he went on to describe the two meetings, the one in Gar og Nadrak and the other here. "The similarities are a little striking, aren't they?"

"Coincidence?"

"Shrugging things off as coincidence is the best way I know of to get in trouble." *

, "All right. For the sake of argument, let's say it wasn't coincidence." The dwarf squatted in the dirt at the roadside, his face twisted in thought. ' "Why don't we take this theory of yours a step farther?" he mused. "Let's look at the notion that these repetitions crop up at significant points in the course of events."

"Sort of like signposts?" Durnik suggested.

"Exactly. I couldn't have found a better term myself. Let's suppose that these signposts point at really important things that are right on the verge of happening—that they're sort of like warnings."

"I'm hearing a lot of 'notions' and 'supposes,' " Silk said skeptically. "I think you're off into the realm of pure speculation."

"You're a brave man, Kheldar," Beldin said sardonically. "Something could be trying to warn you about a potential catastrophe, and you choose to ignore the warning. That's either very brave or very stupid. Of course I'm giving you the benefit of the doubt by using the word 'brave' instead of the other one."

"One for his side," Velvet murmured.

Silk flushed slightly. "But how do we know what it is that's going to happen?" he objected.

' "We don't,"' Belgarath said. * "The circumstances just call for some extra alertness, is all. We've been warned. The rest is up to us."

They took some special precautions when they set up their encampment that evening. Polgara prepared supper quickly, and the fire was extinguished as soon as they had finished eating. Garion and Silk took the first watch. They stood atop a knoll behind the camp, peering into the darkness.

"I hate this," Silk whispered.

"Hate what?"

"Knowing that something is going to happen without knowing what it is. I wish those two old men would keep their speculations to themselves."

"Do you really like surprises?"

' "A surprise is better than living with this sense of dread. My nerves aren't what they used to be."

"You're too high-strung sometimes. Look at all the entertainment you're getting out of anticipation."

"I'm terribly disappointed in you, Garion. I thought you were a nice, sensible boy."

"What did I say?"

"Anticipation. In this situation, that's just another word for 'worry,' and worry isn't good for anybody."

"It's just a way to get us ready in case something happens."

"I'm always ready, Garion. That's how I've managed to live so long, but right now I feel almost as tightly wound as a lute string."

"Try not to think about it."

, "Of course," Silk retorted sarcastically. "But doesn't that defeat the purpose of the warning? Aren't we supposed to think about it?"

The sun had not come up yet when Sadi came back "to their camp, moving very quietly and going from tent to tent with a whispering warning. "There's somebody out there," he warned after he had scratched on the flap of Garion's tent.

Garion rolled out from under his blankets, his hand automatically reaching for his sword. He paused (hen. The old gold hunter had warned them against the shedding of blood. Was this the event for which they had been waiting? But were they supposed to obey the prohibition, or to step over it in response to some higher need? There was not time now to stand locked in indecision, however. Sword in hand, Garion rushed from the tent.

The light had that peculiar steely tint that comes from a colorless sky before the sun rises. It cast no shadows and what lay beneath the broad-spread oaks was not so much darkness as it was a fainter light. Garion moved quickly, his feet avoiding almost on their own the windrows of years-old dead leaves and the fallen twigs and branches that littered the floor of this ancient forest.

Zakath stood atop the knoll, holding his sword. ' 'Where are they?*' Garion's voice was not so much a whisper as a breath.

"They were coming up from the south," Zakath whispered back.

"How many?"

"It's hard to say."

"Are they trying to sneak up on us?"

"It didn't really look that way. The ones we saw could have

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hidden back there among the trees, but they just came walking through the forest.'

Garion peered out into the growing light. And then he saw them. They were dressed all in white-robcs or long smocks- and they made no attempts at concealment. Their movements were deliberate and seemed to have a placid, unhurried calm about them. They came in single file, each following the one in front at a distance of about ten yards. There was something hauntingly familiar about the way they moved through the forest.

"All they need are the torches," Silk said from directly behind Garion. The little man made no attempt to keep his voice down.

"Be still!" Zakath hissed.

"Why? They know we're here." Silk laughed a caustic little laugh. "Remember that time on the Isle of Verkat?" he said to Garion. "You and I spent a half hour or so crawling through me wet grass following Yard and his people, and I'm absolutely sure now that they knew we were there all the time. We could have just walked along behind them and saved ourselves all the discomfort."

"What are you talking about, Kheldar?" Zakath demanded in a hoarse whisper.

"This is another of Belgarath's repetitions." Silk shrugged. * 'Garion and I have been through it before.' He sighed ruefully. "Life is going to get terribly boring if nothing new ever happens." Then he raised his voice to a shout. "We're over here," he called to the white-robed figures out in the forest.

"Are you mad?" Zakatii exclaimed.

"Probably not, but then crazy people never really know, do they? Those people are Dais, and I seriously doubt that any Dal has ever hurt anybody since the beginning of time."

The leader of the strange column halted at the foot of the knoll and pushed back the cowl of his white robe. "We have been awaiting you," he announced. "The Holy Seeress has sent us to see you safely to Kell."

CHAPTER FOUR

King Kheva of Drasnia was irritable that morning He had overheard a conversation the previous evening between his mother and an emmisary of King Anheg of Cherek, and his irritation grew out of a sort of moral dilemma. To reveal to his mother that he had been eavesdropping would of course be quite out of the question, and so he could not discuss with her what he had heard until she broached the subject herself. It seemed quite unlikely that she would do so, and so Kheva was at an impasse.

It should be stated here that King Kheva was not really the sort of boy who would normally intrude on his mother's privacy He was basically a decent lad. But he was also a Drasnian. There is a

national trait among Drasnians which, for want of a better term, might be called curiosity. All people are curious to a certain degree, but in Drasnians the trait was quite nearly compulsive. Some contended that it was their innate curiosity which

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has made spying their national industry. Others maintained with equal vigor that generations of spying had honed the Drasnians' natural curiosity to a fine edge. The debate was much like the endless argument about the chicken and the egg, and almost as pointless. Quite early in life, Kheva had trailed unobtrusively along behind one of the official court spies and thereby discovered the closet hidden behind the east wall of his mother's sitting room. Periodically he would slip into that closet in order to keep track of affairs of state and any other matters of interest. He was the king, after all, and thus he had a perfect right to the information. He reasoned that by spying, he could obtain it while sparing his mother the inconvenience of passing it on to him. Kheva was a considerate boy.

The conversation in question had concerned the mysterious disappearance of the Earl of Trellheim, his ship Seabird, and a number of other individuals, including Trellheim's son Unrak.

Barak, Earl of Trellheim, was considered in some quarters to be an unreliable sort, and his companions in this vanishing were, if anything, even worse. The Alorn kings were disquieted by the potential for disaster represented by Barak and his cohorts roaming loose in the Gods only knew what ocean.

What concerned young King Kheva, however, was not so much random disasters as it was the fact that his friend Unrak had been invited to participate while he had not. The injustice of that rankled. The fact that he was a king seemed to automatically exclude him from anything that could even remotely be considered hazardous. Everyone went out of his way to keep Kheva safe and secure, but Kheva did not want to be kept safe and secure. Safety and security were boring, and Kheva was at an age where he would go to any lengths to avoid boredom.

Clad all in red, he made his way through the marble halls of the palace in Boktor that winter morning. He stopped in front of a large tapestry and made some show of examining it. Then, at least relatively sure that no one was watching—this was Drasnia, after all—he slipped behind the tapestry and into the small closet previously mentioned.

His mother was conferring with the Nadrak girl Vella and with Yarblek, Prince Kheldar's shabby partner. Vella always made King Kheva nervous. She aroused certain feelings in him with which he was not yet prepared to cope, and so he customarily avoided her. Yarblek, on the other hand, could be quite amusing. His speech was blunt and often colorful and laced with oaths Kheva was not supposed to know the meaning of.

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"They'll turn up, Porenn," Yarblek was assuring Kheva's mother.
"Barak just got bored, that's all."

"I wouldn't be so concerned if he'd gotten bored by himself," Queen Porenn replied, "but the fact that this boredom seems to be an epidemic worries me. Barak's companions aren't the most stable men in the world."

"I've met them." Yarblek grunted. "You might just be right." He paced up and down for a moment. "I'll have our people keep an eye out for them."

"Yarblek, I've got the finest intelligence service in the world."

"Perhaps so, Porenn, but Silk and I have more men than you do, and we've got offices and warehouses in places Javelin hasn't even heard of." He looked at Vella. "Do you want to go back to Gar og Nadrak with me?" he asked.

"In the wintertime?" Porenn objected.

"We'll just wear more clothes, that's all." Yarblek shrugged.

"What are you going to do there?" Vella asked. "I'm not really very interested in sitting around listening to you talk business."

"I thought we'd go to Yar Nadrak. Javelin's people don't seem to be having much luck finding out what Drosta's up to." He broke off and looked speculatively at Queen Porenn. "Unless they've picked up something lately I haven't heard about yet," he added.

"Would I keep secrets from you, Yarblek?" she asked with mock innocence.

"Probably, yes. If you've got something, Porenn, share it with me. I don't want to make the trip for nothing, and Yar Nadrak's a miserable place in the winter."

"Nothing yet," she replied seriously.

Yarblek grunted. "I didn't think so. Drasnians look too much like Drasnians to be able to move around in Yar Nadrak without attracting attention." He glanced at Vella. "Well?" he asked.

"Why not?" she agreed. "Don't take this personally, Porenn, but this project of yours—trying to turn me into a lady—is starting to distract me just a (ittle. Would you believe mat yesterday I left my room with only one of my daggers? I think I need some fresh air and stale beer to clear my head.'"

Kheva's mother sighed. "Try not to forget everything I've taught you, Vella."

"I have a very good memory, and I can tell the difference

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between Boktor and Yar Nadrak. Boktor smells better, for one thing."

"How long will you be gone?" Porenn asked the rangy Yarblek.

"A month or two, I'd imagine. I think we'll want to go to Yar Nadrak by a roundabout route. I don't want to announce to Drosta that I'm coming."

"All right then," the queen agreed. Then she thought of something. "One last thing, Yarblek."

"Yes?"

"I'm very fond of Vella. Don't make the mistake of selling her while you're in Gar og Nadrak. I'd be very put out if you did that."

"Who'd buy her?" Yarblek responded. Then he grinned and skipped out of the way as Vella automatically went for one of her daggers.

Eternal Salmissra looked with some distaste at her current Chief Eunuch, Adiss. In addition to being incompetent, Adiss was slovenly. His iridescent robe was food-spotted, and his scalp and face were sparsely stubbled. He had never, she concluded, been more than an opportunist, and now that he had ascended to the position of Chief Eunuch and felt more or less secure there, he had given himself over to the grossest sorts of debauchery. He consumed staggering quantities of some of the most pernicious drugs available in Nyissa and frequently came into her presence with the vacant-eyed shamble of a sleepwalker. He bathed infrequently, and the combination of the climate of Sthiss Tbr and the various drugs he used gave his body a rank, almost rancid, odor. Since the Serpent Queen now sampled the air with her flickering tongue, she could not only smell him but also taste him.

He groveled on the marble floor before the dais, delivering a report on some unimportant matter in a whining, nasal voice. Unimportant matters filled the Chief Eunuch's days. He devoted himself to petty things, since significant things were beyond his capabilities. With the mindless concentration of a man with severely limited talents, he expanded the trivial out of all proportion and reported it as if it were of earthshaking importance. Most of the time, Salmissra suspected, he was blithely ignorant of the things that should really be receiving his full attention.

"That will be all, Adiss," she told him in her sibilant whisper, her coils moving restlessly on her divanlike throne.

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"But, my Queen," he protested, the half-dozen or so drugs he had

taken since breakfast making him brave, "this matter is of utmost urgency."' "

"To you, perhaps. I am indifferent to it. Hire an assassin to cut off the Satrap's head and have done with it."

Adiss stared at her in consternation. "B-but, Eternal Sal-missra," he squeaked in horror, "the Satrap is of vital importance to the security of the nation.' "

"The Satrap is a petty time-server who bribes you to keep himself in office. He serves no particular purpose. Remove him and bring me his head as proof of your absolute devotion and obedience."

"H-hishead?"

"That's the part that has eyes in it, Adiss," she hissed sarcastically. "Don't make a mistake and bring me a foot instead. Now leave."

He stumbled backward toward the door, genuflecting every step or two.

"Oh, Adiss," she added, "don't ever enter the throne room again unless you've bathed."

He gaped at her in stupid incomprehension.

"You stink, Adiss. Your stench turns my stomach. Now get out of here."

He fled.

"Oh, my Sadi," she sighed half to herself, "where are you? Why have you deserted me?"

Urgit, High King of Cthol Murgos, was wearing a blue doublet and hose, and he sat up straight on his garish throne in the Drojim Palace. Javelin privately suspected that Urgit's new wife had a great deal to do with the High King's change of dress and demeanor. Urgit was not bearing up too well under the stresses of marriage. His face had a slightly baffled look on it as if something profoundly confusing had entered his life.

"That is our current assessment of the situation, your Majesty," Javelin concluded his report. "Kal Zakath has so reduced his forces here in Cthol Murgos that you could quite easily sweep them into the sea."

"That's easy for you to say, Margrave Khendon," Urgit replied a bit petulantly, "but I don't see you Alorns committing any of your forces to assist with the sweeping."

"Your Majesty raises a slightly delicate point," Javelin said, thinking very fast now. "Although we have agreed from the

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start that we have a common enemy in the Emperor of Mallorea, the

eons of enmity between the Alorns and the Murgos cannot be erased overnight. Do you really want a Cherek fleet off your coast or a sea of Algar horsemen on the plains of Cthan and Hagga? The Alorn kings and Queen Porenn will give instructions, certainly, but commanders in the field have a way of interpreting royal commands to suit their own preconceptions. Your Murgo generals might very well also choose to misunderstand your instructions when they see a horde of Alorns bearing down on them."

"That's true, isn't it?" Urgit conceded. "What about the Tolnedran legions then? There have always been good relations between Tolnedra and Cthol Murgos."

Javelin coughed delicately and then looked around with some show of checking for unwanted listeners. Javelin knew that he must move with some care now. Urgit was proving to be far more shrewd than any of them had anticipated. Indeed, he was at times as slippery as an eel and he seemed to know instinctively exactly the way Javelin's fine-tuned Drasnian mind was working. "I trust this won't go any further, your Majesty?" he said in a half whisper.

"You have my word on it, Margrave," Urgit whispered back. "Although anyone who takes the word of a Murgo—anda member of the Urga Dynasty as well—shows very poor judgment. Murgos are notoriously untrustworthy, and all Urgas are quite mad, you know."

Javelin chewed on a fingernail, strongly suspecting that he was being outmaneuvered. "We've received some disquieting information from Tol Honeth." "Oh?"

"You know how the Tblnedrans are—always alert for the main chance."

"Oh, my goodness, yes." Urgit laughed. "Some of the fondest memories of my childhood come from the times when Taur Urgas, my late, unlamented father, fell to chewing on the furniture when he received the latest proposal from Ran Borune." "Now mind you, your Majesty," Javelin went on, "I'm not 'Suggesting that Emperor Varana himself is in any way involved in this, but there are some fairly high-ranking Tolnedran nobles who've been in contact with Mal Zeth." "•:. "That's disturbing, isn't it? But Varana controls the legions. —As long as he's opposed to Zakath, we're safe." "That's true—as long as Varana's alive."

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"Are you suggesting the possibility of a coup?"

"It's not unheard of, your Majesty. Your own kingdom gives evidence of that. The great families in northern Tolnedra are still infuriated about the way the Borunes and Anadiles pulled a march on them and put Varana on the imperial throne. If something happens to Varana and he's succeeded by a Vordue or a Honeth or a Horbite, all assurances

go out the window. An alliance between Mal Zeth and Tol Honeth could be an absolute disaster for Murgo and Alorn alike. More than that, though, if such an alliance were kept a secret and you had Tblnedran legions in force here in Cthol Murgos and they received sudden instructions to change sides, you'd be caught between an army of Tolnedrans and an army of Malioreans. That isn't my idea of a pleasant way to spend a summer."

Urgit shuddered.

"Under the circumstances, your Majesty," Javelin went on smoothly, "I'd advise the following course." He began ticking items off on his fingers. "One: There's a vastly diminished Mal-lorean presence here in Cthol Murgos. Two: An Alom force inside your borders would be neither necessary nor advisable. You have enough troops of your own to drive the Malioreans out, and we'd be ill-advised to risk any accidental confrontations between your people and ours. Three: The rather murky political situation in Tolnedra makes it extremely risky to contemplate bringing the legions down here."

"Waitamminute, Khendon," Urgit objected. "You came here to Rak Urga with all sorts of glowing talk about alliances and commonality of interests, but now when it's time to put troops into the field, you back down. Why have you been wasting my time?"

' 'The situation has changed since we began our negotiations, your Majesty," Javelin told him. "We did not anticipate a Mal-lorean withdrawal of such magnitude, and we certainly didn't expect instability in Tolnedra."

' 'What am I going to get out of this then?'

' 'What is Kal Zakath likely to do the minute he gets word that you're marching on his strongholds?"

"He'll turn around and send his whole stinking army back to Cthol Murgos."

"Through a Cherek fleet?" Javelin suggested. "He tried that after Thull Mardu, remember? King Anheg and his berserkers sank most of his ships and drowned his troops by the regiment.'"

"That's true, isn't it?" Urgit mused. "Do you think Anheg

might be willing to blockade the east coast to keep Zakath's army from returning?"

"I think he'd be delighted. Chereks take such childlike pleasure in sinking other people's boats."

' 'He'd need charts in order to make his way around the southern tip of Cthol Murgos, though,'" Urgit said thoughtfully.

Javelin coughed. "Ah—we already have those, your Majesty," he said deprecatingly.

Urgit slammed his fist down on the arm of his throne. ' 'Hang it all, Khendon! You're here as an ambassador, not as a spy."

"Just keeping in practice, your Majesty," Javelin replied blandly. "Now," he went on, "in addition to a Cherek fleet in the Sea of the East, we're prepared to line the northern and western borders of Goska and the northwestern border of Araga with Algar cavalry and Drasnian pikemen. That would effectively cut off escape routes for the Malioreans trapped in Cthol Murgos, block Kal Zakath's favorite invasion route down through Mishrak ac Thull, and seal off the Tolnedran legions in the event of an accommodation between Tol Honeth and Mal Zeth. That way, everybody defends more or less his own territory, and the Chereks keep the Mailoreans off the continent so that we can settle it all to our own satisfaction."

"It also totally isolates Cthol Murgos." Urgit pointed out the one fact that Javelin had hoped to gloss over. "I exhaust my kingdom pulling your chestnuts out of the fire, and then the Alorns, Tolnedrans, Arends, and Sendars are free to march in and eliminate the Angarak presence on the western continent."

"You have the Nadraks and Thulls as allies, your Majesty."

"I'll trade you," Urgit said dryly. "Give me the Arends and the Rivans, and I'll gladly give you the Thulls and Nadraks."

"I think it's time for me to contact my government on these matters, your Majesty. I've already overextended my authority. I'll need further instructions from Boktor."

"Give Porenn my regards," Urgit said, "and teil her that I join with her in wishing a mutual relative well."

Javelin felt a lot less sure of himself as he left.

The Child of Dark had smashed all die mirrors in her quarters in the Grolim Temple at Balasa that morning. It had begun to touch her face now. Dimly she had seen the swirling lights beneath the skin of her cheeks and forehead and then had broken the mirror that had revealed the fact to her--and all the others, as well. When it was done, she stared in horror at the gash in

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the palm of her hand. The lights were even in her blood. Bitterly she recalled the wild joy that had filled her when she had first read the prophetic words: "Behold: the Child of Dark shall be exalted above all others and shall be glorified by the light of the stars." * But the light of the stars was no halo or glowing nimbus. The light was a creeping disease that encroached upon her inch by inch.

It was not only the swirling lights, however, that had begun to consume her. Increasingly her thoughts, her memories, and even her dreams were not her own. Again and again she awoke screaming as the same dream came again and again. She seemed to hang bodiless and indifferent in some unimaginable void, watching all unconcerned as a

giant star spun and wobbled on its course, swelling and growing redder as it shuddered toward inevitable extinction. The random wobble of the off-center star was of no real concern until it became more and more pronounced. Then the bodiless and sexless awareness drifting in the void felt a prickle of interest and then a growing alarm. This was wrong. This had not been intended. And then it happened. The giant red star exploded in a place where that explosion was not supposed to happen; and, because it was in the wrong place, other stars were caught up in it. A vast, expanding ball of burning energy rippled outward, engulfing sun after sun until an entire galaxy had been consumed.

The awareness in the void felt a dreadful wrench within itself as the galaxy exploded, and for a moment it seemed to exist in more than one place. And then it was no longer one. "This must not be," the awareness said in a soundless voice.

"Truly," another soundless voice responded.

And that was the horror that brought Zandramas bolt upright and screaming in her bed night after night—the sense of another presence when always before there had been the perfect solitude of eternal oneness.

The Child of Dark tried to put those thoughts—memories, if you will—from her mind. There was a knock at the door of her chamber, and she pulled up the hood of her Grolim robe to hide her face. "Yes?" she said harshly.

The door opened, and the archpriest of this temple entered. "Naradas has departed, Holy Sorceress," he reported. "You wanted to be told."

"All right," she said in a flat voice.

"A messenger has arrived from the west," the Archpriest continued. "He brings news that a western Grolim, a Hierarch,

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has landed on the barren west coast of Finda and now moves across Dalasia toward Kell."

Zandramas felt a faint surge of satisfaction. "Welcome to Mallorean, Agachak," she almost purred. "I've been waiting for you."

It was foggy that morning along the southern tip of the Isle of Verkat, but Gait was a fisherman and he knew the ways of these waters. He pushed out at first light, steering more by the smell of the land behind him and the feel of the prevailing current than by anything else. From time to time he would stop rowing, pull in his net, and empty the struggling, silver-sided fish into the large box beneath his feet. Then he would cast out his net again and resume his rowing while the fish he had caught thumped and flapped beneath him.

It was a good morning for fishing. Gait did not mind the fog. There were other boats out, he knew, but the fog created the illusion that he had the ocean to himself, and Gait liked that.

It was a slight change in the pull of the current on his boat that warned him. He hastily shipped his oars, leaning forward, and began to clang the bell mounted in the bow of his boat to warn the approaching ship that he was here.

And then he saw it. It was like no other ship Gart had ever seen before. It was long and it was big and it was lean. Its high bowsprit was ornately carved. Dozens of oars propelled it hissing through the water. There could be no mistaking the purpose for which that ship had been built. Gart shivered as the ominous vessel slid past.

Near the stern of the ship, a huge red-bearded man in chain mail stood leaning over the rail. "Any luck?" he called to Gart.

"Fair," Gart replied cautiously. He did not wish to encourage a ship with that big a crew to drop anchor and begin hauling in his fish.

"Are we off the southern coast of the Isle of Verkat yet?" the led-bearded giant asked.

Gart sniffed at the air and caught the faint scent of the land. "15x1 *116 almost past it now," he told them. "The coast takes a bend to the northeast about here."

A man dressed in gleaming armor joined the big red-bearded fellow at the rail. The armored man held his helmet under one arm, and his black hair was curly. "Thy knowledge of these waters doth seem profound, friend," he said in an archaic form of address Gart had seldom heard before, "and thy willingness

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to share thy knowledge with others doth bespeak a seemly courtesy. Canst thou perchance advise us of the shortest course to Mallorea?"

"That would depend on exactly where you wanted to go in Mallorea," Gart replied.

"The closest port," the red-bearded man said.

Gart squinted, trying to recall the details of the map he had tucked on a shelf at home. "That would be Dal Zerba in southwestern Dalasia," he said. "If it were me, I'd go on due east for another ten or twenty leagues and then come about to a northeasterly course."

"And how long a voyage do we face to reach this port thou hast mentioned?" the armored man asked.

Gart squinted at the long, narrow ship alongside him. "That depends on how fast your ship goes," he replied. "It's three hundred and fifty leagues or so, but you have to swing back out to sea again to get around the Turim reef. It's very dangerous, I'm told, and no one tries to go through it."

"Peradventure we might be the first, my Lord," the armored man said gaily to his friend.

The giant sighed and covered his eyes with one huge hand. "No, Mandorallen," he said in a mournful voice. "If we rip out my ship's bottom on a reef, we'll have to swim the rest of the way, and you're not dressed for it."

The huge ship began to slide off into the fog.

"What kind of a ship is that?" Gart called after the disappearing vessel.

"A Cherek war boat," the rumbled reply came back with a note of pride. "She's the largest afloat."

"What do you call her?" Gart shouted between his cupped hands.

"Seabird, "the reply came ghosting back to him.

CHAPTER FIVE

It was not a large city, but its architecture was at a level of sophistication Garion had never seen before. It nestled in a shallow valley near the foot of the vast white peak, looking somehow as if it were resting in the mountain's lap. It was a city of slender white spires and marble colonnades. The low buildings spaced among the spires often had entire walls of glass. There were wide lawns around the buildings and groves of trees with marble benches beneath them. Formal gardens were spaced about the lawns—boxy hedges and beds of flowers lined by low, white walls. Fountains played in the gardens and in the courtyards of the buildings.

Zakath gaped at the city of Kell in stunned amazement. "I never even knew this was here!" he exclaimed.

"You didn't know about Kell?" Garion asked him.

"I knew about Kell, but I didn't know it was like this."

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Zakath made a face. "It makes Mal Zeth look like a collection of hovels, doesn't it?"

"Tol Honeth, as well—and even Melcene," Garion agreed.

"I didn't think the Dais even knew how to build a proper house," the Mallorean said, "and now they show me something like this."

Tom had been gesturing to Durnik.

"He says that it's the oldest city in the world," the smith supplied. "It was built this way long before the world was cracked. It hasn't changed in almost ten thousand years."

Zakath sighed. "They've probably forgotten how to do it, then. I was going to press some of their architects into service. Mal Zeth could use a bit of beautifying."

Toth gestured again, and a frown appeared on Durnik's face. "I can't have gotten that right," he muttered.

"What did he say?"

"The way I got it was that nothing the Dais have ever done has ever been forgotten." Durnik looked at his friend. "Is that what you meant?" he asked.

Tom nodded and gestured again.

Durnik's eyes went wide. "He says that every Dal alive today knows everything that every Dal who's ever lived knew."

"They must have very good schools then," Garion suggested.

Toth only smiled at that. It was a strange smile, tinged slightly with pity. Then he gestured briefly to Durnik, slid down from his horse, and walked away.

"Where's he going?" Silk asked.

"To see Cyradis," Durnik replied.

"Shouldn't we go with him?"

Dumik shook his head. "She'll come to us when she's ready."

Like all the Dais Garion had ever seen, the inhabitants of Kell wore simple white robes with deep cowls attached to the shoulders. They walked quietly across the lawns or sat in the gardens in groups of two or three engaged in sober discussion. Some carried books or scrolls. Others did not. Garion was somehow reminded of the University of Tol Honeth or the one at Melcene. This community of scholars, he was convinced, however, was engaged in studies far more profound than the often petty research that filled the lives of the professors at those exalted institutions.

The group of Dais who had escorted them to this jewellike city led them along a gently curving street to a simple house on

the far side of one of the formal gardens. An ancient, white-TObed man leaned on a long staff in the doorway. His eyes were very blue, and his hair was snowy white. "We have long awaited your coming," he said to them in a quavering voice, "for The Book of Ages has foretold that in the Fifth Age the Child of Light and his company would come to us here at Kell to seek guidance."

"And the Child of Dark?" Belgarath asked him, dismounting. "Will she also come here?"

"No, Ancient Belgarath," the elderly man replied. "She may not come here, but will find direction elsewhere and in a different manner. I am Dalian, and I am bid to greet you."

"Do you rule here, Dalian?" Zakath asked, also dismounting.

"No one rules here, Emperor of Mallorean," Dalian said, "not even you."

"You seem to know us," Belgarath noted.

"We have known you all since the book of the heavens was first opened to us, for your names are written large in the stars. And now I will take you to a place where you may rest and await the pleasure of the Holy Seeress," He looked at the oddly placid she-wolf at Garion's side and the frolicking puppy behind her. "How is it with you, little sister?" he asked in formal tones.

"One is content, friend," she replied in the language of wolves.

"One is pleased that it is so," he replied in her own tongue.

"Does everyone in the whole world except me speak wolf?" Silk asked with some asperity.

"Would you like lessons?" Garion asked.

"Nevermind."

And then with tottering step the white-haired man led them across the verdant lawn to a large marble building with broad, gleaming steps at the front. "This house was prepared for you at the beginning of the Third Age, Ancient Belgarath," the old man said. "Its first stone was laid on the day when you recovered your Master's Orb from the City of Endless Night."

"That was quite sometime ago," the sorcerer observed.

"The Ages were long in the beginning," Dalian agreed. "They grow shorter now. Rest well. We will attend to your mounts." Then he turned and, leaning on his staff, he went back toward his own house.

"Someday a Dal is going to come right out and say what he means without all the cryptic babble, and the world will come

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to an end," Beldin growled. "Let's go inside. If this house has been here for as long as he said it has, the dust's likely to be knee-deep in there, and it's going to need to be swept out."

"Tidiness, uncle?" Polgara laughed as they started up the marble steps. "From you?"

"I don't mind a certain amount of dirt, Pol, but dust makes me

sneeze."

The interior of the house, however, was spotless. Gossamer curtains hung at the windows, billowing in the sweet-scented summer breeze, and the furniture, although oddly constructed and strangely alien-looking, was very comfortable. The interior walls were peculiarly curved, and there were no corners anywhere to be seen.

They wandered about this strange house, trying to adjust themselves to it. Then they gathered in a large, domed central room where a small fountain trickled water down one wall.

"There isn't any back door," Silk noted critically.

"Were you planning to leave, Kheldar?" Velvet asked him.

"Not necessarily, but I like to have that option open if the need should arise."

"You can always jump out a window if you have to."

"That's amateurish, Liselle. Only a first-year student at the academy dives out of windows."

"I know, but sometimes we have to improvise."

There was a peculiar murmuring sound in Garion's ears. At first he thought it might be the fountain, but somehow it didn't quite sound like running water. "Do you think they'd mind if we went out and had a look around?" he asked Belgarath.

"Let's wait a bit before we do that. We were sort of put here. I don't know yet if that means we're supposed to stay or what. Let's feel things out before we take any chances. The Dais here— and Cyradis in particular—have something we need. Let's not offend them." He looked at Dumik. "Did Toth give you any hints about when she'll be coming here?"

' 'Not really, but I got the impression it wouldn't be too long.'

"That's not really too helpful, brother mine," Beldin said. "The Dais have a rather peculiar notion of time. They keep track of it in ages rather than years.'

Zakath had been rather closely examining the wall a few yards from the trickling fountain. "Do you realize that there's no mortar holding this wall together?"

Durnik joined him, took his knife from its sheath, and probed at the slender fissure between two of the marble slabs. "Mortise

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and tenon," he said thoughtfully, "and very tightly fit, too. It must have taken years to build this house."

"And centuries to build the city, if it's all put together that way," Zakath added. "Where did they learn how to do all this? And when?"

"Probably during the First Age," Belgarath told him.

"Stop that, Belgarath," Beldin snapped irritably. "You sound just the way they do."

"I always try to follow local customs."

"I still don't know any more than I did before," Zakath complained.

"The First Age covered the period of time from the creation of man until the day when Torak cracked the world," Belgarath told him. "The beginning of it is a little vague. Our Master was never very specific about when he and his brothers made the world. I expect that none of them want to talk about it because their Father disapproved. The cracking of the world is fairly well pinpointed, though."

"Were you around when it happened, Lady Polgara?" Sadi asked curiously.

"No," she replied. "My sister and I were born a while later."

"How long awhile?"

"Two thousand years or so, wasn't it, father?"

"About that, yes."

"It chills my blood, the casual way you people shrug off eons." Sadi shuddered.

"What makes you think they learned this style of building before the cracking of the world?" Zakath asked Belgarath.

"I've read parts of The Book of Ages," the old man said. "It fairly well documents the history of the Dais. After the world was cracked and the Sea of the East rushed in, you Angaraks fled to Mallorean. The Dais knew that eventually they'd have to come to terms with your people, so they decided to pose as simple farmers. They dismantled their cities—all except this one."

"Why would they leave Kell intact?"

"There was no need to take it apart. The Grolims were the ones they were really worried about, and the Grolims can't come here."

"But other Angaraks can," Zakath noted shrewdly. "How is it that none of them has ever reported a city like this to the bureaucracy?"

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"They're probably encouraged to forget," Polgara told him.

He looked at her sharply.

"It's not really that difficult, Zakath. A hint or two can usually erase memories." An expression of irritation crossed her face. "What is that murmuring sound?" she demanded.

"I don't hear anything," Silk said, looking slightly baffled.

"You must have your ears stopped up, then, Kheldar."

About sunset, several young women in soft white robes brought supper to them on covered trays.

"I see that diings are the same the world over," Velvet said wryly to one of the young women. "The men sit around and talk, and the women do the work."

"Oh, we don't mind," the girl replied earnestly. "It's an honor to serve." She had very large dark eyes and lustrous brown hair.

"That's what makes it even worse," Velvet said. "First they make us do all the work, and then they persuade us that we like it."

The girl gave her a startled look, then giggled. Then she looked around guiltily and blushed.

Beldin had seized a crystal flagon almost as soon as the young women had entered. He filled a goblet and drank noisily. Then he began to choke, spraying a purplish liquid over half the room. "What is this stuff?" he demanded indignandy.

"It's fruit juice, sir," the young woman with the dark hair assured him earnestly. "It's very fresh. It was pressed only this morning."

"Don't you let it set long enough to ferment?"

"You mean when it goes bad? Oh, no. We throw it out when that happens."

Hegroaned. "What about ale? Or beer?"

"What are those?"

"I knew there was going to be something wrong with this place," the dwarf growled to Belgarath.

Polgara, however, had a beatific smile on her face.

"What was that all about?" Silk asked Velvet after the Dal-asian women had left. "Ail that chitchat, I mean?"

"Groundwork," she replied mysteriously. "It never hurts to open channels of communication."

"Women," He sighed, rolling his eyes toward the ceiling.

Garion and Ce'Nedra exchanged a quick look, both of them remembering how often each of them had said approximately

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the same thing in the same tone early in their marriage. Then they both laughed.

"What's so funny?" Silk asked suspiciously.

"Nothing, Kheldar," Ce'Nedra replied. "Nothing at all."

Garion slept poorly that night. The murmuring in his ears was just enough of a distraction to bring him back from the edge of sleep over and over again. He arose the next morning sandy-eyed and out of sorts.

In the large round central room he found Durnik. The smith had his ear pressed against the wall near the fountain. -

"What's the trouble?" Garion asked him.

"I'm trying to pinpoint that noise," Durnik said. "It might be something in the plumbing. The water in this fountain has to come from somewhere. Probably it's piped in, and then the pipe runs under the floor or up through the walls."

"Would water running through a pipe make that sort of noise?"

Dumik laughed. "You never know what sort of sounds are going to come out of the plumbing, Garion. I saw a whole town abandoned once. They all thought the place was haunted. The noise turned out to be coming from the municipal water supply."

Sadi came into the room once again wearing his iridescent silk robe.

"Colorful," Garion observed. For the past several months, the eunuch had been wearing a tunic, hose, and Sendarian half-boots.

Sadi shrugged. "For some reason I feel homesick this morning." He sighed. "I think I could live out my life in perfect contentment if I never saw another mountain. What are you doing, Goodman Durnik? Still examining the construction?"

"No. I'm trying to track down die source of that noise."

"What noise?"

"Surely you can hear it."

Sadi cocked his head to one side. "I hear some birds just outside the window," he said, "and there's a stream somewhere nearby, but that's about all."

Garion and Durnik exchanged a long, speculative look. "Silk couldn't hear it yesterday either," Durnik recalled.

"Why don't we get everybody up?" Garion suggested.

"That might make some of them a little unhappy, Garion."

"They'll get over it. I think this might be important."

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There were some surly looks directed at Garion as the others filed in.

"What's this all about, Garion?" Belgarath asked in exasperation.

"It's what you might call an experiment, Grandfather."

"Do your experiments on your own time."

"My, aren't we cross this morning?" Ce'Nedra said to the old man.

"I didn't sleep very well."

"That's strange. J slept like a baby."

"Durnik," Garion said, "would you stand over there, please?" He pointed to one side of the room. "And Sadi, you over there." He pointed to the other side. "This will only take a few minutes," he told them all. "I'm going to whisper a question to each of you, and I want you to answer yes or no."

"Aren't you being just a bit exotic?" Betgarath asked sourly.

"I don't want to contaminate the experiment by giving all of you the chance to talk it over."

"It's a sound scientific principle," Beldin approved. "Let's humor him. He's stirred up my curiosity."

Garion went from person to person, whispering a single question: "Can you hear that murmuring sound?" Depending on the answer, he asked each of them to join either Sadi or Durnik. It did not take long, and the result confirmed Garion's suspicions. Standing with Durnik were Belgarath, Polgara, Beldin, and— somewhat surprisingly—Eriond. Standing with Sadi were Silk, Velvet, Ce'Nedra, and Zakath.

"Now do you suppose you could explain all this rigama-role?" Belgarath asked.

"I asked everybody the same question, Grandfather. The people standing with you can hear that sound. The people over there can't."

"Of course they can. It kept me awake half the night."

"Maybe that's why you're so dense this morning." Beldin grunted. "Good experiment, Garion. Now, why don't you explain it to our fuzzy-headed friend?"

"It's not difficult, Grandfather," Garion said deprecatingly. "It's

probably so simple that you're overlooking it. The only people who can hear the sound are those with what you used to call 'talent.' Ordinary people can't."

"I'll be honest, Belgarath," Silk said. "I can't hear a sound."

"And I've been hearing it ever since we first caught sight of Kell," Durnik added.

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"Now isn't that interesting?" Beldin said to Belgarath. "Shall we take it a few steps further, or did you want to go back to bed?"

"Don't be absurd," Belgarath replied absently.

"All right, then," Beldin continued, "we've got a sound that ordinary people can't hear, but that we can. I can think of another right offhand, as well, can't you?"

Belgarath nodded. "The sound of someone using sorcery."

"This is not a natural sound, then," Durnik mused. He suddenly laughed. "I'm glad you worked this out, Garion. I was right on the verge of tearing up the floor."

"What on earth for?" Polgara asked him.

"I thought the noise was coming from a water pipe somewhere."

"This isn't sorcery, though," Belgarath said. "It doesn't sound the same and it doesn't feel the same."

Beldin was scratching thoughtfully at his matted beard. "How does this idea strike you?" he said to Belgarath. "The people here have enough concentrated power to deal with any Grolim or group of Grolims who might come along, so why go to the trouble of laying down that curse of theirs?"

"I don't quite follow you."

"A large proportion of Grolims are sorcerers, right? So they'd be able to hear this sound. What if that enchantment is there to keep the Grolims far enough away so that they won't hear it?"

"Aren't you getting a little exotic, Beldin?" Zakath asked skeptically.

"Not really. Actually, I'm simplifying. A curse designed to keep away people you're not really afraid of doesn't make sense. Everybody's always thought that the curse was there to protect Kell itself, and that doesn't make any sense either. Isn't it simpler to assume that there's something more important that has to be protected?"

"What is there about this sound that would make the Dais so concerned about having it overheard?" Velvet asked, sounding perplexed.

"All right," Beldin said. "What is a sound?"

"Not that again." Belgarath sighed.

"I'm not talking about the noise in the woods. A sound is just a noise unless it's meaningful. What do we call a meaningful sound?"

"Talk, isn't it?" Silk ventured.

"Exactly."

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"I don't understand," Ce'Nedra confessed. "What are the Dais saying that they want to keep secret? Nobody understands what they're saying anyway."

Beldin spread his hands helplessly, but Durnik was pacing up and down, his face creased with thought. "Maybe it's not so much what they're saying, but how."

"And you accuse me of being obscure," Beldin said to Bel-garath. "What are you getting at, Durnik?"

"I'm groping," the smith admitted. "The noise, or sound-whatever you want to call it—isn't a signal that somebody's turning people into frogs." He stopped. "Can we really do that?" he asked.

"Yes," Beldin said, "but it's not worth the trouble. Frogs multiply at a ferocious rate. I'd rather have one person who irritated me instead of a million or so aggravating frogs."

"All right, then," Durnik continued. "It's not the noise that sorcery makes."

"Probably not," Belgarath agreed.

"And I think Ce'Nedra's right. Nobody really understands what the Dais are saying—except for other Dais. Half the time I can't follow what Cyradis is saying from one end of a sentence to the other."

"What does that leave?" Beldin asked intently, his eyes alight. "I'm not sure. I've got the feeling though that 'How' is more important than 'What.'" Durnik suddenly looked slightly embarrassed. "I'm talking too much," he confessed. "I'm sure that some of the rest of you have more important things to say about this than I do."

"I don't really think so," Beldin told him. "I think you're right on the edge of it. Don't lose it."

Durnik was actually sweating now. He covered his eyes with one hand,

trying to collect his thoughts. Garion noticed that everyone in the room was almost breathlessly watching his old friend labor with a concept that was probably far beyond the grasp of any of the rest of them.

"There has to be something that the Dais are trying to protect," the smith went on, "and it has to be something that's very simple—for them at least—but something they don't want anybody else to understand. I wish Toth were here. He might be able to explain it.'" Then his eyes went very wide. "What is it, dear?" Polgara asked.

"It can't be that!" he exclaimed, suddenly very excited. "It couldn't be!"

"Durnik!" she said in exasperation.

"Do you remember when Toth and I first began to talk to each other—in gestures, I mean?" Durnik was suddenly talking very fast and he was almost breathless. "We'd been working together, and a man who works with someone else begins to know exactly what the other one is doing—and even what he's thinking." He stared at Silk. "You and Garion and Pol use that finger-language," he said.

"Yes."

"You've seen the gestures Toth makes. Would the secret language be able to say all that much with just a few waves of the hand—the way he does it?"

Garion already knew the answer.

Silk's voice was puzzled. "No," he said. "That would be impossible."

"But I know exactly what he's trying to say," Durnik told them. "The gestures don't mean anything at all. He does it just to make me—to give me some rational explanation for what he's really doing." Durnik's face grew awed. "He's been putting the words directly into my mind—without even talking. He has to, because he can't talk. What if that's what this murmuring we hear is? What if it's the sound of the Dais talking to one another? And what if they can do it over long distances?"

"And overtime, too," Beldin said in a startled voice. "Do you remember what your big, silent friend said when we first got here? He said that nothing the Dais have ever done has ever been forgotten and that every Dal alive knows everything that every Dal who's ever lived knew."

"You're suggesting an absurdity, Beldin," Belgarath scoffed.

"No. Not really. Ants do it. So do bees."

"We aren't ants—or bees."

"I can do almost anything a bee can do." The hunchback shrugged. "Except make honey—and you could probably build a fairly acceptable anthill."

"Will one of you please explain what you're talking about?" Ce'Nedra asked crossly.

"They're hinting at the possibility of a group mind, dear," Polgara said quite calmly. "They're not doing it very well, but that's what they're groping toward." She gave the two old men a condescending sort of smile. "There are certain creatures— usually insects—that don't have very much intelligence individually, but as a group they're very wise. A single bee isn't too

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bright, but a beehive knows everything that's ever happened to it."

The she-wolf had come padding in, her toenails clicking on the marble floor, with the puppy scampering along behind her. "Wolves do it, as well," she supplied, indicating that she had been listening at the door.

"What did she say?" Silk asked.

"She said that wolves do the same thing," Garion translated. Then he remembered something. "I was talking with Hettar once, and he said that horses are the same way. They don't think of themselves as individuals—only as parts of the herd."

' 'Would it really be possible for people to do something like that?" Velvet asked incredulously.

"There's one way to find out," Polgara replied.

"No, Pol," Belgarath said very firmly. "It's too dangerous. You could be drawn into it and never be able to get back out."

"No, father," she replied quite calmly. "The Dais may not let me in, but they won't hurt me or keep me in if I want to leave.'"

"How do you know that?"

"I just do." And she closed her eyes.

CHAPTER SIX

They stood watching her apprehensively as she lifted her flawless face. Eyes closed, she concentrated. Then a strange expression came to her features.

"Well?" Belgarath asked.

"Quiet, father. I'm listening."

He stood drumming his fingers impatiently on the back of a chair, and the others watched breathlessly.

At last Polgara opened her eyes with a vaguely regretful sigh. "It's enormous," she said very quietly. "It has every thought these people

have ever had—and every memory. It even remembers the beginning, and every one of them shares in it."

"And so did you?" Belgarath asked her.

"For a moment, father. They let me catch a glimpse of it. There are parts of it that are blocked off, though."

"We might have guessed that," Beldin said, scowling. "They're not going to provide access to anything that would

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give us the slightest advantage. They've been perched on that fence since the beginning of time."

Polgara sighed again and sat on a low divan.

"Are you all right, Pol?" Durnik asked with some concern.

"I'm fine, Durnik," she replied. "It's just that for a moment I saw something I've never experienced before, and then they asked me to leave."

Silk's eyes narrowed slightly. "Do you think they'd object if we left this house and had a look around?"

"No. They won't mind."

"I'd say that's our next step then," the little man suggested. "We know that the Dais are the ones who are going to make the final choice—at least Cyradis is—but this oversoul of theirs is probably going to provide her some direction."

"That's a very interesting term, Kheldar," Beldin noted.

"What is?"

"Oversoul. How did you come up with it?"

"I've always had a way with words."

"There may be some hope for you after all. Someday we'll have to have a long talk."

"I shall place myself at your disposal, Beldin," Silk said with a florid bow. "Anyway," he continued, "since the Dais are going to decide things, I think we ought to get to know them better. If they're leaning in the wrong direction, maybe we can sway them back."

"Typically devious," Sadi murmured, "but probably not a bad idea. We should split up, though. We'll be able to cover more ground that way."

"Right after breakfast," Belgarath agreed.

"But, Grandfather," Garion protested, impatient to be off.

"I'm hungry, Garion, and I don't think well when I'm hungry--"

"That might explain a lot," Beldin noted blandly. "We should have fed you more often when you were younger."

"You can be terribly offensive sometimes, do you know that?"

"Why, yes, as a matter of fact I do." The same group of young women brought breakfast to them, and Velvet drew aside the large-eyed girl with the glossy brown hair and spoke with her briefly. Then the blond girl returned to the table. "Her name is Onatel," she reported, "and she's invited Ce'Nedra and me to visit the place where she and the other

young women work. Young women talk a great deal, so we might pick up something useful.'"

"Wasn't Onatel the name of that seeress we met on the Isle of Verkat?" Sadi asked.

"It's a common name among Dalasian women," Zakath told him. "Onatel was one of their most honored seeresses."

"But the Isle of Verkat is in Cthol Murgos," Sadi pointed out.

"It's not all that strange," Belgarath said. "We've had some fairly strong hints that the Dais and the slave race of Cthol Murgos are closely related and keep in more or less constant contact. This is just some additional confirmation."

The morning sun was warm and bright as they emerged from the house and strolled off in various directions. Garion and Zak-ath had removed their armor and left their swords behind, although Garion prudently carried the Orb in a pouch tied to his belt. The two of them walked across a dewy lawn toward a group of larger buildings near the center of the city.

"You're always very careful with that stone, aren't you, Gar-ion?" Zakath asked.

"I'm not sure that careful is the exact word," Garion replied, "but then again, maybe it is—in a broader sense. You see, the Orb is very dangerous, and I don't want it hurting people by accident."

"What does it do?"

"I'm not really sure. I've never seen it do anything to anybody—except possibly Torak—but that might have been the sword."

"And you're the only one in the world who can touch the Orb?"

"Hardly. Eriond carried it around for a couple of years. He kept trying to give it to people. They were mostly Alorns, so they knew better than to take it."

"Then you and Eriond are the only people who can touch it?"

"My son can," Garion said. "I put his hand on it right after he was born. It was very happy to meet him."

"A stone? Happy?"

"It's not like other stones." Garion smiled. "It can be a little silly now and then. It gets carried away by its own enthusiasm. I have to be very careful about what I think sometimes. If it decides I really want something, it might just take independent action." He laughed. "Once I was speculating about the time

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when Torak cracked the world, and it proceeded to tell me how to patch it."

"You're not serious!"

"Oh, yes. It has no conception of the word 'impossible.' If I really wanted it to, it could probably spell out my name in stars." He felt a small twitch in the pouch at his belt. "Stop that!" he said sharply to the Orb. "That was just an example, not a request."

Zakath was staring at him.

"Wouldn't that look grotesque?" Garion said wryly. " *Bel-garion' running from horizon to horizon across the night sky?"

"You know something, Garion," Zakath said. "I've always believed that someday you and I would go to war with each other. Would you be terribly disappointed if I decided not to show up?"

"I think I could bear it." Garion grinned at him. "If nothing else, I could always start without you. You could drop by from time to time to see how things were going. Ce'Nedra can fix you supper. Of course, she's not a very good cook, but we all have to make a few sacrifices, don't we?"

They looked at each other for a moment and then burst out laughing. The process that had begun at Rak Uрга with the quixotic Uigit was now complete. Garion realized with a certain amount of satisfaction that he had taken the first few steps toward ending five thousand years of unrelenting hatred between Alorn and Angarak.

The Dais paid little attention to them as they strolled along marble streets and past sparkling fountains. The inhabitants of Kell went about their activities quietly and contemplatively, their eyes lost in thought. They spoke but little, since speech among them was

largely unnecessary.

"It's an eerie sort of place, isn't it?" Zakath observed. "I'm not used to cities where nobody does anything."

"Oh, they're doing something, all right."

"You know what I mean. There aren't any shops, and nobody's even out sweeping the streets."

"It is a little odd, I suppose." Garion looked around. "What's even odder is that we haven't seen a single seer since we got here. I thought this was the place where they lived."

"Maybe they stay indoors."

"That's possible, I suppose."

Their morning stroll gained them little information. They tried occasionally to strike up conversations with the white-robed cit-

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izens, and although the Dais were unfailingly polite, they volunteered little in the way of talk. They answered questions that were put to them, and that was about all.

"Frustrating, wasn't it?" Silk said when he and Sadi returned to the house that had been assigned to them. "I've never met a group of people so disinterested in talk. I couldn't even find anybody willing to discuss the weather."

"Did you happen to see which way Ce'Nedra and Liselle went?" Garion asked him.

"Someplace over on the other side of town, I think. I imagine they'll come back when those young women bring us our lunch."

Garion looked around at the others. "Did anybody happen to see any of the seers?" he asked.

"They aren't here," Polgara told him. She sat by a window mending one of Durnik's tunics. "One old woman told me they have a special place. It's not in the city."

"How did you manage to get an answer out of her?" Silk asked.

"I was fairly direct. You have to push the Dais a bit when you want information."

As Silk had predicted, Velvet and Ce'Nedra returned with the young women who were bringing their meals to them.

"You have a brilliant wife, Belgarion," Velvet said after the Dalasian women had left. "She sounded for all the world as if there weren't a brain in her head. She spent the morning babbling."

"Babbling?" Ce'Nedra objected.

"Weren't you?"

"Well, I suppose so, but 'babbling' is such an unflattering word."

"I presume there was a reason for it?" Sadi suggested.

"Of course," Ce'Nedra said. "I saw fairly soon that those girls weren't going to be very talkative, so I filled up the spaces. They began to loosen up after a bit. I talked so that Liselle could watch their faces." She smiled smugly. "It worked out fairly well, even if I do say it myself."

"Did you get anything out of them?" Polgara asked.

"A few things," Velvet replied. "Nothing all that specific, but a few hints. I think we should be able to get a bit more this afternoon."

Ce'Nedra looked around. "Where's Durnik?" she asked. "And Eriond?"

"Where else?" Polgara sighed.

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"Where did they find any water to fish in?"

"Durnik can smell water from several miles away," Polgara told her in a resigned tone of voice, "and he can tell you what kind of fish are in it, how many, and probably even what their names are."

"I've never cared all that much for fish myself," Beldin said.

"I don't know that Durnik does either, uncle."

"Why does he bother doing then?"

She spread her hands helplessly. "How should I know? The motives of fishermen are dreadfully obscure. I can tell you one thing, though."

"Oh? What's that?"

"You've said a number of times that you want to have some long conversations with him."

"Yes, I do."

"You'd better learn how to fish then. Otherwise, he probably won't be around."

"Has anybody come by to give us any kind of word about Cyradis?" Garion asked,

"Not a soul," Beldin replied.

"We don't really have time for an extended stay," Garion fretted.

' 'I might be able to stir an answer out of somebody,' Zakath offered. "She commanded me to present myself to her here at Kell." He winced slightly. "I can't believe I just said that. Nobody's commanded me to do anything since I was about eight years old. Anyway, you know what I mean. I could insist that somebody take me to her so I can obey her orders."

"I think you might choke on that one, Zakath," Silk said lightly. "Obey is a difficult concept for someone in your position. '

"He's an irritating little fellow, isn't he?" Zakath said to Garion.

"I've noticed."

"Why, your Majesties," Velvet said, all wide-eyed innocence, "what a thing to suggest."

"Well, isn't he?" Zakath said pointedly.

"Of course, but it's not nice to talk about it."

Silk looked slightly offended. "Would you people like for me to go away so you can talk freely?"

"Oh, that won't be necessary, Kheldar," Velvet said with a dimpled smile.

They gained little more in the way of information that after-

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noon, and the frustration of the fruitless quest made them all irritable. "I think perhaps we should follow up that idea of yours," Garion said to Zakath after supper. "First thing tomorrow morning, why don't we go see that old man, Dalian? We'll tell him right out that you're supposed to present yourself to Cyradis. I think it's time to start pushing a little."

"Right," Zakath agreed.

Dalian, however, proved to be as unresponsive as all the rest of the citizens of Kell. "Be patient, Emperor of Mallorean," he advised. "The Holy Seeress will come to you at the proper time."

"And when is that?" Garion asked bluntly.

"Cyradis knows, and that's all that's really important, isn't it?"

"If he wasn't so old and feeble, I'd shake some answers out of him," Garion muttered as he and Zakath walked back to the house.

' 'If this goes on much longer, I might just ignore his age and infirmity," Zakath said. "I'm not in the habit of having my questions evaded this way."

Velvet and Ce'Nedra were approaching the house from the other direction as Garion and Zakath reached the broad marble steps. The two young women were walking quickly, and Ce'Nedra's expression was triumphant.

"I think we managed to get something useful at last," Velvet said. "Let's go inside so we can tell everyone at once."

They gathered again in the domed room, and the blond girl spoke to them quite seriously. "This isn't too precise," she admitted, "but I think it might be all we're likely to get out of these people. This morning, Ce'Nedra and I went back to that house where those young women work. They were weaving, and that's the sort of thing that tends to make people a little less than alert. Anyway, that girl with the large eyes, Onatel, wasn't there, and Ce'Nedra put on her most empty-headed expression and—"

"I most certainly did not," Ce'Nedra said indignantly.

"Oh, but you did, dear—and it was absolutely perfect. She stood there all wide-eyed and innocent and asked the young women where we could find our 'dear friend,' and one of them let something slip that she probably wasn't supposed to have. She said that Onatel had been summoned to serve in 'the place of the seers.' Ce'Nedra's eyes went—if possible—even more

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vacant, and she asked where that might be. Nobody answered, but one of them looked at the mountain."

"How can you avoid looking at that monster?" Silk scoffed. "I'm a little dubious about this, Liselle."

"The girl was weaving, Kheldar. I've done that myself a few times, and I know you have to keep your eyes on what you're doing. She looked away in response to Ce'Nedra's question, and then she jerked her eyes back and tried to cover her mistake. I've been to the academy, too, Silk, and I can read people almost as well as you can. That girl might as well have screamed it out loud. The seers are somewhere up on that mountain."

Silk made a face. "She's probably right, you know," he admitted. "That's one of the things they stress at the academy. If you know what you're looking for, most people's faces are like open books." He squared his shoulders. "Well, Zakath," he said, "it looks as if we'll get to climb that mountain a little sooner than we'd expected."

"I don't think so, Kheldar," Polgara said firmly. "You could spend half a lifetime poking around in those glaciers and still not find the seers."

"Have you got a better idea?"

"Several, actually. "She rose to her feet. "Come along, Gar-ion," she

said. "You, too, uncle."

"What are you up to, Pol?" Belgarath asked.

"We're going to go up and have a look."

"That's what I suggested already," Silk objected.

"There's one difference, though, Kheldar," she said sweetly. "You can't fly."

"Well," he said in an offended tone, "if you're going to be that way about it."

"I am, Silk. It's one of the advantages of being a woman. I get to do all sorts of unfair things, and you have to accept them because you're too polite not to."

"One for her side," Garion murmured.

"You keep saying that," Zakath said, puzzled. "Why?"

"It's an Alorn joke," Garion told him.

"Why don't you save yourself a bit of time, Pol?" Belgarath suggested. "See if you can get some confirmation from that group mind before you go swooping off."

"That's a very good idea, father," she agreed. She closed her eyes and lifted her face. After a moment she shook her head. "They won't let me back in." She sighed.

"That's a kind of confirmation in itself." Beldin chuckled.

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"I don't exactly follow that," Sadi said, rubbing his freshly shaved scalp.

"The Dais may be wise," the hunchback told him, "but they're not very shrewd. These two girls of ours have picked up some information. If the information wasn't correct, there wouldn't be any reason to keep Pol out. Since they did keep her out, it indicates that we're on to something. Let's go outside of town," he suggested to Polgara, "so that we don't give away any secrets."

"I don't really fly all that well, Aunt Pol," Garion said dubiously. "Are you sure you need me?"

"Let's not take chances, Garion. If the Dais go out of their way to make this place inaccessible, we might need to use the Orb to break through. We'll save time if you come along with it in the first place."

"Oh," he said, "maybe you're right."

"Keep in touch," Belgarath said as the three of them started out the door.

"Naturally," Beldin grunted.

Once they were out on the lawn, the dwarf squinted around. "Over there, I think," he said, pointing. "That thicket on the edge of town should hide what we're doing."

"AH right, uncle," Polgara agreed.

"One other thing, Pol," he added, "and I'm not trying to be offensive."

"That's a novelty."

"You're in good form this morning." He grinned. "Anyway, a mountain like that one breeds its own weather--and most particularly, its own winds."

"Yes, uncle, I know."

**I know how fond you are of snowy owls, but the feathers are too soft. If you get into a high wind, you could end up coming back naked."

She gave him a long, level look.

"Do you want all your feathers blown off?"

"No, uncle, as a matter of fact, I don't."

"Why don't you do it my way, then? You might even find that you like being a hawk."

"Blue banded, I suppose?"

"Well, that's up to you, but you do look good in blue, Pol."

"You're impossible." She laughed. "All right, uncle, we'll do it your way.'"

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"I'D change first," he offered. "Then you can use me as a model to make sure you get the shape right."

"I know what a hawk looks like, uncle."

"Of course you do, Pol. I'm just trying to be helpful."

"You're too kind."

It felt very strange to make a shape other than dial of a wolf. Garion looked himself over carefully, making frequent comparisons to Beldin, who perched fierce-eyed and magnificent on a branch overhead.

"Good enough," Beldin told him, "but next time make your tail feathers a little fuller. You need them to steer with."

"All right, gentlemen," Polgara said from a nearby limb, "let's get started."

"I'll lead," Beldin said. "I've had more practice at this. If we hit a downdraft, sheer away from the mountain. You don't want to get banged up against those rocks. *' He spread his wings, flapped a few times, and flew off.

The only time Garion had been aloft before had been on the long flight from Jarviksholm to Riva after Geran had been abducted. He had flown that time as a speckled falcon. The blue-banded hawk was a much bigger bird, and flying over mountain terrain was much different from flying over the vast open expanse of the Sea of the Winds. The air currents eddied and swirled around the rocks, making them unpredictable and even dangerous.

The three hawks spiraled upward on a rising column of air. It was an effortless way to fly, and Garion began to understand Beldin's intense joy in flight.

He also discovered that his eyes were incredibly sharp. Every detail on the mountainside stood out as if it were directly in front of him. He could see insects and the individual petals of wildflowers. His talons twitched involuntarily when a small mountain rodent scurried across a rockfall.

"Pay attention to what we're here for, Garion," he heard Aunt Pol's voice in the silences of his mind.

"But—" The yearning to plummet down with his talons spread wide was almost irresistible.

"No buts, Garion. You've already had breakfast. Just leave the poor little creature alone.'"

"You're taking all the fun out of it for him, Pol," Garion heard Beldin protest.

"We're not here to have fun, uncle. Lead on."

The buffeting was sudden, and it took Garion by surprise. A

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violent downdraft hurled him toward a rocky slope, and it was only at the last instant that he was able to veer away from certain disaster. The downdraft pushed him this way and that, wrenching at his wings, and it was suddenly accompanied by a pelting rainstorm, huge, icy drops that pounded at him like large wet hammers.

"It isn't natural, Garion!" Aunt Pol's voice came to him sharply. He looked around desperately, but he could not see her.

"Where are you?" he called out.

"Never mind that! Use the Orb! The Dais are trying to keep us away!"

Garion was not entirely positive that the Orb could hear him in that strange place to which it went when he changed form, but he had no choice but to try. The driving rain and howling wind currents made settling to earth and resuming his own shape unthinkable. "Make it stop!" he called out to the stone, "the wind, the rain, all of it!"

The surge he felt when the Orb unleashed its power sent him staggering through the air, flapping his wings desperately to hold his balance. The air around him seemed suddenly bright blue.

And then the turbulence and the rain that had accompanied it were gone, and the column of warm air was back, rising undisturbed into the summer air.

He had lost at least a thousand feet in the downdraft, and he saw Aunt Pol and Beldin, each over a mile away in opposite directions. As he began again to spiral upward, he saw that they also were rising and veering through the air toward him. "Stay on your guard," Aunt Pol's voice told him. "Use the Orb to muffle anything else they try to throw at us."

It took them only a few minutes to regain the height they had lost, and they continued upward over forests and rockslides until they reached that region on the flanks of the mountain above the tree line and below the eternal snows. It was an area of steep meadows with grass and wildflowers nodding in the mountain breeze.

"There!" Beldin's voice seemed to crackle. "It's a trail."

"Are you sure it's not just a game trail, uncle?" Polgara asked him.

"It's too straight, Pol. A deer couldn't walk in a straight line if his life depended on it. That trail is man-made. Let's see where it goes." He tilted on one wing and swooped down toward the well-traveled track stretching up one of the meadows toward a gap in a rocky ridge. At the upper end of the meadow,

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he flared his wings. "Let's go down," he told them. "It might be better if we follow the rest of the way on foot."

Aunt Pol and Garion followed him down, and the three of them blurred back into their own forms. "It was touch and go there for a while," Beldin said. "I came within a few feet of bending my beak on a rockslide." He looked critically at Pol-gara. "Would you like to revise your theory about the Dais not hurting anybody?"

"We'll see."

"I wish I had my sword," Garion said. "If we run into trouble, we're

pretty much defenseless."

"I don't know if your sword would be much use against the kind of trouble we're likely to come up against," Beldin told him. "Don't lose contact with the Orb, though. Let's see where this goes." He started up the steep trail toward the ridge.

The gap in the ridge was a narrow pass between two large boulders. Toth stood in the center of the trail, mutely blocking their way.

Polgara looked him coolly in the face. "We will go to the place of the seers, Toth. It is foreordained."

Toth's eyes grew momentarily distant. Then he nodded and stepped aside for them.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The cavern was vast, and there was a city inside. The city looked much like Kell, thousands of feet below, except, of course, for the absence of lawns and gardens. It was dim, since the blindfolded seers needed no light, and the eyes of their mute guides had, Garion surmised, become adjusted to the faint light.

There were few people abroad in those shadowy streets, and those they saw as Toth led them into the city paid no attention to them. Beldin was muttering to himself as he stumped along.

"What is it, uncle?" Polgara asked him.

"Have you ever noticed how much some people are slaves to convention?" he replied.

"I don't quite see what you're getting at."

"This town is inside a cave, but they still put roofs on the houses. Isn't that sort of an absurdity? It isn't going to rain in here."

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"But it will get cold—particulailly in the winter. If a house has no roof, it's a little hard to keep the heat in, wouldn't you say?" He frowned. "I guess I didn't think of that," he admitted. The house to which Toth led them was in the very center of this strange subterranean city. Although it was no different from those around it, its location hinted that the inhabitant was of some importance. Toth entered without knocking and led them to the simple room where Cyradis sat waiting for them, her pale young face illuminated by a single candle.

"You have reached us more quickly than we had expected," she said. In a peculiar way her voice was different from the way it had sounded in their previous meetings. Garion uneasily felt that the seeress was speaking in more than one voice, and the result was startlingly choral.

"You knew that we could come, then?" Polgara asked her. "Of course. It was but a question of time before you would complete your threefold task." "Task?"

"It was but a simple endeavor for one as powerful as thou art, Polgara, but it was a necessary test." "I don't seem to recall—"

"As I told thee, it was so simple that doubtless thou hast forgotten it."

"Remind us," Beldin said gruffly.

"Of course, gentle Beldin." She smiled. "You have found this place; you have subdued the elements to reach it; and Polgara hath spoken correctly the words that gained you entry." "More riddles," he said sourly.

"A riddle is sometimes the surest way to make the mind receptive." He grunted.

"It was necessary for the riddle to be solved and the tasks to be completed ere I could reveal to you that which must be revealed." She rose to her feet. "Let us depart from this place then, and go down even unto Kell. My guide and dear companion will bear the great book that must be delivered into the hands of Ancient Belgarath."

The mute giant went to a shelf on the far side of the dimly lit room and took down a large book bound in black leather. He tucked it under his arm, took his mistress by the hand, and led them back out of the house.

"Why the secrecy, Cyradis?" Beldin asked the blindfolded

girl. "Why do the seers hide up here on the mountain instead of staying at Kell?"

"But this is Kell, gentle Beldin."

"What's that city down in the valley, then?"

"Also Kell." She smiled. "It hath ever been thus among us. Unlike the cities of others, our communities are widespread. This is the place of the seers. There are many other places on this mountain—the place of the wizards, the place of the necromancers, the place of the diviners—and all are a part of Kell."

"Trust a Dal to come up with an unnecessary complication."

"The cities of others are built for different purposes, Beldin. Some are for commerce. Some are for defense. Our cities are built for study."

"How can you study if you have to walk all day in order to talk with your colleagues?"

"There is no need for walking, Beldin. We can speak to each other whenever we choose. Is this not the way in which thou and Ancient Belgarath converse?"

"That's different," he growled.

"In what way?"

"Our conversations are private."

"We have no need of privacy. The thoughts of one are the thoughts of all."

It was shortly before noon when they emerged from the cavern into the warm sunlight again. Gently guiding Cyradis, Toth led them back to the gap in the ridge and down the steep path that crossed the high meadows. After about an hour of descent, they entered a cool green forest where birds caroled from the treetops and insects whirled like specks of fire in the slanting columns of sunlight.

The trail was still steep, and Garion soon discovered one of , (he disadvantages of walking downhill for any extended period of time. A large and painful blister was forming atop one of the toes on his left foot, and a few twinges from his right clearly indicated that he would soon have a matched set. He gritted his teeth and limped on.

It was nearly sunset when they reached the gleaming city in the valley. Garion noticed with a certain satisfaction that Beldin was also limping as they walked along the marble street that led to the house Dalian had lodged them in. ; The others were eating when they entered. As it chanced to happen, Garion was looking at Zakath's face when the Mallo-rean saw that Cyradis was with them. His olive-skinned face

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paled slightly, a pallor made more pronounced by the short black beard he had grown to conceal his identity. He rose to his feet and bowed slightly. "Holy Seeress," he said respectfully.

"Emperor of Mallorea," she responded. "As I promised thee in cloud-dark Darshiva, I surrender myself up to thee as thy hostage."

"There's no need to talk of hostages, Cyradis," he replied with a slightly embarrassed flush. ' 'I spoke in haste in Darshiva, before I clearly understood what it is that I am to do. I am committed now.'

"I am, nonetheless, thy hostage, for it is thus preordained, and I must accompany thee unto the Place Which Is No More to face the task

that awaits me."

"You must all be hungry," Velvet said. "Come to the table and eat."

"I must complete one task first, Huntress," Cyradis told her. She held out both hands, and Toth placed the heavy book he had carried down from the mountain in them. "Ancient Belgarath," she said in that strangely choral voice, "thus do we commend into thy hands our holy book as the stars have instructed us to do. Read it carefully, for thy destination is revealed in its pages."

Belgarath rose quickly, crossed to her, and took the book, his hands trembling with eagerness. "I thank you, Cyradis. I know how precious the book is, and I will care for it while it is in my hands and return it once I've found what I need." Then he went to a smaller table near the window, sat, and opened the heavy volume.

"Move over," Beldin told him, stumping to the table and drawing up another chair. The two old men bent their heads over the crackling pages, oblivious to all around them.

"Will you eat now, Cyradis?" Polgara asked the blindfolded girl.

"Thou art kind, Polgara," the Seeress of Kell replied. "I have fasted since thine arrival here in preparation for mis meeting, and mine hunger weakens me."

Polgara gently led her to the table and seated her between Ce'Nedra and Velvet.

"Is my baby well, Holy Seeress?" Ce'Nedra asked urgently.

"He is well, Queen of Riva, although he doth yearn to be returned to thee."

"I'm surprised he even remembers me." Ce'Nedra said it with some bitterness. "He was only a baby when Zandramas stole him." She sighed. "There's so much I've missed—so many things I'll never see." Her lower lip began to tremble.

Garion went to her and put his arms comfortingly around her. "It's going to be all right, Ce'Nedra," he assured her.

"Will it, Cyradis?" she asked in a voice near to tears. "Will everything really be all right again?"

"That I cannot say, Ce'Nedra. Two courses stand before us, and not even the stars know upon which we will place our feet."

"How was the trip?" Silk asked, more, Garion thought, to get past an uncomfortable moment than out of any burning curiosity.

"Nervous," Garion replied. "I don't fly very well, and we ran into some bad weather."

Silk frowned. "But it's been absolutely clear all day."

"Not where we were, it wasn't." Garion glanced at Cyradis and decided

not to make an issue of the near-disastrous down-draft. "Is it all right to tell them about the place where you live?" he asked her.

"Of a certainty, Belgarion." She smiled. "They are of thy company, and thou shouldst conceal nothing from them."

"Do you remember Mount Kahsha in Cthol Murgos?" Gar-ion asked his friend.

"I Ve been trying to forget."

"Well, the seers have a city that's sort of like the one the Dagashi built at Kahsha. It's inside a very large cave."

"I'm glad I didn't go there, then."

Cyradis turned her face toward him, a concerned little frown touching her forehead. "Hast thou not yet mastered this unreasoning fear of thine, Kheldar?"

"Not noticeably, no—and I'd hardly call it unreasoning. Believe me, Cyradis, I have reasons—lots and lots of reasons." He shuddered.

"Thou must summon up thy courage, Kheldar, for the time will surely come when thou must enter a place such as thou boldest in dread."

"Not if I can help it, I won't."

"Thou must, Kheldar. No choice is open to thee."

His face was bleak, but he said nothing.

"Tell me, Cyradis," Velvet said then, "were you the one who interrupted the progress of Zith's pregnancy?"

"Thou art shrewd to have perceived the pause in that most natural of events, Liselle," the Seeress told her, "but nay, it was not I. The wizard Vard on the Isle of Verkat bade her to wait until her task at Ashaba was completed."

"Vard is a wizard?" Polgara asked in some surprise. "I can usually detect them, but in his case, I didn't sense a thing."

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"He is most subtle," Cyradis agreed. "Things stand so in Cthol Murgos that great care must be exercised in the practice of our arts. The Grolims in the land of the Murgos are ever alert to the disturbances such acts inevitably cause."

"We were quite put out with you on Verkat," Durnik told her. "That was before we understood the reason for what you did. I'm afraid I

treated Toth very badly for a while. He was good enough to forgive me, though."

The big mute smiled at him and made a few gestures.

Durnik laughed. "You don't really have to do that anymore, loth," he told his friend. "I finally figured out how you were talking to me."

loth lowered his hands.

Dumik seemed to listen for a moment. "Yes," he agreed. "It's much easier this way—and faster, too—now that we don't have to wave our hands at each other. Oh, by the way, Eriond and I found a pond a little ways below the city here. It has some very nice trout in it."

loth grinned broadly.

"I thought you might feel that way." Durnik grinned back.

"I'm afraid we've corrupted your guide, Cyradis," Polgara apologized.

"Nay, Polgara." The Seeress smiled. "This passion hath been upon him since boyhood. Ofttimes in our travels he hath found excuse to linger for a time by some lake or stream. I do not chide him for this, for I am fond of fish, and he doth prepare them exquisitely."

They finished their meal and sat, talking quietly to avoid disturbing Belgarath and Beldin who still sat poring over the Mallorean Gospels.

"How is Zandramas going to find out where we're all going?" Garion asked the Seeress. "Since she's a Grolim, she can't come here."

"That I may not tell thee, Child of Light. She will, however, arrive at the appointed place at the proper time."

"With my son?"

"As it hath been foretold."

"I'm looking forward to that meeting." He said it bleakly. ' "There are a great many things Zandramas and I have to settle."'

"Let not thy hatred blind thee to thy tasks," she told him quite seriously.

"And what is my task, Cyradis?"

"That thou wilt know when it doth face thee."

"But not before?"

"Nay. Thy performance of that task would be marred shouldst thou consider it overlong."

"And what is my task, Holy Seeress?" Zakath asked her. "You said you would instruct me here at Kell."

"I must reveal that to thee in private, Emperor of Mallorean. Know,

however, that thy task will begin when thy companions have completed theirs, and it will consume the balance of thy life.'

"As long as we're talking about tasks," Sadi said, "perhaps you could explain mine to me."

"You have already begun it, Sadi."

"Am I doing it very well?"

She smiled. "Passing well, yes."

' 'I might do a little better if I knew what it is.'

"Nay, Sadi. Even as Belgarion's, thy task would be marred shouldst thou know of it."

"Is this place we're going to very far?" Durnik asked her.

"Many leagues, and there is yet much to be done."

"I'll need to talk with Dalian about supplies, then. And I mink I'll want to check the horses' hooves before we start. This might be a good time to get them shod again."

"That's impossible!" Belgarath suddenly burst out.

"What is it, father?" Aunt Pol asked him.

"It's Korim! The meeting is supposed to take place at Korim!"

"Where's that?" Sadi asked in puzzlement.

"It's no place," Beldin growled. "It's not there anymore. It was a mountain range that sank into the sea when Torak cracked the world. The Book of Atom mentions it as The High Places of Korim, which are no more.' "

"There's a certain perverted logic to it," Silk observed. "That's what these assorted prophecies have meant all along when they talked about a Place Which Is No More."

Beldin tugged thoughtfully at one ear. "There's something else, too," he noted. "You remember the story Senji told us back at Melcene? About the scholar who stole the Sardion? His ship was last seen founding the southern tip of Gandahar, and it never came back. Senji said he thought that it had gone down in a storm off the Dalasian coast. It's beginning to sound as if he was right. We have to go where the Sardion is, and I've got the uncomfortable feeling that it's resting on top of a mountain that sank into the sea over five thousand years ago."

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The Queen of Riva was in a pensive mood as they set out from the glowing marble city of Kell. A peculiar kind of languor seemed to come over her as they rode through the forest to the west of Kell, a languor that grew more pronounced with each passing mile. She took no part in the general conversation, but was content merely to listen.

"I don't see how you can be so calm about this, Cyradis," Belgarath was saying to the blindfolded Seeress as they rode along. "Your task will fail the same as ours will if the Sardion is lying at the bottom of the sea. And why are we making this side trip to Perivor?"

"It is there that the instruction thou received from the Holy Book will be made clear to thee, Ancient Belgarath."

"Couldn't you just explain it to me yourself? We're a little pressed for time, you know."

"That I may not do. I may not give thee any aid that I do not

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also give to Zandramas. It is thy task—and hers—to unravel this riddle. To aid one of thee and not the other is forbidden."

"Somehow I thought you might look at it that way," he said glumly.

"Where's Perivor?" Garion asked Zakath.

"It's an island off the south coast of Dalasia," * the Mallolean replied. "The inhabitants there are very strange. Their legends say that they're descendants of some people from the west who were aboard a ship that was blown off course and wrecked on the island about two thousand years ago. The island's of little value, and the people there are fearsome fighters. The general opinion in Mal Zeth has always been that the place wouldn't be worth the trouble it would take to subdue it, and Urvon didn't even bother to send Grolims there."

"If they're so savage, won't it be sort of dangerous for us to go there?"

"No. Actually they're civil and even hospitable—as long as you don't try to land an army there. That's when things start to take a turn for the worse."

"Have we really got the time to go to this place?" Silk asked the Seeress of Kell.

"Ample time, Prince Kheldar," she replied. "The stars have told us for eons that the Place Which Is No More awaits the coming of thee and thy companions, and that thou and thy companions will come there upon the day appointed for die meeting."

"And so will Zandramas, I suppose?"

She smiled a gentle little smile. "How can there be a meeting if the Child of Dark be not also present?" she asked him.

"I think I detected a faint glimmer of humor there, Cyradis," he bantered. "Isn't that a bit out of character for one of the seers?"

"How little you know us, Prince Kheldar." She smiled again. "Ofttimes we have been convulsed with laughter at some message writ large in the stars and at the absurd lengths to which others go to ignore or avoid that which is preordained. Submit to the instruction of the heavens, Kheldar. Spare thyself the agony and turmoil of trying to evade thy fate."

"You throw the word 'fate' around awfully lightly, Cyradis," he said disapprovingly.

"Hast thou not come here in response to a fate laid down for thee at the beginning of days? All thy concern with commerce

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and espionage have been but a diversion to occupy thee until the appointed day."

"That's a polite way to tell someone he's been behaving like a child."

"We are all children, Kheldar."

Beldin came soaring through the sun-dappled forest, avoiding tree trunks with deft shifts of his wings. He settled to earth and changed form.

"Trouble?" Belgarath asked him.

"Not as much as I'd expected." The dwarf shrugged. "And that worries me a bit."

"Isn't that a tittle inconsistent?"

"Consistency is the defense of a small mind. Zandramas couldn't go to Kell, right?"

"As far as we know."

"Then she has to follow us to the meeting place, right?"

"Unless she's found some other way to find out where it is."

"That's what worries me. If she had to follow us, wouldn't it be logical for her to have ringed this forest with troops and Grolims to find out which way we were going?"

"I suppose so, yes."

"Well, there's no army out there—only a few patrols, and they're just going through the motions."

Belgarath frowned. "What's she up to?"

"My point exactly. I'd guess that she's got a surprise in store for

us somewhere."

"Keep your eyes open, then. I don't want her slipping up behind me."

"It might simplify things if she did."

"I doubt it. Nothing about this entire affair has been simple, and I don't expect things to change at this stage."

"I'll go scout ahead." The dwarf blurred and soared away.

They made their encampment that evening beside a spring that gushed out of an outcropping of moss-covered rock. Belgarath seemed moody and out of sorts, so the rest of them avoided him as they worked at tasks they had repeated so many times that they had become habitual.

"You're very quiet this evening," Garion said to Ce'Nedra as they sat by the fire after supper. "What's the matter?"

' 'I just don't feel like talking." The peculiar lethargy that had come over the little queen had not diminished as the day wore on, and she had actually found herself dozing in her saddle several times during the late afternoon.

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"You look tired," he observed.

"I am, a bit. We've been traveling for a long time now. I think it might be starting to catch up with me."

"Why don't you go to bed then? You'll feel better after a good night's sleep."

She yawned and held out her arms to him. "Carry me," she said.

He looked startled. Ce'Nedra enjoyed startling her husband. His face always looked so wide-eyed and boyish. "Aren't you feeling well?" he asked.

"I'm fine, Garion. I'm just sleepy, and I want to be babied a bit. Carry me to the tent, put me to bed, and tuck me in."

"Well, if that's what you want . . ." He rose, picked her up easily, and carried her across the encampment to their tent.

"Garion," she murmured drowsily after he had gently drawn their blankets up around her shoulders.

"Yes, dear?"

' 'Please don't wear your mail shirt when you come to bed. It makes you smell like an old iron pot."

Ce'Nedra's sleep that night was disturbed by strange dreams. She seemed to see people and places she had not seen or even thought of

in years. She saw legionnaires guarding her father's palace, and Lord Morin, her father's chamberlain, hurrying down a marble corridor. Then she seemed to be at Riva, holding a long, incomprehensible conversation with Brand, the Rivan Warder, while Brand's blond niece sat spinning flax by the window. Arell seemed unconcerned about the dagger hilt protruding from between her shoulder blades. Ce'Nedra stirred, muttering to herself, and immediately began to dream again.

She seemed then to be a Rheon in eastern Drasnia. Casually she plucked a dagger from the belt of Vella, the Nadrak dancer, and just as casually drove it to the hilt into the belly of black-bearded Ulfgar, the head of the Bear-cult. Ulfgar was speaking sneeringly to Belgarath as Ce'Nedra sank the knife into him, and he did not even pay any attention to her as she slowly twisted the blade in his vitals.

And then she was at Riva again, and she and Garion were sitting naked beside a sparkling forest pool while thousands of butterflies hovered over them.

She traveled in her restless dream to the ancient city of Val Alorn in Cherek, and then went on to Boktor for the funeral of King Rhodar. And once again she saw the battlefield at Thull

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Mardu, and once more the face of her self-appointed protector, Brand's son Olban.

There was no coherence to the dream. She seemed to go from place to place without effort, moving through time and space looking for something, although she could not remember what it was she had lost.

When she awoke the next morning, she was as tired as she had been the previous evening. Every movement was an effort, and she kept yawning.

"What's the matter?" Garion asked her as they dressed. "Didn't you sleep well?"

"Not really," she replied. "I kept having the strangest dreams."

"Do you want to talk about them? Sometimes that's the best way to put them to rest so they don't keep coming back night after night."

"They didn't make any sense, Garion. They just kept jumping around. It was almost as if someone were moving me from place to place for some reason of her own."

"Her? Was this someone a woman?"

"Did I say 'her'? I can't imagine why. I never saw this person." Ce'Nedra yawned again. "I hope whoever it was got finished with it, though. I'd rather not go through another night like that." Then she gave him a sly, sidelong glance through her eyelashes. "'There were some parts of the dream that were rather nice, though," she said. "Once we were sitting by that pool back at Riva. Do you want to know

what we were doing?"

A slow blush crept up Garion's neck. "Uh, no, Ce'Nedra. I don't really think so."

But she told him anyway—in great detail—until he finally fled from the tent.

Her restless night increased the peculiar lassitude that had lain on her since they had left Kell, and she rode that morning in a half doze that, try though she might, she could not seem to shake off. Garion spoke with her several times to warn her that she was allowing her horse to stray, and then, apparently seeing that she just couldn't keep her eyes open, he took her reins from her hands and led her horse.

About midmorning, Beldin rejoined them. "I think you'd better take cover," he tersely told Belgarath. "There's a Darshivan patrol coming along this trail."

"Are they searching for us?"

"Who knows? If they are, they're not being very serious

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about it. Go back into the woods for a couple hundred yards and let them ride on by. I'll keep an eye on them and let you know when they've passed."

"All right." Belgarath turned aside from the trail and led the rest of them back into the concealment of the forest.

They dismounted and waited tensely. Soon they heard the jingling of the soldiers' equipment as they rode along the forest trail at a trot.

Even in this potentially dangerous situation, Ce'Nedra simply could not keep her eyes open. Dimly she could hear the whispered conversations of the others until she finally dozed off again.

And then she came awake—or at least partially so. She was walking alone through the forest, her mind all bemused. She knew that she should be alarmed at being separated from the others, but oddly, she was not. She walked on, not so much going anywhere in particular as following some sort of subtle summoning.

Then at last she reached a grassy clearing and saw a tall blond girl standing among the wildflowers and holding a blanket-wrapped bundle in her arms. The girl's blond braids were coiled at her temples, and her complexion was like new milk. It was Brand's niece, Arell. "Good morning, your Majesty," she greeted the Queen of Riva. "I've been waiting for you."

Something deep in Ce'Nedra's mind tried to scream at her that this was wrong—that the tall Rivan girl could not possibly be here. But

Ce'Nedra could not remember why, and the moment passed. "Good morning, Arell," she said to her dear friend. "What on earth are you doing here?"

"I came to help you, Ce'Nedra. Look at what I've found." She turned back the corner of the blanket to reveal a tiny face.

"My baby!" Ce'Nedra exclaimed, almost overcome with joy. She ran forward, her arms extended hungrily, and took the sleeping infant from her friend and held him to her body, her cheek pressed against his soft curls. "How did you possibly find him?" she asked Arell. "We've been looking for him for the longest time now."

"I was traveling alone through this forest," Arell replied, "and I thought I smelled the smoke of a campfire. I went to investigate and I found a tent set up beside a little stream. I looked inside the tent, and there was Prince Geran. There was no one else around, so I picked him up and came looking for you."

Ce'Nedra's mind was still trying to scream at her, but she

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was too deliriously happy to pay any attention. She held her baby, rocking back and forth and crooning to him.

"Where is King Belgarion?" Arell asked.

"Back there someplace." Ce'Nedra gestured vaguely.

"You should go to him and let him know that his son is safe."

"Yes. He'll be very happy."

"I have something that I really have to attend to, Ce'Nedra," Arell said. "Do you think you'll be able to find your way back alone?"

"Oh, I'm sure I could, but couldn't you come along? His Majesty is sure to want to reward you for restoring our son to

us."

Arell smiled. "The happiness on your face is all the reward I need, and this matter I must take care of is extremely important. I may be able to join you later, however. Which way will you be traveling?"

"South, I think," Ce'Nedra replied. "We have to get to the seacoast."

"Oh?"

"Yes. We're going to an island—Perivor, I think the name is."

"There's supposed to be a meeting of some kind very soon, isn't there? Is Perivor the place where it's going to happen?"

"Oh, no." Ce'Nedra laughed, still cuddling her baby. "We're just

going to Perivor to get some more information about it. We'll be going on from there."

"I may not be able to join you at Perivor," Arell said, frowning slightly. "Perhaps you could tell me where the meeting's supposed to take place. I'm sure I'll be able to meet you there."

"Let me see," Ce'Nedra pondered. "What did they call it? Oh, now I remember. It's someplace that's called Korim."

"Korim?" Arell exclaimed in astonishment.

"Yes. Belgarath seemed dreadfully upset when he first found out about it, but Cyradis told him that everything would be all right. That's why we have to go to Perivor. Cyradis says that there's something there that will make everything clear. It seems to me that she said something about a chart or something." She laughed a bit giddily. "To be honest with you, Arell, I've been so sleepy for the last few days that I can barely keep track of what the people around me are saying."

"Of course," Arell said absently, her face creased in thought. "'Why would Perivor be the key?'" she mused to herself. "'What could possibly be there to explain an absurdity? Are you abso-

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lutely certain the word was Korim? Perhaps you misunderstood."

"That was the way I heard it, Arell. I didn't read it for myself, but Belgarath and Beldin kept talking about 'the High Places of Korim, Which Are No More,' and isn't the meeting supposed to be at the Place Which Is No More? I mean, it does sort of fit together, doesn't it?"

"Yes," Arell replied, frowning strangely. "Now that I think about it, it does." Then she straightened, smoothing her gown. "I'll have to leave you now, Ce'Nedra," she said. "Take your baby back to your husband. Give him my regards." Her eyes seemed to glint in the sunlight. "Give my best to Polgara, as well," she added. There seemed to be something slightly malicious in the way she said it. She turned then and walked away, crossing the flowery meadow toward the dark edge of the forest.

"Good-bye, Arell," Ce'Nedra called after her, "and thank you so much for finding my baby."

Arell neither turned nor answered.

Garion was frantic. When he first discovered that his wife was missing, he leaped into his saddle and rode Chretienne off into the forest at a gallop. He had gone three hundred yards before Belgarath finally caught up with him. "Garion! Stop!" the old man shouted.

"But, Grandfather!" Garion shouted back. "I've got to find Ce'Nedra!"

"Where do you plan to start looking? Or are you just going to ride

around in circles trusting to luck?"

"But—"

"Use your head, boy! We have another way that's much faster. You know what she smells like, don't you?"

"Of course, but—"

"Then we have to use our noses. Get down off that horse and send him back. We'll change form and follow her trail. It's faster and a great deal more certain."

Garion felt suddenly very foolish. "I wasn't thinking, I guess," he confessed.

"I didn't think you were. Get rid of that horse."

Garion slid down and slapped Chretienne sharply on the rump. The big gray bolted back toward where the others were still concealed. "What on earth was she thinking of?" Garion fumed.

"I'm not sure if she was," Belgarath grunted. "She's been

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acting strangely for the past few days. Let's get on with this. The quicker we find her, the quicker we can get her back to the others. Your aunt can get to the bottom of this." The old man was already blurring into the shape of the huge silver wolf. "You lead," he growled at Garion. "Her scent is more familiar to you." -

Garion changed and cast back and forth until his nose caught Ce'Nedra's familiar fragrance. "She went this way," he cast his thought to Belgarath.

"How fresh is the trail?" the old wolf asked.

' 'It can't be much more than a half hour old,' ' Garion replied, bunching himself to run.

"Good. Let's go find her." And the two of them ran smoothly through the woods, their noses to the ground in the manner of hunting wolves.

They found her after about a quarter of an hour. She was coming happily back through the forest, crooning softly to a bundle she was carrying tenderly in her arms.

"Don't startle her," Belgarath warned. "There's something very wrong here. Just go along with anything she tells you." The two of them shimmered and changed.

Ce'Nedra gave a little cry of delight when she saw them. "Oh, Garion!" she exclaimed, running toward them. "Look! Arell found our baby!'"

"Arell? But Arell's--"

"Just let it lie!" Belgarath snapped under his breath. "Don't send her into hysterics!"

"Why--uh--that's wonderful, Ce'Nedra," Garion said, trying to make it sound natural.

"It's been so long," Ce'Nedra said, her eyes brimming with tears, "and he looks just the same as he did before. Look, Garion. Isn't he beautiful?"

She turned back the blanket, and Garion saw that what she was holding so tenderly was not a baby, but a bundle of rags.

Part Two

PERIVOR

CHAPTER NINE

Eternal Salmissra had dispensed with the services of Adiss, her Chief Eunuch, that morning. Stunned into forgetfulness by a massive dose of one of his favorite drugs, Adiss had shambled into the throne room to make his daily report. When he had come to within a dozen feet of the dais, Salmissra had detected from his rank odor that he had disobeyed her command that he never enter her presence unbathed. Cold-eyed, she had watched the eunuch prostrate himself on the marble floor before the throne to deliver his report in a slurred voice. The report had never been finished. At a sibilant command from the Serpent Queen, a small green snake had emerged from beneath the divanlike throne, purring quietly, and Adiss had received a suitable reward for his disobedience.

And now Eternal Salmissra coiled pensively on her throne idly contemplating her reflection in the mirror. The troublesome business of selecting a new Chief Eunuch still lay before her,

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and she was not really in the mood for it. She decided finally to forgo the chore for a time to give the palace eunuchs the opportunity to scramble for the position. That scramble usually resulted in a number of fatalities, and there were really too many eunuchs in the palace anyway.

From under the throne there was an irritated grumbling. Her pet green snake was obviously distressed about something. "What is it, Ezahh?" she asked him.

"Can't you have them washed before you ask me to bite them, Salmissra?" Ezahh replied plaintively. "You might have at least warned me what to expect." Although Ezahh and Salmissra were of different species, their languages were to some degree compatible.

"I'm sorry, Ezahh. It was inconsiderate of me, I suppose." In rather sharp contrast to her dealings with humans, whom she held more or less in general contempt, the Serpent Queen was unfailingly polite to other reptiles—particularly the venomous ones. This is considered the course of wisdom in the world of snakes.

"It was not entirely your fault, Salmissra." Ezahh was also a snake, and he was also very polite. "I just wish there was some way to get the taste out of my mouth."

"I could send for a saucer of milk. That might help."

"Thank you, Salmissra, but the taste of him might curdle it. What I'd really like is a nice fat mouse—alive, preferably."

"I'll see to it at once, Ezahh." She turned her triangular face around on her slender neck. "You," she hissed to one of the chorus of eunuchs kneeling in adoration at one side of the throne, "go catch a mouse. My little green friend is hungry."

"At once, Divine Salmissra," the eunuch replied obsequiously. He jumped to his feet and backed toward the door, genuflecting at every other step.

"Thank you, Salmissra," Ezahh purred. "Humans are such trivial things, aren't they?"

"They respond only to fear," she agreed, "and to lust."

"That raises a point," Ezahh noted. "Have you had time to consider the request I made the other day?"

"I have some people looking," she assured him, "but your species is very rare, you know, and finding a female for you might take some time."

"I can wait, if necessary, Salrnissra," he purred. "We are all very patient." He paused. "I'm not trying to be offensive,

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but if you hadn't chased Sadi away, you wouldn't have to take the trouble. His little snake and I were on very good terms."

"I noticed that on occasion. You might even be a father by now."

The green snake slid his head out from under the throne and regarded her. Like all snakes of his kind, he had a bright-red stripe down his green back. "What's a father?" he asked in a dull, incurious tone.

"It's a difficult concept," she replied. "Humans make much of it for some reason."

'Does any real creature care about the perverse peculiarities of humans?"

"I certainly don't—at least not anymore."

"You were always a serpent at heart, Salmissra."

"Why, thank you, Ezahh," she said in a pleased hiss. She paused, her restless coils rubbing dryly against each other. "I must select a new Chief Eunuch," she mused. "It's a bothersome thing."

"Why trouble yourself? Select one at random. Humans are all alike, after all."

"Most of them, yes. I've been attempting to locate Sadi, however. I'd like to persuade him to come back to Sthiss Tor."

"That one is different," Ezahh agreed. "One might almost believe that he is somewhat akin to us."

"He does have certain reptilian qualities, doesn't he? He's a thief and a scoundrel, but he still managed the palace better than anyone else has ever been able to. If I hadn't been molting when he fell into disgrace, I might have forgiven him."

"Shedding one's skin is always a trying procedure," Ezahh agreed. "If you don't mind a bit of advice, Salmissra, you should probably make the humans stay away from you at those times."

"I need a few of them around me. If nothing else, it gives me someone to bite."

"Stick to mice," he advised. "They taste better, and at least they can be swallowed." *

' "If I can persuade Sadi to return, it may just solve both our problems," she hissed dryly. "I'll have someone to run the palace without bothering me, and you'll get your little playmate back."

"Interesting notion, Salmissra." He looked around. "Is that human you sent out to fetch my mouse raising it from infancy?" he asked.

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Yarblek and Vella slipped into Yar Nadrak late one snowy evening just before the gates were closed for the night. Vella had left her lavender satin gowns at Boktor and had reverted to her traditional tight leather garb. Because it was winter, she wore in addition a sable coat that would have cost a fortune in Tbl Honeth. "Why does this place always smell so bad?" she asked her owner as they rode through snow-clogged streets toward the riverfront.

"Probably because Drosta let the contract for the sewer system out to one of his cousins." Yarblek shrugged, pulling the collar of his shabby felt coat up around his neck. "The citizens paid a great deal in taxes for the system, but Drosta's cousin turned out to be a better embezzler than he was an engineer. I think it runs in the family. Drosta even embezzles from his own treasury."

"Isn't that sort of absurd?" "We have an absurd sort of king, Vella." "I thought the palace was over that way." She pointed toward the center of town.

"Drosta won't be in the palace at this time of night," Yarblek told her. "He gets lonesome when the sun goes down, and he usually goes out looking for companionship." "He could be anywhere, then."

"I doubt it. There are only a few places in Yar Nadrak where he's welcome after dark. Our king isn't widely loved." Yarblek pointed up a littered alley. "Let's go this way. We'll stop by the office of our factor and get you some suitable clothing." "What's wrong with what I'm wearing?" "Sable attracts attention in the part of town we're going to visit, Vella, and we're trying to be inconspicuous."

The office in Yar Nadrak of Silk and Yarblek's far-flung commercial empire was in a loft over a cavernous warehouse filled with bales of furs and deep-piled Mallorean carpets. The factor was a squinty-eyed Nadrak named Zelmit, who was probably almost as untrustworthy as he looked. Vella had never really liked him and she customarily loosened her daggers in their sheaths whenever she came into his presence, making very sure that he saw her doing so to be certain that there would be no misunderstandings. Technically, of course, Vella was one of Yarblek's possessions, and Zehnit had a reputation for making rather free with things that belonged to his employer.

"How's business?" Yarblek asked as he and Vella entered the cluttered little office.

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"We're getting by," Zelmit said in a rasping voice.

"Specifics, Zelmit," Yarblek said brusquely. "Generalities make my teeth itch."

"We've found a way to bypass Bektor and evade Drasnian customs."

"That's useful."

"It takes a bit longer, but we can get our furs to Tol Honeth without paying Drasnian duties. Our profits in the fur market are up by sixty percent."

Yarblek beamed. "If Silk ever comes back through here, I don't think you really need to tell him about it," he cautioned. "Sometimes he breaks out in a rash of patriotism, and Porenn is his aunt, after all."

"I wasn't really thinking of telling him. We still have to carry the Mallorean carpets through Drasnian, though. The best market for those is still the great fair in central Arendia, and we can't pay anybody enough to get him to freight them across Ulgo-land." He frowned. "Someone's cutting the prices on us, though. Until we can find out what's going on, it might not be a bad idea to curtail our imports."

"Did you manage to sell off those gemstones I brought back from Mallorea?"

"Naturally. We smuggled them out and sold them here and there on our way south."

"Good. It always depresses the market when you show up in one place with a bushel basket full of them. Do you know if Drosta's in the usual place tonight?"

Zelmit nodded. "He went there just before sundown."

"Vella's going to need a sort of nondescript cloak," Yarblek said then.

Zelmit squinted at the girl.

Vella opened her fur coat and put her hands on the hilts of her daggers. "Why don't you go ahead and try it now, Zelmit?" she said. "Let's get it over with."

"I wasn't really planning anything, Vella," he said innocently. "I was just sizing you up, that's all."

"I noticed," she said dryly. "Did that cut on your shoulder ever heal?"

"It aches a little in damp weather," he complained.

"You should have kept your hands to yourself."

"I think I've got an old cloak that'll fit you. It's a little shabby, though."

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"So much the better," Yarblek said. "We're going to the One-Eyed Dog and we'd like to sort of blend in."

Vella removed her sable and laid it across a chair. "Don't lose track of this, Zelmit," she warned. "I'm fond of it, and I'm sure we'd both hate what would happen if it accidentally wound up on a caravan bound for Tol Honeth."

"You don't have to threaten him, Vella," Yarblek said mildly,

"That wasn't a threat, Yarblek," she retorted. "I just wanted to be sure that Zelmit and I understood each other."

"I'll get that cloak," Zelmit offered.

"Do that," she said.

The cloak was not so much shabby as it was tattered, and it smelled as if it had never been washed. Vella pulled it on over her shoulders

with some reluctance.

"Put the hood up," Yarblek told her.

"I'll have to wash my hair if I do,"

"So?"

"Do you know how long it takes hair like mine to dry in the wintertime?"

"Just do it, Vella. Why do you always argue with me?" "It's a matter of principle."

He sighed mournfully. "Take care of our horses," he told Zelmit. "We'll walk the rest of the way." And then he led Vella out of the office. When they reached the street, he took a length of clinking chain with a leather collar on one end out of a side pocket of his overcoat. "Put this on," he told her.

"I haven't worn a chain or collar in years," she said.

"It's for your own protection, Vella," he said wearily. "We're going into a very rough part of town, and the One-Eyed Dog is the roughest place down there. If you're chained, nobody will bother you—unless he wants to fight with me. If you're loose, some of the men in the tavern might misunderstand."

"That's what my daggers are for, Yarblek."

"Please, Vella. Oddly enough, I sort of like you, and I don't want you getting hurt."

"Affection, Yarblek?" She laughed. "I thought the only thing you really liked was money."

"I'm not a complete scoundrel, Vella."

"You'll do until the real thing comes along," she said, fastening the collar around her neck. "As a matter of fact, I sort of like you, too."

His eyes widened, and he grinned.

"Not that much, though," she added.

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The One-Eyed Dog was perhaps the foulest tavern Vella had ever entered and Vella had been in a large number of low dives and shabby taverns in her life. Since the age of twelve, she had always relied on her daggers to ward off unwanted attentions. Although she had seldom been obliged to kill anyone—except for a few enthusiasts—she had nonetheless established a reputation for being a girl no sensible man would attempt. Sometimes that rankled a bit, though, since there

were tunes when Vella might have welcomed an attempt. A nick or two in some unimportant places upon an ardent admirer would sustain her honor, and then--well, who knows?

"Don't drink any of the beer here," Yarblek cautioned as they entered. "The vat is open, and there are usually a few drowned rats floating around in it." He wrapped her chain around his hand.

Vella looked around. "This is really a revolting place, Yarblek," she told him.

"You've been spending too much time with Porenn," he said. "You're starting to get delicate."

"How would you like to have me gut you?" she offered.

"That's my girl." He grinned. "Let's go upstairs."

"What's up there?"

"The girls. Drosta doesn't come here for rat-flavored beer."

"That's disgusting, you know?"

"You've never met Drosta, have you? Disgusting only begins to describe him. He even turns my stomach."

"Are you planning to just walk in on him? Aren't you going to snoop around a bit first?"

"You've been in Drasnia too long," he replied as they started up the steps. "Drosta and I know each other. He knows better than to try to He to me. I'll get to the bottom of this right away, and then we can get out of this stinking town."

"I think you're starting to get delicate, as well."

There was a door at the end of the hall, and the pair of Nadrak soldiers standing at either side of it proclaimed by their presence that King Drosta lek Thun was inside.

"How many so far?" Yarblek asked them as he and Vella stopped in front of the door.

"Three, isn't it?" one of the soldiers asked the other.

"I lost count." The other soldier shrugged. "They all look the same to me. Three or four. I forget."

"Is he busy right now?" Yarblek asked.

"He's resting."

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"He must be getting old. He never used to have to rest after only

three. Do you want to tell him I'm here? I've got a business proposition for him.'" Yarblek suggestively shook Vella's chain.

One of the soldiers eyed Vella up and down. "She might be able to wake him up at that." He leered.

"And I can put him back to sleep just as fast," Vella said, opening her shabby cloak to reveal her daggers.

"You're one of those wild women from up in the forest, aren't you?" the other soldier asked. "We really shouldn't let you in there with him with those daggers."

"Would you like to try to take them away from me?"

"Not me, girl," he replied prudently.

"Good. Resharpening a dagger is very tedious, and I've been hitting bone a great deal lately,'"

The other soldier opened the door. "It's that Yarblek fellow again, your Majesty," he said. "He's got a girl he wants to sell you."

"I just bought three," a shrill voice replied with an obscene giggle.

"Not like this one, your Majesty."

"It's so nice to be appreciated," Vella murmured.

The soldier grinned at her.

"Yarblek, get in here!" King Drosta's high-pitched voice commanded.

"Right away, your Majesty. Come along, Vella." Yarblek tugged on her chain and led her into the room.

Drosta lek Thun, King of Gar og Nadrak, lay half dressed on a rumpled bed. He was by far the ugliest man Vella had ever seen. Even the hunchbacked dwarf Beldin was handsome by comparison. He was scrawny and had bulging eyes. His face was pockmarked, and his beard scraggly. "You idiot!" he snapped at Yarblek. "Yar Nadrak is overrun with Malloreal agents. They know that you're Prince Kheldar's partner and that you practically live in Porenn's palace."

"Nobody saw me, Drosta," Yarblek said, "and even if they did, I Ve got a perfectly legitimate reason to be here.'" He shook Vella's chain.

"Do you really want to sell her?" Drosta saki, eyeing the girl.

"Hardly, but we can tell anybody curious about it that we couldn't agree on a price."

"Why are you really here, then?"

"Porenn's a little curious about your activities. Javelin's got

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some spies in your palace, but you're sneaky enough to hide what you're doing from them. I thought I'd save some time and come right to the source."

"What makes you think I've been up to something?"

"You usually are."

Drosta laughed shrilly. "That's true, I suppose, but why should I tell you?"

"Because if you don't, I'll set up camp in the palace, and the Malloreans will think you're crossing them."

"That's blackmail, Yarblek," Drosta accused.

"Some people call it that, yes."

Drosta sighed. "All right, Yarblek," he said, "but this is for Porenn's ears only, and I don't want you and Silk taking advantage of it. I've been trying to mend my fences with Zakath. He was very angry when I switched sides at Thull Mardu. It's only a question of time until he subdues all of Cthol Murgos, and I don't want him to get the idea of coming north looking for me. I've been negotiating with Brador, the chief of his bureau of internal affairs, and we've almost reached an accommodation. I get to keep my skin if I allow Brador's agents to pass through Gar og Nadrak to infiltrate the west. Zakath's pragmatic enough to forgo the pleasure of having me skinned alive if I'm useful to him."

Yarblek looked at him skeptically. "All right, Drosta, what else? That's hardly enough to keep Zakath from peeling you like an apple."

"Sometimes you're too smart for your own good, Yarblek."

"Give, Drosta. I don't want to have to spend the next month here in Yar Nadrak being conspicuous."

Drosta gave up. "I've cut the import duties on Mallorean carpets. Zakath needs tax revenue to continue the war in Cthol Murgos. If I cut those duties, Mallorean merchants can undersell you and Silk in the marketplaces to the west. The whole plan is to make myself so indispensable to his Imperial Majesty that he'll leave me alone."

"I was wondering why our profits in carpets have been falling off," Yarblek mused. "That's all?" he asked.

"I swear it is, Yarblek."

"Your oaths tend to be a little worthless, my King."

Drosta had been looking at Vella appreciatively. "Are you absolutely positive you don't want to sell this girl?" he asked.

"You couldn't really afford me, your Majesty," Vella told

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him, "and sooner or later your appetite would get the better of you. I'd have to take steps at that point."

"You wouldn't actually draw a knife on your own king, would you?"

"Try me."

"Oh, one other thing, Drosta," Yarblek added. "From now on, Silk and I will be paying the same import duties you're charging the Malloreans."

Drosta's eyes bulged even more. "That's out of the question!" he almost screamed. "What if Brador found out about it?"

"We'll just have to make sure he doesn't, then, won't we? That's my price for keeping my mouth shut. If you don't cut those fees, I'll just have to let it be known that you have. You'll stop being so indispensable to Zakath at that point, won't you?"

"You're robbing me, Yarblek."

"Business is business, Drosta," Yarblek said blandly.

King Anheg of Cherek had journeyed to Tol Honeth to confer with Emperor Varana. When he had been admitted to the imperial apartments, he got right to the point. "We've got a problem, Varana," he said.

"Oh?"

"You know my cousin, the Earl of Trellheim?"

"Barak? Of course."

"He hasn't been seen for quite sometime. He's off with that oversized ship of his and he's got some friends with him."

"It's a free ocean, I suppose. Who are these friends?"

"Cho-Hag's son Hettar, that Mimbrate Mandorallen, and Lelldorin the Asturian. He also has his own son Unrak along and the Ulgo fanatic Relg."

Varana frowned. "That's a dangerous group," he noted.

"I couldn't agree more. It's sort of like a natural disaster looking for a place to happen."

"Any ideas about what they're doing?"

"If I knew which way they're going, I could make a few guesses."

There was a polite tap on the door. "There's a Cherek out here, your Imperial Majesty," one of the guards outside the door announced. "He's a sailor, I think, and he says he needs to talk with King Anheg."

"Send him in," the emperor instructed.

It was Grelidik, and he was slightly drunk. * "I think I've solved

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your problem, Anheg. After I dropped you off on that pier, I wandered around on the docks for a while to see what kind of information I could pick up."

"In taverns, I see."

"You don't find sailors in tearooms. Anyway, I came across the captain of a Tolnedran merchantman. He'd picked up a cargo of Malloreal goods, and he was coming south across the Sea of the East toward the southern end of Cthol Murgos."

"That's very interesting, but I don't quite see the point."

"He saw a ship, and when I described Seabird to him, he agreed that it had been the ship he saw."

"That's a start, anyway. Where's Barak going?"

"Where else? MaUorea, of course."

After about a week's voyage, the Seabird made port at Dal Zerba on the southwest coast of the Malloreal continent. Barak asked a few questions and then led his friends to the offices of Silk's factor in the port city.

The factor was a very thin man, not so much undernourished as he was emaciated.

"We're trying to locate Prince Kheldar," Barak rumbled to him. "It's a matter of some urgency, and we'd appreciate any information you might be able to give us as to his whereabouts."

The factor frowned. "The last I heard was that he was in Melcene on the other side of the continent, but that was over a month ago, and Prince Kheldar moves around a great deal."

"That's Silk, all right," Hettar murmured.

"Do you have any guesses about where he might have gone from Melcene?" Barak asked.

"This office is fairly new," the factor said, "and I'm sort of at the tail end of the route of any couriers." He made a sour face. "The factor up at Dal Finda was a bit put out when Kheldar and Yarblek set up this office. I guess he felt that I might be in competition with him. Sometimes he forgets to pass things on to me. His office has been well established for some time, so the couriers always stop there. If anybody in this part of Dalasia knows anything about Kheldar's location, he would."

"All right. Where's Dal Finda, then?"

"Upriver about forty leagues."

"Thanks for the help, friend. Do you happen to have a map of this part of Mallorea?"

"I believe I could find one for you, yes."

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"I'd appreciate it. We're not familiar with this part of the world."

"So we go upriver?" Hettar said when Silk's factor was out of the room looking for the map.

"If it's the only place where we can find out where Garion and the others are, we'll have to," Barak replied.

The current in the Finda River was sluggish, and the oarsmen made good time as they rowed upstream. They reached the river town late the following day and went immediately to Silk's offices there.

The factor here was almost the reverse of the man in Dal Zerba. He was bulky more than fat and he had huge meaty hands and a florid face. He was not particularly cooperative. "How do I know you're the prince's friends?" he demanded suspiciously. "I'm not going to reveal his location to complete

strangers."

"Are you trying to be difficult?" Barak asked.

The factor looked at the big red-bearded man and swallowed hard. "No, but sometimes the prince wants his whereabouts kept secret."

"Probably when he's planning to steal something," Hettar added.

"Steal?" the factor objected in a shocked voice. "The prince is a respectable businessman."

"He's also a liar, a cheat, a thief, and a spy," Hettar told him. "Now, where is he? We'd heard that he'd been in Melcene awhile back. Where did he go from there?"

"Can you describe him?" the factor countered.

"Short," Hettar replied, "sort of thin. He's got a face like a rat and a long, pointed nose. He's got a clever mouth and he thinks he's funny."

"That's a fair description of Prince Kheldar," the factor conceded.

"We have heard that our friend standeth in a certain amount of danger," Mandorallen said. "We have sailed many leagues to offer our assistance."

"I was sort of wondering why most of you were wearing armor. Oh, all right. The last I heard was that he was bound for a place called Kell."

"Show me," Barak said, unfolding his map.

"It's over here," the factor said.

"Is that river navigable?"

"As far north as Balasa."

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' 'Good. We can sail around the southern end of the continent and go up that river. How far back from the main channel is this Kell place?"

' 'A league or so from the east bank. It's at the foot of a very big mountain. I'd be careful, though. Kell's got a very peculiar reputation. The seers live there, and they don't particularly welcome strangers."

"We'll have to chance it," Barak said. "Thanks for your help, friend. We'll give Kheldar your regards when we catch up with him."

They set out downriver the following morning. There was enough of a breeze so that the sails were able to aid the oarsmen, and they made excellent time. It was shortly before noon when they heard a number of cracking detonations coming from somewhere just ahead.

"Methinks we will encounter a storm ere long," Mandorallen said.

Barak frowned. "The sky's perfectly clear, Mandorallen," he disagreed, "and that doesn't sound exactly right for thunder." He

raised his voice. "Ship oars and lower the sail," he commanded his sailors, swinging his tiller over sharply so that Seabird coasted to the bank.

Hettar, Relg, and Lelldorin came up from below. "Why are we stopping?" Hettar asked.

"There's something peculiar going on just up ahead," Barak replied. "I think we'd better go have a look before we blunder into anything."

"You want me to get the horses?"

"I don't think so. It's not very far, and men on horseback are kind of conspicuous."

"You're starting to sound like Silk."

"We've been together for quite a while. Unrak!" he shouted to his son, who had been riding in the bow. "We're going to go see what that noise is all about. You're in charge here until we get back."

"But, father!" the red-haired boy protested.

"That's an order, Unrak!" Barak thundered.

"Yes, sir." Unrak sounded slightly sullen.

The Seabird swung slowly around in the current and bumped gently against the brush-covered riverbank. Barak and the others jumped from the rail to the bank and started cautiously inland.

There were more of those strange detonations that did not sound exactly like thunder.

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"Whatever it is, it's coming from just up ahead," Hettar said quietly.

"Let's stay out of sight until we find out what's going on," Barak said. "We've heard that kind of sound before—at Rak Cthol when Belgarath and Ctuchik were fighting."

"Sorcerers, thinkest thou?" Mandorallen suggested.

"I'm not positive, but I'm beginning to have some strong suspicions in that direction. I think we'd better stay under cover until we can see just who or what is out there."

They crept to the edge of a clump of scrubby trees and looked out at an open field.

A number of black-robed figures lay smoking on the turf. Others huddled fearfully near the edge of the field.

"Murgos?" Hettar sounded startled.

"Methinks not, my Lord," Mandorallen said. "If thou wilt look closely, thou wilt see that the hoods of their cloaks are lined in diverse colors. Those colors do indicate rank among the Grolims. Thou wert wise, my Lord of Trellheim, to advise caution."

"What's making them smoke like that?" Lelldorin whispered, nervously fingering his bow.

As if in answer to his question, a black-robed and hooded figure rose at the top of a knoll and gestured almost contemptuously. A ball of incandescent fire seemed to leap from the figure's hand, sizzled across the open field, and struck one of the frightened Grolims full in the chest with another of those cracking detonations. The Grolim shrieked and, clutching at his chest, fell to the earth.

"I guess that explains the noise," Relg observed. "Barak," Hettar said quietly, "that one on top of the knoll is a woman." "Are you sure?"

' 'I've got very good eyes, Barak, and I can tell the difference between a man and a woman."

' 'So can I, but not when they're all wrapped up in cloaks like that."

' 'Look at her elbows the next time she raises her arms. Women's elbows are hinged differently from ours. Adara says it has to do with carrying babies."

"Did you fear to come alone, Agachak?" the woman atop the little hill demanded with contempt. Then she flicked another fireball, and another Grolim crumpled to the ground.

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"I fear nothing, Zandramas," a hollow voice came from the trees at the edge of the field.

"Now we know who they are," Hettar said. "But why are they fighting?"

"Zandramas is a woman?" Lelldorin asked in amazement.

Hettar nodded. "Queen Porenn found out about it some time back. She sent word to the Alorn kings, and Cho-Hag told me."

Zandramas almost casually felled the three remaining Grolims. "Well, Agachak," she said then, "will you come out of hiding now? Or must I come and find you?"

A tall, cadaverous-looking Grolim stepped out of the trees. "Your fire will have no effect on me, Zandramas," he said, advancing toward the hooded woman.

"I wasn't thinking of fire, Agachak," she almost purred. "This will

be your fate." She suddenly seemed to blur and shimmer, and then standing in the place she had occupied was an enormous, hideous beast. It had a long, snakelike neck and huge bat wings.

"Belar!" Barak swore. "She just turned into a dragon!"

The dragon spread her wings and flapped into the air. The cadaverous Grolim shrank back, then raised both arms. There was a shocking sound, and the dragon was suddenly encased in a sheet of green fire. The voice that came thundering from the dragon's mouth was still the voice of Zandramas. "You should have paid more attention to your studies, Agachak. If you had, you'd know that Torak made dragons immune to sorcery." The dragon hovered over the now-terrified Grolim. "Incidentally, Agachak," she said, "you'll be happy to know that Urvon is dead. Give him my regards when you see him." And then she struck, sinking her talons into Agachak's chest. He shrieked once before a sudden billow of sooty fire burst from the dragon's mouth and engulfed his face. And then the dragon bit his head off.

Lelldorin made a retching sound. "Great Chamdar!" he gasped in a revolted voice. "She's eating him!"

There was a horrid crunching sound as the dragon continued her ghastly feast. Then at last, with a shrill scream of triumph, she spread her huge wings and flew off to the east.

"Is it safe to come out now?" a shaking voice asked from nearby.

"You'd better," Barak said ominously, drawing his sword.

It was a Thull. He was young, with muddy-colored hair and a slack-lipped mouth.

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"What's a Thull doing in Mallorean?" Lelldorin asked the stranger.

"Agachak brought me," the Thull replied, trembling violently.

"What's your name?" Relg asked him.

"I'm Nathel, King of Mishrak ac Thull. Agachak said he'd make me Overking of Angarak if I'd help him with something he had to do here. Please, don't leave me alone." Tears were streaming down his face.

Barak looked at his companions. They all had expressions of pity on their faces. "Oh, all right," he said grudgingly. "Come along, I guess."

CHAPTER TEN

"What's the matter with her, Aunt Pol?" Garion was looking at Ce'Nedra, who sat crooning over her blanket-wrapped bundle of rags.

"That's what I need to find out," Polgarasaid. "Sadi, I need some Orel."

"Is that really wise, Lady Polgara?" the eunuch asked. "In her present condition . . ." He spread his thin-fingered hands suggestively.

"If there's any danger, Aunt Pol—" Garion began.

"Orel is relatively harmless," she cut him off. "It stimulates the heart a bit, but Ce'Nedra's heart is strong. I can hear it beating half a continent away. We need to know what happened right now, and Orel is the fastest way."

Sadi had opened his red leather case and he handed Polgara one of his little vials. She judiciously tapped three drops of the yellow liquid into a cup and then filled the cup with water.

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"Ce'Nedra, dear," she said to the little queen, "you must be thirsty. This might help." She handed the cup to the red-haired girl.

"Why, thank you, Lady Polgara." Ce'Nedra drank deeply. "As a matter of fact, I was just about to ask someone for a drink of water."

"Very smooth, Pol," Beldin whispered.

"Rudimentary, uncle."

"Do you have any idea of what they're talking about?" Zak-ath asked Garion.

"Aunt Pol implanted the notion of thirst into Ce'Nedra's mind."

"You people can actually do that?"

"As she said, it's rudimentary."

"Can you do it?"

"I don't know. I've never tried." Garion's attention was, however, firmly fixed on his blissfully smiling little wife.

Polgara calmly waited.

"I think you can begin now, Lady Polgara," Sadi said after a few minutes.

"Sadi," she said absently, "we know each other well enough by now to

skip the formalities, I'm not going to choke over 'your Excellency,' so why should you strangle on 'my Lady'?"

"Why, thank you, Polgara."

"Now, Ce'Nedra," Polgara said.

"Yes, Aunt Pol?" the tiny queen said, her eyes slightly unfocused.

"There's a first," Silk said to Beldin.

"She's been living with Garion for quite a while now," the dwarf replied. "Things do rub off after a bit."

' 'I wonder what Polgara'd do if / called her by that name? *'

' 'I don't recommend experimentation,' Beldin told him. * 'It's up to you, though, and you'd make a very interesting-looking radish."

"Ce'Nedra," Polgara said, "why don't you tell me exactly how you got your baby back?"

"Arell found him for me." Ce'Nedra smiled. "Now I have even more reason to love Arell.'"

"We all love Arell."

"Isn't he beautiful?" Ce'Nedra turned back the blanket to reveal her rags.

"He's lovely, dear. Did you and Arell have a chance to talk at all?"

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"Oh, yes, Aunt Pol. She's doing something that's very important. That's why she couldn't join us just now. She said she might be able to catch up with us at Perivor—or maybe later at Korim."

"Then she knew where we're going?"

"Oh, no, Aunt Pol." Ce'Nedra laughed. "I had to tell her. She does so want to be with us, but she has this important thing to do. She asked me where we were going, and I told her about Perivor and Korim. She seemed a little surprised about Korim, though."

Aunt Pol's eyes narrowed. "I see," she said. "Dumik, why don't you set up a tent? I think Ce'Nedra and her baby should get a little rest."

"Right away, Pol," her husband agreed after a quick look at her.

"Now that you mention it, Aunt Pol," Ce'Nedra said happily, "I do feel a little tired, and I'm sure Geran needs a nap. Babies sleep so much, you know. I'll nurse him, and then he'll sleep. He always sleeps after he nurses."

"Steady," Zakath said quietly to Garion as the Rivan King's eyes filled with tears. The Mallorealan Emperor put his hand firmly on his friend's shoulder.

"What's going to happen when she wakes up, though?"

"Polgara can fix it."

After Durnik had set up the tent, Polgara led the bemused girl inside. After a moment, Garion felt a slight surge and heard a whisper of sound. Then his aunt came out of the tent carrying Ce'Nedra's bundle. "Get rid of this," she said, pushing it into Garion's hands.

"Is she going to be all right?" he asked her.

"She's asleep now. She'll wake up in about an hour and, when she does, she won't remember that any of this happened. None of us will mention it to her, and that will be the end of it,"

Garion took the bundle back into the woods and hid it under a bush. When he returned, he approached Cyradis. "It was Zandramas, wasn't it?" he demanded.

"Yes," Cyradis replied simply.

"And you knew it was going to happen, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you warn us?"

"To have done so would have been an interference in an event that had to occur."

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"That was cruel, Cyradis."

"Necessary events sometimes are. I tell thee, Belgarion, Zandramas could not go to Kelt as thou didst. Therefore, she had to find the location of the meeting from one of thy companions, else she would not be at the Place Which Is No More at the proper time."
"Why Ce'Nedra?"

"Zandramas, thou wilt recall, hath imposed her will upon thy queen in times past. It is not difficult for her to reimpose that bond,"

"I'm not going to forgive this, Cyradis." "Garion," Zakath said, "let it go. Ce'Nedra hasn't been hurt, and Cyradis was only doing what she

had to do." The Mallorean seemed peculiarly defensive.

Garion turned and stalked away, his face livid with anger. When Ce'Nedra awoke, she appeared to have no memory of the meeting in the woods and seemed to have returned to normal. Durnik struck the tent, and they rode on.

They reached the edge of the forest about sunset and set up for the night there. Garion rather studiously avoided Zakath, not trusting himself to be civil to his friend after he had jumped to the defense of the blindfolded Seeress. Zakath and Cyradis had engaged in a lengthy conversation before they had all left Kell, and now the Emperor seemed wholly committed to her cause. His eyes were sometimes troubled, though, and he frequently turned in his saddle to look at her.

That night, however, when they were both on watch, it was no longer possible for Garion to avoid his friend.

"Are you still angry with me, Garion?" Zakath asked. Garion sighed. "No, I guess not," he said. "I don't think I was really angry—just a little irritated, is all. Most of all, I'm angry with Zandramas, not with you and Cyradis. I don't like people who play tricks on my wife."

"It really had to happen, you know. Zandramas had to find out where the meeting's going to take place. She has to be there,

too."

"You're probably right. Did Cyradis give you any details about your task?"

"A few. I'm not supposed to talk about it, though. About all I can tell you is that somebody very important is coming, and I'm supposed to help him."

"And that's going to take you the rest of your life?" "And probably the lives of a lot of others, as well."

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"Mine, too?"

"I don't think so. I think your task will be over after the meeting. Cyradis sort of implied that you've done enough already."

They set out early that morning and rode out onto a rolling plain along the west side of the Balasa River. There were farm villages here and there, villages that looked rude, but in which the houses were really very well constructed. The Dalasian villagers labored in the fields with the simplest of tools.

"And it's all subterfuge," Zakath said wryly. "These people are probably far more sophisticated than even the Melcenes, and they've gone to a great deal of trouble to hide the feet."

"Would thy people or the priests of Torak have left them unmolested had the truth been known?" Cyradis asked him.

"Probably not," he admitted. "The Melcenes in particular would likely have pressed most of the Dais into service in the bureaucracy."

"That would not have been compatible with our tasks." "I understand that now. When I get back to Mal Zeth, I think I'll make some changes in imperial policy toward the Dalasian Protectorates. Your people are doing something much, much more important than raising beets and turnips for the rest of Mallorean."

"If all goes well, our work will be done once the meeting hath taken place, Emperor Zakath."

"But your studies will continue, won't they?" She smiled. "Inevitably. The habits of eons die very hard." Belgarath pulled his horse in beside Cyradis. "Could you be a bit more specific about what we're supposed to be looking for when we get to Perivof?" he asked her.

"It is as I told thee at Kell, Ancient Belgarath. At Perivof thou must seek out the map that will guide thee to the Place Which Is No More."

"How is it that the people of Perivof know more about it than the rest of the world?" She did not reply.

"I gather that this is another one of those things you're not going to tell me."

"I may not at this time, Belgarath." Beldin came soaring in. "You'd better get ready," he said. "There's a patrol of Darshivan soldiers just ahead." "How many?" Garion asked quickly. "A dozen or so. They've got a Grolim with them. I didn't

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want to get too close, but I think it's White-eyes. They're hiding in ambush in a grove of trees in the next valley."

"How would he know we're coming this way?" Velvet asked in perplexity.

"Zandramas knows that we're going to Perivof," Polgara replied. "This is the shortest route."

"A dozen Darshivans don't really pose much of a threat," Zakath said confidently. "What's the purpose of this, then?"

"Delay," Belgarath told him. "Zandramas wants to hold us up so that

she can get to Perivor before we do. She can communicate with Naradas over long distances. We can probably expect him to set traps for us every few miles all the way to Lengha."

Zakath scratched at his short beard, frowning in concentration. Then he opened one of his saddlebags, took out a map, and consulted it. "We're still about fifteen leagues from Lengha," he said. He squinted at Beldin. "How fast could you cover that distance?"

"A couple hours. Why?"

"There's an imperial garrison there. I'll give you a message to the garrison commander with my seal on it. He'll move out with troops and spring those traps from behind. As soon as we join those forces, Naradas won't be bothering us anymore." Then he remembered something. "Holy Seeress," he said to Cyradis, "back in Darshiva, you told me to leave my troops behind when I came to Kell. Is that prohibition still in effect?" "Nay, Kal Zakath." "Good. I'll write that message."

"What about the patrol hiding just ahead?" Silk asked Gar-ion. "Or are we just going to wait here until Zakath's troops arrive?"

"I don't think so. What's your feeling about a little exercise?"

Silk's answering grin was vicious.

"There's still a problem, though," Velvet said. "With Beldin on his way to Lengha, we won't have anyone to scout out any other ambushes."

"Tell the she with yellow hair not to be concerned," the wolf said to Garion. "One is able to move without being seen, or if one is seen, the man-things will pay no heed."

"It's all right, Liselle," Garion said. "The wolf will scout for us."

"She's a very useful person to have along." Velvet smiled.

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"Person?" Silk said. "Well, isn't she?"

He frowned. "'You know, you might be right at that. She has a definite personality, doesn't she?"

The wolf wagged her tail at him and then loped off.

"All right, gentlemen," Garion said, loosening Iron-grip's sword in its sheath, "let's go pay these lurking Darshivans a visit."

"Won't Naradas cause some problems?" Zakath asked, handing his note to Beldin.

"I certainly hope he tries," Garion replied.

Naradas, however, proved to no longer be among the Dar-shivan soldiers hidden in the grove of trees. The skirmish was short, since

most of the ambushers seemed to be much better at running than at fighting.

"Amateurs," Zakath said scornfully, wiping his sword blade on the cloak of one of the fallen.

"You're getting fairly competent with that, you know?" Gar-ion complimented him.

"The training I was given when I was young seems to be coming back," Zakath replied modestly.

"He handles that sword almost the same way Hettar handles his saber, doesn't he?" Silk noted, pulling one of his daggers out of a Darshivan's chest.

"Much the same," Garion agreed, "and Hettar got his training from Cho-Hag, the finest swordsman in Algarria."

"Which Taur Urgas discovered the hard way," Silk added.

"I'd have given a great deal to watch that fight," Zakath said wistfully.

"So would I," Garion said, "but I was busy somewhere else at the time."

"Sneaking up on Torak?" Zakath suggested.

"I don't think 'sneaking' is the right word. He knew I was coming."

"I'll go get the ladies and Belgarath," Durnik said.

"Beldin spoke with me," Belgarath told them when he rode up. "Naradas flew out of this grove before you got here. Beldin considered killing him, but he had that parchment in his talons."

"What form did he take?" Silk asked. "Naradas, I mean?"

"A raven," Belgarath said with distaste. "Grolims are always fond of ravens for some reason."

Silk suddenly laughed. "Remember the time when Asharak the Murgo changed into a raven on the plain of Arendia, and

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Polgara called that eagle down to deal with him? U rained black feathers for almost an hour."

"Who's Asharak the Murgo?" Zakath asked.

"He was one of Ctuchik's underlings," Belgarath replied.

"Did the eagle kill him?"

"No," Silk said. "Garion did that later."

"With his sword?"

"No. With his hand."

"That must have been a mighty blow. Murgos are bulky people."

"Actually it was only a slap," Garion said. "I set fire to him." He hadn't thought of Asharak in years. Surprisingly, he found that the memory no longer bothered him.

Zakath was staring at him in horror.

"He was the one who killed my parents," Garion told him. "The action seemed appropriate. He burned them to death, so I did the same thing to him. Shall we ride on?"

The tireless she-wolf ranged out ahead of them and located two more groups of ambushers before the sun went down. The survivors of the first, failed ambush had spread the word, however, and as soon as these other two groups of Darshivans saw Garion and his companions bearing down on them, they fled in panic.

"Disappointing," Sadi said after they had flushed out the second group. He slipped his small, poisoned dagger back into

its sheath.

"I expect that Naradas is going to speak quite firmly with those fellows when he finds out that he's gone to all this trouble for nothing," Silk added gaily. "He'll probably sacrifice a goodly number of them just as soon as he can find an altar."

They met the men of Zakath's imperial garrison from Lengha about noon the following day. The commander of the garrison rode forward and stared at Zakath in some amazement. "Your Imperial Majesty," he said, "is that really you?"

Zakath rubbed at his black beard, "Oh, you mean this, Colonel?" He laughed. "It was the suggestion of that old man over there." He pointed at Belgarath. "We didn't want people to recognize me, and my face is stamped on every coin in Mallo-rea. Did you have any trouble on your way north?"

"Nothing worth mentioning, your Majesty. We encountered a dozen or so groups of Darshivan soldiers—usually hiding in clumps of trees. We encircled each clump, and they all surrendered immediately. They're very good at surrendering."

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"They run quite well, too, we've noticed." Zakath smiled.

The colonel looked at his emperor a bit hesitantly. "I hope you won't be offended at my saying this, your Majesty, but you seem to have

changed since the last time I was in Mal Zeth."

"Oh?"

" I Ve never seen you under arms, for one thing.'"

"Troubled times, Colonel. Troubled times."

"And if you'll forgive my saying so, your Majesty, I Ve never heard you laugh before—or even seen you smile."

"IVe had little reason before, Colonel. Shall we go on to Lengha?"

When they arrived in Lengha, Cyradis, with Toth's assistance, led them directly to the harbor, where a strangely configured ship awaited them.

"Thank you, Colonel," Zakath said to the garrison commander. "Providing this ship was most considerate of you."

"Excuse me, your Majesty," the colonel replied, "but I had nothing to do with the ship."

Zakath gave loth a startled look, and the big mute smiled briefly at Dumik.

Durnik frowned slightly. "Brace yourself, Kal Zakath," he said. "The arrangements for the ship were made several thousand years ago."

Belgarath's face was suddenly creased by a broad smile. "It would seem that we're right on schedule then. I do so hate to be late for an appointment."

"Really?" Beldin said. "I remember one time when you showed up five years after you were supposed to."

"Something came up."

"Something usually does. Wasn't that during the period when you were spending your time with the girls in Maragor?"

Belgarath coughed and cast a slightly guilty look at his daughter.

Polgara raised one eyebrow but didn't say anything.

The ship was manned by the same sort of mute crew as had conveyed them from the coast of Gorut in Cthol Murgos to the Isle of Verkat. Once again Garion was struck by that haunting sense of repetition. As soon as they were on board, the crew cast off all lines and made sail.

"Peculiar," Silk observed. "The breeze is coming in off the sea, and we're sailing directly into it."

"I noticed that," Durnik agreed.

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"I thought you might have. It appears that normal rules don't apply to the Dais."

"Wilt thou, Belgarion, and thy friend Zakath accompany me to the aft cabin?" Cyradis said as they cleared the harbor.

"Of course, Holy Seeress," Garion replied. He noticed that as the three of them moved aft, Zakath took the blindfolded gill's hand to lead her, almost unconsciously duplicating loth's solicitude. A peculiar notion crossed the mind of the Rivan King at that point. He looked rather closely at his friend. Zakath's face was strangely gentle, and his eyes had an odd look in them. The notion was absurd, of course, but as clearly as if he had seen directly into the Mallorean Emperor's heart, Garion knew that it was absolutely true. He rather carefully concealed a smile.

In the aft cabin stood two gleaming suits of armor, looking for all the world like those of the knights at Vo Mimbire.

"These must garb you at Perivor," Cyradis told them.

"There's a reason, I assume," Garion said.

"Indeed. And when we approach that coast, thou must each lower thy visor and under no circumstances raise it whilst we are on that isle unless I give thee leave."

' 'And you're not going to tell us what the reason is, are you?'

She smiled gently and laid one hand on his arm. "Know only that it is needful."

"I sort of thought she might take that position," Garion said to Zakath. He went to the door of the cabin. "Dumik," he called, "we're going to need some help down here."

"We don't have to put it on yet, do we?" Zakath asked him.

"Have you ever worn full armor before?"

"No. I can't say that I have."

"It takes a bit of getting used to. Even Mandorallen grunted a bit when he first put his on."

"Mandorallen? That Mimbriate friend of yours?"

Garion nodded. "He's Ce'Nedra's champion."

"I thought you were."

"I'm her husband. Different rules apply." He looked critically at Zakath's sword, a rather light and slim-bladed weapon. "He's going to need a bigger sword, Cyradis," he told the Seer-ess.

"In that cabinet, Belgarion."

"She thinks of everything," Garion said wryly. He opened the cabinet. Inside, standing almost to shoulder height, was a massive broadsword. He lifted it out with both hands. "Your sword, your Majesty," he said, extending the hilt to Zakath.

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"Thank you, your Majesty." Zakath grinned. As he took the sword, his eyes suddenly went wide. "Torak's teeth!" he swore, almost dropping the huge weapon. "Do people actually use these things on each other?"

"Frequently. It's a major form of entertainment in Arendia. If you think that one's heavy, you should try mine." Then Gar-ion remembered something. "Wake up," he said rather peremptorily to the Orb.

The murmur of the stone was slightly offended.

"Don't overdo this," Garion instructed, "but my friend's sword is just a bit heavy for him. Let's make it lighter—a little at a time." He watched as Zakath strained to raise the sword. "A little more," he instructed the Orb.

The sword point came up—slowly.

"How's that?" Garion asked.

"A bit more, maybe," Zakath grunted.

"Do it," Garion said to the Orb.

"That's better—" Zakath sighed "—but is it really safe to talk to that stone that way? *"

"You have to be firm. It's like a dog or a horse sometimes— or even a woman."

"I will not forget thy remark, King Belgarion," Cyradis said in a crisp tone.

He grinned at her. "I didn't expect you to, Holy Seeress," he said mildly.

"One for your side," Zakath said.

"You see how useful that is?" Garion laughed. "I'll make an Alom of you yet.'"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The ship continued to move against the wind, and when they were perhaps three leagues out from the harbor, the albatross appeared, ghosting along on motionless, seraphlike wings. It made one solitary cry, and Polgara inclined her head in response. Then it took a position just in advance of the bowsprit as if it were leading the vessel.

"Isn't that peculiar?" Velvet said. "It's just like the one we saw on the way to the Isle of Verkat. *"

"No, dear," Polgara told her. "He's the same one."

"That's impossible, Lady Polgara. That was half a world away."

"Distance has no meaning to a bird with wings like that."

"What's he doing here?"

"He has a task of his own."

"Oh? What's that?"

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"He did not choose to tell me, and it would have been impolite of me to ask." *

Zakath had been walking up and down the deck trying to set his armor into place. "This always looks so splendid, but it's really very uncomfortable, isn't it?"

' 'Not nearly as uncomfortable as not having it on when you really need it," Garion told him.

"You get used to it in time, though, don't you?"

"Not appreciably, no."

Although it was some distance to the island of Perivor, the strange ship with its silent crew made good time and landed them on a wooded coast about noon the following day.

"To be perfectly honest with you," Silk said to Garion as they unloaded the horses, "I'm just as happy to be off that vessel. A ship that sails against the wind and sailors who don't swear make me nervous somehow."

* "There are a great many things about this entire business that are making me nervous," Garion replied.

"The only difference is that I'm just an ordinary man. You're a hero."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Heroes aren't allowed to be nervous."

"Who made up that rule?"

"It's a known tact. What happened to that albatross?"

"He flew off as soon as we came in sight of land." Garion put his visor down.

"I don't care what Polgara says about them," Silk said with a shudder. "I've known a lot of sailors, and I've never heard one of them with anything good to say about those birds."

"Sailors are superstitious."

"Garion, there's some basis in fact for all superstitions." The little man squinted at the dark woods lining the upper end of the beach. "Not a very inviting coast, is it? I wonder why the ship didn't put us down in some seaport?"

"I don't think anybody really knows why the Dais do anything."

After the horses had been unloaded from the ship, Garion and the others mounted and rode up the beach into the woods. "I think I'd better cut you and Zakath some lances," Durnik said to Garion. "Cyradis had some reason for putting you two in armor, and I've noticed that an armored man usually looks a little undressed without a lance.'" He dismounted, took his axe, and went back among the trees. He returned a few moments

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later with two stout poles. "I'll put points on them when we stop for the evening," he promised.

"This is going to be awkward," Zakath said, fumbling with his lance and shield.

"You do it like this," Garion said, demonstrating. "Buckle the shield on your left arm and hold the reins in your left hand. Then set the butt of the lance in the stirrup beside your right foot and hold it in place with your free hand."

"Have you ever fought with a lance?"

"A few times, yes. It's fairly effective against another man wearing armor. Once you knock him off his horse, it takes him quite awhile to get back on his feet again."

Beldin, as usual, had been scouting ahead. He came drifting back, ghosting among the trees on almost motionless wings. "You're not going to believe this," he said to Belgarath after he had changed back into his own form.

"What's that?"

"There's a castle up ahead."

"A what?"

* 'A large building. They usually have walls, moats, and

drawbridges."

"I know what a castle is, Beldin."

' 'Why did you ask then? Anyway, the one ahead looks almost as if it had been transplanted directly from Arendia.'

"Do you suppose you could clarify this for us, Gyradis?" Belgarath asked the Seeress.

"It is really no mystery, Ancient Belgarath," she replied. "Some two thousand years ago, a group of adventurers from the west were shipwrecked on the coast of this island. Seeing that there was no way to make their ship whole again, they settled here and took wives from among the local populace. They have retained the customs and manners and even the speech of their homeland."

"Lots of thees and thous?" Silk asked her.

She nodded.

"And castles? "

She nodded again.

"And die men all wear armor? The same as Garion and Zakath are wearing? "

"It is even as thou hast said, Prince Kheldar."

He groaned.

"What's the problem, Kheldar?" Zakath asked him.

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' 'We've traveled thousands of leagues only to find Mimbrates again."

' 'The reports I received from the battlefield at Thull Mardu all said that they're very brave. That might explain the reputation of this island."

"Oh, it does indeed, Zakath," the little man told him. "Mimbrates are the bravest people in the world—probably because they don't have brains enough to be afraid of anything. Garion's friend Mandorallen is totally convinced that he's invincible."

"He is," Ce'Nedra said in automatic defense of her knight. "I saw him kill a lion once with his bare hands."

"I Ve heard of his reputation," Zakath said. "I thought it was exaggerated."

"Not by very much," .Garion said. "I heard him suggest to Barak and Hettar once that the three of them attack an entire Tolnedran legion."

"Perhaps he was joking."

"Mimbrate knights don't know how to joke," Silk told him.

' 'I will not sit here and listen to you people insult my knight,'
Ce'Nedra said hotly.

"We're not insulting him, Ce'Nedra," Silk told her. "We're describing him. He's so noble he makes my hair hurt."

"Nobility is an alien concept to a Drasnian, I suppose," she noted.

"Not alien, Ce'Nedra. Incomprehensible."

"Perhaps in two thousand years they've changed," Durnik said hopefully.

"I wouldn't count on it," Beldin grunted. "In my experience, people who live in isolation tend to petrify."

"I needs must warn ye all of one thing, however," Cyradis said. "The people of this island are a peculiar mixture. In many ways they are even as you have described them, but their heritage is also Dal, and they are conversant with the arts of our people.'"

"Oh, fine," Silk said sardonically, "Mimbrates who use sorcery. That's assuming they can figure out which way to point it."

"Cyradis," Garion said, "is this why Zakath and I are wearing armor?"

She nodded.

' 'Why didn't you just say so?'

"It was necessary for you to find that out for yourselves."

"Well, let's go have a look," Belgarath said. "We've dealt

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with Mimbrates before, and we've usually managed to stay out of trouble."

They rode on through the forest in golden afternoon sunshine and, when they reached the edge of the trees, they saw the structure Beldin had reported. It stood atop a high promontory, and it had the usual battlements and fortifications.

"Formidable," Zakath murmured.

' 'There's no real point in lurking here in the trees,' Belgarath

told them. "We can't get across all that open ground without being seen. Garion, you and Zakath take the lead. Men in armor are usually greeted with some courtesy."

"Are we just going to ride up to the castle?" Silk asked.

"We might as well," Belgarath said. "If they still think like Mimbrates, they'll almost be obliged to offer hospitality for the night, and we need a certain amount of information anyway."

They rode out onto an open meadow and proceeded at a walk toward the grim-looking castle. "You'd better let me do most of the talking when we get there," Garion said to Zakath. "I sort of know the dialect."

"Good idea," Zakath agreed. "I'd probably choke on all the theesand thous."

From inside the castle a horn blew a brazen note, announcing that they had been seen, and a few minutes later a dozen gleaming knights rode out across the drawbridge at a rolling trot. Garion moved Chretienne slightly to the front.

"Prithee, abate thy pace, Sir Knight," the man who appeared to be the leader of the strangers said. "I am Sir Astellig, baron of this place. May I ask of thee thy name and what it is that brings thee and thy companions to the gates of my keep?"

"My name I may not reveal, Sir Knight," Garion replied. "There are certain reasons, which I will disclose unto thee in due course. My fellow knight and I are embarked with these diverse companions on a quest of gravest urgency, and we have come here in search of shelter for the night, which shall descend upon us, methinks, within the next few hours." Garion was rather proud of the speech.

"Thou needst but ask, Sir Knight," the baron said, "for all true knights are compelled by honor, if not by courtesy, to offer aid and shelter to any fellow knight engaged in a quest."

"I cannot sufficiently express our gratitude to thee, Sir Astellig. We have, as thou canst see, ladies of quality with us whom the rigors of our journey have sorely fatigued."

"Let us proceed straightaway to my keep then, Sir Knights.

Attending to the well-being of ladies is the paramount duty of all men of gentle birth." He wheeled his horse with a grand flourish and led the way up the long hill to his castle with his men close behind him.

"Elegant," Zakath commented admiringly.

"I spent some time at Vo Mimbire," Garion told him. "You can pick up their speech after a while. About the only problem with it is that the sentences are so involved that you sometimes lose track of what you're saying before you get to the bottom end of it."

Baron Astellig led the way across the drawbridge, and they all dismounted in a flagstoned courtyard. "My servants will see thee

and thy companions to suitable quarters, Sir Knight," he said, "where you may all refresh yourselves. Then, an it please you, join me in the great hall and disclose unto me how I may aid thee in thy noble quest."

"Thy courtesy is most seemly, my Lord," Garion said. "Be assured that my brother knight and I will join you straightaway, as soon as we have seen to the comfort of the ladies."

They followed one of the baron's servants to comfortable quarters on the second floor of the main keep.

"I'm truly amazed at you, Garion," Polgara said. "I didn't mink you had the faintest idea of how to speak a civilized language."

"Thank you," he said, "I think."

"Maybe you and Zakath should speak with the baron alone," Belgarath told Garion. ' 'You've covered your own need for anonymity fairly well, but if the rest of us are around, he might start asking for introductions. Feel him out rather carefully. Inquire about local customs, that sort of thing, and ask him about any incidental wars going on." He looked at Zakath. "What's the capital of the island?"

"Dal Perivor, I think."

"That's where we'll want to go then. Where is it?"

"On the other side of the island."

"Naturally." Silk sighed.

"You'd better get started," Belgarath told the two armored men. "Don't keep our host waiting."

"When this is all over, would you consider hiring him out to me?" Zakath asked Garion as the two of them clanked down the hall. "You could make a tidy profit, you know, and I'd have the most efficient government in the world."

"Do you really want a man who's likely to live forever run-

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ning your government?' 'Garion asked in an amused tone.' 'Not to mention the feet that he's probably more corrupt than Silk and Sadi put together? That is a very bad old man, Kal Zakath. He's wiser than whole generations, and he's got a large number of disgusting habits.' '

"He's your grandfather, Garion," Zakath protested. "How can you talk about him like that?"

"Truth is truth, your Majesty."

"You Alorns are a very strange people, my friend."

"We've never tried to hide that, my friend."

There was a clicking of toenails from behind, and the she-wolf slipped up between them. "One wonders where you are bound," she said to Garion.

"One and one's friend go to speak with the master of this house, little sister," he replied.

"One will accompany you and your friend," she said. "If needful, one may help to prevent missteps."

"What did she say?" Zakath asked.

"She's coming along to keep us from making any serious mistakes," Garion said.

"A wolf?"

"This is no ordinary wolf, Zakath. I'm beginning to have some suspicions about her."

"One is gratified that even a puppy may show some semblance of perception." The wolf sniffed.

"Thank you," he said. "One is happy to gain approval from one so dearly loved."

She wagged her tail at him. "One requests, however, that you keep your discovery to yourself."

"Of course," he promised.

"What was that all about?" Zakath asked.

"It's a wolfy sort of thing," Garion said. "It doesn't really translate."

Baron Astellig had removed his armor and sat in a massive chair before a crackling hearth. "It is ever thus, Sir Knights," he said. "Stone doth provide protection from foes, but it is forever cold, and the chill of winter is slow to seep away from its obdurate surface. Perforce we are required to maintain our fires even when summer doth bathe our isle with its gentle warmth."

"It is, my Lord, as thou sayest," Garion replied. "E'en the massive walls of Vo Mimbres do harbor this oppressive chill."

"And thou, Sir Knight, hath seen Vo Mimbres?" the baron

asked in wonder. "I would give all that I own or ever will to behold that fabled city. What is it truly like?"

"Large, my Lord," Garion said, "and its golden stones do flash back the light of the sun as if to shame the heavens by its magnificence."

The baron's eyes filled with tears. "Blessed am I, Sir Knight," he said in a voice choked with emotion. "This unexpected encounter with a knight of noble purpose and passing fair eloquence hath been the crown of my life, for the memory of Vo Mimbren, echoing down through the endless progression of years, hath sustained those of us in lonely exile here, though its echoes grow more remote with each passing season even as dearly loved faces of those gone before us are remembered only in a dream that fades and dies as cruel eld creepeth upon us."

"My Lord," Zakath said a bit haltingly, "thy speech hath touched my heart. If I have power—and I do—I will convey thee at some future date even unto Vo Mimbren and present thee before the throne in the palace there, that we may reunite thee with thy kindred."

"You see," Garion murmured to his friend, "it gets to be habit-forming."

The baron wiped his eyes unashamed. "I note this hound of thine, Sir Knight," he said to Garion to ease them past an embarrassing moment, "a bitch, I perceive—"

"Steady," Garion said firmly to the she-wolf.

"That is a very offensive term," she growled.

"He didn't invent it. It's not his fault."

"She is of a lean and lithesome configuration," the baron continued, "and her golden eyes do bespeak intelligence far beyond that of the poor mongrels that do infest this kingdom. Canst thou perhaps, Sir Knight, identify her breed?"

"She is a wolf, my Lord," Garion told him.

"A wolf! " the baron exclaimed, leaping to his feet. "We must flee ere the fearsome beast fall upon us and devour us."

It was a bit ostentatious, but sometimes things like that impress people. Garion reached down and scratched the wolf's ears.

"Thou art brave beyond belief, Sir Knight," the baron said almost in wonder.

"She is my friend, my Lord," Garion replied. "We are linked by ties beyond thine imagining."

"One advises that you stop that," the wolf told him, "unless you have a paw to spare."

"You wouldn't!" he exclaimed, snatching his hand back.

"But you're not entirely sure, are you?" She bared her teeth almost in a grin.

"Thou speakest the language of beasts?" The baron gasped.

"Of a few, my Lord," Garion said. "They each have their own, thou knowest. I have not yet mastered the speech of the serpent. I think it has to do with the shape of my tongue."

The baron suddenly laughed. "Thou art a droll man, Sir Knight. Thou hast presented me here with much to ponder and much at which to marvel. Now, to the main point. What canst thou reveal to me of thy quest?"

"Be very careful here," the wolf warned Garion.

Garion considered. "As thou mayest know, my Lord," he began, "there is a great evil abroad in the world now." That was fairly safe. There was always a great evil abroad in the world.

"Truly," the baron agreed fervently.

"It is the sworn task of my steadfast companion here and myself to confront this evil. Know thou, however, that rumor, like a barking dog, would run before us, announcing—should they be known—our identities to the foul miscreant upon whom we mean to do war. Should, all forewarned, this vicious enemy learn of our approach, its minions would waylay us. Thus it is that we must conceal ourselves behind our visors and refrain from declaring before all the world our names—which have some smirch of honor upon them in diverse parts of the world." Garion was beginning to enjoy this. "We, neither one, fear any living thing." Mandorallen himself could not have said it more confidently. "We have, however, dear companions in this quest, whose lives we dare not endanger. Moreover, our quest is fraught with perilous enchantments that may even vaunt our prowess. Thus, though it is distasteful, we must, with thieftike stealth, approach this despised miscreant that we may administer suitable chastisement." He said the last word with something as close to the crack of doom as he could manage.

The baron got the point immediately. "My sword, and those of my knights, are at thine immediate disposal, my Lord. Let us eradicate this evil for good and all." The baron was a Mim-brate to the bone, all right.

Garion raised one regretful hand. "Nay, my Lord of Astel-lig," he said. "It may not be so, though I would welcome thee and thy brave companions with all my heart. This task hath been lain upon me and upon my dear companions. To accept thine

aid in this endeavor would be to anger the minions of the spirit world, which, no less than we, do contend in this matter. We—all of us—are but mortal, and the spirit world is a world of immortals. To

defy the commands of die spirits might well confound the purpose of those friendly spirits that take our part in this ultimate battle."

"Though it wounds my heart, Sir Knight," the baron said sadly, "I must agree that thine argument hath cogency. Know, moreover, that a kinsman of mine hath but recently arrived from the capital at Dal Perivor and hath advised me privately of a disturbing turn of events at court. No more than a few days ago, a wizard appeared at the king's palace. Doubtless using enchantments such as thou hast mentioned, he beguiled our king within the space of a few hours and gained the king's ear and is now his closest advisor. He now doth wield almost absolute authority in the kingdom. Guard yourselves well, Sir Knights. Should, perchance, this wizard be one of the minions of your foe, he now hath power to do thee gravest injury." The baron made a wry face. "Methinks the beguiling of the king was no serious task for him. It is improper of me to say it, perhaps, but his Majesty is not a man of profound intellectual gifts." This from aMimbrate*? "This wizard," the baron continued, "isawicked man, and I must advise thee in the spirit of true comradeship to avoid him."

"I thank thee, my Lord," Garion said, "but our destiny, and that of our quest, compels us to Dal Perivor. If needs be, we will confront this wizard and rid the kingdom of his influence."

"May the Gods and the spirits guide thy hand," the baron said fervently. Then he grinned. "Mayhap, an it please thee, I might watch as thou and thy valiant, laconic companion administer such chastisement as thou seest fit."

"We would be honored, my Lord," Zakath assured him.

"With that end in view then, my Lords," the baron said, "be advised that I and diverse nobles journey on the morrow toward the king's palace at Dal Perivor, there to participate in the grand tourney that our Lord King hath ordained to select champions of the kingdom to deal with a certain recurrent problem which hath confronted us. Know, moreover, that by centuries-old tradition, misunderstandings and frictions are held in the abeyance of general truce during this period and we may expect general tranquility on our journey to the west. An it please you, my Lords, may I entreat you to accompany me to the capital?"

"My Lord," Garion said, bowing with a slight creaking of

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annor, "your suggestion and gracious invitation could not suit our purposes more. And now, if we may, we will retire to make our preparations."

As Garion and Zakath strode down the long hall, the wolf's toenails had an almost metallic ring to them. "One is pleased," she said. "You didn't do all that badly—for a couple of puppies."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Perivor proved to be a pleasant island with rolling, emerald-green hills where sheep grazed and with dark plowed fields where meticulously straight rows of crops flourished. Baron Astellig looked about with some pride. "It is a fair land," he observed, "though doubtless not so fair as far-off Arendia."

"Methinks thou wouldst be somewhat disappointed by Arendia, my Lord," Garion told him. "Though the land be fair, the kingdom is much marred by civil turmoil and by the misery of the serfs."

"Doth that sad institution still prevail there? It was abolished here many centuries ago."

Garion was a bit surprised at that.

"The folk who inhabited this isle ere we came are a gentle people, and our forebears sought wives from among them. At first these common folk were bound in serfdom, as had always been the practice in Arendia, but our ancestors soon perceived

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that this was the grossest injustice, since the serfs were kinsmen by marriage." The baron frowned slightly. "Doth this civil discord thou spake of truly mar our ancestral homeland to any great extent?"

Garion sighed. "We have some small expectation that it may abate, my Lord. Three great duchies warred with each other for centuries until one—Mimbre—finally achieved nominal mastery. Rebellion lurked ever beneath the surface, however. Moreover, the barons of southern Arendia make bloody war upon each other for the most trivial of reasons."

"War? Truly? Such affairs arise here on Perivor, as well, but we have attempted to formalize the conflict to such degree that few are ever slain."

"How meanst thou 'formalize,' my Lord?"

"Such disputes as arise are—except in cases of outrage or gravest insult—customarily settled by tourneys." The baron smiled. "Indeed, I have known of a number of disputes that were counterfeited by the mutual contrivance of the principals merely as an excuse to hold such tourneys—which do entertain nobles and commons alike."

"How very civilized, my Lord," Zakath said.

The strain of phrasing such involuted sentences was beginning to wear on Garion. He asked the baron to excuse him, pleading the need to confer with his companions, and rode back to talk with Belgarath and

the others.

' 'How are you and the baron getting along?' ' Silk asked him.

"Quite well, actually. The intermarriage with the Dais has altered certain of the more irritating Arendish tendencies."

"Such as?"

"Gross stupidity for one thing. They've abolished serfdom, and they usually settle disputes with tournaments rather than open war." Garion looked at the dozing Belgarath. "Grandfather."

Belgarath opened his eyes.

"Do you think we've managed to get here ahead of Zandra-mas?"

"There's no way to know for sure."

"I could use the Orb again."

"It's probably better if you don't just yet. If she's on the island, there's no way to know where she landed. She may not have come this way, so the Orb wouldn't react to her trail. I'm sure she can feel it, though, and about all we'd succeed in doing

would be to let her know we're here. Besides, the Sardion is in mis part of the world. Let's not wake it up just yet.'

"You might ask your friend the baron," Silk suggested. "If she's here, he might have heard something about her."

"I doubt it," Belgarath said. "In the past she's usually gone to a great deal of trouble to remain unobserved."

"That's true," Silk conceded, "and I think she'll go to even more trouble now. She might have some difficulty trying to explain those lights under her skin.'

"Let's wait until we get to Dal Perivor," Belgarath decided. "I want to sort things out there before we do anything irrevocable."

"Do you suppose it would do any good to ask Cyradis?" Garion asked quietly, glancing back at the Seeress, who rode in the splendid carriage the baron had provided for the ladies.

"No," Belgarath said. "She won't be permitted to answer us."

"I think we might have a certain advantage in all this," Silk observed. "Cyradis is the one who's going to make the choice, and the fact that she's traveling with us instead of with Zandra-mas bodes rather well, wouldn't you say?"

"I don't think so," Garion disagreed. "I don't think she's traveling with us so much as she's here to keep an eye on Zakath. He has something very important to do, and she doesn't want him to stray."

Silk grunted. "Where do you propose to start looking for this map

you're supposed to find?" he asked Belgarath.

"A library probably," the old man replied. "This map is another one of those 'mysteries,' and I've had a fair degree of luck finding the others in libraries. Garion, see if you can persuade the baron to take us to the king's court in Dal Perivor. Palace libraries are usually the most complete."

"Of course," Garion agreed.

"I want to take a look at this wizard anyway. Silk, do you have an office in Dal Perivor?"

"I'm afraid not, Belgarath. There's nothing here worth trading in."

"Well, no matter. You're a businessman, and there'll be others in the city. Go talk business with them. Tell them you want to check over shipping routes. Look at every map you can lay your hands on. You know what we're looking for."

"You're cheating, Belgarath," Beldin growled.

"How do you mean?"

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"Cyradis told you that you were supposed to find the map."

"I'm only delegating responsibility, Beldin. It's perfectly legitimate."

"I don't think she'd see it that way."

"You can explain it to her. You're much more persuasive than I am."

They traveled in easy stages, more to spare the horses, Garion felt, than for any other reason. The horses of Perivor were not large, and they labored under the weight of men in full armor. So it was that it was several days before they crested a hill and looked down at the seaport city which was the capital of Perivor.

"Behold Dal Perivor," the baron proclaimed, "the crown and the heart of the isle."

Garion saw immediately that the shipwrecked Arends who had arrived on this shore two thousand years ago had made a conscious effort to duplicate Vo Mimbire. The city walls were high and thick and yellow, and brightly colored pennons flew from spires within those walls.

"Where did they find the yellow stone, my Lord?" Zakath asked the baron. "I have seen no such rock on our journey here."

The baron coughed a bit apologetically. "The walls are painted, Sir Knight," he explained.

"Whatever for?"

' 'To serve as a remembrance of Vo Mimbre,' the baron said a bit sadly. "Our ancestors were homesick for Arendia. Vo Mimbre is the jewel of our ancestral home, and its golden walls speak to our blood even across the endless miles.'"

"Ah," Zakath said.

"As I have promised thee, Sir Knight," the baron said to Garion, "gladly will I convey thee and thy companions forthwith to the king's palace where he will doubtless honor thee and offer thee his hospitality.'"

"Once more we are in thy debt, my Lord," Garion replied.

The baron smiled a bit slyly. ' 'I confess it to thee, Sir Knight, that my motives are not altogether magnanimous. I will accrue much credit by presenting at court stranger knights bent on a noble quest."

"That's quite all right, my friend." Garion laughed. "This way there's something for everybody."

The palace was almost identical to that in Vo Mimbre, a fortress within a fortress with high walls and a stout gate.

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"At least this time I don't think my grandfather will have to grow a tree," Garion murmured to Zakath.

"Do what?"

"When we first went to Vo Mimbre, the knight in charge of the palace gate didn't believe Mandorallen when he introduced Grandfather as Belgarath the Sorcerer, so Grandfather took a twig from his horse's tail and made an apple tree grow right there in the square in front of the palace. Then he ordered the skeptical knight to spend the rest of his life taking care of it. *"

"Did the knight actually do it?"

"I assume so. Mimbrates take those kinds of commands very seriously."

"Strange people."

"Oh, yes, indeed. I had to force Mandorallen to marry a girl he loved since childhood, and I had to stop a war in the process.' *"

"How do you stop a war?"

"I made some threats. I think they took me seriously." He thought about it. "The thunderstorm I created may have helped, though," he added. "Anyway, Mandorallen and Nerina had loved each other for years, but they'd been suffering in silence beautiful for all that

time. I finally got tired of it, so I made them get on with it. I made some more threats. I've got this big knife back here." He poked his thumb over his shoulder. "It attracts a lot of attention sometimes.'"

"Garion!" Zakath laughed. "You're a peasant."

"Yes. Probably," Garion admitted. "But it got them married, after all. They're both deliriously happy now, and if anything goes wrong, they can always blame me, can't they?"

"You're not like other men, my friend," Zakath said very seriously.

"No." Garion sighed. "Probably not. I'd like to be, though. The world lies very heavily on you and me, Zakath, and it doesn't leave us any time for ourselves. Wouldn't you just like to ride out on a summer morning to look at the sunrise and see what lies over the next hilltop?'"

"I thought mat's what weVe been doing."

"Not entirely. We're doing all this because we're compelled to. What I was talking about was doing it just for fun.'"

"I haven't done anything just for fun in years."

"Didn't you rather enjoy threatening to crucify King Gethel of the Thulls? Ce'Nedra told me about that."

Zakath laughed. "That wasn't too bad," he admitted. "I

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wouldn't have done it, of course. Gethel was an idiot, but he was sort of necessary at that point."

"It always comes to that, doesn't it? You and I do what's necessary, not what we'd really prefer to do. Neither of us sought this eminence, but we'll do what's necessary and what's expected of us. If we don't, this world will die, and good, honest men will die with it. I won't permit that if I can help it. I won't betray those good, honest men, and neither will you. You're too good a man yourself.'"

"Good? Me?"

' 'You underestimate yourself, Zakath, and I think that very soon someone will come and teach you not to hate yourself anymore.'"

Zakath started visibly.

"You didn't think I knew?" Garion said, boring in relentlessly. "But that's nearly over now. Your suffering and pain and remorse are almost done, and if you need any instructions in how to be happy, look me up. After all, that's what friends are for, aren't they?"

A choked sob came from behind Zakath's visor.

The she-wolf had been standing between their horses. She looked up at Garion. "Very well done," she said. "Perhaps one has misjudged you, young wolf. Perhaps you are not a puppy after all."

"One can but do one's best," Garion replied, also in the language of wolves. "One hopes that one has not been too much a disappointment."

"One feels that you have some promise, Garion."

And that confirmed something that Garion had suspected for some time now. "Thank you, Grandmother," he said, sure at last just to whom he was speaking.

"And it took you so very, very long to say it?"

"It might have been considered impolite."

' 'One believes that you have been too long with one's eldest daughter. She is, one has noticed, much caught up in propriety. One assumes you will continue to keep your discovery to yourself?"

"If you wish."

"It might be wiser." She looked at the palace gate. "What is this place?"

"It is the palace of the king."

"What are kings to wolves?"

"It is the custom among the man-things to pay respect to

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them, Grandmother. The respect is more to the custom than to the man-thing who wears the crown."

"How very curious," she sniffed.

At last, with a great deal of creaking and the clanking of chain, the drawbridge boomed down, and Baron Astellig and his knights led them into the palace courtyard.

As was the one in Vo Mimbire, the throne room here in Dal Perivor was a great, vaulted hall with sculptured buttresses soaring upward along the walls. Tall, narrow windows rose between the buttresses, and the light streaming through their stained-glass panels was jeweled. The floor was polished marble, and on the red-carpeted stone platform at the far end stood the throne of Perivor, backed by heavy purple drapes. Flanking the draped wall hung the massive antique weapons of two thousand years of the royal house. Lances, maces, and huge swords, taller than any man, hung among the tattered war-banners of forgotten kings.

Almost bemused by the similarities, Garion half expected to see

Mandorallen in his gleaming armor come striding across the marble floor to greet me, flanked by red-bearded Barak and horse-maned Hettar. Once again, that strange sense of recurrence struck him. With a start he realized that in recounting past experiences to Zakath, he had in fact been reliving them. In some obscure way this seemed a kind of cleansing in preparation for the now almost inevitable meeting in the Place Which Is No More.

"An it please ye, Sir Knights," Baron Astellig said to Garion and Zakath, "let us approach the throne of King Oldorin that I may present ye to his Majesty. I will advise him of the diverse restrictions your quest hath lain upon ye."

"Thy courtesy and consideration become thee, my Lord of Astellig," Garion said. "Gladly will we greet thy king."

The three of them proceeded along the marble floor toward the carpeted platform. King Oldorin, Garion noticed, was a more robust-looking man than Korodullin of Arendia, but his eyes revealed a fearful lack of anything resembling thought.

A tall, powerfully built knight stepped in front of Astellig. "This is unseemly, my Lord," he said. "Instruct thy companions to raise their visors that the king may behold those who approach him."

"I will explain to his Majesty the reason for this necessary concealment, my Lord," Astellig replied a bit stiffly. "I assure thee that these knights, whom I dare to call friends, intend no disrespect to our Lord King."

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"I'm sorry, Baron Astellig," the knight said, "but I cannot permit this."

The baron's hand went to his sword hilt.

"Steady," Garion warned, placing one gauntleted hand on Astellig's arm. "As all the world knows, it is forbidden to draw arms in the king's presence."

"Thou art well versed in propriety, Sir Knight," the man barring their way said, sounding a bit less sure of himself now.

"I've been in the presence of kings before, my Lord, and I am conversant with the customary usages. I do assure thee that we mean no disrespect to his Majesty by our visored approach to the throne. We are compelled to it, however, by a stern duty that hath been laid upon us."

The knight looked even more unsure of himself. "Thou art well spoken, Sir Knight," he admitted grudgingly.

"An it please you then, Sir Knight," Garion continued, "wilt thou accompany Baron Astellig, my companion, and myself to the throne? A man of thine obvious prowess can easily prevent mischief." A little

flattery never hurt anything in difficult situations.

"It shall be as thou sayest, Sir Knight," the knight decided.

The four of them approached the throne and bowed somewhat stiffly.
"My Lord King," Astellig said.

"Baron," Oldorin replied with an absent-seeming nod.

"I have the honor to present two stranger knights who have traveled here from afar in pursuit of a noble quest."

The king looked interested. The word "quest" rang bells in Mimbrate heads.

"As thou may have noticed, your Majesty," Astellig continued, "my friends are visored. This is not to be taken as a gesture of disrespect, but is a necessary concealment required by the nature of their quest. A foul evil is abroad in the world, and they journey with diverse companions to confront it. They each have some eminence in the world beyond the shores of our isle, and should they reveal their faces, they would instantly be recognized, and the evil one they seek would be forewarned of their coming and would seek to impede them. Thus it is that their visors must remain closed."

"A reasonable precaution," the king agreed. "Greetings, Sir Knights, and well met."

"Thou art kind, your Majesty," Garion said, "and we are grateful to thee for thy gracious understanding of our circumstances. Our quest is fraught with perilous enchantments, and I

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do fear me that should we reveal our identities, we might well fail, and the whole world would suffer as a result."

' "I do fully understand, Sir Knight, and I will not press thee for further details of thy quest. The walls of any palace have ears, and some there are even here who might be in league with the villain thou seekest."

"Wisely spoken, my King," a rasping voice said from the back of the throne room. "As I myself know full well, the powers of enchanter are myriad, and even the prowess of these two brave knights may not be sufficient to match them."

Garion turned. The man who had spoken had absolutely white eyes.

' "The wizard of whom I told thee," Baron Astellig whispered to Garion. "Be wary of him, Sir Knight, for he hath the king in thrall."

"Ah, good Erezel," the king said, his face lighting up, "an it please thee, approach the throne. Mayhap in thy wisdom thou mayest advise these two questors concerning the possibility of avoiding the perils posed by the enchantments certain to be strewn in their path."

"It shall be my pleasure, Lord King," Naradas replied.

"You know who he is, don't you?" Zakath murmured to Garion.

"Yes."

Naradas came down to the throne. "If I may be so bold as to suggest it, Sir Knights," he said in an unctuous tone, "a great tourney is planned not long hence. Should you not participate, it might arouse suspicion in the minions the one you seek hath doubtless placed here. My first advice to you, therefore, is that you enter our tourney and thus avoid that mischance." • "A most excellent suggestion, Erezel," the empty-headed king approved. "Sir Knights, this is Erezel, a great wizard and UK closest advisor to our throne. Consider well his words, for they have great merit. We will, moreover, be greatly honored to have two such mighty men join with us in our forthcoming entertainment."

Garion ground his teeth together. With that one innocent-seeming suggestion, Naradas had effectively achieved the delay he had been seeking for weeks now. There was no way out, however. "We would be honored to join with thee and thy val-feuit knights in thy sport, your Majesty," he said. "Prithee, when are the games to begin?"

"Ten days hence, Sir Knight."

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The quarters to which they were escorted were again hauntingly familiar. The displaced Arends who had been washed ashore here so many centuries ago had, it appeared, lovingly recreated the royal palace at Vo Mimbren down to the last detail— even including its inconveniences. Durnik, ever practical, noticed this immediately. "You'd think they'd have taken advantage of the opportunity to improve a few things," he observed.

"There's a certain charm in archaism, dear," Polgara said, smiling.

"It's nostalgic, perhaps, Pot, but a few modern touches wouldn't have hurt all that much. You have noticed that the baths are located down in the cellar, haven't you?"

"There's a point there, Lady Polgara," Velvet agreed.

"It was much more convenient in Mal Zeth," Ce'Nedra concurred. "A bath in one's own apartments offers all sorts of opportunities for fun and mischief,"

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Garion's ears turned bright red.

"I seem to be missing the more interesting parts of this

conversation," Zakath said slyly.

"Never mind," Garion told him shortly.

And then the dressmakers arrived, and Polgara and the other ladies were whisked away to engage in that activity which, Gar-ion had noticed, always seems to fill the feminine heart with a kind of dreamy bliss.

Immediately behind the dressmakers came the tailors, equally bent on making everyone look as old-fashioned as possible. Beldin, of course, adamantly refused their ministrations, even going so far as to show one insistent fellow a gnarled and very large fist to indicate that he was perfectly satisfied with the way he looked already.

Garion and Zakath, however, were under the constraint placed upon them by the Seeress of Kell, and so they remained buckled up in their armor.

When they were finally alone, Belgarath's expression grew grave. "I want you two to be careful hi that tournament," he told the armored men. "Naradas knows who we are, and he's already managed to delay us. He may try to go a little farther." He looked sharply toward the door. "Where are you going?" he demanded of Silk.

"I thought I'd nose around a bit," the little thief said innocently. "It never hurts to know what you're up against."

"All right, but be careful—and don't let anything slip into your pockets by mistake. We're walking on some fairly shaky ground here. If someone sees you pilfering, we could all get into a great deal of trouble."

"Belgarath," Silk replied in an offended tone, "no one has ever seen me steal anything." And then he went out muttering to himself.

"Is he trying to say that he doesn 't steal?" Zakath asked.

"No," Eriond replied. "Only that no one ever sees him doing it." He smiled gently. "He has a few bad habits, but we've been trying to break him of them." It was the first time in quite a while that Garion had actually heard his young friend say anything. Eriond had grown increasingly reticent—one might even say withdrawn. It was troubling. He had always been a •(range boy, and he seemed to be able to perceive things that none of the rest of them could. A chill came over Garion as he remembered the fateful words of Cyradis at Rheon: "Thy quest

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will be fraught with great peril, Belgarion, and one of thy companions shall lose his life in the course of it."

And then, almost as if his memory had summoned her, the blindfolded Seeress of Kell emerged from the room in which the ladies had been conferring with their dressmakers. Immediately behind her came Ce'Nedra, clad only in a very short chemise. "It's a perfectly suitable gown, Cyradis," she was protesting.

"Suitable for thee perhaps, Queen of Riva," the Seeress replied, "but such finery is not for me."

"Ce'Nedra!" Garion exclaimed in a shocked gasp. "You're not dressed!"

"Oh, bother that!" she snapped. "Everyone here has seen undressed women before. I'm just trying to reason with my mystical young friend here. Cyradis, if you don't put on the gown, I'll be very cross with you—and we really need to do something with your hair."

The Seeress unerringly took the tiny queen in her arms and embraced her fondly. "Dear, dear Ce'Nedra," she said gently, "thy heart is larger than thyself, and thy concern doth fill mine as well. I am content, however, in this simple garb. Mayhap in time my tastes will change, and then will I gladly submit to thy gentle ministrations."

"There's absolutely no talking to her," Ce'Nedra said, throwing her arms in the air. Then, with a charming flirt of the hem of her chemise, she stormed back into the room from which the two of them had emerged.

"You ought to feed her more," Beldin told Garion. "She's really very skinny, you know."

"I sort of like her the way she is," Garion replied. He looked at Cyradis. "Will you sit, Holy Seeress?"

"If I may."

"Of course." He waved off Tom's almost instinctive move to aid his mistress and guided the girl to a comfortable chair.

"I thank thee, Belgarion," she said. "Thou art as kind as thou art brave." She smiled, and it was like the sun coming up. She touched one hand to her hair. "Doth this really look so ugly?" she asked.

"It's just fine, Cyradis," he told her. "Ce'Nedra sometimes exaggerates, and she has an absolute passion for making people over-me, usually."

"And dost thou mind her efforts, Belgarion?"

"I suppose not. I'd probably miss them if she didn't try, at least."

"Thou art caught in the snare of love, King Belgarion. Thou art a mighty sorcerer, but methinks thy little queen hath a more powerful sorcery yet, for she holds thee in the palm of that tiny band."

"That's true, I suppose, but I don't really mind all that much."

"If this gets any more cloying, I think I'll throw up," Beldin said

gruffly.

And then Silk returned.

"Anything?" Belgarath asked.

"Naradas beat you to the library. I stopped by there, and the man in charge—"

"Librarian," Belgarath corrected absently.

"Whatever. Anyway, he said that as soon as Naradas arrived, he ransacked the library.'"

"So that's it, then," Belgarath said. "Zandramas isn't on the island. She sent Naradas here to do her looking for her, it seems. Is he still looking?"

"Apparently not."

"That means he's found it, then."

"And probably destroyed it to keep us from getting a look at it," Beldin added.

"Nay, gentle Beldin," Cyradis said. "The chart ye seek doth still exist, but it is not in the place where ye propose to seek.'"

"I don't suppose you could give us a few hints?" Belgarath asked her.

*' She shook her head. .. "I didn't think so."

"You said the chart," Beldin said, approaching the subject obliquely. "Does that mean there's only one copy?"

She nodded.

The dwarf shrugged. "Oh, well," he said. "Looking for it gives us something to do while we're waiting for our two heroes to get out and start denting other people's armor."

"That brings up a point," Garion said. He looked at Zakath. "Tibu're not particularly familiar with the lance, are you?"

"Not really, no."

"Tomorrow morning, then, we'll have to go someplace so that I can give you some instruction."

•"- "That seems like a sensible plan to me."

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The two of them arose early the following morning and left the palace on horseback. "I think we'd better go out of town," Garion said. "There's a practice field near the palace, but there'll be other knights there. I'm not trying to be offensive, but the first few passes are usually very awkward. We're supposed to be great knights, so let's not let anybody get the idea that you're totally inept."

"Thanks," Zakath said dryly.

"Do you enjoy public embarrassment?"

"Not really."

"Let's do it my way, then."

They rode out of the city and to a meadow a few miles away.

"You've got two shields," Zakath noted. "Is that customary?"

' 'The other one is for our opponent. *'

"Opponent?"

"A stump or a tree probably. We need a target." Garion reined in. "Now," he began, "we're going to be involved in a formal tournament. The idea is not to kill anybody, since that's considered bad form. We'll probably be using blunted lances. That helps to keep down the fatalities."

"But sometimes people do get killed, don't they?"

"It's not unheard of. The whole purpose of a formal joust is to knock the other fellow off his horse. You ride at him and aim your lance at the center of his shield.'"

"And he does the same thing to me, I suppose."

"Exactly."

"It sounds painful."

"It is. After a few passes, you'll probably be bruised from head to hip."

"And they do this for entertainment?"

"Not entirely. It's a form of competition. They do it to find out who's the best."

"Now that I can understand."

"I thought the notion might appeal to you."

They buckled the spare shield to a springy lower limb of a cedar tree. "That's about the right height," Garion said. "I'll make the first couple of passes. Watch very closely. Then you can try."

Garion had become quite proficient with the lance and he hit the shield squarely on both passes.

"Why do you stand up at the last second?" Zakath asked him.

"I wasn't actually standing so much as leaning forward. The idea is to brace your feet in the stirrups, lean forward, and hold your body rigid. That way the weight of the horse is added to your own."

"Clever. Let me try it."

Zakath completely missed the shield on his first attempt. "What did I do wrong?" he asked.

"When you raised up and leaned forward, the point of your lance dipped. You have to adjust your point of aim."

"Oh, I see. All right, let me try it again." On the next pass he struck the shield a glancing blow that made it spin around the limb. "Any better?" he asked.

Garion shook his head. "You'd have killed him. When you hit the top of the shield that way, your lance is deflected upward, and it drives right into his visor. It breaks his neck."

"I'll try it again."

By noon Zakath had made considerable progress.

"That's enough for today," Garion said. "It's starting to get hot out here."

"I'm still all right," Zakath objected.

"I was thinking about your horse."

"Oh. He is lathered a bit, isn't he?"

"More than just a bit. Besides, I'm starting to get hungry."

The day of the tourney dawned clear and sunny, and throngs of the citizens of Dal Perivor streamed through the streets in bright-colored clothing toward the field where the festivities were to take place. "A thought just occurred to me," Garion said to Zakath as they left the palace. * 'You and I aren't really interested Mr who gets proclaimed the winner of the tournament, are we?"

"I don't follow you."

'-• *"We have something much more important to do, and as-anted broken bones would probably hinder us. We make a few ptsses and unhorse a few knights and then allow ourselves to get knocked out of the saddle. We'll have satisfied the requirements of honor without putting ourselves in any serious danger Of injury."

•t "Are you suggesting that we deliberately lose?" Zakath asked Incredulously.

"Approximately, yes." ; "I've never lost a contest of any kind in my whole life."

•"You're starting to sound more and more like Mandorallen ." Garion sighed.

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"Besides," Zakath went on, "I think you're overlooking something. We're supposed to be mighty knights embarked on a noble quest. If we don't try our very best, Naradas will fill the king's ears with all sorts of innuendo and suspicion. If we win, on the other hand, we pull his teeth."

"Win?" Garion snorted. "You've learned very quickly in the past week or so, but the knights we'll be facing have been practicing all their lives. I don't think we're in any real danger of winning."

"A compromise then?" Zakath asked slyly.

"What have you got in mind?"

"If we win the tournament, there's almost nothing the king won't grant us, right?"

"That's usually the way it works."

"Wouldn't he be more than happy to let Belgarath have a look at that chart? I'm sure he knows where it is—or he can compel Naradas to produce it."

"You've got a point there, I suppose."

"You're a sorcerer. You can fix it so that we win, can't you?"

' 'Wouldn't that be cheating?''

"You're very inconsistent, Garion. First you suggest that we deliberately fall off our horses, and that's cheating, too, isn't it? I'll tell you what, my friend. I'm the Emperor of Mallorean. You have my imperial permission to cheat. Now, is there a way you can do it?"

Garion thought about it and then remembered something. "Do you remember the time I told you that I had to stop a war in order to get Mandorallen and Nerina safely married?"

"Yes?"

"This is how I did it. Most lances break sooner or later. By the time this tournament is over, the lists will be ankle-deep in splinters. On the day I stopped that war, though, my lance would not break, and I sort of surrounded it with pure force. It was very effective."

Nobody, not even the best knights in all of Mimbren, stayed on his horse that day.'

"I thought you said you conjured up a thunderstorm."

"That was a little later. The two armies were facing each other across an open field. Not even Mimbrenates would charge across a field where lightning was blowing big holes in the turf. They're not that stupid."

"You've had a remarkable career, my young friend." Zakath laughed.

"I had a bit of fun that day," Garion admitted. "It's not too

often that one man gets to bully two complete armies. I got into a great deal of trouble about it later, though. When you tamper with the weather, you can't be sure just what the consequences are going to be. Belgarath and Beldin spent the next six months running around the world quieting things down. Grandfather was very cross when he got back. He called me all sorts of names, and 'blockhead' was about the mildest."

"You mentioned something called 'lists.' What are they?"

"They sink posts into the ground and fasten a long, heavy pole to the tops of them. The pole is about shoulder high on a horse. The knights who are jousting ride toward each other on opposite sides of the pole. I think the idea is to keep the horses from running into each other. Good horses are expensive. Oh, that reminds me of something else. We're going to have a certain advantage in this anyway. Our horses are quite a bit bigger and stronger than the local ones.'

"That's true, isn't it? I'll still feel more comfortable if you cheat, though."

"I probably will, too. If we were to do it legitimately, we'd still pick up so many bruises that neither one of us would be able to get out of bed for a week, and we've got an appointment—if we can ever find out where it's supposed to take place.'

The tournament field was gaily decorated with bright-colored bunting and flapping pennons. A stand had been erected for the king, the ladies of the court, and members of the gentry too old to participate on the field. The commoners stood on the far side of the lists, watching avidly. A pair of gaily dressed jugglers was entertaining the crowd while the knights made their preparations. Brightly striped pavilions stood at either end of the lists—places for knights to have their armor repaired and places where the injured could suffer out of sight, since watching people groaning and writhing tends to dampen an otherwise enjoyable afternoon.

"I'll be right back," Garion told his friend. "I want to talk with Grandfather for a moment." He dismounted and crossed the bright-green turf to the end of the stand where Belgarath sat. The old man was wearing a snowy white robe and a disgruntled expression.

"Elegant," Garion said.

"It's somebody's idea of a joke," Belgarath said.

"Your obvious antiquity shines in your face, old friend," Silk said impudently from just behind him. "People instinctively want to make you as dignified-looking as possible."

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"Do you mind? What is it, Garion?"

"Zakath and I are going to cheat a little. If we win, the king will grant us a boon—like letting you look at that chart."

"That might actually work, you know."

"How do you cheat in a tournament?" Silk asked.

"There are ways."

"Are you sure you'll win?"

"I can almost guarantee it."

Silk jumped to his feet.

"Where are you going?" Belgarath demanded.

"I want to lay a few wagers." And the little man scurried off.

"He never changes," Belgarath observed.

"One thing, though. Naradas is here. He's a Grolim, so he'll know what we're doing. Please, Grandfather, keep him off my neck. I don't want him tampering with what I'm doing at some crucial moment.'"

"I'll handle him," Belgarath said bleakly. "Go out there and do your best, but be careful.'"

"Yes, Grandfather." Garion turned and went back to where Zakath waited with their horses.

"We'll stand in the second or third rank," Garion said. "It's customary to let the winners of previous tournaments joust first. It makes us look properly modest, and it'll give you a chance to see how to approach the lists." He looked around. "We'll have to surrender our lances before we joust; and they'll give us each one of those blunted ones from that rack over there. I'll take care of them as soon as we get our hands on them."

"You're a devious young man, Garion. What's Kheldar doing? He's running through those stands like a pickpocket hard at work."

"As soon as he heard what we're planning, he went out to place a few wagers."

Zakath suddenly burst out laughing. "I wish I'd known. I'd have given him some money to wager for me, as well."

"Getting it back from him might have been a little difficult, though."

Their friend, Baron Astellig, was unhorsed on the second pass. "Is he all right?" Zakath asked with concern.

"He's still moving," Garion said. "He probably just broke one of his legs."

"At least we won't have to fight him. I hate hurting friends. Of course, I don't have all that many friends."

"You probably have more than you realize."

After the third pass of the front rank, Zakath said, "Garion, have you ever studied fencing?"

"Alorns don't use light swords, Zakath. Except for the Al-gars."

"I know, but the theory is similar. If you twist your wrist or elbow at the last instant, you could knock your opponent's lance aside. Then you could correct your aim and smash into the center of his shield when his lance is completely out of position. He wouldn't have a chance at that point, would he?"

Garion considered it. "It's highly unorthodox," he said dubiously.

"So's using sorcery, isn't it? Would it work?"

"Zakath, you're using a fifteen-foot lance, and it weighs about two pounds a foot. You'd need arms like a gorilla to move it around that fast."

"Not really. You don't really have to move it that far back and forth. Just a tap would do. Can I try it?"

"It's your idea. I'll be here to pick you up if it doesn't work."

"I knew I could count on you." Zakath's voice sounded excited—even boyish.

"Oh, Gods," Garion murmured almost in despair.

"Anything wrong?" Zakath asked.

"No, I guess not. Go ahead and try it, if you feel that you have to."

"What difference does it make? I can't get hurt, can I?"

"I wouldn't go entirely that far. Do you see that?" Garion pointed at a knight who had just been unhorsed and had come down on his back across the center pole of the lists, scattering bits and pieces of

his armor in all directions.

"He's not really hurt, is he?"

','. "He's still moving—a little bit—but they'll need a blacksmith to get him out of his armor before the physicians can go to work on him." ... "I still think it might work," Zakath said stubbornly.

"We'll give you a splendid funeral if it doesn't. All right. It's our turn. Let's go get our lances."

The blunted lances were padded at the tip with layer upon layer of woolly sheepskin tightly wrapped in canvas. The result was a round padded ball that looked totally humane, but which Garion knew would hurl a man from his saddle with terrific force, and it was not the impact of the lance that broke bones, other than it was the violent contact with the ground. He was a bit

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distracted at the point when he began to focus his will, and so the best word he could come up with as a release for that will was "Make it that way." He was not entirely positive that it worked exactly as he had planned. His first opponent was hurled from his saddle at a point some five feet before Garion's lance touched his shield. Garion adjusted the aura of force around their lances. Zakath's technique, Garion saw with some surprise, worked flawlessly. A single, almost unnoticeable, twist of his forearm deflected his opponent's lance, and then his own blunted lance smashed directly into the center of the knight's shield. A man hurled forcefully from the back of a charging horse flies through the air for quite some distance, Garion noticed, and the crash when he hits the ground sounds much like that which might come from a collapsing smithy. Both their opponents were carried senseless from the field.

It was a bad day for the pride of Perivor. As their experience with their enhanced weapons increased, the Rivan King and the Emperor of Mallorean quite literally romped through the ranks of the steel-clad knights of Perivor, filling the dispensaries with row upon row of groaning injured. It was more than a rout. It soon reached disastrous proportions. At last, with even their unthinking Mimbrate heritage sobered by the realization that they were facing an invincible pair, the knights of Perivor gathered and took counsel with each other. And then, en masse, they yielded.

"What a shame," Zakath said regretfully. "I was starting to enjoy this."

Garion decided to ignore that.

As the two started back toward the stands to make the customary salute to the king, white-eyed Naradas came forward with an oily smile. "Congratulations, Sir Knights," he said. "Ye are men of great prowess and extraordinary skill. Ye have won the field and the laurels of the day. Mayhap ye have heard of the great prize of honor and glory that is to be bestowed upon the champions of this field?"

"No," Garion said flatly. "I can't say that we have."

' 'Ye have contested this day for the honor of subduing a troublesome beast that betimes hath disturbed the peace of our fair kingdom."

"What kind of beast?" Garion asked suspiciously.

"Why, a dragon, of course, Sir Knight."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"He's tricked us again, hasn't he?" Beldin growled when they had returned to their quarters following the tourney. "White-eyes is beginning to irritate me just a bit. I think I'll take some steps."

"Too noisy," Belgarath told him, "The people here are not entirely Mimbrate." He turned to Cyradis. "There's a certain sound sorcery makes," he said.

"Yes," she replied. "I know."

"Can you hear it?"

She nodded.

"Are there other Dais here on the island who can hear it, as well?" .
"Yes, Ancient Belgarath."

"How about these counterfeit Mimbrates? They're at least half Dal. Is it possible that some of them might be able to hear it, too?"

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"Entirely so."

"Grandfather," Garion said in a worried tone, "that means that half the people in Dal Perivor heard what I did to the lances."

"Not over the noise of the crowd, they didn't."

"I didn't know that would make a difference."

"Of course it does."

"Well," Silk said grimly, "I won't use sorcery, and I can guarantee that there won't be any noise."

"But there will be a certain amount of evidence, Kheldar," Sadi pointed out, "and since we're the only strangers in the palace, there

might be some embarrassing questions if they find Naradas with one of your daggers sticking out of his back. Why don't you let me handle it? I can make things look much more natural."

"You're talking about cold-blooded murder, Sadi," Durnik accused.

"I appreciate your sensibilities, Goodman Durnik," the eunuch replied, "but Naradas has already tricked us twice and, each time he does, he delays us that much more. We have to get him out of the way.'"

"He's right, Durnik," Belgarath said.

"Zith?" Velvet suggested to Sadi.

He shook his head. "She won't leave her babies—not even for the pleasure of biting someone. I have a few other things that are just as effective. They're not quite as fast perhaps, but they get the job done."

"Zakath and I still have to come up against Zandramas," Garion said glumly, "and this time we'll have to do it alone—because of that stupid tournament."

"It won't be Zandramas," Velvet told him. "Ce'Nedra and I spoke with some of the young ladies here at court while you two were out there being magnificent. They told us that this 'fearsome beast' has been showing up from time to time for centuries now, and Zandramas has only been active for a dozen years, hasn't she? I really think the dragon you'll be fighting will be the real one."

"I'm not so sure, Liselle," Polgara disagreed. "Zandramas can take the form of that dragon at any time. If the real one is asleep in her lair, it could very well be Zandramas who's been out there terrorizing the countryside this time—all as a part of the scheme to force a confrontation before we get to the place of the meeting."

"I'll know which it is as soon as I get a look at it," Garion said.

"How?" Zakath asked him.

"The first time we met, I cut off about four feet of her tail. If the one we run into out there has a stub tail, we'll know it's Zandramas."

' 'Do we really have to go to this celebration tonight? *' Beldin asked.

"It's expected, uncle," Aunt Pol told him.

"But I haven't got a single solitary thing to wear, don't y' know," he said roguishly, lapsing back into Feldegast's brogue.

"We'll take care of you, uncle," she said ominously.

The affair that evening had been weeks in the planning. It was the grand finale of the tournament, and it involved dancing—in which Garion and Zakath, still in armor, could not participate. It involved

a banquet—which, visored, they could not eat. And it involved a great many flowery toasts to 'these mighty champions, who have lent luster to our remote isle by their presence here," as the nobles in the court of King Oldorin vied with one another to heap extravagant praise on Garion and Zakath.

"How long is this likely to go on?" Zakath muttered to Gar-ion.

"Hours."

"I was afraid you might say that. Here come the ladies."

Polgara, flanked by Ce'Nedra and Velvet, entered the throne room almost as if she owned it. Cyradis, strangely—or perhaps not—was not with them. Polgara, as usual, was gowned in royal-blue velvet trimmed with silver. She looked magnificent. Ce'Nedra wore a cream-colored gown much like her wedding dress, although the seed pearls that had adorned her nuptial gown were missing. Her wealth of copper-colored hair spilled down in curls over one shoulder. Velvet was gowned in lavender satin. Any number of the young knights of Perivor—those who could still walk after the day's entertainment—were hopelessly smitten by the sight of her.

"Time fbrsome obscure introductions, Ithink," Garion muttered to Zakath. Pleading the necessity for anonymity, the ladies had remained in their quarters since their arrival. Garion stepped forward and escorted them to the throne. "Your Majesty," he); said to King Oldorin, bowing slightly, ' 'though I may not, by , • reason or our need for concealment, tell thee in fulsome detail : of their lands of origin, it would be discourteous of me—to both ; thee and to the ladies themselves—not to present them. I have

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the honor to present her Grace, the Duchess of Erat.'' That was safe. Nobody on this side of the world would have the faintest idea where Erat was.

Polgara curtsied with exquisite grace. "Your Majesty," she greeted the king in her rich voice.

He rose to his feet with alacrity. "Your Grace," he replied with a deep bow. "Thy presence here illuminates our poor palace."

"And, your Majesty," Garion went on, "her Highness, Princess Xera." Ce'Nedra stared at him. "Your real name might be too well known," he whispered to her.

Ce'Nedra recovered instantly. "Your Majesty," she said with a curtsy every bit as graceful as Polgara's. After all, a girl can't grow up in an imperial court without learning a few things.

"YourHighness," the king responded. "Thy beauty doth rob my poor tongue of speech."

"Isn't he nice?" Ce'Nedra murmured.

"And lastly, your Majesty," Garion concluded, "but certainly not the least, the Margravine of Tuna," he introduced Velvet, making the name up on the spur of the moment.

Velvet curtsied. "Your Majesty," she said. When she straightened, she was smiling, leveling the full impact of her dimples upon him.

"My Lady—" The king faltered, bowing once again "—thy smile doth stop my heart." He looked around, a bit puzzled. "Methinks I do remember another lady among thy companions, Sir Knight," he said to Garion.

"A poor blind girl, your Majesty," Polgara interceded, "who hath but recently joined us. Courtly entertainments, I fear, would be lost on one who lives in darkness perpetual. She is in the care of the enormous man in our company, one of her family *s faithful retainers, who hath guided and protected her since the melancholy occasion when the light of day forever vanished from her eyes."

Two great tears of sympathy trickled down the king's cheeks. Arends, even transplanted ones, were, after all, an emotional people.

Then Garion's other companions entered, and Garion was glad that his visor hid his grin. Beldin's face was like a thundercloud. His hair and beard had been washed and combed, and he wore a blue robe not unlike Belgarath's white one. Garion proceeded with a group of introductions as fraudulent as the previous ones, concluding with, "And this, your Majesty, is

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Master Feldegast, a supremely talented jester, whose rare japes do lighten the weary miles for us all."

Beldin scowled at him and then made a cursory bow. "Ah, yer Majesty, 'tis overwhelmed I am by the splendor of yer city an' yer magnificent palace here. 'Tis a match fer Tol Honeth, Mal Zeth, an' Melcene—all of which places I have seen in th' plyin' of me trade an' demonstratin' me unspeakable talents, don't y' know."

The king was grinning broadly. "Master Feldegast," he said, inclining his head. "In a world full of sorrow, such men as thou art rare and precious."

"Ah, isn't it grand of y't* say it, yer Majesty?"

Then, with the formalities over, Garion and the others drifted away to mingle. A determined-looking young lady advanced on .Garion and Zakath. "You are the greatest knights on life, my Lords," she greeted them with a curtsy, "and the exalted stations of your companions do proclaim louder than words that ye are both men of high, mayhap even royal, rank." She gave Garion a smoldering look. "Art thou perchance betrothed, Sir Knight?" she asked.

Another one of those repetitions, Garion groaned inwardly. "Married, my Lady," he replied. This time he knew how to deal with the

situation.

"Ah," she said, her eyes clearly disappointed. Then she filmed to Zakath. "And thou, my Lord?" she asked. "Art thou espoused, as well—or betrothed, perchance?"

"Nay, my Lady," Zakath answered, sounding puzzled.

Her eyes brightened.

Garion stepped in at that point. "It is time, my friend, for thee to consume yet another draft of that admittedly foul-tasting potion."

"Potion?" Zakath asked in a baffled voice.

Garion sighed. "Thy malady worsens, I perceive," he said, feigning a sorrowful voice. "This forgetfulness of thine is, I fear me, a precursor of the more violent symptoms that will inevitably ensue. Pray to all seven Gods that we may conclude our quest ere the hereditary madness, the curse of thy family, o'erwhelms thee quite."

The determined-looking young lady backed away, her eyes wide with fright.

"What ore you talking about, Garion?" Zakath muttered.

"I've been through this before. The girl was looking for a husband."

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"That's absurd."

"Not to her, it wasn't."

And then the dancing started. Garion and Zakath drew off to one side to watch. "It's a silly pastime, isn't it?" Zakath observed. "I've never known why any sane man would choose to waste tune on it."

"Because the ladies love to dance," Garion told him. "I've never met one who didn't. It's in their blood, I think." He looked toward the throne and saw that King Oldorin was unoccupied at the moment. He sat smiling and tapping his foot in time to the music. "Let's find Belgarath and go talk with the king. This might be a good time to ask about that chart."

Belgarath was leaning against one of the buttresses, watching the dancers with a slightly bored look on his face. "Grandfather," Garion said to him, "nobody's talking to the king right now. Why don't we go ask him about that map?"

"Good idea. This party's likely to last well into the night, so there won't be much chance for a private audience.'"

They approached the throne and bowed. "Might we have a word with thee, your Majesty?" Garion asked.

"Of course, Sir Knight. Thou and thy companion are my champions, and it would be churlish of me indeed not to lend an ear to thee. What is this matter that concerns thee?"

"It is but a small thing, your Majesty. Master Garath here—" Garion had dropped the "Bel" in making the introduction "—as I told thee earlier, is mine eldest advisor and he hath guided my steps since earliest childhood. In addition, he is a scholar of some note and hath recently turned his attention to the study of geography. There hath been a long-standing dispute among geographers concerning the configuration of the world of antiquity. By purest chance, Master Garath happened to hear of an ancient chart that, his informant assured him, is kept here in the palace in Dal Perivor. Beset by raging curiosity, Master Garath hath implored me to inquire of thee if thou knowest if such a chart doth indeed exist, and if perchance thou dost, if thou wilt give him permission to peruse it."

"Indeed, Master Garath," the king said, "I do assure thee that thine informant was not in error. The chart thou seekest is one of our most prized relics, for it is the selfsame chart that guided our ancestors to the shores of this isle eons ago. As soon as we have leisure, I will be most happy to provide thee access to it in furtherance of thy studies."

Then Naradas stepped from behind the purple drape at the

back of the throne. "There will be, I fear me, scant time for Studies for some while, your Majesty," he said, sounding just a bit smug. ' 'Forgive me, my King, but I chanced to overhear thy last remark as I was hurrying to bring thee perhaps distressing news. A messenger hath arrived from the east advising that the foul dragon doth even now ravage the village of Dal Esta not three leagues from here. The beast is unpredictable in its depredations and may lurk in the forest for days ere it emerge again. It well may be that this tragic occurrence is to our advantage. Now is the time to strike. What better opportunity than this for our two brave champions to sally forth and rid us of this nuisance? And I do perceive that these powerful knights do rely heavily upon the advice of this ancient man, and it is fitting therefore that he should accompany them to guide their strategy."

"Well spoken, Erezel," the silly king agreed enthusiastically. "I had feared me that flushing the beast from hiding might have consumed weeks. Now it is accomplished in the space of a single night. Venture forth then, my champions and Master Garath. Rid my kingdom of this dragon, and no boon ye ask shall be denied thee."

"Thy happy discovery was timely, Master Erezel," Belgarath said. The words were bland, but Garion knew his grandfather well enough to recognize their implication. "As his Majesty hath said, thou hast saved us much time this night. As soon as I have leisure, I will think of some way to thank thee properly."

Naradas shrank back slightly, his face apprehensive. "No thanks are

necessary, Master Garath," he said. "I did no more than my duty to my king and his realm."

"Ah, yes," Belgarath said, "duty. We all have many duties, don't we? Commend me to the Child of Dark when next thou prayest to her. Advise her that, as is foreordained, we shall meet anon."

Then he turned and, with Garion and Zakath close behind him, he strode out among the dancers and left the throne room. So long as he had been in the presence of strangers, the old man's expression had been neutral. Once they reached the deserted corridor, however, he began to swear savagely. "I was right on the verge of getting my hands on that chart," he fumed. "Naradas has done it to me again."

"Should I go back and get the others?" Garion asked.

"No. They'd all want to go along, and that'd only start an argument. We'll leave a note."

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"Again?"

"These repetitions are cropping up more and more regularly, aren't they?"

"Let's hope Aunt Pol doesn't react the same way this time."

"What are you two talking about?" Zakath asked.

"Silk, Grandfather, and I slipped out of Riva when we went to meet Torak," GaVion explained. "We left a note, but Aunt Pol didn't take it too well. As I understand it, there was a lot of swearing and a number of explosions."

"Lady Polgara? She's the very soul of gentility."

"Don't be deceived, Zakath," Belgarath told him. "Pol's got a vile temper when things don't go the way she wants them to go."

"It must be a family trait," Zakath said blandly. "'Are you trying to be funny? You two go down to the stables. Tell the grooms to saddle, our horses and find out where this village is. I want to talk with Cyradis a moment b'efore we leave. I'm going to get some straight answers out of that girl. I'll join you in the courtyard in

a few minutes."

It was perhaps ten minutes later when they mounted. Garion and Zakath took their lances from the rack at the stable wall, and then the three of them rode out of the palace compound. "Any luck with Cyradis?" Garion asked Belgarath.

' 'Some. She told me that the dragon out there is not Zandra-mas."

"It's the real one then?"

"Probably. She got cryptic on me then, though. She said that there's some other spirit influencing the dragon. That means you'll both have to be very careful. The dragon's very stupid normally, but if some spirit's guiding her, she might be a bit more perceptive."

A shadow slunk from a dark side street. It was the she-wolf. "How is it with you, little sister?" Garion greeted her formally. At the last instant, he avoided calling her "Grandmother. ' "

"One is content," she replied. "You go to hunt. One will accompany you."

"One must advise you that the creature we seek is not fit for eating."

"One does not hunt only to eat." "We will be glad of your company then." "What did she say?" Zakath asked. ' 'She wants to go along.' "

"Did you warn her that it's going to be dangerous?"

"I think she already knows."

"It's up to her." Belgarath shrugged. "Trying to tell a wolf what to do is an exercise in futility."

They passed out through the city gate and took the road to which one of the grooms had directed Garion. "He said it's about eight miles," Garion said.

Belgarath squinted up at the night sky. "Good," he said, "there's a full moon. Let's try a gallop until we get to about a mile from that village."

"How will we know when we're that close?" Zakath asked.

"We'll know," Belgarath replied bleakly. "There'll be all kinds of fire.' "

"They don't really breathe fire, do they?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, they do. You're both wearing armor, so that makes it a little safer. Her sides and belly are a bit softer than her back. Try to get your lances into her, then finish her off with your swords. Let's not drag this out. I want to get back to the palace and get my hands on that map. Let's ride."

It was about an hour later when they saw the red glow of fire just ahead. Belgarath reined in. "Let's go carefully," he said. "We'll want to pinpoint her location before we go charging in there."

"One will! go look," the she-wolf said, and loped off into the darkness.

"I'm glad she came along," Belgarath said. "For some reason it's comforting to have her around."

Garion's visor concealed his smile.

The village of Dal Esta was perched on a hilltop, and they could see the sooty red flames shooting up out of burning bams and houses. They rode up the hill a ways and found the wolf waiting for them. "One has seen the creature we seek," she advised. "It is feeding just now on the other side of that hill where the dens of the man-things are."

"What's it feeding on?" Garion asked apprehensively. • "A beast such as the one upon which you sit."

"Well?" Zakath asked.

"The dragon's on the other side of the village," Belgarath told him. "She's eating a horse just now."

"A horse*! Belgarath, this isn't a good time for surprises. Just how big is that thing?'"

*' About the size of a house—that's not counting the wings, of course."

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Zakath swallowed hard. "Could we perhaps reconsider this? I haven't taken much joy in my life until recently. I 'd sort of like to savor it a little longer."

"I'm afraid we're committed now," Garion told him. "She doesn't fly very fast, and it takes her quite a while to get off the ground. If we can surprise her while she's eating, we might be able to kill her before she attacks."

They rode carefully around the hill, noting the trampled crops and the carcasses of half-eaten cows. There were a few other dead things, as well—things at which Garion carefully avoided

looking.

And then they saw it. "Torak's teeth!" Zakath swore. "It's

bigger than an elephant!''

The dragon was holding down the carcass of a horse with its front claws, and she was not so much feeding as she was ravening.

"Give it a try," Belgarath said. "She's usually a bit unwary when she's eating. Be careful, though. Get clear of her as soon as you sink your lances into her. And don't let your horses go down. She'll kill them if they do, and a man on foot is at a serious disadvantage when he's fighting a dragon. Our little sister and I will slip around to the rear and attack her tail. She's sensitive there, and a few bites might distract her." He dismounted, walked some distance away from the horses, and blurred into the shape of the great silver wolf. "That still unnerves me," Zakath admitted. Garion had been looking carefully at the feedilig dragon. "Notice that she has her wings raised," he said quietly. "With her head down like that, they block her vision toward the rear. You go around to that side, and I'll go to this one. When we both get into position, I'll whistle. That's when we'll charge. Go in as fast as you can and try to stay behind that upraised wing. Sink your lance as deep into her as you can and leave it stuck in. A couple of lances hanging out of her should impede her movements a bit. Once you get the lance in, wheel and get out of there."

"You're awfully cold-blooded about this, Garion."

"In this kind of situation you almost have to be. If you stop to think about it, you'll never do it. This isn't the most rational thing weVe ever done, you know. Good luck."

"You, too."

They separated and moved out slowly at some distance from the feeding dragon until they had flanked her on either side.

Zakath dipped his lance twice to indicate that he was in position. Garion drew in a deep breath. He noticed that his hands were shaking slightly. He shook off all thought and concentrated on a spot just behind the dragon's front shoulder. Then he whistled shrilly.

They charged.

As far as it went, Canon's strategy worked quite well. The dragon's scaly hide, however, was much tougher than he had expected, and their lances did not penetrate as deeply as he might have wished. He wheeled Chretienne and rode away at a dead run.

The dragon shrieked, belching fire, and she tried to turn toward Garion. As he had hoped, the lances protruding from her sides impeded her movements. Then Belgarath and the she-wolf darted in, savagely biting and tearing at the scaly tail. Desperately the dragon began to flap her saillike wings. She rose ponderously into the air, screeching and belching out fire.

"She's getting away!" Garion threw the thought at his grandfather.

' 'She 'II be back. She's a very vindictive beast.''

Garion rode past the dead horse and rejoined Zakath.

"The wounds we inflicted are probably mortal, aren't they?" the Mallorean said hopefully.

"I wouldn't count on it," Garion replied. "We didn't get the lances in deep enough, I'm afraid. We should have backed off another hundred yards to pick up more momentum. Grandfather says that we can expect her back."

"Garion," Belgarath's voice sounded in his mind, "I'm going to do something. Tell Zakath not to panic."

"Zakath," Garion said, "Grandfather's going to use sorcery of some kind. Don't get excited."

"What's he going to do?"

"I don't know. He didn't tell me." Then Garion felt the familiar surge and rush of sound. The air around them turned a pale azure.

"Colorful," Zakath said. "What's it supposed to do?" His voice sounded nervous.

.Belgarath came padding out of the darkness.' 'Good enough," - he said in the language of wolves.

"What is it?" Garion asked.

"It's a kind of a shield. It'll protect you from the fire—at least partially. The armor should take care of the rest. You might get

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singed a bit, but the fire won't really hurt you. Don't get too brave, though. She still has claws and fangs."

"It's a shield of sorts," Garion told Zakath. "It should help to protect us from the flame."

Then from off to the east there was a scream and a sooty belch of fire up in the sky. "Get ready!" Garion said sharply. "She's coming back!" Cautioning the Orb to behave itself, he drew Iron-grip's sword. Zakath also pulled his broadsword from its sheath with a steely hiss. "Spread out," Garion said. "Get far enough away so that she can attack only one of us at a time. If she comes at you, I'll attack her from behind. If she comes at me, you do the same. If you can manage it, try for her tail. She goes all to pieces when somebody attacks that. She'll try to turn around to protect it. Then whichever one of us is in front of her might be able to get a clear swing at her neck."

"Right," Zakath said.

They fanned out again, tensely awaiting the dragon's attack.

Their lances, Garion saw, had been bitten off, leaving only short stumps protruding from the dragon's sides. It was upon Zakath that she fell, and the force of her strike knocked him out of his saddle. He floundered, trying to get to his feet as the dragon bathed him in flames.

Again and again he struggled, trying to get up, but he instinctively flinched back from each billow of flame, and the dragon's raking talons dug at him, making it impossible for him to regain his feet. Snakelike, the dragon's head darted forward, her cruel fangs screeching across his armor.

Garion discarded his strategy at that point. His friend needed immediate protection. He leaped from his saddle to run to Zakath's aid. "I need some fire!" he barked at the Orb, and his sword immediately burst into bright-blue flame. He knew that Torak had made the dragon invincible to common sorcery on the day he had created her, but he hoped that she might not be immune to the power of the Orb. He stepped in front of Zakath's struggling body and drove the dragon back with great, two-handed strokes. Iron-grip's sword sizzled each time it bit into her face, and she shrieked in pain with every stroke. She did not, however, flee.

"Get up!" Garion shouted to Zakath. "Get on your feet!" Behind him he could hear the rattling of Zakath's armor as the Malloorean struggled to rise. Suddenly ignoring the pain Garion's blows were causing her, the dragon clawed at him with her talons, knocking him off balance. He stumbled backward and

fell on top of Zakath. The dragon shrieked in triumph and lunged in. Desperately Garion stabbed with his sword, and with a great, sizzling hiss, her bulging left eyeball collapsed. Even as he struggled to get back up again, a strange notion came to Garion. It was the same eye. Torak's left eye had been destroyed by the power of the Orb, and now the same thing had happened to the dragon. Despite the dreadful danger they were in, Garion was suddenly certain that they would win.

The dragon had fallen back, bellowing in pain and rage. Garion took advantage of that. He scrambled to his feet and yanked Zakath up. "Get around to her left side!" he barked. "She's blind on that side now! I 'll keep her attention! You swing at her neck!"

They separated, moving fast to get into position before the dragon could recover. Garion swung his great, blazing sword as hard as he could and opened a huge wound across the dragon's snout. The blood spurted out, drenching his armor, and the dragon answered his blow with a billow of flame that engulfed him. He ignored the fire and drove in, swinging stroke after stroke at her face. He could see Zakath directing two-handed blows at the snakelike neck, but the heavy, overlapping scales defeated his best efforts. Garion continued his attack with the burning sword. The half-blinded dragon clawed at him, and he struck at the scaly forepaw, half severing it. Injured now almost beyond endurance, the dragon began a grudging, step-by-

step retreat.

"Keep on her!" Garion shouted to Zakath. "Don't give her time to set herself again!"

Grimly the pair drove the hideous beast back and back, alternating their blows. When Garion struck, the dragon turned her head to bathe him in fire. Then Zakath would swing at the unprotected back of her head. She would swivel her head to meet his attack, and then Garion would strike at her. Confused and frustrated by this deadly tactic, the dragon helplessly swung her head back and forth, her fumacelike breath singeing bushes and turf more often than it did her attackers. Finally, driven beyond her ability to bear the pain, she began to desperately flap her saillike wings, clumsily attempting to rise from the earth.

"Don't let up!" Garion called. "Keep pushing her!" They continued their savage attack. "Try to get her wings!" Garion yelled. "Don't let her get away!"

They switched their attack to the batlike wings, desperately striving to cripple the dragon's final option, but her armored

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skin defeated their purpose. Ponderously she rose into the air, and still shrieking, belching flame, and streaming blood from her many wounds, she flew off toward the east.

Belgarath had resumed his own form and he strode up to them, his face livid with rage. "Are you two insane?" he almost screamed at them. "I told you to be careful!"

"Things got a little out of hand there, Belgarath," Zakath panted. * 'We didn't have much choice in the matter. *' He looked at the Rivan King. "You saved my life again, Garion," he said. "You're starting to make a habit of that."

"It sort of seemed like the thing to do," Garion replied, sinking exhausted to the ground. "We're still going to have to chase her down, though. If we don't, she'll only come back."

"One does not think so," the she-wolf said. "One has had much experience with wounded beasts. You poked sticks into her, put out her eye, and cut her face and forepaw with fire. She will return to her den and remain there until she heals—or dies."

Garion quickly translated for Zakath.

"It presents a problem, though," the emperor of Malloreia said dubiously. "How are we going to persuade the king that we've driven her off for good? If we'd have killed her, we'd have no further obligation, but the king—with Naradas prompting him—might very well insist that we stay here until he's sure she's not coming back."

Belgarath was frowning. "I think Cyradis was right," he said. "The

dragon wasn't behaving exactly right. Each time Garion hit her with that burning sword, she flinched momentarily."

"Wouldn't you have?" Zakath asked him.

"This is a little different. The dragon herself wouldn't even feel fire. She was being directed by something--something that the Orb can injure. I'll talk it over with Beldin when we get back. As soon as you two get your breath, we'll round up the horses. I want to get back to Dal Perivor and have a look at that map."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

It was nearly dawn by the time they returned to the palace, and to their surprise, they found nearly everyone awake. A ripple of gasps ran through the throne room as Garion and Zak-ath entered. Garion's armor was scorched and red with the dragon's blood; Zakath's surcoat was charred, and great fang marks scarred one side of his breastplate. The condition of their armor gave mute testimony to the seriousness of the encounter.

"My glorious champions!" the king exulted as they entered the throne room. It appeared to Garion at first that the king was leaping to a conclusion--that because they had returned alive, they had succeeded in killing the dragon. . "In all the years that this foul beast hath been ravaging this realm," the king said, however, "this is the first time anyone hath forced it to flee." Then, noting Belgarath's puzzled look, he elaborated. "Not two hours ago, we observed the dragon flying over the city, shrieking in pain and fright."

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"Which way did it go, your Majesty?" Garion asked. "It was last seen flying out to sea, Sir Knight, and, as all men know, its lair lies somewhere to the west. The chastisement thou and thy valiant companion administered hath driven it from the realm. Doubtless it will seek shelter in its lair and lick its wounds there. Now, an it please ye, our ears hunger for an account of what transpired."

"Let me," Belgarath muttered. He stepped forward. "Thy two champions, your Majesty, are modest men, as befits their nobility. They would, I do fear me, be reticent in their description of their exploit out of a desire not to appear boastful. Better, perhaps, that I describe the encounter for them so that your Majesty and the members of thy court receive a truer version of what actually occurred."

"Well said, Master Garath," the king replied. "True humility is the crown of any man of noble birth, but it doth, as thou sayest, oftentimes obscure the truth of an encounter such as this knight hath witnessed. Say on, I pray thee."

"Where to begin?" Belgarath mused. "Ah, well. As your Majesty knoweth, Master Erezel's timely warning that the dragon was ravaging the village of Dal Esta came not a moment too soon. Directly upon our

departure from this very hall, we took to horse and rode posthaste to the aforementioned village. Great fires burned there, graphic evidence of the dragon's fiery breath, and cattle and many of the inhabitants had already been slain and partially consumed by the beast—for whom all flesh is food."

"Piteous." The king sighed.

"His commiseration is all very pretty," Zakath murmured to Garion, "but I wonder if he'll be willing to dip into his treasury to aid the villagers in the reconstruction of their homes."

' 'You mean actually to give back some of the taxes after he's gone to all the trouble of extorting them from his people?" Garion asked in mock surprise. "What a shocking thing to suggest."

"Carefully thy champions reconnoitered the area around the village," Belgarath was saying, "and they soon located the dragon, which was at that very moment feeding on the bodies of a herd of horses."

"I only saw one," Zakath whispered. "Sometimes he embellishes things to make his stories more exciting," Garion whispered back.

Belgarath was warming to his subject now. "Advised by me,"

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he said modestly, "thy champions paused to take stock of the situation. At once we all perceived that the dragon's attention was wholly riveted upon its grisly feast, and of a certainty, because of its size and savagery, it had never been given reason to be wary. The champions separated and circled around the feeding dragon that they might attack one from either side, hoping thereby to drive their lances into its vitals. Cautiously, step by step, they moved, for though they are the bravest men on liie, they are not foolhardy."

There was absolute silence in the throne room as the king's court listened to the old man with that same breathless fascination Garion had seen before in the dining hall at Faldor's farm.

"Isn't he laying it on a bit thick?" Zakath whispered.

"It's a compulsion, I think," Garion whispered back. "Grandfather's never been able to let a good story rest on its own merits. He always feels the need for artistic enhancement."

Certain now that he had his audience's full attention, Belgarath began to utilize all those subtle tricks of the storyteller's art. He altered pitch and volume. He changed cadences. Sometimes his voice dropped to a whisper. He was obviously enjoying himself enormously. He described the simultaneous charge on the dragon in glowing detail. He told of the dragon's initial retreat, adding gratuitously a wholly fictional feeling of triumph in the hearts of the two knights and their belief that they had struck mortal blows with their lances. Though this last was not entirely true, it helped to heighten the suspense.

"I wish I'd seen that fight," Zakath murmured. "Ours was a lot more prosaic."

The old man then went on to describe the dragon's vengeful return, and, just to make things interesting, he expanded hugely on Zakath's mortal peril. "And then," he went on, "heedless of his own life, his stalwart companion leaped into the fray. Sick with the fear that his friend might already have received fatal injury and filled with righteous rage, he hurled himself into the very teeth of the beast with great two-handed strokes of his mighty blade."

"Were you really thinking those things?" Zakath asked Gar-ion. •
"Approximately."

"And then," Belgarath said, "though it may have been some trick of the flickering light coming from the burning village, methought I saw the hero's blade come all aflame. Again and again he struck, and each stroke was rewarded with rivers of

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bright blood and with shrieks of agony. And then, horror of horrors, a chance blow from the dragon's mighty talons hurled our champion back, and then he stumbled, and then he fell-full upon the body of his companion, who was still vainly striving to rise."

Groans of despair came from the throng crowding the throne room, even though the presence of the two heroes plainly said that they had survived.

"I admit it freely," Belgarath continued, "that I felt dark despair in my heart. But as the savage dragon sought to slay our champions, the one—I may not say his name—plunged his burning sword into the very eye of the loathsome beast."

There was a great roar of applause.

"Shrieking in pain, the dragon faltered and fell back. Our champions took advantage of this momentary opportunity to regain their feet. And then what a mighty battle ensued." Belgarath proceeded in loving detail to describe at least ten times more sword strokes than Garion and Zakath had actually delivered.

"If I'd swung that sword that many times, my arms would have fallen off," Zakath said.

"Never mind," Garion said. "He's enjoying himself."

"At last," Belgarath concluded, "unable to any longer bear the dreadful punishment, the dragon, which had never known fear before, turned and cravenly fled from the field, to pass, as your Majesty hath said, directly over this fair city toward its hidden lair, where the fear it hath learned this night will, methinks, canker far more than the wounds it received. It will, I believe, never return to thy kingdom, your Majesty, for, stupid though it may be, it will not

willingly return to the place that hath been the site of so much pain. And that, your Majesty, is exactly what happened."

"Masterful!" the king said delightedly. And from the assemblage there in the throne room came thunderous applause. Belgarath turned and bowed, signaling to Garion and Zakath to do likewise, generously permitting them to share in the adulation.

The nobles of the court, some of them with actual tears in their eyes, pressed forward to congratulate the trio, Garion and Zakath for their heroism and Belgarath for his lurid description of it. Naradas, Garion noticed, stood at the king's elbow, his dead white eyes burning with hatred. "Brace yourselves," Garion warned his friends. "Naradas is planning something."

When the hubbub had died down, the white-eyed Grolim

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stepped to the front of the dais. "I, too, join my voice with these others in this hall to heap praise upon these mighty heroes and their brilliant advisor. Never hath this kingdom seen their match. Methinks, however, that caution is indicated here. I do fear me that Master Garath, fresh from the scene of this unutterably magnificent struggle and understandably exhilarated by what he hath witnessed, may have been too sanguine in his assessment of the dragon's present state of mind. Truly, most normal creatures would shun a place that hath been the locale of such desperate agony, but this foul, loathsome brute is no normal creature. Might it not be more probable that, given what we know of it, it will instead be consumed with rage and a hunger and a thirst for revenge? Should these mighty champions depart now, this fair and beloved kingdom would lie defenseless beneath the vengeful depredations of a creature consumed with hatred."

"I knew he was going to do that," Zakath grated.

"I am honor bound, therefore," Naradas added, "to advise his Majesty and the members of his court to consider long and well rather than make hasty decision concerning the disposition of these knights. We have seen that they are perhaps the only two on life who can face this monster with any hope of success. Of what other knights in all this land are there any of whom we can make the same statement with any degree of certainty?"

"What thou sayest may well be true, Master Erezel," the king said with surprising coolness, "but it would be churlish of me to hold them here against their will in view of the sacred nature of the quest in which they are engaged. We have delayed them here too long already. They have rendered us amply sufficient service. To insist on more would be ungrateful of us in the extreme. I thereby decree that tomorrow will be a day of celebration and of gratitude throughout the realm and shall culminate with a royal banquet at which we will honor these mighty champions and bid them a regretful farewell. I do perceive that the sun hath risen, and our champions are doubtless greatly fatigued by the rigors of the tourney of yesterday and by

their encounter last night with the loathsome dragon. This day, therefore, will be a day of preparation, and tomorrow will be a day of joy and thanksgiving. Let us then to our beds for a time to refresh ourselves that we may more assiduously turn to our several tasks."

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"I thought he'd never get around to that," Zakath said as the three of them moved through the packed throne room. "Right now I could sleep standing up."

"Please don't," Garion said. "You're wearing armor, and you'd make an awful clatter when you toppled over. I don't want to be startled out of sleep. I'm as tired as you are."

"At least you have someone to sleep with."

"Two someones, actually, counting the puppy. Puppies take an unwholesome interest in toes, I've noticed."

Zakath laughed.

"Grandfather," Garion said, "up until now, the king has blithely gone along with anything Naradas suggested. Did you tamper with him at all?"

"I made a couple of suggestions," Belgarath admitted. "I don't usually like to do that, but the situation was a bit unusual."

It was in the corridor outside that Naradas caught up with them. "You haven't won yet, Belgarath," he hissed.

"No, probably not," Belgarath admitted with aplomb, "but then, neither have you, Naradas, and I imagine Zandramas— you've heard the name before, I trust—will be a bit cross with you when she finds out how miserably you've failed here. Maybe, if you start running right now, you can get away from her—for a while, at least."

"This isn't the end of this, Belgarath."

"Never thought it was, old boy." Belgarath reached out and insultingly patted Naradas on the cheek. "Run along now, Gro-lim," he advised, "while you still have your health." He paused. "Unless, of course, you'd like to challenge me. Considering your limited talents, I don't advise it, but that's entirely up to you."

After one startled look at the Eternal Man, Naradas fled.

"I enjoy doing that to his kind," Belgarath gloated.

"You are a dreadful old man, aren't you?" Zakath said.

"Never pretended not to be, Zakath." Belgarath grinned. "Let's go

talk with Sadi. Naradas is starting to become an inconvenience. I think it's high time he left us."

"You'll do anything, won't you?" Zakath asked as they continued down the corridor.

"To get the job done? Of course."

"And when I interfered with you back in Rak Hagga, you could have blown me into nothingness, couldn't you?"

"Probably, yes."

"But you didn't. Why not?"

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"Because I thought I might need you, and I saw more in you than others did."

"More than Emperor of half the world?"

"That's trash, Zakath," Belgarath said scornfully. "Your friend here is Overlord of the West, and he still has trouble getting his boots on the right feet."

"I do not\," Garion objected vehemently.

"That's probably because you've got Ce'Nedra to help you figure it out. That's what you really need, Zakath—a wife, someone to keep you looking reasonably presentable."

"I'm afraid that's quite out of the question, Belgarath," Zakath sighed.

"We'll see," the Eternal Man said.

The greetings they received in their quarters in the royal palace at Dal Perivor were not cordial.

"You old fool!" Polgara began, speaking to her father. Things deteriorated quite rapidly from there.

"You idiot!" Ce'Nedra shrieked at Garion.

"Please, Ce'Nedra," Polgara said patiently, "let me finish first."

"Oh, of course, Lady Polgara," the Rjvan Queen agreed politely. "Sorry. You have many more years of aggravation than I do. Besides, I can get this one alone in bed and give him a piece of my mind."

"And you wanted me to get married?" Zakath asked Belgarath.

"It has its drawbacks," Belgarath replied calmly. He looked around. "The walls are still standing, I see, and there doesn't seem to be any evidence of explosions. Maybe, eventually, you'll grow up after all, Pol."

"Another note?" she half shrieked. "A miserable note?"

"We were pressed for time,"

"The three of you went up against the dragon alone?"

"More or less—yes. The she-wolf was with us, however."

"An animal! That's your idea of protection?"

"She was very helpful."

At that point, Polgara began to swear—in several different languages.

"Why, Pol," he objected mildly, "you don't even know what those words mean—at least I hope you don't."

"Don't underestimate me, old man. This isn't over yet. All right, Ce'Nedra, it's your turn."

"I think I'd prefer to conduct my discussions with his Majesty

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in private—where I can be much more direct," the tiny queen said in an icy tone.

Garion winced.

Then, surprisingly, Cyradis spoke. "It was discourteous of thee, Emperor of Mallorean, to hurl thyself into mortal danger without first consulting me." Belgarath, it appeared, had been characteristically obscure in his discussion with her before they had gone forth to face the dragon, conveniently forgetting to mention what they proposed to do.

"I beg thy forgiveness, Holy Seeress," Zakath apologized, lapsing, perhaps unconsciously, into archaic language. "The urgency of the matter was such that there was no time for consultation."

"Nicely spoken," Velvet murmured. "We'll make a gentleman out of him yet."

Zakath raised his visor and grinned at her—a surprisingly boyish grin.

"As it may be, Kal Zakath," Cyradis continued sternly, "know that I am wroth with thee for thy hasty and unthinking rashness."

"I am covered with confusion, Holy Seeress, that I have offended thee, and I hope that thou canst find it in thy heart to forgive mine

error."

"Oh," Velvet sighed, "he'll be just fine. Kheldar, were you taking notes?"

"Me?" Silk sounded surprised.

"Yes. You."

There were far too many things going on, and Garion was hovering on the verge of exhaustion. "Durnik," he said a bit plaintively, "can you help me out of this?" He rapped his knuckles on the breastplate of his armor.

"If you wish." Even Durnik's voice sounded cold.

"Does he really have to sleep with us?" Garion complained about midmorning.

"He's warm," Ce'Nedra replied in a snippy tone, "which is more than I can say for some others. Besides, he sort of fills the vacancy I have in my heart—in a small way, of course."

The wolf puppy under the covers was enthusiastically licking Garion's toes, then, inevitably, fell to nibbling.

They slept for a goodly part of the day, rising about midaf-

ternoon. They sent a servant to the king, asking to be excused from this night's festivities, pleading extreme fatigue.

"Wouldn't this be a good time to ask to see that map?" Beldin asked.

"I don't think so," Belgarath replied. "Naradas is getting desperate now. He knows how unforgiving Zandramas can be, so he'll do just about anything to keep us away from that chart. He still has the king's ear, and he'll come up with all kinds of excuses to stop us. Why don't we just let him wonder about what we're up to? It might help to keep him off balance until Sadi has the chance to put him to sleep."

The eunuch bowed a bit mockingly.

"There's an alternative, Belgarath," Silk volunteered. "I could slip around a bit and fish for information. If I can pinpoint the location of the map, a bit of burglary could solve our problem." , "What if you got caught?" Durnik asked.

"Please, Durnik," Silk said in a pained voice, "don't be insulting."

"It's got some possibilities," Velvet said. "Kheldar could steal a man's teeth even if the man had his mouth closed."

"Better not chance it," Polgara told her. "Naradas is a Gro-lim, and he may very well have laid a few traps around that chart. He knows all of us, by reputation at least, and I'm sure he's fully aware of Silk's specialized talents."

"Do we really have to kill him?" Eriond asked sadly. "Naradas, I mean?"

"I don't think we have any choice, Eriond," Garion said. "As long as he's still alive, we'll be stumbling over him at every turn. "He frowned. "It may be my imagination, but Zandramas seems very reluctant to leave the choice to Cyradis. If she can block us, she'll win by default."

"Thy perception is not altogether awry, Belgarion," Cyradis told him. "Zandramas indeed hath done all in her power to thwart my task." She smiled briefly. "I tell thee truly, she hath caused me much vexation, and were the choice to be between her and thee, well might I be tempted to choose against her by way of retribution.' *

"I never thought I'd hear that from one of the seers," Beldin said. "Are you actually coming down off that fence, Cyradis?" She smiled again. "Dear, gentle Beldin," she said affectionately, "our neutrality is not the result of whim, but of duty—a duty laid upon us before even thou wast bom."

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Since they had slept most of the day, they talked well into the night. Garion awoke refreshed the next morning and prepared to face the day's festivities.

The nobles at the court of King Oldorin had utilized the previous day and probably half the night preparing speeches—long, flowery, and generally tedious speeches—in praise of "our heroic champions." Protected by his closed visor, Garion frequently found himself dozing—a languor brought on not by weariness, but by boredom. At one point he heard a light clang on the side of his armor.

"Ouch!" Ce'Nedra said, rubbing her elbow.

"What's the matter, dear?"

"Do you have to wear all that steel?"

"Yes, but you know I'm wearing it. What possessed you to try to gouge me in the ribs?"

"Habit, I suppose. Stay awake, Garion."

"I wasn't sleeping," he lied.

"Really? Why were you snoring then?"

Following the speeches, the king assessed the glassy-eyed condition of his court and called upon "Good Master Felde-gast" to lighten things up.

Beldin was at his outrageous best that day. He walked on his hands; he did astonishing back-flips; he juggled with amazing dexterity—all the while telling jokes in his lilting brogue. "I hope I've managed in me small way t' add t' the festivities, yer Majesty," he concluded the performance after bowing in response to the enthusiastic applause of the assemblage.

"Thou art truly a virtuoso, Master Feldegast," the king complimented him. "The memory of thy performance this day will warm many a dreary winter evening in this hall."

"Ah, yer too kind t' say it, yer Majesty." Beldin bowed.

Before the banquet got under way, Garion and Zakath went back to their quarters for a light meal, since they would be unable to eat in the main dining hall without raising their visors. As guests of honor, however, it was incumbent upon them to be present.

"I've never gotten very much entertainment out of watching other people eat," Zakath said quietly to Garion after they had entered the banquet hall and taken their seats.

"If you want entertainment, watch Beldin," Garion replied. "Aunt Pol spoke very firmly with him last night. She told him to mind his manners today. You've seen the way he usually eats."

The strain of behaving himself should come very close to making him fly apart."

Naradas sat at the king's right elbow. His white eyes were uncertain—even slightly baffled. The fact that Belgarath had made no attempt to get his hands on the map obviously confused him.

And then the serving men began to bring in the banquet. The smells made Cation's mouth water, and he began to wish that he'd eaten a bit more earlier.

"I must talk with the king's chef before we leave," Polgara said. "This soup is exquisite."

Sadi chuckled slyly.

"Did I say something amusing, Sadi?"

"Just watch, Polgara. I wouldn't want to spoil it for you."

Suddenly there was a commotion at the head of the table. Naradas had half risen, clutching at his throat with his hands. His white eyes were bulging, and he was making strangling noises.

"He's choking!" the king cried out. "Someone help him!"

Several of the nobles near the head of the table leaped to their feet and began to pound the Grolim on the back. Naradas, however, continued to strangle. His tongue protruded from his mouth, and his face started to turn blue.

"Save him!" the king almost screamed.

But Naradas was beyond saving. He arched backward, stiffened, and toppled to the floor.

There were cries of dismay from all over the dining hall.

"How did you do that?" Velvet murmured to Sadi. "I'd take an oath that you were never anywhere near his food."

Sadi smirked wickedly. "I didn't have to go near his food, Liselle," he said. "The other night I took a rather careful note of his customary place at the table. He always sits to the king's right. I slipped in here an hour or so ago and anointed his spoon with a little something that makes a man's throat swell shut." He paused. "I hope he enjoyed his soup," he added. "I know /certainly did."

"Liselle," Silk said, "when we get back to Boktor, why don't you have a chat with your uncle? Sadi's out of work just now, and Javelin could use a man with his talents."

"It snows in Boktor, Kheldar," Sadi said with some distaste, ***and I really don't like snow that much." . "You wouldn't necessarily have to be stationed in Boktor,

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Sadi. How would Tbl Honeth suit you? You'd have to let your hair grow, though."

Zakath leaned forward, chuckling. "Brilliant, Sadi,*' he added his congratulations, "and so perfectly appropriate. Nar-adas poisoned me back in Rak Hagga, and you poisoned him here. I'll tell you what, I'll double any offer Javelin makes you if you'll come to work for me in Mal Zeth."

"Zakath!" Silk exclaimed.

"The employment opportunities seem to be cropping up in all quarters of the world," Sadi observed.

"Good men are hard to find, my friend," Zakath told him.

The king, shaking and with his face white, was being slowly escorted from the room. As he passed their table, Garion could hear him sobbing.

Belgaralh began to swear under his breath.

"What's the matter, father?" Polgara asked him."

"That idiot will be in mourning for weeks. I'll never get my hands on that map."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Belgarath was still swearing when they returned to their quarters. "I think I've outsmarted myself," he fumed. "We should have exposed Naradas before we killed him. There's no way to discredit him in the king's eyes now."

Cyradis sat at the table eating a simple meal with Toth standing protectively over her. "What hath thou wrought, Ancient One?" she asked.

"Naradas is no longer with us," he replied, "and now the king's in mourning for him. It could be weeks before he recovers his composure enough to show me that map."

Her face grew distant and Garion seemed to hear the murmur of that strange group mind. "I am permitted to aid thee in this, Ancient One," she said. "The Child of Dark hath violated the Tt-fpommandment we laid upon her when we assigned her this task. •'Ipbe sent her henchman here rather than coming to seek the chart 4llerself. Thus certain strictures upon me are relaxed." '\$&• i ft i

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She leaned back in her chair and spoke briefly to Toth. He nodded and quietly left the room. ' 'I have sent for one who will assist us," she said.

"What exactly are you going to do?" Silk asked her.

"It might be unwise of me to tell thee in advance, Prince Kheldar. Canst thou, however, discover the location of the remains of Naradas for me?"

"I should be able to do that," he replied. "I'll go ask around a bit." Then he left the room.

"And when Prince Kheldar returns with the location of dead Naradas, thou, King of Riva, and thou, Emperor of Mallorean, go even unto the king and prevail upon him in the strongest of terms to accompany you at midnight to that place, for certain truths shall be revealed to him there which may lessen his grief."

"Cyradis," Beldin sighed, "why must you always complicate things?"

She smiled almost shyly. ' 'It is one of my few delights, gentle Beldin. To speak obscurely doth cause others to ponder my words more carefully. The dawning of understanding in them causes me a certain satisfaction."

"Not to mention the fact that it's very irritating."

"That perhaps is also a part of the delight," she agreed impishly.

"You know," Beldin said to Belgarath, "I think she's a human being after all."

It was about ten minutes later when Silk returned. "Found him," he said a bit smugly. "They've got him laid out on a bier in the chapel of Chamdar on the main floor of the palace. I looked in on him. He's really much, much more attractive with his eyes closed. The funeral's scheduled for tomorrow. It's summer, and he probably won't keep."

"What would be thine estimate of the hour, Goodman?" Cyradis asked Durnik.

The smith went to the window and looked up at the stars. "I make it about an hour before midnight," he replied.

"Go then now, Belgarion and Zakath. Use all the powers of persuasion at your command. It is absolutely essential that the king be in that chapel at midnight."

"We'll bring him, Holy Seeress," Zakath promised her.

"Even if we have to drag him," Garion added.

"I wish I knew what she was up to," Zakath said as he and Garion walked down the hall outside. "It might make the king a bit easier to persuade if we could tell him what to expect."

"It might also make him skeptical," Garion disagreed. "I think Cyradis is planning something fairly exotic, and some people have difficulty accepting that sort of thing."

"Oh, my, yes." Zakath grinned.

"His Majesty does not wish to be disturbed," one of the guards at the king's door said when they asked admission.

"Tell him, please, that it is a matter of extremes! urgency," Garion said.

"I'll try, Sir Knight," the guard said dubiously, "but he is much distraught at the death of his friend."

The guard returned a few moments later. "His Majesty consents to see thee and thy companion, Sir Knight, but prithee, be brief. His suffering is extreme."

"Of course," Garion murmured.

The king's private chambers were ornate. The king himself sat in a deeply cushioned chair reading a slender volume by the light of a single candle. His face looked ravaged, and there were signs that he had been weeping. He held up the book after they had presented themselves to him. "A volume of consolation," he said. "It doth not

offer much of that to me, however. How may I serve ye, Sir Knights?"

"We have come in part to offer thee our condolences, your Majesty," Garion began carefully. "Know that first grief is always sharpest. The passage of time will dull thy pain."

' 'But never banish it entirely, Sir Knight.'

"Undoubtedly true, your Majesty. What we have come to ask of thee may seem cruel in the light of present circumstances, and we would not presume to intrude upon thee were the matter not of such supreme urgency—not to us so much as it is to thee."

"Say on, Sir Knight," the king said, a faint interest showing in his eyes.

"There are certain truths which must be revealed unto thee this very night, your Majesty," Garion went on, "and they can be revealed only in the presence of thy late friend."

"Unthinkable, Sir Knight," the king said adamantly.

"We are assured by the one who will reveal these truths that they may in some measure assuage thy sorrow. Erezel was thy dearest friend, and he would not have thee suffer needlessly.'

"Truly," the king conceded. "He was a man with a great

"I'm sure," Garion said.

"There is perhaps another, more personal reason for thee to

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visit the chapel where Master Erezel lies in state, your Majesty," Zakath added. "His funeral will be held, we are told, tomorrow. The ceremony will be attended by most of thy court. This night provides thee thy last opportunity to, visit with him privately and to fix his well-loved features in thy memory. My friend and I will guard the chapel door to insure that thy communion with him and with his spirit shall be undisturbed."

The king considered that. "It may be even as thou sayest, Sir Knight," he conceded. "Though it may wring my heart, I would indeed look upon his face one last time. Very well, then, let us repair to the chapel." He rose and led them from the chamber.

The chapel of Chamdar, the Arendish God, was dimly lighted by a lone candle standing on the bier at the body's head. A gold-colored cloth covered the immobile form of Naradas to the chest, and his face was calm, even serene. Knowing what he did of the Grolim's career, Garion found that apparent serenity a rriockery.

' 'We will guard the chapel door, your Majesty,' Zakath said, "and leave thee alone with thy friend." He and Garion stepped back out into the corridor and closed the door.

"You were very smooth back there," Garion told his friend.

"You weren't so bad yourself, but smooth or rough, at least we got him here."

They stood at the door awaiting Cyradis and the others. After about a quarter of an hour, they arrived.

"Is he in there?" Belgarath asked Garion.

"Yes. We had to do a bit of fast talking, but he finally agreed."

Standing beside Cyradis was a figure robed and hooded in black. It appeared to be a woman, a Dal most likely, but it was the first time Garion had ever seen one of that race clad in any color but white. "This is the one who will aid us," the Seeress said. "Let us go in unto the king, for the hour is nigh."

Garion opened the door, and they filed in.

The king looked up in some surprise.

"Be not dismayed, King of Perivor," Cyradis said to him,, "for, as thy champions have told thee, we have come to reveal truths to thee, truths which will lessen thy sorrow."

"I am grateful for thine efforts, Lady," the king replied, "but that is scarce possible. My sorrow may neither be lessened nor banished. Here lieth my dearest friend, and my heart lieth on that coki bier with him."

"Thine heritage is in part Dal, your Majesty," she said to him, "so thou art aware that many of us possess certain gifts. There are things the one you called Erezel did not tell thee ere

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he died. I have summoned one who will question him ere his spirit doth sink into the darkness."

"A necromancer? Truly? I have heard of such, but have never seen the art practiced."

"Knowest thou that one with such gifts cannot misspeak what the spirits reveal?"

"I understand so, yes."

"I assure thee that it is true. Let us then probe the mind of this Erezel, and see what truths he will reveal to us."

The dark-robed and hooded necromancer stepped to the bier and laid her pale, slender hands on Naradas' chest,

Cyradis began posing the questions. "Who art thou?" she asked.

"My name was Naradas," the figure in black replied in a halting, hollow voice. "I was Grolim Archpriest of the Temple of Torak at Hemil in Darshiva."

The king stared first at Cyradis and then at the body of Naradas in stunned astonishment.

"Whom didst thou serve?" Cyradis asked.

"I served the Child of Dark, the Grolim Priestess Zandra-mas."

"Wherefore earnest thou to this kingdom?."

"My mistress sent me hither to seek out a certain chart and to impede the progress of the Child of Light to the Place Which Is No More."

"And what means didst thou use to accomplish these ends?"

"I sought out the king of this isle, a vain and foolish man, and I beguiled him. He showed me the chart which I sought, and the chart revealed to me a wonder which my shadow conveyed immediately to my mistress. Now she knows precisely where the final meeting is to take place. I prevailed upon the king's gullibility and was able to lead him into various acts which delayed the Child of Light and his companions so that my mistress might arrive at the Place Which Is No More before him and thereby avoid the necessity of leaving the issue in the hands of a certain seeress whom my mistress distrusts."

"How is it that thy mistress did not herself perform this task, which was laid upon her and not upon thee?" Cyradis' voice was stern.

"Zandramas had other concerns. I was her right hand, and all that I did was as if she had done the deeds herself."

"His spirit doth begin to sink out of reach, Holy Seeress," the necromancer said in a more normal tone of voice. "Ask

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quickly, for soon I will no longer be able to wrest further answers from him."

"What were these concerns of thy mistress which prevented her from seeking the answer to the last riddle herself as she was commanded to do?"

"A certain Grolim Hierarch from Cthol Murgos, Agachak by name, had come to Mallorea seeking the Place Which Is No More, hoping to supplant my mistress. He was the last of our race with enough power to challenge her. She met him near the barrens of Finda and killed him there.'" The hollow voice broke off, and then there came a

despairing wail. "Zandramas!" the voice cried. "You said that I would not die! You promised, Zandramas!" The last word seemed to fall away into some unimaginable abyss.

The dark-hooded necromancer's head slumped forward, and she was shuddering violently. "His spirit has gone, Holy Seer-ess," she said in a weary voice. "The midnight hour is past, and he can no longer be reached."

"I thank thee," Cyradis said simply.

"I but hope, Holy Seeress, that I have been able in some small way to aid thee in thine awesome task. May I retire now? For contact with this diseased mind hath distressed me beyond measure."

Cyradis nodded briefly, and the necromancer quietly left the chapel.

The King of Perivor, his face ashen but firmly set, walked to the bier. He took hold of the golden cloth that covered Naradas to the chest and hurled it to the floor. "Some rag perhaps," he said from between clenched teeth. "I would not look upon the face of this foul Grolim more."

"I'll see what I can find, your Majesty," Durnik said sympathetically. He stepped out into the hall.

The rest stood silently by as the king, his back to the bier and his jaws clenching and unclenching, stared at the back wall of the chapel.

After a few moments, the smith returned with a torn piece of burlap, rusty and mildewed. "There was a storeroom just down the hall, your Majesty," he said. "This was plugging up a rat hole. Was it more or less what you had in mind?"

"Perfect, my friend. An it please thee, throw it over the face of that piece of carrion. I declare here unto ye all, there will be no funeral for this miscreant. Some ditch and a few spadefuls of earth shall be his grave."

"More than a few spadefuls I think, your Majesty," Dumik suggested prudently. "He's corrupted your kingdom enough already. We wouldn't want him to pollute it any more, would we? I'll take care of it for you."

"I like thee, my friend," the king said. "An it please thee, bury the Grolim facedown."

"We'll see to it, your Majesty," Durnik promised. He nodded to loth, and the two of them roughly lifted the body of Naradas from the bier by the shoulders and dragged it from the chapel with its sandal-shod feet bouncing unceremoniously across the floor.

Silk stepped closer to Zakath. "So now we know that Agachak is dead," he said quietly to the Mallorean. "Urgit will be delighted to hear it. I don't suppose you'd be willing to send a messenger to him to let him know about it?"

"The tensions between your brother and myself have not re-: taxed all that much, Kheldar."

"Who are ye all?" the king demanded. "Was this so-called quest of thine mere subterfuge?"

"The time hath come for us to reveal ourselves," Cyradis said gravely. "The need for concealment is now past, for the other spies Zandramas hath set in this place without the knowledge of Naradas cannot commune with her without his aid.'" "

"That's Zandramas, all right," Silk said. "She doesn't even trust herself."

Garion and Zakath raised their visors with some relief. "I know that your kingdom is isolated, your Majesty," Garion said in his normal dialect. "How much do you know of the outside world?"

"There are times when seafarers call upon this harbor," the Icing replied. "They bring us news as well as goods."

"And what of the events that shaped the world in times past?" "

"Our forebears brought many books with them, Sir Knight, for the hours at sea are long and tedious. Among those volumes were those of history, which I have read."

"Good," Garion said. "That should make things a bit easier to explain. I am Beigarion, King of Riva," he introduced himself.

The king's eyes widened. "The Godslayer?" he asked in an awed voice.

4 "You've heard about that, I see," Garion said wryly. , "All the world hath heard of it. Didst thou indeed slay the God of Angarak?"

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"I'm afraid so. My friend here is Kal Zakath, Emperor of Mallorean."

The king began to tremble. "What event is of such magnitude that it persuaded ye two to put aside thy hereditary enmity?"

"We'll get to that in a moment, your Majesty. The helpful fellow who's out burying Naradas is Durnik, the most recent disciple of the God Aldur. The short one there is Beldin, also a disciple, and the one with the whiskers is Belgarath the Sorcerer. '" "

"The Eternal Man?" The king's voice was choked.

"I wish you wouldn't throw that around so much, Garion," Belgarath said in a pained tone. "Sometimes it upsets people."

"It saves time, Grandfather," Garion replied. "The tall lady with the lock of white hair is Belgarath's daughter, Polgara the Sorceress. The little one with the red hair is Ce'Nedra, my wife. The blond girl is the Margravine Liselle of Drasnia, niece to the chief of Drasnian intelligence, and the blindfolded girl who exposed Naradas is the Seeress of Kell. The big fellow who's helping Durnik is Toth, her guide, and this one is Prince Kheldar of Drasnia."

"The richest man in the world?"

"The reputation might be a trifle exaggerated, your Majesty," Silk said modestly, "but I'm working on it."

"The young fellow with blond hair is named Eriond, a very close friend."

"I am awed to be in such august company. Which of ye is the Child of Light?"

"That's the burden I bear, your Majesty," Garion told him. "Now, though it's largely a part of Alorn history and prophecy, you may know that from time to time in the past there have been meetings between the Child of Light and the Child of Dark. We're going toward the last one there's ever going to be. The meeting's going to decide the fate of the world. Coir problem at the moment is discovering where the meeting's supposed to take place."

"Thy quest then is even more awesome than I had imagined, King Belgarion. I will aid thee in whatsoever way I can. The foul Grolim Naradas misled me into hindering thee. Whatever small way in which I might assist thee may serve as partial recompense for that error. I will send forth my ships to seek out the place of the meeting for thee wheresoever it may be, from the beaches of Ebal to the reef of Korim."

"The reef of w/wf?" Belgarath exclaimed.

"Korim, Ancient Belgarath. It doth lie to the northwest of this isle. Its location is clearly marked upon that chart which tfeou hast sought. Let us repair to my chambers, and I will show

thee."

"I think we've just about come to the end of it, Belgarath," Beldin said. "As soon as you take a look at that map, you'll be able to go home."

"What are you talking about?"

"That's the end of your task, old man. We certainly appreciate your efforts, though."

"You wouldn't mind too much if I came along, would you?"

"That's up to you, of course, but we wouldn't want to keep you from anything important you've been neglecting." Beldin's grin grew vicious. Needling Belgarath was one of his favorite forms of entertainment.

As they turned toward the chapel entrance, Garion saw the she-wolf sitting in the doorway. Her golden eyes were intent, and her tongue lolled out in a wolfly smile.

PERIVOR

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

They followed the king through the dimly lighted and deserted midnight halls of the palace at Perivor. A tense excitement filled Garion. They had won. No matter how hard Zan-dramas had tried to prevent it, they had still won. The answer to the riddle lay no more than a few yards away, and once it was answered, the meeting would take place. No power on earth could prevent it now.

"Stop that, " the voice in his mind told him. "You have to be calm now—very calm. Try to think about Faldor's farm. That always seems to settle you."

"Where have you—" Garion started, then broke off.

"Where have I what?"

"Never mind. The question always irritates you. "

"Amazing. You actually remembered something I said. Faldor's farm, Garion. Faldor's farm. "

He did as he had been told. Though the memories had seemed 190

to fade over the years, they suddenly returned with startling clarity. He saw the shape of the place, the sheds and barns and the kitchen, smithy, and dining hall on the lower floor, and the gallery on the second floor where the sleeping chambers were— all surrounding that central yard. He could hear the steely ring of Durnik's hammer coming from the smithy and smell the warm fragrance of freshly baked bread coming from Aunt Pol's kitchen. He saw Faldor and old Cralto and even Brill. He saw Doroon and Rundorig and, last, Zubrette—blond and pretty and artfully deceitful. A vast kind of calm came over him, not unlike the calm that had engulfed him when he had stood in the tomb of the one-eyed God in the City of Endless Night so long ago.

' 'That 's better,' the voice said. ' 'Try to hold on to that. You 're going to have to think very clearly in the next few days and you can't do that with your mind racing every which way. You can't do pieces after it's all over.'

"That's if I'm still around. "

"We can hope. "Then the voice was gone.

The guards at the king's door admitted them, and the king went directly to a cabinet, unlocked it, and removed a roll of ancient, crackling parchment. "It is much faded, I do fear me," he said. "We have tried to protect it from the light, but it is very old." He went

to a table and carefully unrolled the chart, weighting down the corners with books. Once again Garion felt the tense excitement as he held back slightly, reaching back into his memories of Faldor's farm to steady himself.

The King of Perivor pointed with his finger. "Here lieth Perivor," he told them, "and here doth lie the reef of Korim."

Garion knew that if he looked too long at that fateful spot on the map, the wild excitement and sense of triumph would return, so he merely glanced at it, then let his eyes rove over the rest of the map. The spellings were strangely archaic. His eyes automatically sought his own kingdom. "Ryva" it was spelled. There were also "Aryndia," "Kherech," and "Tol Nydra" as well as "Draksnya" and "Chthall Margose."

"It's misspelled," Zakath noted. "The proper name is the lUrimreef."

Beldin began to explain, but Garion already knew the answer. "Things change," the dwarf said, "and among those tilings are the way we say certain words. The sounds of words shift over the centuries. The name of that reef has probably changed several times over the last few thousand years. It's a common phenomenon. If Belgarath were to speak in the language the people

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spoke in the village where he grew up, for example, none of us would be able to understand him. I'd guess that for a time the reef was called Torim or something like that, and it finally settled into Turim. It may change again a few times. I've made a study of that sort of thing. You see, what happens is that—"

"Will you get on with it?" Belgarath demanded in exasperation.

"Aren't you interested in expanding your education?"

"Not at the moment, no."

Beldin sighed. "Anyway," he continued, "what we call writing is just a way to reproduce the sound of a word. As the sound changes, so does the spelling. The difference is easily explained."

"Thine answer to the question was cogent, gentle Beldin," Cyradis said, "but in this particular case, the change of the sound was imposed."

"Imposed?" Silk said, "by who—whom?"

"It was the two prophecies, Prince Kheldar. In furtherance of their game, they altered the sound of the word to conceal the location from Ancient Belgarath and from Zandramas. These two were both required to

solve the riddle ere the final meeting could take place."

"Game?" Silk asked incredulously. "They were playing games with something diis important?"

"These two eternal awarenences are not as we, Prince Kheldar. They contend with each other in myriad ways. Ofttimes, one will attempt to alter the course of a star, while the other strives to hold it in place. At other times, one will attempt to move a grain of sand while the other exerts all its energy to keep the grain motionless. Such struggles ofttimes consume whole eons. The riddle game they have played with Belgarath and Zandramas is but another of the ways they have used to formalize their contention, for should it ever come to pass that they confront each other directly, they would rend the universe apart,"

Garion suddenly remembered an image that had come to him in the throne room at Vo Mimbire just before he had exposed the Murgo Nachak to King Korodullin. He had seemed to see two faceless players seated at a game where the moves had been so complex that his mind could not follow them. With absolute certainty now he saw that he had caught a momentary glimpse of the higher reality Cyradis had just described. "Did you do that on purpose?" he asked the voice in his mind.

"Naturally. You needed a bit of encouragement to get you to

do something that was necessary. You 're a competitive sort of boy, so J thought the image of the great game might get you stoned. "

Then something else occurred to Garion. "Cyradis," he said, "why is it that there are so many of us while Zandramas appears to be almost totally alone?"

"It hath ever been thus, Belgarion. The Child of Dark is solitary, even as was Torak in his pride. Thou, however, art humble. Thou hast never pushed thyself forward, forthou know-est not thine own worth. This is endearing in thee, Child of Light, for thou art not puffed up with thine own importance. The Prophecy of Dark hath ever chosen one and one only, and hath infused that one with all its power. The Prophecy of Light, however, hath chosen to disperse its power among many. Although thou art the principal bearer of the burden, all of thy companions share it with thee. The difference between the two prophecies is simple, but it is profound."

Beldin was frowning. "You're saying that it's sort of like the difference between absolutism and shared responsibility, then?"

"It is much as thou hast said. The difference is more complex, however."

"I was just trying to be concise."

"Now that's a first," Belgarath said. Then he looked at the King of Perivor. "Can you describe this reef to us, your Majesty?" he asked. "The representation on the map isn't too precise."

"Gladly, Ancient Belgarath. In my youth I sailed thither, for the reef is something of a marvel. Seafarers assert that there is none

like it in all the world. It doth consist of a series of rocky pinnacles rising from the sea. The pinnacles themselves are easy to see and therefore to avoid. Other dangers, however, lurk beneath the surface. Savage currents and tides do rush through gaps in the reef, and the weather there is ever unsettled. By reason of these perils, the reef hath never been charted in any detail. All prudent sailors avoid it entirely, giving that dangerous obstruction wide berth."

Dumik and Toth entered. "We've taken care of it, your Majesty," Durnik reported. "Naradas is safely in the ground now. He won't trouble you—or us—ever again. Did you want to know where we put him?"

"Methinks not, my friend. Thou and thy massive companion have done me a service this night. I implore thee, if ever I can do thee service in return, hesitate not to call upon me."

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"Cyradis," Belgarath said, "is this the last part of the riddle? Or are there other bits and pieces lurking about?"

"Nay, Ancient One. The game of the riddles is finished. Now the game of deeds doth begin."

"Finally," Belgarath said with some relief. Then he and Bel-din fell to studying the map.

"Did we find it?" Durnik asked Silk. "I mean, does the map show the location of Korim?"

Silk led him to the table. "It's right here," he said, pointing. "This is a very old map. Modern maps misspell the name. That's why we had to come here."

"We've been doing a lot of running around chasing after scraps of paper," the smith observed.

"We have indeed, my friend. According to Cyradis, it's all been part of a game being played by the friend Garion's got inside his head and the other one, who's probably inside Zan-dramas* head."

"I hate games."

"I don't mind them."

"That's because you're Drasnian."

"That could be part of it, I suppose."

"It's in the approximate location where the mountains of Korim were, Belgarath," Beldin said, measuring off distances with his fingers. "They were probably moved a bit when Torak cracked the world."

"A lot of things were moved that day, as I recall."

"Oh, yes," Beldin agreed fervently. "I had trouble standing up, and Inbuilt closer to the ground than you are."

"You know something? I've noticed that myself. Your Majesty," the old man addressed the king, "could you be a bit more specific about the reef? Trying to land on the side of a rock pinnacle from a boat that's pitching around in the surf would be difficult and dangerous."

"If memory doth serve me, Ancient Belgarath, I do seem to recall a few rocky beaches, built up, doubtless, from shards and boulders tumbled from the sides of the peaks and then pounded to bits by the restless sea. When the tide is low, this rubble, accumulated over the eons, doth rise above the surface of the sea, providing means whereby one may move freely from one pinnacle to the next."

"Sort of like that land bridge from Morindland to Mallorean," Silk recalled sourly. "That wasn't a very pleasant trip."

"Are there any landmarks of any kind?" Belgarath pressed.

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"That reef goes on for quite a ways. It could take a lot of wading to find the exact place we need to reach."

"I cannot attest to this from mine own true knowledge," the king said cautiously, "but certain seafarers have asserted that there appears to be a cave mouth on the north side of the highest pinnacle. On occasion, more adventurous ones have sought to go ashore to explore its depths, for, as is widely known, remote caves oftentimes serve as repositories for the ill-gotten gains of freebooters and pirates. The pinnacle, however, hath ever repulsed their most valiant efforts. Each time one of these brave souls attempts landing there, the sea becomes angry, and sudden storms do appear from a cloudless sky.'"

"That's it, Belgarath." Beldin chortled exultantly. "Something's been going out of its way to keep casual explorers out of that cave."

"TU-o somethings, I gather," Belgarath agreed. "You're right, though. We've finally located the exact place of the meeting. It's in that cave.'"

Silk groaned.

"Art thou ill, Prince Kheldar?" the king inquired.

"Not yet, your Majesty, but I think I'm going to be."

"Our Prince Kheldar has difficulties with caves, your Majesty," Velvet explained,, smiling.

"There's nothing difficult about it at all, Liselle," the rat-faced little man disagreed. "It's really very simple. Every time I see a cave, I go into an absolute panic."

"I have heard of this malady," the king said. "One wonders what may be its mysterious source.'"

"There's nothing mysterious about the source of mine, your Majesty," Silk said dryly. "I know exactly where it came from."

"If it is thine intent to dare the perilous reef, Ancient Belgarath," the king said then, "I will provide thee and thy companions with a stout ship to convey thee thither. I will give orders that the ship be ready to sail with the morning tide."

"Your Majesty is very kind."

"It is but small payment for the service thou hast rendered to me this night." The king paused, his face reflective. "It may be even as the spirit of foul Naradas proclaimed," he mused. "I may indeed be a vain and foolish man, but I am not immune to the promptings of gratitude. You all have preparations to make," he said then. "I will not delay you more. We shall meet i on the morrow ere you depart."

"We thank you, your Majesty," Garion said, his armor

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creaking as he bowed. Then he led the others from the chamber. He was not at all surprised to see the she-wolf sitting just outside the door.

"The time is exactly right, isn't it, Cyradis?" Polgara said to the Seeress once they were all out in the corridor. "At Ash-aba, you said it would be nine months until the meeting. As I make it, the exact time will be the day after tomorrow."

"Thy calculations are correct, Polgara."

"It works out precisely then. It should take us one full day to reach the reef, and we'll go to the cave on the following morning." Polgara smiled a bit wryly. "All this time we've been fretting about arriving late, and now we get there precisely on time." She laughed. "What a waste of all that perfectly good worrying."

"Well, now we know where and when," Durnik said. "All that's left to do is to go there and get on with it."

"That sums it up, I'd say," Silk agreed.

Eriond sighed, and Garion felt a chill suspicion that was not quite a certainty. "Is it going to be he?" he asked the dry voice. "Is Eriond going to be the one who dies?"

But the voice would not answer.

They entered their quarters with the wolf close behind them.

"It's been a long time getting here," Belgarath said wearily. "I'm getting a little old for these extended journeys."

"Old?" Beldin snorted. "You were born old. I still think you've got a few miles left in you, though."

"I think that when we get home, I'll spend a century or so in my tower."

"That's an idea. It should take you about that long to get it cleaned up—oh, one other thing, Belgarath. Why don't you fix that loose step?"

"I'll get around to it."

"Aren't we all assuming that we're going to win?" Silk said. "I think that making plans for the future at this point might be a bit premature—unless the Holy Seeress might see fit to let slip a hint or two about the outcome?" He looked at Cyradis.

"I would not be permitted to do that, Prince Kheldar— even if I knew the answer."

"You mean you don't know?" he asked incredulously.

"The Choice hath not yet been made," she said simply. "It may not be made until I stand in the presence of the Child of Light and the Child of Dark. Until that moment, the outcome doth still hang in the balance."

"What good is it being a Seeress if you can't predict the future?"

"This particular Event is not susceptible to prediction, Kheldar," she said tartly.

"I think we'd all better get some sleep," Belgarath said. "The next couple of days are going to be hectic."

The she-wolf followed Garion and Ce'Nedra to their room and entered with them. Ce'Nedra looked a bit startled at that, but the wolf went directly to the bed and put her forepaws up on it to look critically at the puppy, who lay sleeping on his back with all four of his paws in the air.

The wolf gave Garion a slightly reproachful look. "One notes that he has grown fat," she said. "Your mate has ruined him with overfeeding and pampering. He is no longer fit to be a wolf. He no longer even smells like a wolf."

"One's mate bathes him from time to time," Garion explained.

"Bathes," the wolf said in a tone loaded with contempt. "A wolf should be bathed only by the rain or in the course of swimming across a river." She dropped to her haunches. "One would ask a favor of your mate."

"One will convey your request to her."

' 'One had hoped you might. Ask your mate if she will continue to care for the young one. One believes you need not add that she has spoiled him so badly that he is unfit to be anything but alapdog."

"One will phrase your request cautiously."

"What's she saying?" Ce'Nedra asked.

"She wants to know if you'd be willing to take care of the puppy."

"Of course I will. I've wanted to do that all along." Then she knelt and impulsively put her arms about the she-wolf's neck. "I will care for him," she promised.

"One notes that her scent is not unpleasant," the wolf said to Garion.

"One has also noticed that."

' 'One was fairly certain that you had.'" Then the wolf rose to her feet and silently left the room.

"She's going to leave us now, isn't she?" Ce'Nedra said wistfully. "I'm going to miss her."

"What makes you think that?"

"Why else would she give up her baby?"

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"I think there's a bit more to it than that. She's preparing for something.'" "

"I'm very tired, Garion. Let's go to bed."

Later, in the velvet darkness as they lay close together in the bed, Ce'Nedra sighed. "I\vo more days and I'll see my baby again. It's been so very, very long."

"Try not to dwell on it, Ce'Nedra. You need your rest, and thinking too much about it will keep you awake."

She sighed again, and after a few moments, she drifted off to sleep.

' 'Cyradis is not the only one who has to make a choice,'" the voice in his mind told him. "You and Zandramas also have choices to make.'" "

' ' What choices are those ?' ' "

"You have to choose your successors. Zandrafnas has already chosen hers. You should be giving some thought to your last task as the

Child of Light. It's going to be fairly significant.'

' I suppose that in a way, I 'II sort of miss having that to carry around, but I'll be glad to get rid of it. Now I'll be able to go back to being ordinary again.'

' 'You never were ordinary, you know. You 've been the Child of Light since the moment you were born.'

"I know I'm going to miss you. "

"Please don't get sentimental, Garion. I may stop by from time to time, just to see how you 're doing. Now get some sleep.'

When he awoke the next morning, Garion lay in bed for quite some time. He had tried for very long not to think about something, but now he had no choice but to face it squarely. He had every reason in the world to hate Zandramas, but...

Finally, he slipped out of bed, dressed himself, and went looking for Belgarath.

He found the old man in the central room, seated with Cyradis. "Grandfather," he said, "I've got a problem."

"There's nothing unusual about that. What's got you worked up this time?"

"Tomorrow I'm going to meet Zandramas."

"Why, do you know? I think you're right." '

"Please don't do that. This is serious."

"Sorry, Garion. I'm feeling whimsical today."

"I'm afraid that the only way we're going to be able to stop her is to kill her, and I'm not sure I'll be able to do that. Torak was one thing, but Zandramas is a woman.'

"Well, she was. I think her gender has become irrelevant now, though—even to herself."

"I still don't think I'll be able to do it."

"There will be no need, Belgarion," Cyradis assured him. "Another fate doth lie in store for Zandramas, no matter what my choice may be. Thou wilt not be required to shed her blood."

A vast wave of relief came over Garion. "Thank you, Holy Seeress," he said. ' 'I Ve been afraid to face up to that. It's good to know that it's not one of the tasks I Ve got ahead of me. Oh, by the way, Grandfather, my friend up here—" He tapped his forehead "—has been visiting again. Last night he told me that my final task will be to choose my successor. I don't suppose I could get you to help me, could I?"

"No, Garion, I'm afraid not. I don't think I'm supposed to, am I,

Cyradis?"

"Nay, Ancient Belgarath. That task lieth on the Child of Light alone."

"I was afraid you might look at it that way," Garion said glumly.

"Oh, one thing, Garion," Belgarath said. "The one you choose has a fair chance of becoming a God. Don't choose me. I 'm not suited for the job.'"

The others drifted in singly or in pairs. As each one entered, Garion considered their faces, trying to picture each of his friends as a divinity. Aunt Pol? No, that didn't seem right somehow, and that automatically excluded Durnik. He could not deprive her of her husband. Silk? That idea very nearly caused Garion to collapse in helpless laughter. Zakath? It had some possibilities. Zakath was an Angarak, and the new God would be the God of that race. Zakath was a bit unpredictable, however. Until recently, he had been obsessed with power. A sudden onset of Godhood might unsettle his mind and make him revert. Garion sighed. He'd have to think about it some more.

The servants brought in breakfast, and Ce'Nedra, obviously remembering her promise of the previous night, fixed a plate for the puppy. The plate contained eggs, sausage, and a generous dollop of jam. The she-wolf looked away with a shudder.

They deliberately avoided the subject of tomorrow's meeting as they ate. The meeting was inevitable now, so there was no point in talking about it.

Belgarath pushed back his plate with a look of contentment on his face. "Don't forget to thank the king for his hospitality," he told Garion.

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And then the she-wolf came over and laid her head in the old man's lap. Belgarath looked startled. The wolf had usually avoided him. "What is it, little sister?" he asked her.

Then, to everyone's astonishment, the wolf actually laughed and spoke quite plainly in the language of humans.' Your brains have gone to sleep, old wolf," she said to Belgarath. "I thought you'd have known me weeks ago. Does this help?" A sudden blue nimbus surrounded her. "Or this?" She shimmered, and then the wolf was gone. Standing in its place was a tawny-haired, golden-eyed woman in a brown dress.

"Mother!" Aunt Pol exclaimed.

"You're no more observant than your father, Polgara," Po-ledra said reprovingly. "Garion has known for quite some time now."

Belgarath, however, was staring in horror at the puppy.

"Oh, don't be silly, old man," his wife told him, "You know that

we're mated for life. The puppy was weak and sick, so the pack had to leave him behind. I cared for him, that's all."

The smile on the face of the Seeress of Kell was gentle. "This is the Woman Who Watches, Ancient Belgarath," she said. "Now is thy company complete. Know, however, that she is ever with thee, as she has always been."

Part Three

THE HIGH

PLACES OF KORIM

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Garion had seen his grandmother—or her image—several times, but the similarity of her features to Aunt Polls seemed uncanny. There were differences, of course. Aunt Pol's hair, except for that white lock at her brow, was dark, almost black, and her eyes were a deep, deep blue. Poledra, on the other hand, had tawny hair, hovering nearly on the verge of being as blond as Velvet's, and her eyes were as golden as the eyes of a wolf. The features of the two women, however, were almost identical, as had been, the one time Garion had seen her image, the features of Aunt Pol's sister, Beldaran. Belgarath, his wife, and his daughter had withdrawn to the far side of the room, and Beldin, his tears glistening through his scowl, had placed himself squarely between them and the others in the room to guard their privacy during their reunion.

"Who is she?" Zakath asked Garion in puzzlement.

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"She's my grandmother," Garion replied simply, "Belgar-ath's wife."

"I didn't know he had a wife."

"Where did you think Aunt Pol came from?"

"I guess I hadn't thought of that." Zakath looked around, noting that both Ce'Nedra and Velvet were dabbing at their eyes with wispy little handkerchiefs.

"Why is everyone so misty-eyed?" he asked.

"We all thought that she had died in childbirth when Aunt Pol and her sister Beldaran were born."

"And how long ago was that?"

"Aunt Pol is over three thousand years old." Garion shrugged.

Zakath began to tremble. "And Belgarath's been grieving all that time?-"

"Yes." Garion didn't really want to talk just then. All he wanted to do was to drink in the radiant faces of his family. The word came to him unbidden, and he suddenly remembered that bleak tune after he had first learned that Aunt Pol was not, strictly speaking, his aunt. He had felt then so terribly alone— an orphan in the most dreadful sense of the word. It had taken years, but now everything was all right. His family was nearly complete. Belgarath, Poledra, and Aunt Pol did not speak, for speech was largely unnecessary. Instead they simply sat in chairs drawn closely together gazing into each other's faces and holding hands. Garion could only faintly begin to understand the intensity of their emotions. He did not, however, feel cut off from them, but rather seemed somehow to share their joy.

Durnik crossed the room to the rest of them. Even solid, practical Durnik's eyes shone with unshed tears. "Why don't we leave them alone?" he suggested. "It's a good time to get the packing done anyway. We have a ship to catch, you know."

"She said you knew," Ce'Nedra said accusingly to Garion when they had returned to their room.

"Yes," he admitted.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"She asked me to keep it to myself."

"That doesn't apply to your own wife, Garion."

"It doesn't?" he asked in feigned surprise. "When did they pass that rule?"

"I just made it up," she admitted. "Oh, Garion," she said then, throwing her arms about his neck and kissing him, "I do love you."

"I certainly hope so. Shall we pack?"

The corridors of the royal palace here in Perivor were cool as Garion and Ce'Nedra returned to the central room, and the arched embrasures admitted golden morning sunlight as if even the elements were bestowing a benediction on what was, after all, a special, even sacred, day.

When they had all gathered once again, Belgarath and his wife and daughter had composed themselves enough so that they welcomed company.

"Would you like to have me introduce them, mother?" Aunt Pol asked.

"I know all of them, Polgara," Poledra replied. "I've been with you for quite some time, remember?"

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I wanted to see if you could figure it out for yourself. You disappointed me just a bit, Polgara."

"Mother," Aunt Pol protested, "not in front of the children."

They both laughed that same warm, rich laugh. "Ladies and gentlemen," Polgara said then, "this is my mother, Poledra."

They crowded around the tawny-haired legend. Silk extravagantly kissed her hand. "I suppose, Lady Poledra," he said slyly, "we should congratulate Belgarath. All things considered, I think you got the worst of that bargain. You daughter's been trying to reform him for about three eons now without much notable success."

Poledra smiled. "One has perhaps greater resources at one's command than one's daughter, Prince Kheldar." She lapsed, it seemed, unconsciously into her previous mode of speech.

"All right, Poledra," Beldin growled, stumping forward, "what really happened? After the girls were born, our Master came to us and told us that you were no longer with us. We all thought he meant that you had died. The twins cried for two straight months, and that left me to try to cope with the babies. What really happened?"

"Aldur didn't tie to you, Beldin," she replied calmly. "In a very real sense, I was no longer with you. You see, shortly after the girls were born, Aldur and UL came to me. They said they had a great task for me but that it would involve an equally great sacrifice. I would have to leave you all behind to prepare for the task. At first, I refused, but when they explained the task to me, I had no choice but to agree. I turned my back on the Vale and went with UL to Prolgu to receive instruction. From time to time

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he'd relent and let me go unobserved out into the world to see how my family was doing." She looked rather firmly at Belgarath. "You and I have much to discuss, Old Wolf," she told him.

Belgarath winced. v

"I don't suppose you could give us some enlightenment about this momentous task?" Sadi suggested mildly.

"I'm afraid not."

"I didn't think so," the eunuch murmured.

"Eriond," Poledra said then, greeting the blond-haired young man.

"Poledra," he responded. Eriond-, as always, seemed unsurprised by this turn of events. Eriond, Garion had noticed, was never surprised.

"You've grown since we last met," she noted.

"I suppose I have," he agreed.

"Are you ready?"

The question sent a chill through Garion as he suddenly remembered the strange dream he had had the night before his true identity had been revealed.

There was a polite knock on the door. Dumik answered it and found an armored knight standing outside. "His Majesty hath dispatched me to advise thee and thy companions that thy ship awaiteth thee in the harbor, my Lord," the knight said.

"I'm not a—" Durnik started.

"Let it be, Durnik," Silk told him. "Sir Knight," he said to the armored man at the door, "where might we find his Majesty? We would take our leave of him and thank him for his many kindnesses,"

"His Majesty doth await thee and thy companions at the harbor, my Lord. He would bid ye all farewell there and see ye off on the great adventure which doth lie in store for ye."

"We will make haste then, Sir Knight," the little man promised. "It were discourteous of us in the extreme to keep one of the paramount monarchs of the world awaiting our arrival. Thou hast performed thine appointed task in manner which does thee credit, Sir Knight, and we are all in thy debt."

The knight bowed, beaming. Then he went back down the hallway.

"Where did you ever learn to speak like that, Kheldar?" Velvet asked in some surprise.

"Ah, dear Lady," Silk replied with outrageous extravagance, "knowest thou not that the poet doth lurk beneath the most common exterior? And it please thee, I will deliver unto thee

fulsome compliments upon thine every ravishing and unsurpassed part." He eyed her up and down suggestively.

"Kheldar!" she exclaimed, blushing bright red.

"That's sort of fun, you know," Silk said, referring to the archaic speech—at least Garion hoped that was what he was referring to. "Once you learn how to wrap your tongue around the 'haths,' and 'doths,' and 'forasmuches,' it has a certain ring and cadence to it, doesn't it?"

"We're surrounded by charlatans, mother." Polgara sighed.

"Belgarath," Dumik said seriously, "there's not much point in taking the horses, is there? What I mean is that we're going to be

clambering over rocks and wading in surf when we get to the reef. Wouldn't the horses just be in the way?"

"You're probably right, Dumik," the old man agreed.

"I'll go down to the stables and talk with the grooms," the smith said. "The rest of you go on ahead. I'll catch up." He turned and left the room.

"An eminently practical man," Poledra observed.

"The poet, however, doth lurk beneath that most practical of exteriors, Mother—" Polgara smiled "--and thou woudst not believe how much pleasure I take in that aspect of him."

"I think it's time for us to get off this island, Old Wolf," Poledra said wryly. "Two more days and they'll all be sitting around composing bad poetry."

Servants arrived then to carry their packs to the harbor, and Garion and his companions trooped through the halls of the palace and out into the streets of Dal Perivor. Although the morning had dawned bright and sunny, a bank of heavy clouds had begun to build up off to the west, heavy, purple clouds that spoke eloquently of the likelihood of bad weather over Korim.

"I suppose we should have known." Silk sighed. "Once—just once—I'd like to see one of these stupendous events happen in good weather."

Garion fully understood what lay behind the apparently tight-hearted banter. None of them approached tomorrow without a certain apprehension. The pronouncement Cyradis had made at Rheon that one of them would not survive the meeting lay heavily on each of their minds, and in the fashion as old as man himself, each tried to make light of his fears. That reminded him of something, and he dropped back to have a word with the Seeress of Kell. "Cyradis," he said to the blindfolded girl, "should Zakath and I wear our armor when we get to the reef?" He plucked at the front of the doublet he had put on with

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some relief that morning in the hope that he might never again be obliged to encase himself in steel. "What I'm getting at is that if the meeting is going to be entirely spiritual, there's no real need for it, is there? But if there's a possibility of some ; fighting, we should probably be prepared, shouldn't we?"

"Thou art as transparent as glass, Belgarion of Riva," she said, chiding him gently, "Thou thinkest to trick answers from me to ' questions which I am forbidden to discuss with thee. Do as it pleaseth thee, King of Riva. Prudence, however, doth suggest that a bit of

steel here and mere in thine apparel might not be inappropriate when approaching a situation where surprises might await thee."

"I wUl be guided by thee." Garion grinned. "Thy prudent advice seemeth to me the course of wisdom."

"Makestthou a rather feeble attempt at humor, Belgarion?"

"Would I do that, Holy Seeress?" He grinned at her and strode back to where Belgarath and Poledra walked hand in hand just behind Zakath and Sadi. "Grandfather, I think I just man- r aged to sneak an answer out of Cyradis," he said.

"That might be a first," the old man replied. :

"I think there might be some fighting when we get to the | reef. I asked her if Zakath and I should wear armor when we i get there. She didn't answer me directly, but she said that it might not be a bad idea—just in case."

' 'You might want to pass that on to the others. Let's not have them walking into something blind."

"I'll do that."

The king, along with most of his gaily clad court, awaited them on a long wharf extending out into the choppy waters of , the harbor. Despite the temperate morning, the king wore an ' ermine robe and a heavy gold crown. "Gladly do I greet thee and thy noble companions, Belgarion of Riva," he declaimed, "and in sadness do I await thy departure. Many here have pled with me that I might permit them also to speak to this matter, but in thy behalf I have steadfastly refused such permission, knowing full well the urgency of thy quest."

"Thou art a true and faithful friend, your Majesty," Garion said with genuine gratitude at being spared a morning of windy speeches. He clasped the king's hand warmly. "Know that if the Gods grant us victory on the morrow, we will return straightaway to this happy isle so that we may more fulsomely express our gratitude to thee and the members of thy court who have all treated us with such noble courtesy.'" Besides, they had to come back for the horses anyway. "And now, your Majesty, our fate

awaits us. We must, with scant and niggard farewell, take ship to go forth with resolute hearts to meet that fate. An it please the Gods, we shall return anon. Good-bye, my friend."

"Fare thee well, Belgarion of Riva," the king said in a voice near to tears. "May the Gods grant thee and thy companions victory."

"Pray that it may be so." Garion turned with a rather melodramatic swirl of his cloak and led his friends up the gangway. He glanced back over his shoulder and saw Durnik pushing his way through the crowd. That would help. As soon as the smith was on board, Garion could give the order to cast off all lines and thus avoid the necessity of more extended farewells shouted across the ship's rail.

Directly behind Durnik came die several carts carrying their packs. Their belongings were quickly transferred to the ship, and Garion went aft to speak with the captain, a grizzled old seaman with a weathered face.

Unlike western vessels, whose bare plank decks were usually holystoned into some semblance of whiteness, the quarterdeck and its surrounding railings were finished with a dark, glossy varnish, and snowy ropes hung in neat coils from highly polished- belaying pins. The effect was almost ostentatiously neat, evidence that the vessel's master took great pride in his ship. The captain himself wore a somewhat weathered blue doublet. He was, after all, in port. A jaunty velvet cap was cocked rakishly over one of his ears.

"I guess that's everything, Captain," Garion said. "We may as well cast off and get clear of the harbor before the tide turns."

"You've been to sea before, I see, young master," the captain said approvingly. "I hope your friends have, as well. It's always a trial to have landsmen aboard. They never seem to realize that throwing up into the wind isn't a good idea." He raised his voice to an ear-splitting bellow. "Cast off all lines! Prepare to make sail!"

"Your speech doesn't seem to be that of the island, Captain," Garion observed.

"I 'd be surprised if it were, young master. I 'm from the Mel-cene Islands. About twenty years ago, there were some ugly rumors about me being circulated in some quarters back home, so I thought it might be prudent to absent myself for a while. I came here. You wouldn't believe what these people were calling a ship when I got here."

' 'Sort of like a seagoing castle?' ' Garion suggested.

"You've seen them then?"

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"In another part of the world.' "

"Make sail!" the captain roared at his crew. "There, young master." He grinned at Garion. "I'll have you out of earshot in no time at all. That should spare us all that drasty 'eloquence. Where was I? Oh, yes. When I got here, the ships of Perivor were so top-heavy that a good sneeze would capsize them. Would you believe it only took me five years to explain that to these people?"

"You must have been amazingly eloquent, Captain." Garion laughed.

"A bout or two with belaying pins helped a bit," the captain conceded. "Finally I had to issue a challenge, though. None of these blockheads can refuse a challenge, so I proposed a race around the island. Twenty ships started out, and only mine finished. They started listening about then. I spent the next five years in the yards supervising construction. Then the king finally let me go back to sea. I got me a baronetcy out of it-not that it matters. I think

IVe even got a castle somewhere."

A brazen blast came from the wharf as, in true Mimbrate fashion, the knights of the king's court saluted them on their horns. "Isn't that pitiful?" the captain said. "I don't think there's a man on the whole island who can carry a tune." He looked appraisingly at Garion. "I heard tell that you're making for the Turim reef."

"Korim reef," Garion corrected absently.

"You've been listening to the landsmen, I see. They can't even pronounce the name right. Anyway, before you get your mind set in stone about where you want to land, send for me. There's some very ugly water around that reef. It's not the sort of place where you want to make mistakes, and IVe got some fairly accurate charts."

"The king told us there weren't any charts of the reef."

The captain winked slyly. "The rumors I mentioned earlier stirred some ship captains to try to follow me," he admitted, "although 'chase' would probably be a more accurate word. Rewards cause that sort of thing sometimes. Anyhow, I was passing near the reef in calm weather once, and I decided to take some soundings. It never hurts to have a place to hide where others are afraid to follow you."

"What's your name, Captain?" Garion asked him.

"Kresca, young master."

"I think we can drop that. Garion will do just fine."

"Whatever you like, Garion. Now get oifmy quarterdeck so I can maneuver this old tub out of the harbor. *'

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The speech was different, and it was halfway around the world, but Captain Kresca was so much like Barak's friend Grel-dik that Garion felt suddenly very secure. He went below to join the others. "WeVe had a bit of luck," he told them. "Our captain is a Melcene. He's not overburdened with scruples, but he has got charts of the reef. He's probably the only man in these waters who does. He's offered to advise us when the time comes to decide on where we want to land."

"That was helpful of him," Silk said.

"Maybe, but I think his main concern is not ripping the bottom out of his ship."

"I can relate to that," Silk said. "As long as I'm on board, anyway."

"I'm going back up on deck," Garion said then. "Staying in a stuffy compartment on the first day of a voyage always makes me a little queasy for some reason."

"And you 're the ruler of an island? " Poledra said.

"It's just a question of getting adjusted, Grandmother."

"Of course."

The sea and sky were unsettled. The heavy cloud bank was still coming in from the west, sending long, ponderous combers rolling in from that direction, waves that had in all probability started somewhere off the east coast of Cthol Murgos. Although, as king of an island nation, Garion knew that the phenomenon was not unusual, he nonetheless felt a certain sense of superstitious apprehension when he saw that the surface winds were moving westward while those aloft, as proclaimed by the movement of the clouds, moved east. He had seen this happen many times before, but this time he could not be positive that the weather was responding to natural causes or to something else. Idly he wondered what those two eternal awarenesses might have done had he and his friends not found a ship. He had a momentary vision of the sea parting to provide a broad highway across its bottom, a highway littered with startled fish. He began to feel less and less in charge of his own destiny. Even as he had on the long trek to Cthol Mishrak, he became increasingly certain that the two prophecies were herding him toward Korim for a meeting that, though he himself might not have chosen it, was the ultimate Event toward which the entire universe had been yearning since the beginning of days. A plaintive "Why me?" hovered on his lips.

And then Ce'Nedra was there, burrowing under his arm as she had during those first few heady days when they had finally discovered that they did, in fact, love each other. "What are

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you thinking about, Garion?" she asked softly. She had changed out of the antique green satin gown she had worn at the palace and now wore a gray dress of utilitarian wool.

"I'm not, really. Probably worrying comes a lot closer."

"What's there to worry about? We're going to win, aren't we?"

' 'That hasn't been decided yet.' '

"Of course you're going to win. You always do."

"This time's a little different, Ce'Nedra." He sighed. "It's not just the meeting, though. I've got to choose my successor, and the one I choose is going to be the new Child of Light—and most probably a God. If I pick the wrong person, it's possible that I'll create a God who'll be an absolute disaster. Could you imagine Silk as a God? He'd be out there picking the pockets of the other Gods and inscribing off-color jokes in the constellations."

"He doesn't really seem to have the right kind of temperament for it," she agreed. "I like him well enough, but I'm afraid UL might disapprove very strongly. What else is bothering you?"

"You know what else. One of us isn't going to live through tomorrow.'"

"You don't really have to concern yourself about that, Gar-ion," she said wistfully. "It's going to be me. I've known that from the very beginning."

"Don't be absurd. I can make sure it's not you."

"Oh? How?"

"I'll just tell them that I won't make the Choice if they hurt you in any way."

"Garion!" she gasped. "You can't do that! You'll destroy the universe if you do!"

"So what? The universe doesn't mean anything to me without you, you know."

"That's very sweet, but you can't do it. You wouldn't do it anyway. You've got too great a sense of responsibility."

"What makes you think you're going to be the one?"

"The tasks, Garion. Every one of us has a task—some of us more than one. Belgarath had to find out where the meeting's going to take place. Velvet had to kill Harakan. Even Sadi had a task. He had to kill Naradas. I have no task—except to die."

Garion decided at that point to tell her. "You did have a task, Ce'Nedra," he told her, "and you did it very well."

"What are you talking about?"

"You wouldn't remember it. After we left Kell, you were very drowsy for several days."

"Yes, I remember that."

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"It wasn't because you were sleepy. Zandramas was tampering with your mind. She's done it before. You remember that you got sick on your way to Rak Hagga?"

"Yes."

"It was a different kind of sickness, but it was Zandramas again. She's been trying to take control of you for more than a year now."

Ce'Nedra stared at him.

"Anyway, after we left Kell, she managed to put your mind to sleep. You wandered off and, out there in the forest, you thought you met Arell."

"Arell? She's dead."

"I know, but you thought you met her all the same, and she gave you what you thought was our baby. Then this supposed Arell asked you some questions, and you answered them."

"What kind of questions?"

"Zandramas had to find out where the meeting was supposed to take place, and she couldn't go to Kell. She posed as Arell so she could ask you those questions. You told her about Perivor, about the map, and about Korim. That was your task."

"I betrayed you?" Her look was stricken.

"No. You saved the universe. Zandramas absolutely has to be at Korim at the right time. Somebody had to tell her where to go, and that was your task."

"I don't remember any of this."

"Of course not. Aunt Pol erased the memory of it from your mind. It wasn't really your fault, and you'd have been overcome with remorse if you'd been able to remember what happened."

"I still betrayed you."

"You did what had to be done, Ce'Nedra." Garion smiled a bit wistfully. "You know, both sides in this have been trying to do the same thing. We—and Zandramas, of course—have been trying to find Korim and to keep the other side from finding out where it is so that we can win by default. It was never going to happen that way, though. The meeting absolutely has to take place before Cyradis can choose. The prophecies weren't going to let it happen any other way. Both sides have wasted a great deal of effort trying to do something that simply could not be done. We should have all realized that from the very beginning. We could have saved ourselves a lot of trouble. About the only consolation I have is that Zandramas wasted a lot more effort than we did."

"I'm still certain that it's going to be me."

"Nonsense."

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"I just hope they let me hold my baby before I die," she said sadly.

"You're not going to die, Ce'Nedra."

She ignored him. "I want you to take care of yourself, Gar-ion," she said firmly. "Be sure that you eat right, dress warmly in winter, and make sure that our son doesn't forget me."

"Ce'Nedra, will you stop this?"

"One last thing, Garion," she plowed on relentlessly. "After I've been gone for a while, I want you to marry again. I don't want you moping around the way Belgarath has for the last three thousand years."

"Absolutely not. Besides, nothing's going to happen to you."

"We'll see. Promise, Garion. You weren't meant to be alone, and you need somebody to take care of you."

"Have you almost finished with this?" It was Poledra. She stepped out from behind the foremast in a businesslike way. "It's all very pretty and sweetly melancholy, I'm sure, but isn't it just a trifle overdramatic? Garion's right, Ce'Nedra. Nothing's going to happen to you, so why don't you fold up all this nobility and put it away in a closet someplace?"

"I know what I know, Poledra," Ce'Nedra said stubbornly.

"I hope you won't be too disappointed when you wake up the day after tomorrow and find that you're in perfect health."

"Who's it going to be, then?"

"Me," Poledra said simply. "I've known about it for over three thousand years now, so I've had time to get used to it. At least I have this day with the ones I love before I have to leave for good. Ce'Nedra, that wind is very chilly. Let's go below before you catch cold."

"She's just like your Aunt Pol, isn't she?" Ce'Nedra said over her shoulder as Poledra firmly led her toward the stair leading belowdecks.

"Naturally," Garion called back.

"It's started, I see," Silk said from not far away.

"What's started?"

"The gushy farewells. Just about everybody's convinced that he's the one who won't see the sun go down tomorrow. I'd imagine that they'll all come up here one by one to say good-bye to you. I thought I'd be first—sort of to get it out of the way—but Ce'Nedra beat me to it."

"You? Nothing could kill you, Silk. You're too lucky."

"I've made my own luck, Garion. It's not that hard to tamper with dice." The little man's face grew reflective. "We've really

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had some good times, haven't we? I think they outweigh the bad ones, and that's about all a man can hope for."

"You're as maudlin as Ce'Nedra and my grandmother were."

"It does sort of seem that way, doesn't it? And that's very unbecoming. Don't be too sad about it, Garion. If I do happen to be the one, it should spare me the discomfort of making a very unpleasant decision.'"

"Oh? What decision is that?"

"You know my views on marriage, don't you?"

"Oh, yes. You've spoken on the subject many, many times."

Silk sighed. "All that to the contrary, I think I'm going to have to make up my mind about Liselle."

"I wondered how long that would take you."

"You knew?" Silk looked surprised.

"Everybody knew, Silk. She set out to get you, and she did exactly that."

"That's depressing—to get trapped finally when I'm in my dotage."

"I'd hardly say you're that far gone."

"I must be even to be considering something like this," Silk said moodily. "Liselle and I could continue to go on the way we have been, I suppose, but sneaking down hallways to her bedroom in the middle of the night seems a little disrespectful for some reason, and I'm too fond of her for that."

"Fond?"

"All right then," Silk snapped. "I'm in love with her. Does it make you feel better to have me come right out and say it?"

"I just wanted to get it clear, that's all. Is this the first time you've admitted it—even to yourself?"

"I've been trying to avoid that. Do you suppose we could talk about something else?" He looked around. "I wish he'd go find another piece of air to fly in," he said in a grouchy tone of voice.

"Who?"

"That blasted albatross. He's back again." Silk pointed. Gar-ion, turned and saw the white seabird with its enormous wings Oil station once more just ahead of the bowsprit. The cloud bank to the west had grown more and more purpie as the morning had progressed, and against that backdrop the snowy bird .seemed almost to glow with an unearthly incandescence.

"That's very strange," Garion said.

"I just wish I knew what he was up to," Silk said. "I'm going below. I don't want to look at him anymore." He took

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Garion's hand in his. "We've had fun," he said gruffly. "Take care of yourself."

"You don't have to leave."

"I have to make room for all the others waiting in line to see you, your Majesty." Silk grinned. "I think you're in for a depressing day. I'm going to go find out if Beldin's found an ale barrel yet." With a jaunty wave, the little man turned and went to the stairway leading below.

Silk's prediction proved to be all too accurate. One by one, Garion's friends came up on deck to take leave of him, each firmly convinced that he would be the one to die. All in all, it was a very gloomy day.

It was almost twilight when the last of the self-composed epitaphs had been completed. Garion leaned on the rail, looking back at the phosphorescent wake glowing behind their ship.

"Bad day, I take it?" It was Silk again.

"Dreadful. Did Beldin find any ale?"

"I don't recommend any of that for you. You'll need your wits about you tomorrow. I just came up to make sure that all the gloom your friends have been piling on you doesn't make you start thinking about drowning yourself." Silk frowned. "What's that?" he asked.

"What's what?"

"That booming noise." He looked toward the bow. "There it is," he said tensely.

The purple sky had turned almost black with the onset of evening, a black pierced here and there with patches of angry red, the light of the setting sun glowing through the clouds. There was a rusty-colored blur low on the horizon, a blur that seemed to be wearing a white necklace of frothy surf.

Captain Kresca came forward with the rolling walk of a man who spends little time ashore. "That's it, good masters," he told them. "That's the reef."

Garion stared out at the Place Which Is No More, his thoughts and emotions stumbling over each other.

And then the albatross gave a strange cry, a cry that seemed almost triumphant. The great pearly-white bird dipped its pinions once, then continued toward Korim on seemingly motionless wings.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Oskatat the Seneschal moved with a certain deliberate speed through the corridors of the Drojim Palace toward the throne room of Urgit, high King of Cthol Murgos. Oskatat's scarred face was bleak, and his mind was troubled. He stopped before the closely guarded door to the throne room. "I will speak with his Majesty," he declared.

The guards hastily opened the door for him. Although by mutual agreement between himself and King Urgit, Oskatat still bore only the title of Seneschal, the guards, like everyone else in the palace, recognized the fact that he was second only to the king himself in authority in Cthol Murgos.

He found his rat-faced monarch in light conversation with Queen Praia and Queen Mother Tamazin, Oskatat's own wife. "Ah, there you are, Oskatat," Urgit said. "Now my little family is complete. We've been discussing some extensive remodeling of the Drojim Palace. All these jewels and the tons of gold

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on the ceilings are in terribly bad taste, wouldn't you say? Besides, I need the money I'll be able to get for all that trash for the war effort."

"Something important has come up, Urgit," Oskatat told his king. By royal command, Oskatat always called his king by his first name in private conversations.

"That's depressing," Urgit said, sprawling deeper into the cushions on his throne. Taur Urgas, Urgit's supposed father, had scornfully rejected such comforts as cushions, preferring to set an example of Murgo hardihood by sitting for hours on cold stone. About all that brainless gesture had gained the mad king had been a fistula, which had added quite noticeably in the later years of his life to his irritability.

"Sit up straight, Urgit," Lady Tamazin, the king's mother, said absently.

"Yes, mother," Urgit replied, straightening slightly on his throne. "Go ahead, Oskatat," he said, "but please drop it on me gently. Lately I've noticed that 'important things' usually turn out to be disasters."

"I've been in contact with Jaharb, Chief Elder of the Da-gashi," Oskatat reported. "At my request, he's been trying to pinpoint the location of Agachak the Hierarch. We've finally found him—or at least found the port he sailed from when he left Cthol Murgos."

"Astonishing," Urgit said with a broad grin. "For once you've

actually brought me some good news. So Agachak has left Cthol Murgos. We can hope that it's his intention to sail off the edge of the world. I'm glad you told me about this, Oskatat. I'll sleep much better now that that walking corpse no longer contaminates what's left of my kingdom. Were Jaharb's spies able to find out his intended destination?"

"He's bound for Mallorea, Urgit. Judging from his actions, he appears to believe that the Sardion is there. He went to Thull Mardu and pressured King Nathel into accompanying him."

Urgit suddenly laughed uproariously. "He actually did it!" he exclaimed with delight.

"I don't quite follow you."

"I suggested to him once that he take Nathel instead of me when he went after the Sardion. Now he's saddled himself with that cretin. I'd give a great deal to listen to some of their conversations. If he happens to succeed, he'll make Nathel Over-king of Angarak, and Nathel can't even tie his own shoes."

"You don't actually think Agachak will succeed, do you?"

Queen Praia said, a slight frown creasing her flawless brow. Queen Praia was several months gone with child, and she'd taken flHvorrying about things lately.

"Win?" Urgit snorted. "He hasn't got a chance. He has to get past Belgarion first—not to mention Belgarath and Polgara. They'll incinerate him." He smiled sardonically. "It's so nice to have powerful friends." He stopped, frowning slightly. "We really ought to warn Belgarion, though—and Kheldar," he added. He sprawled down into his cushions again. ' 'The last we heard, Belgarion and his friends had left Rak Hagga with Kal Zakath. Our best guess was that they were going to Mal Zeth, either as guests or as prisoners.' ' He pulled at his long, pointed nose. "I know Belgarion well enough to know that he's not the sort to stay a prisoner for very long, though. Zakath probably knows where he is, however. Oskatat, is there any way we can get a Dagashi to Mal Zeth?"

' 'We could try, Urgit, but our chances of success wouldn't be too good, and a Dagashi might have some difficulty getting in to see the Emperor, Zakath's got a civil war on his hands, so he's likely to be a bit preoccupied."

"That's true, isn't it?" Urgit tapped his fingers on the arm of his throne. "He's still keeping abreast of what's happening here in Cthol Murgos, though, wouldn't you say?"

"Undoubtedly."

' 'Why not let him be our messenger to Belgarion then?'

"You're moving a little fast for me, Urgit," Oskatat confessed.

"What's the nearest town occupied by the Malloreans?"

"They still have a reduced garrison at Rak Cthaka. We could overwhelm them in a few hours, but we haven't wanted to give Zakath any reason to return to Cthol Murgos in force."

Urgit shuddered. "I'm very strongly inclined toward that line of thinking myself," he admitted, "but I owe Belgarion several favors, and I want to protect my brother as much as I can. I'll tell you what you do, Oskatat. Take about three army corps and run on down to Rak Cthaka. Malloreans out in the countryside will run off to Rak Hagga to pass the word on to Kal Zakath that we're beginning to attack his cities. That should get his attention. Mill around outside the city for a while, then surround the place. Ask for a parlay with the garrison commander. Explain the situation to him. I'll compose a letter to Kal Zakath pointing out a certain community of interest in this affair. I'm sure he doesn't want Agachak in Mallorea any more than I want the old

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magician here in Cthol Murgos. I'll suggest in the strongest terms that he pass the word on to Belgarion. The word he'll have already received about our hostile actions will guarantee that he'll at least look at my letter. He'll get in touch with Belgarion, and then we can both sit back and watch the Godslayer solve our problem for us." He grinned suddenly. "Who knows? This might even be the first step toward a reconciliation between his Imperial Implacableness and me. I really think it's time for An-garaks to stop killing each other."

' 'Can't you squeeze any more speed out of her?' ' King Anheg demanded of Captain Grelidik.

"Of course, Anheg," Grelidik growled. "I could crowd on more sail, and we'll be as swift as an arrow—for about five minutes. Then the masts will break, and we'll go back to rowing. Which shift should I put you down for?"

"Grelidik, have you ever heard the term 'lfse-majestf'?"

"YouVe mentioned it frequently, Anheg, but you should take a look at maritime law sometime. When we're on board this ship and at sea, I have even more absolute authority than you've got in Val Alorn. If I tell you to row, you'll row—or swim."

Anheg walked away, muttering curses under his breath.

"Any luck?" Emperor Varana asked as the Alorn king approached the bow.

"He told me to mind my own business," Anheg grunted. "Then he offered to let me man an oar if I was in such a hurry."

"Have you ever manned an oar before? "

"Once. Chereks are a seagoing people, and my father thought it would be educational for me to make a voyage as a deckhand. I didn't mind the rowing so much. It was the flogging that irritated me."

"They actually flogged the crown prince?" Varana asked incredulously.

"It's very hard to see an oarsman's lace when you're coming up behind him." Anheg shrugged. "The oarsmaster was trying to get more speed out of us. We were pursuing a Tolnedran merchantman at the time, and we didn't want her to reach the safety of Tblnedran territorial waters."

"Anheg!" Varana exclaimed.

"That was years ago, Varana. I've given orders now that Tblnedran vessels are not to be molested—at least not in the sight of witnesses. The whole point of this is that Grelidik's

probably right. If he puts on all sail, the wind will uproot his masts, and you and I'll both wind up rowing."

"We don't have much chance of catching up with Barak, then, do we?"

"I'm not so sure. Barak's not nearly as good a sailor as Grelidik is, and that oversized tub of his isn't very responsive to the helm. We're gaining on him every day. When he gets to Mal-lorea, he's going to have to stop in every port to ask questions. Most Malloreans wouldn't recognize Garion if he walked up and spat in their eyes. Kheldar's another matter, though. I understand that the little thief has branch offices in most of the cities and towns in Mallorea. I know how Barak thinks. As soon as he gets to Mallorea, he's going to go looking for Silk, since Silk and Garion are obviously going to be together. I don't have to ask about Silk, though. All I've got to do is describe the Seabird to waterfront loafers in just a few towns. For the price of a few tankards of ale, I'll be able to follow Barak wherever he goes. Hopefully we'll catch up with him before he finds Garion and ruins everything. I just wish that blind girl hadn't told him he couldn't go along. The fastest way I know of to get Barak to do something is to forbid him to do it. If he was with Garion, at least Belgarath would be there to keep him under control."

"How do you propose to stop him even if we do catch up with him? His ship may be slower than this one, but it's also bigger, and it carries more men."

"Grelidik and I have worked that out," Anheg replied. "Grelidik's got a special piece of equipment in his forward hold. It bolts to the bow of this ship. If Barak refuses to come about when I order him to, Grelidik's going to ram him. He won't go very fast in a sinking ship."

"Anheg, that's monstrous!"

"So's what Barak's trying to do. If he succeeds in breaking through to Garion, Zandramas will win, and we'll all end up under the heel of somebody worse than Torak was. If I have to sink Seabird to avoid that, I'll do it ten times over." He sighed. "I'll miss my cousin,

though, in case he gets drowned," he admitted.

Queen Porenn of Drasnia had summoned Margrave Khen-don, the chief of her intelligence service, to her private chambers that morning and issued her commands in no uncertain terms. "Every one of them, Javelin," she had said in a peremptory-

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tory tone, "I want every single spy out of this wing of the palace for the rest of the day."

"Porenn!" Javelin had gasped. "That's unheard of! "

"Not really. You just heard it—from me. Tell your people to sweep all the unofficial spies out, as well. I want this wing of the palace totally unpopulated within the hour. I have spies of my own, Javelin, and I know where all the usual hiding places are. Clean out every one of them."

"I'm bitterly disappointed in you, Porenn. Monarchs simply don't treat the intelligence service in this fashion. Have you any idea of what this is going to do to my people's morale?"

"Frankly, Khendon, I couldn't care less about the morale of your professional snoops. This is a matter of supreme urgency."

"Has my service ever failed you, your Majesty?" Javelin's tone had been a bit offended.

"Twice that I recall. Didn't the Bear-cult infiltrate your service? And didn't your people fail abysmally to warn me about General Haldar's defection?"

Javelin had sighed. "All right, Porenn, sometimes a few minor things have escaped us."

"You call Haldar's going over to the Bear-cult minor?"

"You're being unnecessarily critical, Porenn,"

"I want this wing cleared, Javelin. Would you like to have me summon my son? We'll draw up a proclamation making the prohibition against spying on the royal family permanent."

"You wouldn't!" Javelin's face had turned absolutely white. "The whole service would collapse. The right to spy on the royal family has always been the highest reward for exemplary service. Most of my people jump at the chance." He frowned slightly. "Silk's turned it down three times already, though," he added.

"Then clear them out, Javelin—and don't forget the closet hidden

behind the tapestry in the corridor just outside."

"How did you find out about thafi"

"Ididn't. Kheva did, actually."

Javelin had groaned.

A few hours after that, Porenn sat impatiently in her sitting room with her son, King Kheva. Kheva was maturing rapidly now. His voice had settled into a resonant baritone, and a downy beard had begun to sprout on his cheeks. His mother, in somewhat marked contrast to most regents, had been gradually introducing him into state councils and negotiations with foreign powers. It would not be long now until she could gently guide

him to the forefront and gradually withdraw herself from her unwanted position of authority. Kheva would be a good king, she thought. He was very nearly as shrewd as his father had been and he had that most necessary trait in a reigning monarch,

good sense.

There was a rather heavy-handed pounding on the sitting-room door. "Yes?" Porenn replied.

"It's me, Porenn," a brash-sounding voice said. "Yarblek." v "Come in, Yarblek. We've got something to talk about." s, Yarblek pushed the door open, and he and Vella entered. | Porenn sighed. During the course of her visit to Gar og Nadrak, & Vella had reverted. She had shed the shallow veneer of gentility f?Porenn had labored so long to create, and her garb indicated f that she had once again become the wild, untameable creature 'I she had always been before.

| "What's all the rush, Porenn?" Yarblek said gruffly, dump-|ing his shabby felt coat and shaggy hat in the corner. "Your messenger almost killed his horse getting to me."

"Something urgent has come up," the Queen of Drasnia replied. "I think it concerns us all. I want you to keep it in strictest ^confidence, however."

"Confidence." Yarblek laughed derisively. "You know there f aren't any secrets in your palace, Porenn." ; "There is this time," Porenn said a bit smugly. "This mom-

:ing I ordered Javelin to clear all the spies out of this wing of die 'i palace."

Yarblek grinned. "How did he take it?" "Badly, I'm afraid."

"Good. He's been getting just a little too sure of himself flately. All right, let's get down to business. What's this prob-"tem?"

;- "In a moment. Did you find out what Drosta's been up to?" "Of course. He's trying to make peace with Zakath. He's been dealing-at a distance-with the Mallorean who's in charge [of their Bureau of Internal Affairs; Brador, I think his name is. Anyway, Drosta's been

letting Mallorean agents runnel through Gar og Nadrak to infiltrate the west.'

It was Yarblek's tone of voice more than anything that warned renn that there was more. "All of it, Yarblek. You're holding ngs back.'

Yarblek sighed. "I hate dealing with a clever woman," he implained. "It seems so unnatural for some reason." Then he prudently skipped out of the range of Vella's daggers. "All

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right.'

He gave up. ' 'Zakath needs money and lots of it to deal with the wars he's got on two different fronts. Drosta's cut the import duties on Mallorean carpets—at least to the merchants who pay taxes to Mal Zeth. Those Malloreans have been scalping Silk and me in the Arendish markets."

"I assume you took advantage of that information?"

"Naturally." He thought a moment. "Here's your chance to make a tidy profit, Porenn," he suggested. "Drosta's cut the import duties to the Malloreans by fifteen percent. You could raise your duties by the same amount. You'll make money, and Silk and I can stay competitive."

"I think you're trying to swindle me, Yarblek," Porenn said suspiciously.

"Me?"

"We'll talk about it later. Now, listen very carefully. This is the reason I sent for you. Barak, Mandorallen, Hettar, Lell-dorin, and Relg are sailing to Malloreia. We're not entirely positive, but we think they plan to intrude themselves in Belgarion's quest. You were there at Rheon, and you know what that Dala-sian Seeress told us. Those hotheads absolutely have to stay out of it."

"I'll certainly agree about that."

"How fast can you get a message to your people in Malloreia?"

"A few weeks. Maybe a little fester if I make it a top priority."

"This matter has the highest priority, Yarblek. Anheg and Varana are chasing Barak, but we can't be sure they'll catch him in time. We have to delay Barak, and the best way to do that is to feed him misinformation. I want you to instruct your people in Malloreia to tell Barak lies. Keep him going off in the wrong direction every chance you get. Barak will be following Khel-dar, so he'll be checking in at every one of your branch offices in Malloreia for information. If Kheldar and the others are going to Maga Renn or Penn Daka, have your people tell Barak thai he's going to Mal Dariya."

"I know the procedure, Porenn," Yarblek said. He squinted at her speculatively. "You'll be turning authority here in Drasnia over to his Majesty here fairly soon, won't you?" he asked her.

"In a few years, yes."

"When this business in Malloreia is concluded, I think Silk and I might want to have a long discussion with you."

"Oh?"

"What's your feeling about accepting a junior partnership in our operation—after your obligations here in Boktor have all been satisfied?"

"I'm very flattered, Yarblek. What possessed you to raise such a possibility? "

"You're very shrewd, Porenn, and you've got all sorts of contacts. We might even be prepared to go as high as a five percent share."

"Absolutely out of the question, Yarblek," King Kheva interrupted surprisingly. "The percentage would have to be at least twenty."

"Twenty?" Yarblek almost screamed.

"' I have to protect my mother's interests,'" Kheva said blandly. "She won't always be young, you know, and I'd hate to see her spend her declining years scrubbing floors."

"This is highway robbery, Kheva!" Yarblek's face had turned bright red.

"I'm not holding a knife to your throat, Yarblek," Kheva said. "It might really be better in the long run if mother went into business for herself anyway. She should be able to do very well—particularly in view of the fact that all members of the royal family are exempt from Drasnian import duties.'"

"I think you just stabbed yourself in the hand, Yarblek." Vella smirked. "As long as you're getting bad news today anyway, I might as well add my share. When this is all over, I want you to sell me."

"Sell you? To whom?"

"I'll tell you when the time comes."

"Has he got any money?"

"I really don't know, but that doesn't matter. I'll pay you your share of the price myself.'"

"You must really think a lot of him to make that kind of an offer."

"You have absolutely no idea, Yarblek. I was made for this man."

"We were told to stay here, Atesca," Bradorsaid stubbornly.

"That was before this long silence," General Atesca said, nervously pacing up and down in the large pavilion they shared. Atesca wore his uniform and his gold-inlaid steel breastplate. "The Emperor's well-being and safety are my responsibility."

"They're as much mine as they are yours." Brador was ab-

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sently rubbing the furry tummy of the half-grown cat lying ecstatic in his lap.

"All right, why aren't you doing something about it then? We haven't had word of him in weeks. Not even your intelligence network can tell us where he is."

"I know that, Atesca, but I'm not going to disobey an imperial command just because you're getting nervous—or bored."

' "Why don't you stay here and take care of the kittens, then?" ' Atesca said acidly. "I'm going to move the army out tomorrow morning."

"I didn't deserve that, Atesca."

"Sorry, Brador. This long silence is making me a little edgy, and I'm losing my grip on civility."

"I'm as concerned as you are, Atesca," Brador said, "but all of my training rises up in protest at the notion of flying directly in the face of an imperial command." The kitten in Brador's lap nuzzled at his fingers affectionately. "You know," he said, "I think that when his Majesty returns, I'll ask him if I can have this kitten. I'm really growing rather fond of her."

"That's up to you," Atesca said. "Trying to find homes for two or three litters of kittens every year might keep you out of trouble." The broken-nosed general tugged thoughtfully at one earlobe. "How about a compromise?" he suggested.

"I'm always willing to listen."

"All right. We know that Urvon's army has largely disbanded, and there's fairly strong presumptive evidence that Ur-von is dead."

"I'd say so, yes."

"And Zandramas has moved her forces into the Dalasian protectorates."

"That's what my people report."

"Now then, we're both senior officials in his Majesty's government, aren't we?"

"Yes."

"Doesn't that mean that we're expected to use our own initiative to take advantage of tactical situations that arise in the field without consulting Mal Zetn?"

"I suppose so. You've spent more time in the field than I have, though."

"It's standard practice, Brador. All right, then. Darshiva is virtually undefended. What I'm suggesting is that we restore order across the river in Peldane and move in to occupy Darshiva. That way we cut Zandramas off from her base of support."

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We set up a main line of resistance along the edge of those mountains to repel her forces if they try to return. We'll have effectively brought these two provinces back under imperial control. We might even get a few medals out of it."

"His Majesty would be rather pleased if that happened, wouldn't he?"

"He'd be overjoyed, Brador."

"I still don't see how occupying Darshiva is going to get us any closer to locating his Majesty."

"That's because you're not a military man. We have to keep track of the enemy. In this case, that means the Darshivan army. Standard military procedure in such situations is to send out patrols in force to make contact with the enemy to determine his strength and probable intentions. If those patrols should just happen to encounter the Emperor in the process, well—" He spread his hands eloquently.

"You'd have to brief the officers in command of those patrols rather thoroughly," Brador pointed out cautiously. "A green lieutenant might get flustered and blurt out things we'd rather not have the Emperor aware of."

"I said patrols in force, Brador." Atesca smiled. "I was thinking along the lines of full brigades. A brigade is commanded by a colonel, and I've got a number of fairly intelligent colonels."

Brador grinned at his friend. "When do we start?" he asked.

"Did you have anything planned for tomorrow morning?"

"Nothing that I can't postpone," Brador said.

* 'But why didn't you know it was coming?' Barak demanded of Drolag, his bosun. The two of them stood on the aft deck with the wind-driven rain sheeting almost horizontally across the rail to tear at their beards.

Drolag mopped at his face with one hand. "I haven't got the faintest idea, Barak," he admitted. "That leg has never failed me before."

Drolag was one of those unfortunates who at some time in the past had broken one of his legs—in Drolag's case it had happened in a tavern brawl. He had discovered not long after the bone had knit that the leg was extraordinarily sensitive to weather changes. He was able to predict the onset of bad weather with uncanny accuracy. His shipmates always watched him very closely. When Drolag winced with every step, they began searching the horizons for oncoming storms; when he limped, they shortened sail and began rigging safety lines; and

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when he fell down with a surprised cry of pain, they immediately battened down all hatches, rigged the sea anchor, and went below. Drolag had turned a temporary inconvenience into a lifetime career. He always commanded top pay, and nobody ever expected him to do any real work. All he had to do was pace the deck where everybody could watch him. The miraculous leg even made it possible for him to predict with some degree of certainty just exactly when a given storm would hit. But not this time. The storm that swept the Seabirtfs decks with wind and pelting rain had come unannounced, and Drolag was as surprised by its arrival as any man on board.

"You didn't get drunk and fall down and break it again, did you?" Barak demanded suspiciously. Barak had very little knowledge of human anatomy—except about where to hit someone with an axe or to run a sword through him that would have the desired, and usually fatal, results. The big red-bearded man reasoned somewhat foggily that if Drolag had achieved his weather sensitivity by breaking his leg, a second break might very well have taken it away again.

"No, of course I didn't, Barak," Drolag said disgustedly. "I'm not going to risk my livelihood for a few tankards of bad ale."

"How did the storm sneak up on you, then?"

"I don't know, Barak. Maybe it's not a natural storm. Some wizard may have summoned it. I don't know if my leg would react to something like that."

"That's always an easy excuse, Drolag," Barak scoffed. "Anytime an ignorant man can't explain something, he blames it on magic."

"I don't have to take this, Barak," Drolag said hotly. "I earn my way, but I tanot responsible for supernatural forces."

"Go below, Drolag," Barak told him. "Have a long talk with your leg and see if it can come up with a better excuse."

Drolag staggered down the pitching deck talking to himself.

Barak was in a foul humor. Everything seemed to be conspiring to delay him. Not long after he and his friends had witnessed Agachak's unpleasant demise, Seabird had struck a submerged log and sprung a seam. It had only been by dint of herculean bailing that they had been able to limp downriver to Dal Zerba and to haul the leaky ship up onto a mud bar for repairs. That chore had cost them two weeks,

and now this storm from nowhere added to the delay. Then Unrak came up from below, trailed by the dull-faced King of the Thulls. Unrak

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looked around with the wind clawing at his bright-red hair. "It doesn't seem to be letting up, does it, father?" he observed.

"Not noticeably."

"Hettar wants to talk with you."

"I've got to steer this big brute."

"The mate can do it, father. All he has to do is keep her bow into the wind. Hettar's been studying that map, and he thinks we're in danger."

"From this little storm? Don't be silly."

"Is Seabirtfs bottom strong enough to take on rocks?"

"We're in deep water."

"Not for long, I don't think. Just come below, father. Hettar can show you."

Grumbling, Barak turned the tiller over to the first mate and followed his son to the companionway leading below. Nathel, the King of the Thulls, trailed along behind them, his face incurious. Nathel was a bit older than Unrak, but he had taken to following Barak's red-haired son about like a stray puppy. Unrak was none too gracious to his unwanted companion.

"What's this all about, Hettar?" Barak demanded of his friend as he entered the cramped cabin.

"Come over here and have a look," the tall Algar said.

Barak strode to the bolted-down table and looked down at the map.

"We left Dal Zerba yesterday morning, right?"

"Yes. We'd have gotten away sooner if somebody'd been paying attention to what was lying under the surface of that river. I think I'll find out who was on bow watch that day and have him keel-hauled."

"What's keel-hauled?" Nathel asked Unrak.

"Something very unpleasant," the red-haired boy replied.

"I'd rather you didn't tell me, then. I don't like unpleasant stuff."

"Whatever you want, your Majesty." Unrak did have a few manners.

"Couldn't you just call me Nathel?" the Thull asked plaintively. "I'm not really a king anyway. Mother's the one who makes all the decisions."

"Anything you want, Nathel." Unrak said it with a certain pity.

"How far would you estimate we've come since yesterday?"

Hettar asked Barak.

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"Oh, maybe twenty leagues. We had to heave to last night because we're in strange waters."

"That puts us almost right here, doesn't it?" Hettar pointed at an ominous symbol on the map.

"We aren't anywhere near that reef, Hettar. We came about to southeast as soon as we came out of that estuary at the mouth of the river."

"But we haven't been going southeast, Barak. There seems to be a current that comes down along the west coast of Mal-lorea, and it's a fairly strong one. I've checked a few times. Your bow is pointed southeast, but the Seabird has been drifting sideways almost due south because of that current."

' 'When did you suddenly become such an expert on sailing?'

**I don't have to be, Barak. Take a stick of wood and throw it off your starboard side. Your ship will catch up with the stick in just a few minutes. We're definitely drifting south in spite of whichever direction your bow is pointed. I'd guess that within an hour we'll be able to hear the surf breaking on that reef.'

"I do confirm that our friend speaketh truth, my Lord of Trelheim," Mandorallen assured him. "I myself have witnessed his experiment with the stick. Truly, we are tending southward."

"What can we do?" Lelldorin asked a bit apprehensively.

Barak stared gloomily at the map. "We don't have any choice," he said. "We can't get back out into open sea in this storm. We'll have to drop both anchors and hope that we can find a bottom that'll hold us. Then we sit tight and ride it out. What's the name of that reef, Hettar?"

"ftirim," the Algar replied.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Like almost every other ship's cabin in all the world, the one on Captain Kresca's vessel was low and had dark-stained beams overhead.

The furniture was bolted to the floor, and oil lamps swung from the beams as the ship, swinging at anchor, rolled heavily in the combers coming in off the Sea of the East. Garion rather liked being at sea. There was a calmness, a kind of suspension of care out on deep water. When he was ashore it seemed that he was always scurrying from place to place through crowds of people, all filling his ears with distractions. At sea, however, there was time to be alone with his thoughts, and the even, patient roll of waves and the slow movement of the sky made those thoughts long and deep.

Their evening meal had been simple, a hearty bean soup and thick slices of dark, rich bread, and they sat on the benches around the plain table after they had eaten, talking idly and

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awaiting the arrival of the captain, who had promised to join them as soon as he had secured his ship.

The half-grown wolf lay under the table near where Ce'Nedra sat, and his eyes had a studied, pleading look in them. Ce'Nedra slipped him tidbits when she thought no one was watching her. Wolves are not stupid, after all.

"The surf seems to be heavy," Zakath said, cocking his head to one side to listen to the booming of the waves against the rocks of the reef. ' 'That's likely to cause some problems when we try to land, isn't it?"

' 'I rather doubt it," Belgarath said. ' 'This storm has probably been brewing since the day the earth was made. It's not going to interfere with us in any way,"

"Aren't you being just a little fatalistic, Belgarath?" Beldin suggested. "And perhaps slightly overconfident?"

"I don't think so. The two prophecies must have this meeting. They've been coming toward this place since the beginning of time. They're not going to let anything interfere with the arrival of anyone who's supposed to be here."

"Why raise a storm like this, then?"

"The storm wasn't designed to hinder us—or Zandramas."

"What is its purpose?"

"It's probably out there to keep others away. There are only certain people who are supposed to be on that reef tomorrow. The prophecies are going to see to it that no one else can set foot on it until after our business has been completed."

Garion looked at Cyradis. The blindfolded girl's face was calm, even serene. The half concealment of the strip of cloth across her eyes

had always at least partially concealed her features from him. In this light, however, he suddenly realized just how extraordinarily beautiful she really was.' 'That raises something rather interesting, Grandfather," he said. "Cyradis, didn't you tell us that the Child of Dark has always been solitary? Doesn't that mean that she'll have to face us alone tomorrow?"

"Thou hast misread my meaning, Belgarion of Riva. Thou and each of thy companions have had your names writ large in the stars since the beginning of days. Those who will accompany the Child of Dark, however, are of no moment. Their names do not stand in the book of the heavens. Zandramas is the only emissary of the dark prophecy of any significance. The others she will bring with her were doubtless chosen at random, and their numbers are limited to match your force."

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"A fair fight, then," Velvet murmured approvingly. "I think we can probably cope."

"That doesn't bode too well for me, though," Beldin said. "Back at Rheon, you rather carefully listed the people who were supposed to come here with Garion. As I recall, my name wasn't on the list. Do you suppose they forgot to send me an invitation?"

"Nay, gentle Beldin. Thy presence here is necessary now. Zandramas hath included in her forces one who is beyond the prophecies. Thou art here to offset that one, though in numbers only."

"Zandramas can't ever play a game without cheating, can she?" Silk said.

"Can you?" Velvet asked him.

"That's different. I'm only playing for worthless counters-bits and pieces of unimportant metal. The stakes in this game are a lot higher."

The cabin door opened, and Captain Kresca entered with several rolls of parchment under his arm. He had changed out of his doublet and now wore a tar-stained canvas sea coat and no hat. Garion saw that his short-cropped hair was as silvery as Belgarath's, a startling contrast to his deeply tanned and weathered face. "The storm seems to be abating," he announced. "At least around the reef it is. I don't think I've ever seen a storm like this."

"I'd be surprised if you had, Captain," Beldin told him. "As closely as we can determine, this is the first one—and probably the last—of its kind."

"I think you're wrong, friend," Captain Kresca disagreed. "There's nothing new in the way of weather in the world. It's all happened before."

"Just let it lie," Belgarath said quietly to Beldin. "He's a Melcene. He's not really prepared for this sort of thing."

"AH right," the captain said, pushing their soup bowls out of the way and laying his charts on the table. "We're here." He pointed. "Now, which part of the reef was it you propose to land on?"

"The highest pinnacle," Belgarath told him.

Kresca sighed. "I might have known," he said. "That's the one part of the reef where my charts aren't too accurate. About the time I got to taking soundings around that one, a squall came out of nowhere, and I had to back off." He thought about it. "No matter," he decided. "We'll stand a half mile or so off-

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shore and go in with the longboat. There's something you ought to know about that part of the reef, though."

"Oh?" Belgarath said.

"I think there are some people there."

"I sort of doubt it."

"I don't really know of any other creature that builds fires, do you? There's a cave on the north side of that pinnacle, and sailors have been seeing the light of fires coming out of the mouth of it for years now. It's my guess that there's a band of pirates living in there. It wouldn't be all that hard for them to come out in small boats on dark nights and waylay merchantmen in the straits on the landward side of the reef."

' 'Can you see the fire from where we are right now?' ' Garion asked him.

' 'I 'd guess so. Let's go topside and have a look. *'

The ladies, Sadi, and Toth remained in the cabin, and Garion and his other friends followed Captain Kresca up the companionway to the deck. The wind, which had been howling through the rigging when the sailors had dropped anchor, had fallen off, and the surf along the reef was no longer frothy.

"There," Kresca said, pointing. "It's not quite as visible from this angle, but you can make it out. When you're standing out to sea from the cave mouth, it's really bright."

Dimly, Garion could see a sooty red glow a short way up the side of a bulky-looking peak jutting up out of the sea. The other rocks that formed the reef appeared to be little more than slender spires, but the central peak had a different shape. For some reason, it reminded Garion of the truncated mountain that was the site of far-off Prolgu in Ulgoland.

"Nobody's ever explained to my satisfaction how the top of that mountain got sliced off like that," Kresca said.

"It's probably a very long story," Silk told him. The little man shivered. "It's still a little chilly out here," he noted. "Why don't we go below again?"

Garion fell back to walk beside Belgarath. "What's making that light, Grandfather?" he asked quietly.

"I'm not entirely sure," Belgarath replied, "but I think it might be the Sardion. We know it's in that cave."

"We do?"

"Of course we do. At the time of the meeting, the Orb and the Sardion have to come into each other's presence in the same way you and Zandramas do. That Melcene scholar who stole the Sardion—the one Senji told us about—sailed around the

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southern tip of Gandahar and disappeared into these waters. That was all too convenient to be mere coincidence. The Sardion was controlling the scholar, and the scholar delivered the stone to the precise place it wanted to go. It's probably been waiting for us in that cave for about five hundred years."

Garion looked back over his shoulder. The hilt of his sword was covered by the leather sleeve, but he was still fairly certain that he'd be able to see the muted glow of the Orb. "Doesn't the Orb usually react to the presense of the Sardion?" he asked.

"We may not be close enough yet, and we're still at sea. Open water confuses the Orb. Then, too, maybe it's trying to conceal itself from the Sardion."

"Could it actually think its way through that complex an idea? It's usually fairly childish, I've noticed."

"Don't underestimate it, Garion."

"Everything's fitting together, then, isn't it?"

"It all has to, Garion. Otherwise what's going to happen tomorrow couldn't happen."

"Well, father?" Polgara asked as they reentered the cabin.

"There's a fire of some kind in that cave, all right," he told her. His fingers, however, were telling her something else.—We'll talk about it in more detail after the captain leaves.—He turned toward Kresca. "When's the next low tide?" he asked the seaman.

Kresca squinted, calculating. "We just missed one," he said. "The tide's coming in now. The next low tide will come about daybreak and, if my observations are correct, it should be a neap tide. Well, I'll leave you to get some rest now. I sort of gather that you've got a

full day ahead of you tomorrow."

"Thank you, Captain Kresca," Garion said, shaking the seaman's hand.

"Don't mention it, Garion." Kresca grinned. "The King of Peldane paid me very handsomely for this voyage, so being helpful doesn't really cost me anything."

"Good." Garion grinned back. "I like to see friends get ahead in the world."

The captain laughed and went back out with a hearty wave.

"What was he talking about?" Sadi asked. "What's a neap tide?"

"It only happens a few times a year," Beldin explained. "It's an extreme low tide. It has to do with the positions of the sun and moon."

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"Everything seems to be going out of its way to make tomorrow a very special day," Silk observed.

"All right, fother," Polgara said crisply. "What's the story on the fire in that cave?"

"I can't be positive, Pol, but I rather strongly suspect that it's not a group of pirates—not after all the trouble the prophecies have gone to to keep people away from the cave."

"What do you think it is, then?"

"It's probably the Sardion."

"Would it give off a red glow?"

He shrugged. "The Orb glows blue. I suppose there's a sort of logic to the Sardion's glowing a different color."

"Why not green?" Silk asked.

"Green's an in-between color," Beldin told him. "It's a mixture of blue and yellow."

"You're a real gold mine of useless information, you know that, Beldin?" Silk said.

"There's no such thing as useless information, Kheldar." Beldin sniffed.

"All right," Zakath said, "how are we going to go about this?"

"Cyradis," Belgarath said to the Seeress, "I'm guessing about this, but I think I'm fairly close. Nobody is going to reach that cave first, are they? What I mean is that the prophecies aren't going to let Zandramas get there before we do—or let us get there first either."

"Astounding," Beldin murmured. "That actually sounded like real logic. Aren't you feeling well, Belgarath?"

"Would you please?" Belgarath growled. "Well, Cyradis?"

She paused, her expression distant. Garion seemed to hear that faint choral murmuring. "Thy reasoning is correct, Ancient One. The same perception came to Zandramas some time ago, so I am not revealing anything unto thee which she doth not already know. Zandramas, however, hath rejected the fruits of her reasoning and hath striven to circumvent her conclusions."

"Very well, then," Zakath said, "since we're all going to get there at the same time anyway, and since everybody knows about it, there's not much point in being coy, is there? I say we just land on the beach and march straight to the cave."

"Stopping only long enough for you and me to put on our armor," Garion added. "It probably wouldn't be a good idea to dress up here on board ship. It might make Kresca nervous."

"Your plan sounds good to me, Zakath," Durnik agreed.

"I'm not so sure," Silk said dubiously. "There's a certain advantage to sneaking."

"Drasnians," Ce'Nedra sighed.

"Listen to his reasons before you throw the notion out, Ce'Nedra," Velvet suggested.

"It's sort of like this," Silk went on. "Zandramas knows— deep down—that she can't beat us to that cave, but she's been trying for months all the same, hoping that there's some way she can bypass the rules. Now, let's try to think the way she does."

"I'd sooner take poison," Ce'Nedra said with a shudder.

"It's only for the sake of understanding your opponent, Ce'Nedra. Now, Zandramas has been hoping against hope that she can beat us to that cave and avoid the necessity of coming up against Garion. He did kill Torak, after all, and nobody in his right mind would willingly confront the Godslayer."

"I'm going to have that removed from my title when I get back to Riva," Garion said sourly.

"You can do that later," Silk told him. "What would Zandramas most likely feel if she arrived at the cave mouth, looked around, and didn't see us?"

"I think I see where you're going, Kheldar," Sadi said admiringly.

"You would," Zakath said dryly.

"It's really rather brilliant, you know, Kal Zakath," the eunuch said. "Zandramas is going to feel a wild exultation. She'll believe that she's succeeded in circumventing the prophecies and that she's won in spite of them."

' 'Then what's going to happen to her when we all step out from behind a boulder and she finds out that she still has to face Garion and submit to the choice of Cyradis after all?" Silk asked.

"She's probably going to be very disappointed," Velvet said.

"I think disappointment might be too mild a term," Silk suggested. "I think chagrin might come closer. Couple that with exasperation and a healthy dose of fear, and we'll be looking at somebody who's not going to be thinking too clearly. We're fairly sure there's going to be a fight when we get there, and you've always got an advantage in a fight when the opposing general is distracted."

"It's sound tactical reasoning, Garion," Zakath conceded.

"I'll go along with it," Belgarath said. "If nothing else, it should give me the opportunity to pay Zandramas back for all the times she's upset me. I think I still owe her just a bit for

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slicing pieces out of the Ashabine Oracles. I'll talk with Captain Kresca early tomorrow morning and find out if there's a beach on the east side of the peak. With a neap tide, our chances should be pretty good. Then we'll work our way up along the side of the peak, staying out of sight. We'll take cover near the cave mouth and wait for Zandramas to put in an appearance. Then we'll step out and surprise her."

"I can add an even bigger advantage," Beldin said. "I'll scout on ahead and let you know when she lands. That way, you'll be ready for her."

"Not as a hawk, though, uncle," Polgara suggested.

"Why not?"

"Zandramas isn't stupid. A hawk wouldn't have any business on that reef. There wouldn't be anything there for him to eat."

"Maybe she'll think the storm blew me out to sea."

"Do you want to risk your tail feathers on a maybe? A seagull, uncle."

"A seagull?" he objected. "But they're so stupid—and so dirty."

"You? Worried about dirt?" Silk asked him, looking up. Silk had been busily counting on his fingers.

"Don't push it, Kheldar," Beldin growled ominously.

"What day of the month was Prince Geran born on?" Silk asked Ce'Nedra.

"The seventh, why?"

"We appear to have another one of those things that's setting out to make tomorrow very special. If I've counted right, tomorrow will be your son's second birthday."

"It can't be!" she exclaimed. "My baby was born in the wintertime."

"Ce'Nedra," Garion said gently, "Riva's up near the top of the world. This reef is near the bottom. It is winter in Riva right now. Count up the months since Geran was born—the time he spent with us before Zandramas stole him, the time we spent marching on Rheon, the trip to Prolgu then to Tol Honeth and on to Nyissa and all those other places where we had to stop. I think if you count rather closely, you'll find that it has been very close to two years."

She frowned, ticking the months off. Finally, her eyes went very wide. "I think he's right!" she exclaimed. "Geran will be two years old tomorrow!"

Dumik laid his hand on the little queen's arm. "I'll see if I can make something for you to give as a present, Ce'Nedra,"

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he said gently. "A boy ought to have a birthday present after he's been separated from his family for so long."

Ce'Nedra's eyes filled with tears. "Oh, Durnik!" She wept, embracing him. "You think of everything."

Garion looked at Aunt Pol, his fingers moving slightly.—Why don't you ladies take her in and put her to bed?—\vt suggested.—We're all through here, and if she thinks too much about this, she's going to get herself worked up. Tomorrow's going to be hard enough for her anyway, —

—You might be right. —

After the ladies had left, Garion and the other men sat around the bolted-down table reminiscing. They covered in some detail the various adventures they had shared since that wind-tossed night so long ago when Garion, Belgarath, Aunt Pol, and Dumik had crept out through the gate of Faldor's farm into the world where the possible and the impossible inexorably merged. Again Garion felt that sense of cleansing, coupled with something else. It was as if, by recapitulating all that had happened in their long journey to the reef lying out there in the darkness, they were somehow bringing

everything into focus to strengthen their resolve and their sense of purpose. It seemed to help for some reason.

"I think that's about enough of that," Belgarath said finally, rising to his feet. "Now we all know what's behind us. It's time to pack all that away and start looking ahead. Let's get some sleep. *"

Ce'Nedra stirred restlessly when Garion slipped into bed. "I thought you were going to stay up all night," she said sleepily.

"We were talking."

"I know. I could hear the murmur of voices even in here. And men think women talk all the time."

"Don't you?"

"Probably, but a woman can talk while her hands are busy. A man can't."

"You might be right."

There was a moment of silence. "Garion," she said.

"Yes, Ce'Nedra?"

"Can I borrow your knife—the little dagger Durnik gave you when you were a boy?"

"If you want something cut, point it out. I'll cut it for you."

"It's nothing like that, Garion. I just want to have a knife tomorrow."

"What for?"

"As soon as I see Zandramas, I'm going to kill her."

"Ce'Nedra!"

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"I have every right to kill her, Garion. You told Cyradis you didn't think you could do it because Zandramas is a woman. I don't suffer from the same kind of delicacy as you do. I'm going to carve out her heart—if she has one—slowly.'" She said it with a fierceness he had never heard in her voice before. "'I want blood, Garion! Lots of blood, and I want to hear her scream as I twist the knife in her. You'll lend me your dagger, won't you?'"* "Absolutely not!"

"That's all right, Garion," she said in an icy tone. "I'm sure Liselle will lend me one of hers. LiseUe's a woman and she knows how I feel,'" Then she turned her back on him. "Ce'Nedra," he said placatingly. "Yes?" Her tone was sulky. "Be reasonable, dear."

"I don't want to be reasonable. I want to kill Zandramas." ' 'I'm

not going to let you put yourself in that kind of danger. We have much more important things to do tomorrow.'" She sighed. "I suppose you're right. It's just—" "Just what?"

She turned back and put her arms around his neck. "Never mind, Garion," she said. "Let's go to sleep now." She nestled down against him, and after a few moments her regular breathing told him that she had drifted off.

"You should have given her the knife, "the voice in his mind told him. "Silk could have stolen it back from her sometime tomorrow. " "But—"

"We've got something else to talk about, Garion. Have you been thinking about your successor?"

"Well—sort of. It doesn't really fit any of them, you know. " "Have you given serious consideration to each of them?" "I suppose I have, but I haven't been able to make any decisions yet. "

"You're not supposed to make your choice yet. All you had to do was think about each one of them and get them all firmly fixed in your mind. "

"When do I make the choice then?" "At the last possible moment, Garion. Zandramas might be able to hear your thoughts, but she can't hear what you haven't decided yet. "

"What if I make a mistake?"

"I really don't think you can, Garion. I really don't. "

Garion's sleep was troubled that night. His dreams seemed

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chaotic, disconnected, and he woke often only to sink back into a restless doze. There was at first a kind of distorted recapitulation of the strange dreams that had so disturbed him that night long ago on the Isle of the Winds just before his life had been unalterably changed. The question "Are you ready?" seemed to echo again and again in the vaults of his mind. Again he faced Rundorig with Aunt Pol's matter-of-fact instruction to kill his boyhood friend roaring in his mind. And then the boar he had encountered in the snowy wood outside Val Alorn was there, pawing at the snow, its eyes aglow with rage and hate. "Are you ready?" Barak asked him before releasing the beast. Then he stood on the colorless plain surrounded by the pieces of the incomprehensible game trying to decide which piece to move while the voice in his mind urged him to hurry.

The dream subtly changed and took on a different tone. Our dreams, no matter how bizarre, have a familiarity to them, since they are formed and shaped by our own minds. Now it seemed as if Garion's dreams were being formed by a different and unfriendly awareness almost in the same way that Torak had intruded himself in dreams and in thoughts before the meeting at Cthol Mishrak.

Again he faced Asharak the Murgo in the loamy Wood of the Dryads, and once again he unleashed his will with that single, open-handed slap and the fatal word, "Burn!" This was a familiar nightmare. It had haunted Garion's sleep for years. He saw Asharak's cheek begin to seethe and smoke. He heard the Grolim shriek and saw him clutch at his burning face. He heard the dreadful plea, "Master, have mercy!" He spurned that plea and intensified the flame, but this time the act was not overlaid with the sense of self-loathing that had always accompanied the dream, but a kind of cruel exultation, a hideous joy as he watched his enemy writhe and burn before him. Deep within him something cried out, trying to repudiate that unholy joy.

And then he was at Cthol Mishrak, and his flaming sword slid again and again into the body of the One-Eyed God. Tbrak's despairing "Mother!" did not this time fill him with pity but with a towering satisfaction. He felt himself laughing, and the savage, unpitying laughter erased his humanity.

Soundlessly shrieking in horror, Garion recoiled, not so much from the awful images of those whom he had destroyed, but more from his own enjoyment of their despairing agony.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

They were a somber group when they gathered in the main cabin before daybreak the following morning. With a sudden, even surprising, insight, Garion was very certain that the nightmares had not been his alone. Insight and intuitive perception were not normal for Garion. His sensible Sendarian background rejected such things as questionable, even in some peculiar way, immoral. "Did you do that?" he asked the voice.

'Wo. Rather surprisingly, you came up with it all on your own. You seem to be making some progress—slowly, of course, but progress all the same.

"Thanks."

'Don't mention it.'

Silk looked particularly shaken as he entered the cabin. The little man's eyes were haunted, and his hands were shaking. He slumped onto a bench and buried his face in his hands. "Have you got any of that ale left?" he asked Beldin in a hoarse voice.

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"A little quivery this morning, Kheldar?" the dwarf asked him.

"No," Garion said. "That's not what's bothering him. He had some bad dreams last night."

Silk raised his face sharply. "How did you know that?" he demanded.

"I had some myself. I got to relive what I did to Asharak the Murgo, and I killed Torak again—several times. It didn't get any better as we went along."

"I was trapped in a cave," Silk said with a shudder. "There wasn't any light, but I could feel the walls closing in on me. I think the next time I see Relg, I 'm going to hit him in the mouth—gently, of course. Relg's sort of a friend."

"I'm glad I wasn't the only one," Sadi said. The eunuch had placed a bowl of milk on the table, and Zith and her babies were gathered around it, lapping and purring. Garion was a bit surprised to note that no one really paid any attention to Zith and her brood anymore. People, it seemed, could get used to almost anything. Sadi rubbed his long-fingered hand over his shaved scalp. ' 'It seemed to me that I was adrift in the streets of Sthiss Tor, and I was trying to survive by begging. It was ghastly."

"I saw Zandramas sacrificing my baby," Ce'Nedra said in a stricken voice. "There was crying and so much blood—so very much blood."

"Peculiar," Zakath said. "I was presiding over a trial. I had to condemn a number of people. There was one of them I cared a great deal about, but I was forced to condemn her anyway."

"I had one, too," Velvet admitted.

"I rather expect we all did," Garion told them. "The same thing happened to me on the way to Cthol Mishrak. Torak kept intruding in my dreams." He looked at Cyradis. "Does the Child of Dark always fall back on this?" he asked her. "We've found that events keep repeating themselves when we're leading up to one of these meetings. Is this one of those events that keeps happening over and over again?"

"Thou art very perceptive, Belgarion of Riva," the Seeress told him. "In all the uncounted eons since these meetings began, thou art the first Child of either Light or Dark to have realized that the sequence must be endlessly repeated until the division hath ended."

"I am not sure I can take much credit for it, Cyradis," he admitted. "As I understand it, the meetings are getting closer and closer together. I 'm probably the first in history to have been

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the Child of Light—or Dark—during two meetings, and even then it took me awhile to realize that it was happening. The nightmares are part of that pattern then?"

"Thy guess is shrewd, Belgarion." She smiled gently. "Unfortunately, it is not correct. It seemeth to me a shame to waste such a clever perception, though."

"Are you trying to be funny, Holy Seeress?"

"Would I do that, noble Belgarion?" she said, perfectly imitating Silk's inflection.

"You could spank her," Beldin suggested.

"With that human mountain standing guard over her?" Gar-ion said, grinning at Toth. His eyes narrowed. "You're not permitted to help us with diis, are you, Cyradis?" he asked her.

She sighed and shook her head.

"That's all right, Holy Seeress," he said. "I think we can come up with a workable answer to the question by ourselves.'" He looked at Belgarath. "AH right," he said. "Torak tried to frighten me with nightmares, and now it looks as if Zandramas is trying to do the same thing, except that this time, she's doing it to all of us. If it's not one of those usual repetitions, what is it?"

"That boy's beginning to develop a rather keen analytical mind, Belgarath," Beldin said.

"Naturally," the old man said modestly.

"Don't wrench your shoulder out of its socket trying to pat yourself on the back," Beldin said sourly. He rose to his feet and started pacing up and down, his forehead creased in thought. "Now then," he began, "first: This isn't just erne of the tedious repetitions that have been dogging us since the beginning, right?"

"Right," Belgarath agreed.

"Second: It happened in about the same way last time." He looked at Garion. "Right?" he asked.

"Right," Garion said.

"That's only two times. Twice can be a coincidence, but let's assume that it's not. We know that the Child of Light always has companions, but that the Child of Dark is always solitary."

"So Cyradis tells us," Belgarath agreed.

"She doesn't have any reason to lie to us. All right, if the Child of Light has companions but the Child of Dark is alone, wouldn't that put the Dark at a serious disadvantage?"

"You'd think so."

"But the two have always been so evenly matched that not

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even the Gods can predict the outcome. The Child of Dark is using something to offset the apparent advantage of our side. I think these nightmares might be part of it.'"

Silk rose and came over to Garion. "Discussions like this make my head ache," he said quietly. "I'm going up on deck for a while." He left the cabin, and for no apparent reason the gangly young wolf followed him.

' 'I don't really think a few nightmares would make that much difference, Beldin," Belgarath disagreed.

"But what if the nightmares are only a part of it, Old Wolf?" Poledra asked him. "You and Pol were both at Vo Mimbren, and that was one of these meetings, too. You two have been companions of the Child of Light twice already. What happened at Vo Mimbren?"

"We did have nightmares," Belgarath conceded to Beldin.

"Anything else?" the dwarf asked intently.

"We saw things that weren't there, but that could have come from all the Grolims in the vicinity."

"And?"

' 'Everybody went sort of crazy. It was all we could do to keep Brand from trying to attack Torak with his teeth, and at Cthol Mishrak I entombed Belzedar in solid rock, and then Pol wanted to dig him up so that she could drink his blood."

"Father! I did not!" she objected.

"Oh, really? You were very angry that day, Pol."

"It fits the same pattern, Old Wolf," Poledra said somberly. "Our side fights with normal weapons. Garion's sword might be a little abnormal, but it's still just a sword."

"You wouldn't say that if you'd been at Cthol Mishrak," her husband told her.

"I was there, Belgarath," she replied.

"You were?"

"Of course. I was hiding in the ruins watching. Anyway, the Child of Dark doesn't attack the body; it attacks the mind. That's how it manages to keep everything so perfectly balanced."

"Nightmares, hallucinations, and ultimately madness," Polgara mused. "That's a formidable array of things to throw against us. It might even have worked—if Zandramas hadn't been so clumsy."

"I don't quite follow that, Pol," Durnik said.

"She blundered." Polgara shrugged. "If only one person has a nightmare, he'll probably try to shrug it off and he certainly won't mention it on the morning of the meeting. Zandramas

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sent nightmares to all of us, though. This conversation probably wouldn't have taken place if she hadn't."

"It's nice to know that she can stumble, too," Belgarath said. "All right then, we know that she's been tampering with us. The best way to defeat that tactic is to put those nightmares out of our minds."

"And to be particularly wary if we start seeing things that shouldn't be there," Polgara added.

Suk and the wolf came back down the stairs to the cabin. "WeVe got absolutely beautiful weather this morning," he reported happily, bending slightly to scratch the pup's ears.

"Wonderful," Sadi murmured dryly. Sadi was carefully anointing his small dagger with a fresh coating of poison. He was wearing a stout leather jerkin and leather boots that reached to midthigh. Back in Sthiss Tor, Sadi had appeared, despite his slender frame, to be soft, even in some peculiar way dabby. Now, however, he looked lean and tough. A year or more without drugs and widi an enforced regimen of hard exercise had changed him a great deal.

"It's perfect," Silk told him. "We have fog this morning, ladies and gentlemen," he said, "a nice, wet, gray fog almost thick enough to walk on. That fog would be a burglar's delight. *'

"Trust Silk to think of that." Duraik smiled. The smith wore his usual clothing, but he had given Toth his axe, while he himself carried the dreadful sledge with which he had driven off the demon Nahaz.

"The prophecies are leading us around by the noses again," Beldin said irritably, ' 'but at least it appears that we made the right decision last night. A good thick fog makes sneaking almost inevitable." Beldin looked the same as always, tattered, dirty, and very ugly.

"Maybe they're just trying to help," Velvet suggested. Velvet had shocked them all when she had entered the cabin a half hour earlier. She wore tight-fitting leather clothing not unlike that normally worn by the Nadrak dancer, Vella. It was a peculiarly masculine garb and bleakly businesslike. "They've done a great deal to assist Zandramas. Maybe it's our turn to get a little help.''

"Is she right?" Garion asked the awareness that shared his mind. "Are you and your opposite helping us far a change?"

"Don't be silly, Garion. Nobody's been helping anybody. That's forbidden at this particular stage of the game.''

"Where did the fog come from then?"

"Where does fog usually come from?"

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"How would I know ? "

"I didn't think so. Ask Beldin. He can probably tell you. The fog out there is perfectly natural.'"

"Liselle," Garion said, "I just checked with my friend. The fog isn't the result of any playing around. It's a natural result of the storm."

"How disappointing," she said.

Ce'Nedra had risen that morning fully intent on wearing a Dryad tunic. Garion had adamantly rejected that idea, however. She wore instead a simple gray wool dress with no petticoats to hinder her movements. She was quite obviously stripped down for action. Garion was fairly certain that she had at least one knife concealed somewhere in her clothing. "Why don't we get started?" she demanded.

"Because it's still dark, dear," Polgara explained patiently. "We have to wait for at least a little bit of light." Polgara and her mother wore almost identical plain dresses, Polgara's gray and Poledra's brown.

"Garion," Poledra said then, "why don't you step down to the galley and tell them that we'll have breakfast now? We should all eat something, since I doubt that we'll have time or maybe even the need for lunch." Poledra sat at Belgarath's side, and the two of them were almost unconsciously holding hands. Gar-ion was a bit offended at her suggestion. He was a king, after all, not an errand boy. Then he realized just how silly that particular thought was. He started to rise.

"I'll go, Garion," Eriond said. It was almost as if the blond young man had seen into his friend's thoughts. Eriond wore the same simple brown peasant clothes he always wore, and he had nothing even resembling a weapon.

As the young man went out through the cabin door, Garion had an odd thought. Why was he paying so much attention to the appearance of each of his companions? He had seen them all before, and for the most part, he had seen the clothing they wore this morning so many times that the garments should not even have registered on his mind. Then, with dreadful certainty, he knew. One of them was going to die today, and he was fixing mem all in his mind so that he could remember for the rest of his life the one who was to make that sacrifice. He looked at Zakath. His Mallorean friend had shaved off his short beard. His slightly olive skin was no longer pale, but tanned and healthy-looking save for the now-lighter patch on his chin and jaw. He wore simple clothing much like Garion's own, since as

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soon as they reached the reef, the two of them would be putting on their armor.

Toth, his face impassive, was dressed as always—a loincloth, sandals, and that unbleached wool blanket slung across one shoulder. He did not, however, have his heavy staff. Instead, Durnik's axe lay in his lap.

The Seeress of Kell was unchanged. Her hooded white robe gleamed, and her blindfold, unwrinkled and unchanged, smoothly covered her eyes. Idly Garion wondered if she removed the cloth when she slept. A chilling thought came to him then. What if the one they would lose today was going to be Cyradis? She had sacrificed everything for her task. Surely the two prophecies could not be so cruel as to require one last, supreme sacrifice from this slender girl.

Belgarath, of course, was unchanged and unchangeable. He still wore the mismatched boots, patched hose, and rust-colored tunic he had worn when he had appeared at Faldor's farm as Mister Wolf the storyteller. The one difference about the old man was the fact that he did not hold a tankard in his free hand. At supper the previous evening, he had almost absently drawn himself one that brimmed with foaming ale. Poledra, just as absently, had firmly removed it from his hand and had emptied it out a porthole. Garion strongly suspected that Belgarath's drinking days had come rather abruptly to an end. He decided that it might be refreshing to have a long conversation with his grandfather when the old man was completely sober.

They ate their breakfast with hardly any conversation, since there was nothing more to say. Ce'Nedra dutifully fed the puppy, then looked rather sadly at Garion. "Take care of him, please," she said.

There was no point in arguing with her on that score. The idea that she would not survive this day was so firmly fixed in her mind that no amount of talking would erase it. "You might want to give him to Geran," she added. "Every boy should have a dog, and caring for him will teach our son responsibility."

"I never had a dog," Garion said.

"That was unkind of you, Aunt Pol," Ce'Nedra said, lapsing unconsciously—or perhaps not—into that form of address.

"He wouldn't have had time to look after one, Ce'Nedra," Polgara replied. "Our Garion has had a very busy life."

"Let's hope that it gets less so when this is all over," Garion said.

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After they had eaten, Captain Kresca entered the cabin carrying a map. "This isn't very precise," he apologized. "As I said last night, I was never able to take very accurate soundings around that peak. We can inch our way to within a few hundred yards of the beach, and then we'll have to take to the longboat. This fog is going to make it even more complicated, I'm afraid."

"Is there a beach along the east side of the peak?" Belgarath asked

him.

"A very shallow one," Kresca replied. "The neap tide should expose a bit more of it, though."

"Good. There are a few things we'll need to take ashore with us." Belgarath pointed at the two stout canvas bags holding the armor Garion and Zakath would wear.

"I'll have some men stow them in the boat for you."

"When can we get started?" Ce'Nedra asked impatiently.

"Another twenty minutes or so, little lady."

"So long?"

He nodded. "Unless you can figure out a way to make the sun come up early."

Ce'Nedra looked quickly at Belgarath.

"Never mind," he told her.

"Captain," Poledra said, "could you have someone look after our pet?" She pointed at the wolf. "He's a bit overenthusiastic sometimes, and we wouldn't want him to start howling at the wrong time."

"Of course, Lady." Kresca, it appeared, had not spent enough time ashore to recognize a wolf when he saw one.

"Inching" proved to be a very tedious process. The sailors raised the anchors and then manned the oars. After every couple of strokes, they paused while a man in the bow heaved out the lead-weighted sounding line.

"It's slow," Silk observed in a low voice as they all stood on deck, "but at least it's quiet. We don't know who's on that reef, and I'd rather not alert them."

"It's shoaling, Captain," the man with the sounding line reported, his voice no louder than absolutely necessary. The obviously warlike preparations of Garion and his friends had stressed the need for quiet louder than any words. The sailor cast out his line again. There was that interminable-seeming wait while the ship drifted up over the weighted line. "The bottom's coming up fast, Captain," the sounder said then. "I make it two fathoms."

"Back your oars," Kresca commanded his crew in a low

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voice. "Drop the hook. This is as close as we can go." He turned to his mate. "After we get away in the longboat, back out about another hundred yards and anchor there. We'll whistle when we come back--the usual signal. Guide us in."

"Aye, aye, Cap'n."

"You've done this before, I see," Silk said to Kresca.

"A few times, yes," Kresca admitted.

"If ali goes well today, you and I might want to have a little talk. I have a business proposition that I think might interest you."

"Is that all you ever think about?" Velvet asked him.

' 'A missed opportunity is gone forever, my dear Liselle,' ' he replied with a certain pomposity.

"You're incorrigible."

"I suppose you could say that, yes."

An oil-soaked wad of burlap in the hawsehole muffled the rattling of the anchor chain as the heavy iron hook sank down through the dark water. Garion felt rather than heard the grating of the points of the anchor on the rocks lying beneath the heavy swells.

"Let's board the longboat," Kresca said. "The crew will lower her after we're all on board.'" He looked apologetically at them. "I'm afraid you and your friends are going to have to help with the rowing, Garion. The longboat only holds so many people."

"Of course, Captain."

"I'll come along to make sure you get ashore safely."

"Captain," Belgarath said then, "once we're ashore, stand your ship out to sea a ways. We'll signal you when we're ready to be picked up."

"All right."

"If you don't see a signal by tomorrow morning, you might as well go on back to Perivor, because we won't be coming back."

Kresca's face was solemn. "Is whatever it is you're planning to do on that reef really that dangerous?" he asked.

"Probably even more so," Silk told him. "We've all been trying very hard not to think about it.'"

It was eerie rowing across the oily-seeming black water with the grayish tendrils of fog rising from the heavy swells. Garion was suddenly reminded of that foggy night in Sthiss Tor when they had crossed the River of the Serpent with only the unerring sense of direction of the one-eyed assassin Issus to guide them.

Idly, as he rowed, Garion wondered whatever had happened to Issus.

After every ten stokes or so, Captain Kresca, who stood in the stern at the tiller, signaled for them to stop, and he cocked his head, listening to the sound of the surf. "Another couple hundred yards now," he said in a low voice. "You there," he said to the sailor in the bow who held another sounding line, "keep busy with that lead. I don't want to hit any rocks. Sing out if it starts shoaling."

"Aye, aye, Cap'n."

The longboat crept on through dark and fog toward the unseen beach where the long wash and slither of the waves on graveled shingle made that peculiar grating sound as each wave lifted pebbles from the beach to carry them up to the very verge of land and then, with melancholy and regretful note, to draw them back again as if the ever-hungry sea mourned its inability to engulf the land and rum all the world into one endless ocean where huge waves, unimpeded, could roll thrice around the globe.

The heavy fog bank lying to the east began to turn lighter and lighter as dawn broke over the dark, mist-obscured waves.

"Another hundred yards," Kresca said tensely.

"When we get there, Captain," Belgarath said to him, "keep your men in the boat. They won't be permitted to land anyway, and they'd better not try. We'll push you back out as soon as we get ashore."

Kresca swallowed hard and nodded.

Garion could hear the surf more clearly now and catch the seaweed-rank smell of the meeting of sea and land. Then, just before he was able to make out the dark line of the beach through the obscuring fog, the heavy, dangerous swells flattened, and the sea around the longboat became as flat and slick as a pane of glass.

"That was accommodating of them," Silk observed.

"Shh," Velvet told him, laying one finger to her lips. "I'm trying to listen."

The bow of the longboat grated on the gravel strand, and Durnik stepped out of the boat and drew it farther up onto the pebbles. Garion and his friends also stepped out into the ankle-deep water and waded ashore. "We'll see you tomorrow mom-Big, Captain," Garion said quietly as Toth prepared to push the boat back out. "I hope," he added.

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"Good luck, Garion," Kresca said. "After we're all back on board, you'll have to tell me what this was all about."

"I may want to forget about it by then," Garion said ruefully.

"Not if you win," Kresca's voice came back out of the fog.

"I like that man," Silk said. "He's got a nice optimistic attitude."

"Let's get off this open beach," Belgarath said. "In spite of what Garion's friend told him, I sense a certain tenuousness about this fog. I'll feel a lot better if we've got some rocks to hide behind."

Durnik and Toth picked up the two canvas bags containing the armor, and Garion and Zakath drew their swords and led the way up from the gravel strand. The mountain they approached seemed composed of speckled granite, fractured into unnatural blocks. Garion had seen enough granite in the mountains here and there around the world to know that the stone usually crumbled and weathered into rounded shapes. "Strange," Durnik murmured, kicking with one still-wet boot at the perfectly squared-off edge of one of the blocks. He lowered the canvas bag and drew his knife. He dug for a moment at the rock with his knife point. "It's not granite," he said quietly. "It looks like granite, but it's much too hard. It's something else."

"We can identify it later," Beldin told him. "Let's find some cover just in case Belgarath's suspicion turns out to be accurate. As soon as we get settled, I'll drift around the peak a few times."

"You won't be able to see anything," Silk predicted.

"I'll be able to hear, though."

"Over there," Durnik said, pointing with his sledge. "It looks as if one of these blocks got dislodged and rolled down to the beach. There's a fairly large niche there."

"Good enough for now," Belgarath said. "Beldin, when you make the change, do it very slowly. I'm sure Zandramas landed at almost the exact same time we did, and she'll hear you."

"I know how it's done, Belgarath."

The niche in the side of the strange, stair-stepped peak was more than large enough to conceal them, and they moved down into it cautiously.

"Neat," Silk said. "Why don't you all wait here and catch your breath? Beldin can turn into a seagull and go have a look around the island. I'll go on ahead and pick out a trail for us."

"Be careful," Belgarath told him.

"Someday you're going to forget to say that, Belgarath, and

it'll probably wither every tree on earth." The little man climbed back up out of the niche and disappeared into the fog.

"You do say that to him a lot, you know," Beldin said to Belgarath.

"Silk's an enthusiast. He needs frequent reminding. Did you plan to leave sometime during the next hour?"

Beldin spat out a very unflattering epithet, shimmered very slowly, and sailed away.

"Your temper hasn't improved much, Old Wolf," Poledra said to him.

"Did you think it might have?"

"Not really," she replied, "but there's always room for hope."

Despite Belgarath's premonition, the fog hung on. After about a half hour, Beldin returned. "Somebody's landed on the west beach," he reported. "I couldn't see them, but I could certainly hear them. Angaraks seem to have some trouble keeping their voices down—sorry, Zakath, but it's the truth."

"I'll issue an imperial command that the next three or four generations converse in whispers, if you'd like."

"No, that's all right, Zakath." The dwarf grinned. "As long as I'm on the opposite side from at least some Angaraks, I like to be able to hear them coming. Did Kheldar make it back yet?"

"Not yet," Garion told him.

"What's he doing? These stone blocks are much too big to steal."

Then Silk slipped over the edge of the niche and dropped tightly to the stone floor. "You're not going to believe this," he said.

"Probably not," Velvet said, "but why don't you go ahead and tell us anyway?"

"This peak is man-made—or at least something made it. These blocks encircle it like terraces, all straight and smooth. The ming forms steps up to that flat place on top. There's an altar up there and a huge throne."

"So that's what it meant!" Beldin exclaimed, snapping his fingers. "Belgarath, have you ever read the Book of Torak?"

"I've struggled through it a few times. My Old Angarak isn't really all that good."

"You can speak Old Angarak?" Zakath asked with some surprise. "It's a forbidden language here in Mallorea. I suspect Tbrak was changing a few things, and he didn't want anyone to catch him at it."

"I learned it before the prohibition went into effect. What's the point of this, Beldin?"

"Do you remember that passage near the beginning--in the middle of all that conceited blather--when Torak said he went up into the High Places of Korim to argue with UL about the creation of the world?"

"Vaguely."

"Anyway, UL didn't want anything to do with it, so Torak turned his back on his father and went down and gathered up the Angaraks and led them back to Korim. He told them what he had in mind for them, and then, in true Angarak fashion, they fell down on their faces and started butchering each other as sacrifices. There's a word in that passage, 'Halagachak.' It means 'temple,' or something like that. I always thought that Torak was speaking figuratively, but he wasn't. This peak is that temple. The altar up there more or less confirms it, and these terraces were where the Angaraks stood to watch while the Gro-lims sacrificed people to their God. If I'm right, this is also the place where Torak spoke with his father. Regardless of how you feel about old Burnt-Face, this is one of the holiest places on earth."

"You keep talking about Torak's father," Zakath said, looking puzzled. "I didn't know that the Gods had fathers."

"Of course they do," Ce'Nedra said loftily. "Everybody knows that."

"I didn't."

' *UL is their father,' * she said in a deliberately offhand manner.

"Isn't he the God of the Ulgos?"

"Not by choice exactly," Belgarath told him. "The original Gorim more or less bullied him into it."

"How do you bully a God?"

"Carefully," Beldin said, "Very, very carefully."

"IVemetUL," Ce'Nedra supplied gratuitously. "Hesortof likes me."

"She can be very irritating at times, can't she?" Zakath said to Garion.

"YouVe noticed."

"You don't have to like me," she said with a toss of her curls, "either one of you. As long as the Gods like a girl, she'll do all right."

Garion began to have some hope at that point. If Ce'Nedra was willing to banter with them, it was a fair indication that she

did not take her supposed intimations of her own incipient demise all

that seriously. He did, however, wish that he could get that knife away from her.

"During the course of your fascinating explorations, did you by any chance happen to locate that cave?" Belgarath asked Silk. "I more or less thought that's why you were out there sneaking around in the fog."

"The cave?" Silk said. "Oh, that's around on the north side. There's a sort of amphitheater in front of it. It's almost exactly in the middle of that face. I found that in the first ten minutes."

Belgarath glared at him.

"It's not exactly a cave, though," Silk added. "There may be a cave back inside the peak, but the opening is more like a wide doorway. It's got pillars on each side and a familiar face above the lintel."

"Tbrak?" Garion said with a sinking feeling.

"None other."

"Hadn't we better get started then?" Durnik suggested. "If Zandramas is already on the island . . ." He spread his hands.

"So what?" Beldin said.

They all stared at the grotesque little hunchback.

"Zandramas can't go into the cave until we get there, can she?" he asked Cyradis.

"Nay, Beldin," she replied. "That is forbidden."

"Good. Let her wait, then. I'm sure she'll enjoy the anticipation. Did anybody think to bring anything to eat? I may have to be a seagull, but I don't have to eat raw fish."

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They waited for almost an hour until Beldin decided that by now Zandramas must be keyed to a fever pitch. Garion and Zakath took advantage of the delay to put on their armor. "I'll take a look," the dwarf said finally. He slowly slipped into the shape of a seagull and drifted away into the fog. When he returned, he was chuckling evilly. "I've never heard a woman use that kind of language," he said. "She even puts you to shame, Pol."

"What's she doing?" Belgarath asked him.

"She's standing outside the cave mouth—or door, or whatever you want to call it. She had about forty Grolims with her."

"Forty?" Garion exclaimed. He turned on Cyradis. "I thought you said

we'd be evenly matched," he accused.

"Art thou not a match for at least five, Belgarion?" she asked simply.

"Well--"

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"You said had," Belgarath said to his brother.

"I'd say dial our star-speckled friend tried to force several of her Grolims to push through whatever il is that has the door sealed against her. I 'm not sure if it was the force holding the door or if Zandramas lost her temper when the Grolims failed. About five of them are noticeably dead at the moment, and Zandramas is stalking about outside inventing swear words. All of her Grolims have purple linings on the insides of their hoods, by the way."

"Sorcerers, then," Polgara said bleakly.

"Grolim sorcery is not all that profound." Beldin shrugged.

"Could you see if she's got those lights under her skin?" Garion asked.

"Oh, my, yes. Her face looks like a meadow full of fireflies on a summer evening. I saw something else, too. That albatross is out there. We nodded, but we didn't have time to stop and speak."

"What was he doing?" Silk asked suspiciously.

"Just hovering. You know how albatrosses are. I don't think they move their wings more than once a week. The fog is starting to thin. Why don't we just ease around and stand on one of these terraces just above that amphitheater and let this murk dissipate. Seeing a group of dark figures emerging out of the fog should give her quite a turn, wouldn't you think?"

"Did you see my baby?" Ce'Nedra asked, her heart in her voice.

"He's hardly a baby anymore, little girl. He's a sturdy little lad with curls as blond as Eriond's used to be. I gathered from his expression that he's not very fond of the company he's in, and judging from the look of him, he's going to grow up to be as bad-tempered as the rest of his family. Garion could probably go down there and hand him the sword, and then we could all sit back and watch him deal with the problem."

"I'd rather not have him start killing people until after he loses his baby teeth," Garion said firmly. "Is there anybody else there?"

"Judging from his wife's description, the Archduke Otrath is among the group. He's wearing a cheap crown and sort of secondhand royal robes. There's not too much in the way of intelligence in his eyes."

"That one is mine," Zakath grated. "I Ve never had the op* portunity to deal with high treason on a personal level before."

"His wife will be eternally in your debt." Beldin grinned.

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"She might even decide to journey to Ma! Zeth to offer her thanks—among other things—in person. She's a lush wench, Zakath. I'd advise that you get plenty of rest."

"Methinks I care not for the turn this conversation hath taken," Cyradis said primly. "The day wears on. Let us proceed."

"Anythin' yer heart desires, me little darlin'." Beldin grinned.

Cyradis smiled in spite of herself.

Again they all spoke with that jocular bravado. They were approaching what was probably the most important Event in all of time, and making light of it was a natural human response. Silk led the way out of the niche, his soft boots making no sound on the wet stones under their feet. Garion and Zakath, however, had to move with some care to avoid clinking. The sharply mounting stone terraces were each uniformly about ten feet tall, but at regular intervals there were stairways leading from one terrace to the one above. Silk led them up about three levels and then began circling the truncated pyramid. When they reached the northeast corner, he paused. "We'd better be very quiet now," he whispered. "We're only about a hundred yards from that amphitheater. We don't want some sharp-eared Gro-lim to hear us."

They crept around the corner and made their way carefully along the north face for several minutes. Then Silk stopped and leaned out over the edge to peer down into the fog. "This is it," he whispered. "The amphitheater's a rectangular indentation in the side of the peak. It runs from the beach up to that portal or whatever you want to call it. If you look over the edge, you'll see that the terraces below us break off back there a ways. The amphitheater is right below us. We're within a hundred yards of Zandramas right now."

Garion peered down into the fog, almost wishing that by a single act of will he could brush aside the obscuring mist so that he could look at the face of his enemy.

"Steady," Beldin whispered to him. "It's going to come soon enough. Let's not spoil the surprise for her."

Disjointed voices came up out of the fog—harsh, guttural Gro-lim voices. The fog seemed to muffle them, so Garion could not pick out individual words, but he didn't really have to.

They waited.

The sun by now had risen above the eastern horizon, and its pale disk was faintly visible through the fog and the roiling cloud

that was the aftermath of the storm. The fog began to eddy and swirl. Gradually the mist overhead dissolved, and now Garion could see the sky. A thick blanket of dirty-looking scud lay over the reef but extended only a few leagues to the east. Thus it was that the sun, low on the eastern horizon, shone on the underside of the clouds and stained them an angry reddish orange with its light. It looked almost as if the sky had taken fire.

"Colorful," Sadi murmured, nervously passing his poisoned dagger from one hand to the other. He set his red leather case down and opened it. Then he took up the earthenware bottle, worked the stopper out, and laid it on its side. "There should be mice on this reef," he said, "or the eggs of seabirds. Zith and her babies will be all right." Then he straightened, carefully putting a small bag he had taken from the case in the pocket of his tunic. "A little precaution," he whispered by way of explanation.

The fog now lay beneath them like a pearly gray ocean in the shadow of the pyramid. Garion heard a strange, melancholy cry and raised his eyes. The albatross hovered on motionless wings above the fog. Garion peered intently down into the obscuring mist, almost absently working the leather sleeve off the hilt of his sword. The Orb was glowing faintly, and its color was not blue, but an angry red, almost the color of the burning sky.

"That confirms it, Old Wolf," Poledra said to her husband. "The Sardion's in that cave."

Belgarath, silvery hair and beard glowing red in the light reflected from the clouds overhead, grunted.

The fog below began to swirl, its surface looking almost like an angry sea. It thinned even more. Garion could now see shadowy forms beneath them, hazy, indistinct, and uniformly dark. The fog was now no more than a faintly obscuring haze. "Holy Sorceress!" a Grolim voice exclaimed in alarm. "Look!"

A hooded figure in a shiny black satin robe spun about, and Garion looked full into the face of the Child of Dark. He had heard the lights beneath her skin described several times, but no description had prepared him for what he now saw. The lights in Zandramas' face were not stationary, but swirled restlessly beneath her skin. In the shadow of the ancient pyramid, her features were dark, nearly invisible, but the swirling lights made it appear, in the cryptic words of the Ashabine Oracles, as if "all the starry universe" were contained in her flesh. Behind him he heard the sharp hiss of Ce'Nedra's indrawn

breath. He turned his head and saw his little queen, dagger in hand and eyes ablaze with hatred, starting toward the stairs leading down

into the amphitheater. Polgara and Velvet, obviously aware of her desperate plan, quickly restrained and disarmed

her.

Then Poledra stepped to the edge of the terrace. "And so it has come at last, Zandramas," she said in a clear voice.

"I was but waiting for thee to join thy friends, Poledra," the sorceress replied in a taunting tone. "I was concerned for thee, fearing that thou hadst lost thy way. Now it is complete, and we may proceed in orderly fashion."

"Thy concern with order is somewhat belated, Zandramas," Poledra told her, "but no matter. We have all, as was foretold, arrived at the appointed place at the appointed time. Shall we put aside all this foolishness and go inside? The universe must be growing impatient with us."

"Not just yet, Poledra," Zandramas replied flatly. "How tiresome," Belgarath's wife said wearily. "That's a failing in thee, Zandramas. Even after something obviously isn't working, thou must continue to try. Thou hast twisted and turned and tried to evade this meeting, but all in vain. And all of diine evasion hath only brought thee more quickly to this place. Thinkest thou not that it is time to forgo thine entertainments and to go along gracefully?" "I do not think so, Poledra."

Poledra sighed. "All right, Zandramas," she said in a resigned tone, "as it pleaseth thee." She extended her arm, pointing at Garion. "Since thou art so bent on this, thus I summon the Godslayer,"

Slowly, deliberately, Garion reached back across his shoulder and wrapped his hand about the hilt of his sword. It made an angry hiss as it slid from its sheath and it was already flaming an incandescent blue as it emerged. Garion's mind was icy calm now. All doubt and fear were gone, even as they had been at Cthol Mishrak, and the spirit of the Child of Light possessed him utterly. He took the sword hilt in both hands and slowly raised it until the flaming blade was pointed at the fiery clouds overhead. "This is thy fate, Zandramas!" he roared in an awful voice, the archaic words coming unbidden to his lips.

"That has yet to be determined, Belgarion." Zandramas' tone was defiant, as might be expected, but there was something else behind it. "Fate is not always so easily read." She made an imperious gesture, and her Grolims formed up into a phalanx

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around her and began to intone a harsh chant in an ancient and hideous language.

"Get back!" Polgara warned sharply, and she, her parents, and Beldin stepped to the edge of the terrace.

Flickering faintly, an inky shadow began to appear at the very edge of Garion's vision, and he began to feel an obscure sense of dread. "Watch yourselves," he quietly warned his friends. "I think she's starting one of those illusions we were talking about last night.'" Then he felt a powerful surge and heard a roar of sound. A wave of sheer darkness rolled out from the extended hands of the Grolims massed around Zandramas, but the wave shattered into black fragments that sizzled and skittered around the amphitheater like frightened mice as the four sorcerers blew it apart almost contemptuously with a single word spoken in unison. Several of the Grolims collapsed writhing to the stone floor, and most of the rest of them staggered back, their faces suddenly pasty white.

Beldin cackled evilly. "An' would ye like t' try it again, daiiin'?" he taunted Zandramas. "If that's yer intent, ye should have brought more Grolims. Yer usin' 'em up at a fearful rate, don't y' know."

"I wish you wouldn't do mat," Belgarath said to him.

"So does she, I'll wager. She takes herself very seriously, and a little ridicule always sets that sort off their pace.'"

Without changing expression, Zandramas hurled a fireball at the dwarf, but he brushed it aside as if it were no more than an annoying insect.

Garion quite suddenly understood. The sudden sheet of darkness and the fireball were not intended seriously. They were no more than subterfuge, a way to distract attention from that shadow at the edge of vision.

The Sorceress of Darshiva smiled a chill little smile. "No matter." She shrugged. "I was only testing you, my droll little hunchback. Keep laughing, Beldin. I like to see people die happy."

"Truly," he agreed. "Smile a bit yerself, me darlin', an' have a bit of a look around. Y' might say good-bye t' the sun while yer at it, fer I don't think ye'll be seein' it fer much longer."

"Are all these threats really necessary?" Belgarath asked wearily.

"It's customary," Beldin told him. "Insults and boasting are a common prelude to more serious business. Besides, she started

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it." He looked down at Zandramas' Grolims, who had started to move menacingly forward. "I guess it's time, though. Shall we go downstairs then and prepare a big pot of Grolim stew? I like mine chopped rather fine." He extended his hand, snapped his fingers, and wrapped the hand around the hilt of a hook-pointed Ulgo knife.

With Garion in the lead, they walked purposefully to the head of the stairs and started down as the Grolims, with a variety of weapons in their hands, rushed to the bottom.

"Get back!" Silk snapped at Velvet, who had resolutely joined them with one of her daggers held professionally low.

"Not a chance," she said crisply. "I'm protecting my investment."

' 'What investment?'

"We can talk about it later. I'm busy right now."

The Grolim leading the charge was a huge man, almost as big as Toth. He was swinging a massive axe, and his eyes were filled with madness. When he was perhaps five feet from Gar-ion, Sadi stepped up to the Rivan King's shoulder and hurled a fistful of strangely colored powder full into the ascending Gro-lim's face. The Grolim shook his head, pawing at his eyes. Then he sneezed. And then his eyes filled with horror, and he screamed. Howling in terror, he dropped his axe, spun, and bolted back down, shouldering his companions off the steps as he fled. When he reached the floor of the amphitheater, he did not stop, but ran toward the sea. He floundered out into waist-deep water and then stepped off the edge of an unseen terrace lurking beneath the surface. It did not appear that he knew how to swim.

"I thought you were out of that powder," Silk said to Sadi even as he made a long, smooth, overhand cast with one of his daggers. A Grolim stumbled back, plucking at the dagger hilt protruding from his chest, missed his footing, and fell heavily backward down the stairway.

"I always keep a bit for contingencies," Sadi replied, ducking under a sword swipe and deftly slicing a Grolim across the belly with his poisoned dagger. The Grolim stiffened, then slowly toppled out off the side of the staircase. A number of black-robed men, seeking to surprise them from the rear, were clambering up the rough sides of the stairway. Velvet knelt and coolly drove one of her daggers into the upturned face of a Grolim on the verge of reaching the top. With a hoarse cry he

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clutched at his face and fell backward, sweeping several of his companions off the wall as he plunged down.

Then the blond Drasnian girl darted to the other side of the stairs, shaking out her silken cord. She deftly looped it about the neck of a Grolim in the act of scrambling up onto the steps. She stepped under his flailing arms, turned until they were back to back, and leaned forward. The helpless Grolim's feet came up off the step, and he clutched at the cord about his neck with both hands. His feet kicked futilely at the air for a few moments, his face turning black, and then he went limp. Velvet turned back, unlooped her cord, and coolly kicked the inert body off the edge.

Durnik and Toth had moved up to take positions beside Gar-ion and Zakath, and the four of them moved implacably down the stairs, step by step, chopping and smashing at the black-robed figures rushing up to meet them. Dumik's hammer seemed only slightly less dreadful than the sword of the Rivan King. The Grolims fell before them as they

moved inexorably down the stairs. Toth was chopping methodically with Durnik's axe, his face as expressionless as that of a man felling a tree. Zakath was a fencer, and he feinted and parried with his massive, though nearly weightless, sword. His thrusts were quick and usually lethal. The steps below the dreadful quartet were soon littered with twisted bodies and were running with rivulets of blood.

' 'Watch your footing,' ' Dumik warned as he crushed another Grolim's skull. "The steps are getting slippery."

Garion swept off another Grolim head. It bounced like a child's ball down the steps even as the body toppled off the side of the stairway. Garion risked a quick look back over his shoulder. Belgarath and Beldin had joined Velvet to help the girl repel the black-robed men scrambling up the sides of the steps. Beldin seemed to take vicious delight in driving his hook-pointed knife into Grolim eyes, then, with a sharp twist and a jerk he would pull out sizable gobs of brains. Belgarath, his thumbs tucked into his rope belt, waited calmly. When a Grolim's head appeared above the edge of the stair, the old man would draw back his foot and kick the priest of Torak full in the face. Since it was a thirty-foot drop from the stairs to the stones of the amphitheater, few of the Grolims he kicked off the side of the stairs tried the climb a second time.

When they reached the foot of the stairs, scarcely any of Zandramas' Grolims survived. With his usual prudence, Sadi darted around first one side of the stairway and then the other,

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coolly sinking his poisoned dagger into the bodies of those Grolims who had fallen to the amphitheater floor, the inert dead as well as the groaning injured.

Zandramas seemed somewhat taken aback by the sheer violence of her foes' descent. She held her ground nonetheless, drawing herself up in scornful defiance. Standing behind her, his mouth agape with terror, stood a man in a cheap crown and somewhat shopworn regal robes. His features bore a faint resemblance to those of Zakath, so Garion assumed that he was the Archduke Otrath. And then at last, Garion beheld his own young son. He had avoided looking at the boy during the bloody descent, since he had been unsure of what his own reaction might have been at a time when his concentration was vital. As Beldin had said, Geran was no longer a baby. His blond curls gave his face a softness, but there was no softness in his eyes as he met his father's gaze. Geran was quite obviously consumed with hatred for the woman who firmly held his arm in her grasp.

Gravely, Garion raised his sword to his visor in salute, and, just as gravely, Geran lifted his free hand in response.

Then the Rivan King began an implacable advance, pausing only long enough to kick an unattached Grolim head out of his way. The uncertainty he had felt back in Dal Perivor had vanished now. Zandramas stood no more than a few yards away, and the fact that she was a woman no longer mattered. He raised his flaming sword and

continued his advance.

The flickering shadow along the periphery of his vision grew darker, and he hesitated as his sense of dread increased. Try though he might, he could not stifle it. He faltered.

The shadow, vague at first, began to coalesce into a hideous face that towered behind the black-robed sorceress. The eyes were soullessly blank, and the mouth gaped open in an expression of unspeakable loss as if the owner of the face had been plunged into a horror beyond imagining from a place of light and glory. That loss, however, bespoke no compassion or gentleness, but rather expressed the implacable need of the hideous being to find others to share its misery.

"Behold the King of Hell!" Zandramas cried triumphantly. "Flee now and live a few moments longer ere he pulls you all down into eternal darkness, eternal flames, and eternal despair."

Garion stopped. He could not advance on that ultimate horror.

And then a voice came to him out of his memories, and with

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the voice there came an image. He seemed to be standing in a damp clearing in a forest somewhere. A light, drizzling rain was falling from a heavy, nighttime sky, and the leaves underfoot were wet and soggy. Eriond, all unconcerned, was speaking to them. It had happened, Garion realized, just after their first encounter with Zandramas, who had assumed the shape of the dragon to attack them. "But the fire wasn't real," the young man was explaining. "Didn't you all know that?" He looked slightly surprised at their failure to understand. "It was only an illusion. That's all evil ever really is—an illusion. I'm sorry if any of you were worried, but I didn't have time to explain."

That was the key, Garion understood now. Hallucination was the product of derangement; illusion was not. He was not going mad. The face of the King of Hell was no more real than had been the illusion of Arell that Ce'Nedra had encountered in the forest below Kell. The only weapon the Child of Dark had to counter the Child of Light with was illusion, a subtle trickery directed at the mind. It was a powerful weapon, but very fragile. One ray of light could destroy it. He started forward again.

"Garion!" Silk cried.

"Ignore the face," Garion told him. "It isn't real. Zandramas is trying to frighten us into madness. The face isn't there. It doesn't even have as much substance as a shadow."

Zandramas flinched, and the enormous face behind her wavered and vanished. Her eyes darted this way and that, lingering, Garion seemed to perceive, upon the portaJ leading into the cave. As surely as if he could see it, Garion knew that there was something in that

cave—something which was Zandramas' last line of defense. Then, seemingly all unconcerned by the obliteration of the weapon that had always served the Child of Dark so well, she made a quick gesture to her remaining Groiims.

"No." It was the light, clear voice of the Seeress of Kell. "I cannot permit this. The issue must be decided by the Choice, not by senseless brawling. Put up thy sword, Belgarion of Riva, and withdraw thy minions, Zandramas of Darshiva."

Garion found that the muscles of his legs had suddenly cramped, and that he could no longer move even one step. Painfully, he twisted around. He saw Cyradis descending the stairs, guided now by Eriond. Immediately behind her came Aunt Pol, Poledra, and the Rivan Queen.

"The task you both share here," Cyradis continued in an echoing choral voice, "is not to destroy each other, for should it come to pass that one of you destroyeth the other, your tasks

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will "remain uncompleted, and I also will be unable to complete mine. Thus, all that is, all that was, and all that is yet to be will forever perish. Put up thy sword, Belgarion, and send away thy Grolims, Zandramas. Let us go even into the Place Which Is No More and make our choices. The universe grows weary of our delay."

Regretfully, Garion sheathed his sword, but the Sorceress of Darshiva's eyes narrowed. "'Kill her,'" she commanded her Grolims in a chillingly flat voice. "Kill the blind Dalasian witch in the name of the new God of Angarak."

The remaining Grolims, their faces filled with religious exaltation, started toward the foot of the stairs. Eriond sighed and resolutely stepped forward to place his body in front of that of Cyradis.

"That will not be necessary, Bearer of the Orb," Cyradis told him. She bowed her head slightly, and the choral voice swelled to a crescendo. The Grolims faltered, and then began to grope around, staring with unseeing eyes at the daylight around them.

"It's the enchantment again," Zakath whispered, "the same one that surrounded Keli. They're blind."

This time, however, what the Grolims saw in their blindness was not the vision of the Face of God that the gentle old priest of Torak they had met in the sheep camp above Kell had seen, but something altogether different. The enchantment, it appeared, could cut two ways. The Grolims cried out first in alarm, then in fright. Then their cries became screams, and they turned, stumbling over each other and even crawling on hands and knees to escape that which they saw. They scrambled blindly down to the water's edge, obviously bent on following the hulking Gro-lim into whose face Sadi had thrown that strange powder of his. They floundered out into the now gently rolling waves, and one by one stepped off into deep water.

A few could swim, but not very many. Those who could swam desperately out to sea and inevitable death. Those who could not sank beneath the surface, their imploring hands reaching upward even after their heads had gone under. Columns of bubbles rose to the top of the dark water for a few moments, and then they stopped.

The albatross, its great wings motionless, drifted over them for a moment and then returned to hover over the amphitheater.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

"And now art thou, as thou hast ever chosen to be, alone, Child of Dark," Cyradis said sternly.

"The ones who were here with me were of no moment, Cyradis," Zandramas replied indifferently. "They have served their purpose, and I no longer need them."

' 'Art thou then ready to enter through the portal into the Place Which Is No More to stand in the presence of the Sardion, there to make thy choice?"

"Of course, Holy Seeress," Zandramas acquiesced with surprising mildness. ' 'Gladly will I join with the Child of Light that together we may enter the Temple of Torak."

"Watch her, Garion," Silk whispered. "The whole tone of this is wrong. She's up to something."

But Cyradis, it appeared, had also detected the ruse. "Thy sudden acceptance is puzzling, Zandramas," she said. "Vainly hast thou striven for all these weary months to avoid this meet-

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ing, and now thou wouldst rush-eagerly into the grotto. What hath so altered thee? Doth perchance some unseen peril lurk within yon grot? Seekest thou still to lure the Child of Light to his doom, thinking thereby to avoid the necessity of the Choice?"

"The answer to thy question, blind witch, doth lie behind that portal," Zandramas replied in a harsh voice. She turned her glittering face toward Garion. "Surely the great Godslayer is without fear," she said. "Or is he who slew Tbrak become of a sudden timid and fearful? What threat could. I, a mere woman, pose to the mightiest warrior in the world? Let us then investigate this grotto together. Confidently will I deliver my safety into thy hands, Belgarion."

"It may not be so, Zandramas," the Seeress of Kell declared. "It is

too late now for subterfuge and deceit. Only the Choice will free thee now." She paused and briefly bowed her head. Again Garion heard that choral murmuring. "Ah," she said at last, "now we understand. The passage in the book of the heavens was obscure, but now it is clear." She aimed toward the portal. "Come forth, Demon Lord. Lurk not in darkness awaiting prey, but come forth that we may see thee." "No!" Zandramas cried hoarsely.

But it was too late. Reluctantly, almost as if being driven, the battered and half-crippled dragon limped out of the grotto, roaring and belching billows of flame and smoke. "Not again," Zakath groaned.

Garion, however, saw more than just the dragon. Even as in the snow-clogged forest outside Val Alorn when he had seen the image of Barak superimposed upon that of the dreadful bear rushing to his rescue after he had speared the boar when he was no more than fourteen, he now saw the form of the Demon Lord Mordja within the shape of the dragon. Mordja, archfey of Na-haz, the demon that had borne the shrieking Urvon into the eternal pit of Hell. Mordja, who with a half-dozen snakelike arms grasped a huge sword—a sword that Garion recognized all too well. The Demon Lord, encased in the form of the dragon, strode forward with monstrous steps wielding Cthrek Goru, Torak's dread sword of shadows.

The burning red clouds overhead erupted with lightning as the hideously twinned beast came at them. "Spread out!" Garion shouted. "Silk! Tell them what to do!" He drew a deep breath as great bolts of lightning streaked down from the roiling red sky above to crash against the sides of the terraced pyramid.

with earth-shattering claps of thunder. "Let's go!" Garion cried to Zakath as he once more drew Iron-grip's sword. But then he paused, dumbfounded. Poledra, as calmly as she would if crossing a meadow, approached the awful monstrosity. "Thy Master is the Lord of Deception, Mordja," she said to the suddenly immobilized creature before her, "but it is time for deceit to end. Thou wilt speak only truth. What is thy purpose here? What is the purpose of all of thy kind in this place?"

The Demon Lord, frozen within the form of the dragon, snarled its hatred as it twisted and writhed, attempting to break free.

"Speak, Mordja," Poledra commanded. Did anyone have that kind of power?

"I will not." Mordja spat out the words.

"Thou wilt," Garion's grandmother said in a dreadfully quiet voice.

Mordja shrieked then, a shriek of total agony.

"What is thy purpose?" Poledra insisted.

"I serve the King of Hell!" the demon cried.

"And what is the purpose of the King of Hell here?"

"He would possess the stones of power," Mordja howled.

"And why?"

"That he may break his chains, the chains in which accursed UL bound him long ere any of this was made."

"Wherefore hast thou then aided the Child of Dark, and wherefore didst thy foe Nahaz aid the Disciple of Torak? Didst not thy Master know that each of them sought to raise a God? A God which would even more securely bind him?"

"What they sought was of no moment," Mordja snarled. "Nahaz and I contended with each other, in truth, but our contention was not on behalf of mad Urvon or sluttish Zandramas. In the instant that either of them gained Sardion would the King of Hell reach forth with my hands—or with the hands of Nahaz— and seize the stone. Then, using its power, would the one of us or the other wrest Cthrag Yaska from the Godslayer and deliver both stones to our Master. In the instant that he took up the two stones would he become the new God. His chains would break and he would contend with UL as an equal—nay, an even mightier—God, and all that is, was, or will be would be his and his done."

"And what then was to be the fate of the Child of Dark or the Disciple of Tbrak?"

*'They were to be our rewards. Even now doth Nahaz feed

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eternally upon mad Urvon in the darkest pit of Hell, even as I shall feed upon Zandramas. The ultimate reward of the King of Hell is eternal torment."

The Sorceress of Darshiva gasped in horror as she heard her soul's fate so cruelly pronounced.

"Thou canst not stop me, Poledra," Mordja taunted, "for the King of Hell hath strengthened my hand."

"Thy hand, however, is confined in the body of this rude beast," Poledra said. "Thou hast made thy choice, and in this place, a choice, once made, cannot be unmade. Here wilt thou contend alone, and thine only ally will not be the King of Hell, but no more than this mindless creature which thou hast chosen."

The demon raised its dreadful, fang-filled muzzle with a great howl, and it struggled, heaving its vast shoulders this way and that as it desperately tried to wrench itself free of the shape that enclosed it.

"Does this mean we have to fight them both!" Zakath asked Garion in a shaking voice.

"I'm afraid so."

"Garion, have you lost your mind?"

"It's what we do, Zakath. At least Poledra has limited Mord-ja's power—I don't know how, but she has. Since he doesn't have his full powers, we at least have a chance against him. Let's get at it.'" Garion clapped down his visor and strode forward, swinging his flaming sword before him.

Silk and the others had separated, and they were approaching the dragon from the sides and from the rear.

As he and Zakath warily moved in, Garion saw something that might be an even greater advantage. The melding of the primitive mind of the dragon and the age-old one of the demon was not complete. The dragon, with stubborn stupidity, could only focus her single eye upon those enemies who stood directly before her, and she charged on, unmindful of Garion's friends moving toward her flanks. Mordja, however, was all too much aware of the dangers advancing from the sides and from the rear. The division of the unnaturally joined mind of the vast, bat-winged creature gave it a kind of uncharacteristic hesitation, indecision even. Then Silk, the sword of a fallen Grolim in his hands, darted in from the rear and chopped manfully at the writhing tail.

The dragon bellowed in pain, and flames burst from her gaping mouth. Overriding what little control Mordja exerted upon

her, she wheeled clumsily to respond to Silk's attack. The little thief, however, skipped nimbly out of her way even as the others dashed in to attack her flanks. Durnik rhythmically hammered on one exposed flank while Torn chopped no less rhythmically at the other.

A desperate plan came unbidden to Garion as he saw that the dragon had turned almost completely around to meet Silk's attack. "Work on her tail!" he shouted to Zakath. He backed off a few paces to give himself running room, then lumbered forward, his movements made awkward by his armor. He leaped over the slashing tail and ran up the dragon's back.

"Garion!" he heard Ce'Nedra scream in horror. He ignored her frightened cry and continued to scramble up the scaly back until he was finally able to plant his feet on the dragon's shoulders between the batlike wings. The dragon, he knew, would not fear or even feel the strokes of his burning sword. Mordja, however, would. He raised Iron-grip's sword and struck a two-handed blow at the base of the scaly neck. The dragon, weaving her fearsome head and breathing fire and smoke as she sought out those who were attacking her, paid no heed. Mordja, however, screamed in agony as the power of the Orb seared him. That was their advantage. Left to herself, the dragon was incapable of meeting their many-pronged attack. It was the added intelligence of the Demon Lord that made her so dangerous in this situation, but Garion had seen evidence in the past that the Orb could inflict intolerable agony upon a demon. In that respect, it had

even more power than did a God. Demons fled from the presence of the Gods, but they could not flee from the chastisement of Aldur's Orb. "Hotter!" he commanded the stone as he raised his blade again. He struck and struck and Struck again. The great blade no longer bounced off the dragon's scales but seared its way through them to bite into the dragon's Besh. The half-indistinct image of Mordja, encased in the dragon, shrieked as the sword cut into his neck even as it slashed at that of the dragon. Almost in mid-stroke, Garion reversed his sword and, grasping the crosspiece of the hilt, drove it down into the dragon's back between the vast shoulders.

Mordja screamed.

Garion wrenched the sword back and forth, tearing the wound even wider.

Even the dragon felt that. She screamed,

Garion raised his sword again, and once again sank it into the bleeding wound, deeper this time.

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The dragon and Mordja screamed in unison.

Ludicrously, Garion remembered a time in his bygone youth when he had watched old Cralto digging holes for fence posts. He consciously imitated the old farm worker's rhythmic motion, raising his reversed sword high overhead as Cralto had his shovel, and driving the blade down into the dragon's flesh. With each driving blow the wound grew deeper, and blood gushed and spurted from the quivering flesh. He momentarily saw the white of bone and altered his point of aim. Not even Iron-grip's sword could shear through that tree-trunk-sized backbone.

His friends had momentarily fallen back, astonished at the Rivan King's insane-appearing audacity. Then they saw that the dragon's almost serpentlike head was raised high in the air as she tried desperately to writhe her neck around to bite at the tormenter digging a huge hole between her shoulder blades. They rushed back into the attack, hacking and stabbing at the softer scales covering the dragon's throat, belly, and flanks. Darting in and out quickly to avoid being trampled by the huge beast, Silk, Velvet, and Sadi attacked the unprotected underside of the distracted dragon. Durnik was steadily pounding on the dragon's side, methodically breaking ribs one by one as Toth chopped at the other side. Belgarath and Poledra, once again as wolves, were gnawing on the writhing tail.

Then Garion saw what he had been searching for—the hawserlike tendon leading down into one of the dragon's huge wings. "Hotter!" he shouted again at the Orb.

The sword flared anew, and this time Garion did not strike. Instead he set the edge of his weapon against the tendon and began to saw back and forth with it, burning through the tough ligament rather than chopping. The tendon, finally severed, snapped, its cut ends

slithering snakelike back into the bleeding flesh.

The bellow of pain that emerged from that flame-filled mouth was shattering. The dragon lurched, then fell, thrashing its huge limbs in terrible agony.

Garion was thrown clear when the dragon fell. Desperately he rolled, trying to get away from those flailing claws. Then Zakath was there, yanking him to his feet. "You're insane, Gar-ion!" he shouted in a shrill voice. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," Garion said in a tight voice. "Let's finish it."

Toth, however, was already there. In the very shadow of the dragon's huge head he stood, his feet planted wide apart, chopping at the base of the dragon's throat. Great gushes of blood

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sputtered from severed arteries as the huge mute, his heavy shoulders surging, sought to find and cut the barrellike windpipe. Despite the concerted efforts of Garion and his friends, there had been little more than pain before. Toth's singleminded attack, however, threatened the dragon's very life. Were he to succeed in severing or even broaching the thick gristle of that windpipe, the dragon would die, choking for lack of breath or drowning in her own blood. She clawed her way back onto her forelegs and reared high over the huge mute.

"Toth!" Durnik shouted. "Get out of there! She's going to strike!"

But it was not the fanged maw that struck. Dimly, within the bleeding body of the dragon, Garion saw the indistinct shape of Mordja desperately raise Cthrek Goru, the sword of shadows. Then the Demon Lord thrust out with the sword. The blade, as if insubstantial, emerged from the dragon's chest and, as smoothly, plunged into Toth to emerge from his back. The mute stiffened, then slid limply off the sword, unable even in death to cry out.

"No!" Durnik roared in a voice filled with indescribable loss.

Garion's mind went absolutely cold. "Keep her teeth off me," he told Zakath in a flat, unemotional tone. Then he dashed forward, reversing his sword once again in preparation for a thrust such as he had never delivered before. He aimed that thrust not at the wound Toth had opened but at the dragon's broad chest instead.

Cthrek Goru flickered out to ward him off, but Garion parried that desperate defensive stroke, then set his shoulder against the massive crosspiece of his sword's hilt. He fixed the now-shrinking demon with a look of pure hatred and then he drove his sword into the dragon's chest with all his strength, and the great surge as the Orb unleashed its power almost staggered him.

The sword of the Rivan King slid smoothly into the dragon's heart, like a stick into water.

The awful bellowing from both the dragon and the Demon Lord broke off suddenly in a kind of gurgling sigh.

Grimly, Garion wrenched his sword free and stepped clear of the convulsing beast. Then, like a burning house collapsing in on itself, the dragon crumpled to the ground, twitched a few times, and was still.

Garion wearily turned.

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Tbth's face was calm, but blind Cyradis knelt on one side of his body and Duraik on the other. They were both weeping openly.

High overhead, the albatross cried out once, a cry of pain and loss.

Cyradis was weeping, her blindfold wet with her tears.

The smoky-looking orange sky roiled and tumbled overhead, and inky black patches lay in the folds of the clouds, shifting, coiling, and undulating as the clouds, still stained on their undersides by the new-risen sun, writhed in the sky above and flinched and shuddered as they begot drunken-appearing lightning that staggered down through the murky air to strike savagely at the altar of the One-Eyed God on the pinnacle above.

Cyradis was weeping.

The sharply regular stones that floored the amphitheater were still darkly wet from the clinging fog that had enveloped the reef before dawn and the downpour of yesterday. The white speckles in that iron-hard stone glittered like stars under their sheen of moisture.

Cyradis was weeping.

Garion drew in a deep breath and looked around the amphitheater. It was not as large perhaps as he had first imagined—certainly not large enough to contain what had happened here—but then, all the world would probably not have been large enough to contain that. The faces of his companions, bathed in the fiery light from the sky and periodically glowing dead white in the intense flashes of the stuttering lightning, seemed awed by the enormity of what had just happened. The amphitheater was littered with dead Grolims, shrunken black patches lying on the stones or sprawled in boneless-looking clumps on the stairs. Garion heard a peculiar, voiceless rumble that died off into something almost like a sigh. He looked incuriously at the dragon. Its tongue protruded from its gaping mouth, and its reptilian eyes stared blankly at him. The sound he had heard had come from that vast carcass. The beast's entrails, still unaware that they, like the rest of the dragon, were dead, continued their methodical work of digestion. Zandramas stood frozen in shock. The beast she had raised and the demon she had sent to possess it were both dead, and her desperate effort to evade the necessity of standing powerless and defenseless in the place of the Choice had

crumbled and fallen as a child's castle of sand crumbles before the encroaching waves. Garion's son looked

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upon his father with unquestioning trust and pride, and Garion took a certain comfort in that clear-eyed gaze.

Cyradis was weeping. All else in Garion's mind was drawn from reflection and random impressions. The one incontrovertible fact, however, was that the Seeress of Kell was crushed by her grief. At this particular time she was the most important person in the universe, and perhaps it had always been so. It might very well be, Garion thought, that the world had been created for the one express purpose of bringing this frail girl to this place at this time to make this single Choice. But could she do that now? Might it not be that the death of her guide and protector—the one person in all the world she had truly loved—had rendered her incapable of making the Choice?

Cyradis was weeping, and so long as she wept, the minutes ticked by. Garion saw now as clearly as if he were reading in that book of the heavens which guided the seers that the time of the meeting and of the Choice was not only this particular day, but would come in a specific instant of this day, and if Cyradis, bowed down by her unbearable grief, were unable to choose in that instant, all that had been, all that was, and all that was yet to be would shimmer and vanish like an ephemeral dream. Her weeping must cease, or all would be forever lost.

It began with a clear-toned single voice, a voice that rose and rose in elegaic sadness that contained within it the sum of human woe. Then other voices emerged singly or in trios or in octets to join that aching song. The chorus of the group mind of the seers plumbed the depths of the grief of the Seeress of Kell and then sank in an unbearable diminuendo of blackest despair and faded off into a silence more profound than the silence of the grave.

Cyradis was weeping, but she did not weep alone. Her entire race wept with her.

That lone voice began again, and the melody was similar to the one that had just died away. To Garion's untrained ear, it seemed almost the same, but a subtle chord change had somehow taken place, and as the other voices joined in, more chords insinuated themselves into the song, and the grief and unutterable despair were questioned in the final notes.

Yet once again the song began, not this time with a single voice but with a mighty chord that seemed to shake the very roots of heaven with its triumphant affirmation. The melody remained basically the same, but what had begun as a dirge was now an exultation.

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Cyradis gently laid Toth's hand on his motionless chest, smoothed his hair, and groped across his body to touch Durnik's tear-wet face consolingly.

She rose, no longer weeping, and Garion's fears dissolved and faded as the morning fog that had obscured the reef had faded beneath the onslaught of the sun. "Go," she said in a resolute voice, pointing at the now-unguarded portal. "The time approaches. Go thou, Child of Light, and thou, Child of Dark, even into the grot, for we have choices to make which; once made, may never be unmade. Come ye with me, therefore, into the Place Which Is No More, there to decide the fate of all men." And with firm and unfaltering step, the Seeress of Kell led the way toward that portal surmounted by the stony image of the face of Torak.

Garion found himself powerless in the grip of that clear voice and he fell in beside satin-robed Zandramas to follow the slender Seeress. He felt a faint brush against his armored right shoulder as he and the Child of Dark entered the portal. It was almost with a wry amusement that he realized that the forces controlling this meeting were not so entirely sure of themselves. They had placed a barrier between him and the Sorceress of Darshiva. Zandramas' unprotected throat lay quite easily within the reach of his vengeful hands, but the barrier made her as unassailable as if she had been on the far side of the moon. Faintly, he was aware that the others were coming up behind, his friends following him, and Geran and the violently trembling Otrath trailing after Zandramas.

"This need not be so, Belgarion of Riva," Zandramas whispered urgently. "Will we, the two most powerful ones in all the universe, submit to the haphazard choice of this brain-sickly girl? Let us bestow our choices upon ourselves. Thus will we both become Gods. Easily will we be able to set aside UL and the others and rule all creation jointly." The swirling lights beneath the skin of her face spun faster now, and her eyes glowed red. 'Once we have achieved divinity, thou canst put aside thine earthly wife, who is not, after all, human, and thou and I could mate. Thou couldst father a race of Gods upon me, Belgarion, and we could sate each other with unearthly delights, Thou wilt find me fair, King of Riva, as all men have, and I will consume thy days with the passion of Gods, and we will share in the meeting of Light and iDark."

Garion was startled, even a little awed by the single-mindedness of the Spirit of the Child of Dark. The thing was as

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implacable and as unchangeable as adamant rock. He perceived that it did not change because it could not. He began to grope his way toward something that seemed significant. Light could change. Every day was testimony to that. Dark could not. Then it was at last that he understood the true meaning of the eternal division which had rent the universe apart. The Dark sought immobile stasis; the Light sought progression. The Dark crouched in a perceived perfection; the Light, however, moved on, informed by the concept of perfectability. When

Garion spoke, it was not in reply to the blatant inducements of Zandramas, but rather to the Spirit of Dark itself. "It will change, you know," he said. "Nothing you can do will stop me from believing that. Torak offered to be my father, and now Zandramas offers to be my wife. I rejected Ibrak, and I reject Zandramas. You cannot lock me into immobility. If I change only one little thing, you've lost. Go stop the tide if you can, and leave me alone to do my work."

The gasp that came from the mouth of Zandramas was more than human. Garion's sudden understanding had actually stung the Dark, not merely its instrument. He felt a faint, almost feath-erlike probing, and made no effort to repel it.

Zandramas hissed, her eyes aflame with hate-filled frustration.

"Didn't you find what you wanted?" Garion asked.

The voice that came from her lips was dry, unemotional. "You'll have to make your choice eventually, you know," it said.

The voice that came from Garion's lips was not his own, and it was just as dry and clinical. "There's plenty of time," it replied. "My instrument will choose when it is needful."

"A clever move, but it does not yet signify the end of the game."

"Of course not. The last move lies in the hands of the Seeress of Kell."

"So be it, then."

They were walking down a long, musty-smelling corridor.

"I absolutely hate this," Garion heard Silk murmur from behind him.

' 'It's going to be all right, Kheldar,' ' Velvet told the little man comfortingly. "I won't let anything happen to you."

Then the corridor opened out into a submerged grotto. The walls were rough, irregular, for this was not a construction but a natural cavern. Water oozed down a far wall to trickle end-

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lessly with silvery note into a dark pool. The grotto had a faintly reptilian smell overlaid by the odor of long-dead meat, and the floor was littered with gnawed white bones. By some ironic twist, the lair of the Dragon God had become the lair of the dragon herself. No better guard had been necessary to protect this place.

On the near wall stood a massive throne carved from a single rock, and before the throne there was one of the now all-too-familiar altars. Lying on the center of that altar was an- oblong stone somewhat larger than a man's head. The stone glowed red, and its ugly light illuminated the grotto. Just to one side of the altar lay a human skeleton, its bony arm extended in a gesture of longing. Garion

frowned. Some sacrifice to Torak, perhaps? Some victim of the dragon? Then he knew. It was the Melcene scholar who had stolen the Sardion from the university and fled with it to this place to die here in unthinking adoration of the stone that had killed him.

Just over his shoulder, Garion heard a sudden animallike snarl coming from the Orb, and a similar sound came from the red stone, the Sardion, which lay on the altar. There was a confused babble of sound in a multitude of languages, some drawn, for all Garion knew, from the farthest reaches of the universe. Flickering streaks of blue shot up through the milky-red Sardion, and similarly, angry red bathed the Orb in undulant waves as all the conflicts of all the ages came together in this small, confined space.

"Control it, Garion!" Belgarath said sharply. "If you don't they'll destroy each other—and the universe, as well!"

Garion reached back over his shoulder and placed his marked palm over the Orb, speaking silently to the vengeful stone. "'Not yet," he said. "Ah in good time." He could not have explained why he had chosen those precise words. Grumbling almost like a petulant child, the Orb fell silent, and the Sardion also grudgingly broke off its snarl. The lights, however, continued to stain the surfaces of both stones.

"'You were quite good back there,'" the voice in Garion's mind congratulated him. "'Our enemy is a bit off balance now. Don't get overconfident, though. We're at a slight disadvantage here because the Spirit of the Child of Dark is very strong in this grotto. "

"' Why didn't you tell me that before ?'"

"' Would you have paid any attention ? Listen carefully, Gar-ion. My opposite has agreed that we should leave the matter in

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Cyradis' hands. Zandramas, however, has made no such commitment. She's very likely to make one last attempt. Put yourself between her and the Sardion. No matter what you have to do, don't let her reach that stone. "

"'All right,'" Garion said bleakly. He reasoned that attempting to edge into position inch by inch would not deceive the Sorceress of Darshiva as to his intent. Instead, quite calmly and deliberately, he simply stepped in front of the altar, drew his sword, and set its point on the floor of the grotto in front of him with his crossed hands resting on the pommel.

"What art thou about?" Zandramas demanded in a harsh, suspicious tone of voice.

"You know exactly what I'm doing, Zandramas," Garion replied. "The two spirits have agreed to let Cyradis decide between them. I haven't heard you agree yet. Do you still think you can avoid the Choice?"

Her light-speckled face twisted with hatred. "Thou wilt pay for this, Belgarion," she answered. "All that thou art and all that thou lovest will perish here.'"

"That's for Cyradis to decide, not you. In the meantime, nobody's going to touch the Sardion until after Cyradis makes her choice."

Zandramas ground her teeth in sudden, impotent fury.

And then Poledra came closer, her tawny hair stained by the light of the Sardion. "Very well done, young wolf," she said to Garion.

"Thou no longer hast the power, Poledra." The strangely abstracted words came from Zandramas' unmoving mouth.

"Point." The familiar dry voice spoke through Poledra's lips.

"I perceive no point."

"That's because you've always discarded your instruments when you were finished with them. Poledra was the Child of Light at Vo Mimbire. She was even able to defeat Torak there— if only temporarily. Once that power is bestowed, it can never be wholly taken away. Did not her control over the Demon Lord prove that to you?"

Garion was almost staggered by that. Poledra? The Child of Light during that dreadful battle five hundred years ago?

The voice went on. "Do you acknowledge the point?" it asked its opposite.

"What difference can it make? The game will be played out soon."

"I claim point. Our rules required that you acknowledge it."

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"Very well. I acknowledge the point. You've really become quite childish about this, you know."

"A rule is a rule, and the game isn't finished yet."

Garion went back to watching Zandramas very closely so that he might meet any sudden move she made toward the Sardion.

"When is the time, Cyradis?" Belgarath quietly asked the Seeress of Keli.

"Soon," she replied. "Very soon."

"We're all here," Silk said, nervously looking up-at the ceiling. "Why don't we get on with it?"

' 'This is the day, Kheldar,' ' she said,' 'but it is not the instant. In the instant of the Choice, a great light shall appear, a light which even /will see."

It was the strange detached calm that came over him that alerted Garion to the fact that the ultimate Event was about to take place. It was the same calm that had enveloped him in the ruins of Cthol Mishrak when he had met Torak.

Then, as if the thought of his name had aroused, if only briefly, the spirit of the One-Eyed God from its eternal slumber, Garion seemed to hear Torak's dreadful voice intoning that prophetic passage from the last page of the Ashabine Oracles:

"Know that we are brothers, Belgarion, though our hate for each other may one day sunder the heavens. We are brothers in that we share a dreadful task. That thou art reading my words means that thou hast been my destroyer. Thus must I charge thee with the task. What is foretold in these pages is an abomination. Do not let it come to pass. Destroy the world. Destroy the universe if need be, but do not permit this to come to pass. In thy hand is now the fate of all that was, all that is, and all that is yet to be. Hail, my hated brother, and farewell. We will meet—or have met—in the City of Endless Night, and there will our dispute be concluded. The task, however, still lieth before us in the Place Which Is No More. One of us must go there to face the ultimate horror. Should it be thou, fail us not. Failing all else, thou must reave the life from thine only son, even as thou hast reft mine from me."

This time, however, the words of Torak did not fill Garion with weeping. They simply intensified his resolve as he finally began to understand. What Torak had seen in the vision that had come to him at Ashaba had been so terrifying that in the moment of his awakening from his prophetic dream the maimed God had felt impelled to lay the possibility of the dreadful task upon his most hated foe. That momentary horror had surpassed even

Tbrak's towering pride. It had only been later, after the pride had reasserted itself, that Torak had mutilated the pages of his prophecy. In that one bleak moment of sanity, the maimed God had spoken truly for perhaps the one time in his life. Garion could only imagine the agony of self-abasement that single moment of truth had cost Tbrak. In the silence of his mind Garion pledged his fidelity to the task his most ancient foe had lain upon him. "I will do all that is in my power to keep this abomination from coming to pass, my brother," he threw out his thought to the spirit of Torak. ' 'Return to thy rest, for here / take up the burden."

The dusky red glow of the Sardion had muted the swirling tights in the flesh of Zandramas, and Garion could now see her features quite clearly. Her expression was troubled. She had quite obviously been unprepared for the sudden acquiescence of the spirit that dominated her. Her drive to win at any cost had been frustrated by the withdrawal of the support of that spirit. Her own mind—or what was left of it—still strove to evade facing the choice. The two prophecies had agreed at the beginning of time to place the entire matter in the hands of the Seeress of Kell. The evasions, the

trickery, and the multitudinous atrocities that had marked the passage of the Child of Dark through the world had all come from the twisted Grolim perceptions of the Sorceress of Darshiva herself. At this moment, Zandramas was more dangerous than she had ever been.

"Well, Zandramas," Poledra said, "and is this the time thou hast chosen for our meeting? Shall we destroy each other now when we have come so close to the ultimate instant? If thou but await the Choice of Cyradis, thou wilt stand an even chance of obtaining that which thou hast so desperately sought. If thou shouldst confront me, however, thou wilt cast the entire matter into the lap of pure chance. Wilt thou throw away thy half chance of success in exchange for an absolute uncertainty?"

"I am stronger than thou art, Poledra," Zandramas declared defiantly. "I am the Child of Dark."

"And I was the Child of Light. How much art thou willing to gamble on the possibility that I can still call forth the strength and power? Wilt thou gamble all, Zandramas? All?"

Zandramas' eyes narrowed, and Garion could clearly feel the clenching of her will. Then, with a blasting surge of energy and a vast roar, she released it. An aura of darkness suddenly surrounded her, and she seized Canon's son and lifted him. "Thus will I conquer, Poledra!" she hissed. She closed her hand about

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the struggling boy's wrist and pushed his Orb-marked hand out in front of her.' 'In the instant the hand of Belgarion's son touches the Sardion, I will triumph." Implacably, step by step, she started forward.

Garion raised his sword and leveled its point at her. "Push her back," he commanded the Orb. A bolt of intense blue light shot from the sword point, but it divided as it struck that dark aura, encasing the shadow but in no way interfering with Zandramas' advance. "Do something!" Garion shouted silently.

' 7 can't interfere,' the voice told him.

"Is that really the best thou canst do, Zandramas?" Poledra asked calmly. Garion had often heard that same note in Aunt Pol's voice, but never with quite such indomitable determination. Poledra raised her hand almost indifferently and released her will. The surge and the sound nearly buckled Garion's knees. The aura of dark surrounding Zandramas and Geran vanished. The Sorceress of Darshiva, however, did not falter, but continued her slow advance. "Wilt thou kill thy son, Belgarion of Riva?" she asked. "For thou canst not strike at me without destroying him."

' 7 can't do it!'' Garion cried out, his eyes suddenly full of tears. "I can't!"

' 'You must. You 've been warned that this might happen. If she succeeds and puts your son's hand on the Sardion, he will be worse than dead. Do what must be done, Garion. "

Weeping uncontrollably, Garion raised his sword. Geran looked him steadily in the face, his eyes unafraid.

' 'No!'' It was Ce'Nedra. She dashed across the floor of the grotto and threw herself directly in front of Zandramas. Her face was deathly pale. "If you intend to kill my baby, you'll have to kill me, too, Garion," she said in a broken voice. She turned her back on Garion and bowed her head.

"So much the better," Zandramas gloated. "Wilt thou kill thy son and thy wife both, Belgarion of Riva? Wilt thou carry that with thee to thy grave?"

Garion's face twisted in agony as he gripped the hilt of his flaming sword more firmly. With one stroke, he would destroy his very Hie.

Zandramas, still holding Geran, stared at him incredulously. "Thou wilt not!" she exclaimed. "Thou canst not!"

Garion clenched his teeth and raised his sword even higher.

Zandramas' incredulity suddenly turned to fright. Her advance stopped, and she began to shrink back from that awful stroke.

"Now, Ce'Nedra!" Polgara's voice cracked like a whip.

The Rivan Queen, who had been coiled like a spring beneath her apparent mute submission to her fate, exploded. With a single leap, she snatched Geran from the arms of Zandramas and fled with him back to Polgara's side.

Zandramas howled and tried to follow, her face filled with rage.

"No, Zandramas," Poledra said. "If thou turnest away, I will kill thee—or Belgarion will. Thou hast inadvertently revealed thy decision. Thy choice hath been made, and thou art no longer the Child of Dark, but are only an ordinary Grolim priestess. There is no longer any need for thee here. Thou art free now to depart—or to die."

Zandramas froze.

. "Thus all thy subterfuge and evasion have come to naught, Zandramas. Thou hast no longer any choice. Wilt thou now submit to the decision of the Seeress of Kell?"

Zandramas stared at her, the expression on her star-touched face a mixture of fear and towering hatred.

"Well, Zandramas," Poledra said, "what is it to be? Wilt thou die

this close to thy promised exaltation?" Poledra's golden eyes were penetrating as she looked into the face of the Grolim priestess. "Ah, no," she said quite calmly, "I perceive that thou wilt not. Thou canst not. But I would hear the words from thine own mouth, Zandramas. Wilt thou now accept the decision of Cyradis?"

Zandramas clenched her teeth. "I will," she grated.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The thunder still cracked and rumbled outside, and the wind accompanying the storm that had been brewing since the earth had been made moaned in the passageway leading into the grotto from the amphitheater outside. In an abstract sort of way as he resheathed his sword, Garion recognized precisely what his mind was doing. It had happened so often in the past that he wondered why he had not expected it. The circumstances required that he make a decision. The fact that he no longer even considered the decision, but concentrated instead on a meticulous examination of his surroundings, indicated that he had already made his choice somewhere so deep in his mind that it did not even register on the surface. There was, he conceded, a very good reason for what he was doing. Dwelling upon an impending crisis or confrontation would only rattle him, lead him into that distracting series of "what ifs," and make him begin to have those second thoughts that could quite easily lock

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him into an agonized indecision. Right or wrong, the choice had been made now, and to continue to worry at it would serve no purpose. The choice, he knew, was based not only on careful reasoning but also on deep feelings. He had that serene inner peace which flowed from the knowledge that the choice, whatever it was, was right. Calmly, he turned his attention to the grotto itself.

The stones of the walls appeared, though it was hard to be sure in the pervading red light of the Sardion, to be a kind of basalt that had fractured into a myriad of flat surfaces and sharp edges. The floor was peculiarly smooth, either as a result of eons of patiently eroding water or of a single thought of Torak during his sojourn in this cave while he had contended with and ultimately rejected UL, his father. The trickle of water into the pool on the far side of the grotto was something of a mystery. This was the highest peak of the reef. Water should run down from here, not up to the hidden spring in the wall. Beldin could probably explain it—or Dumik. Garion knew that he needed to be alert in this strange place, and he did not want to break his concentration by pondering the ins and outs of hydraulics.

And then, since it was the only source of light in this dim grotto, Garion's almost indifferent eyes were drawn inevitably to the Sardion. It was not a pretty stone. It was streaked with pale orange and milky white in alternating stripes banded closely together, and it was now stained with the wavering blue light emanating from the Orb. It was as smooth and polished as the Orb. The Orb had been

polished by the hand of Aldur, but who had polished the Sardion? Some God unknown? Some shaggy clan of the brutish precursors of man squatting in dull-eyed patience over the stone, devoting generation after generation to the single incomprehensible task of rubbing the orange and white surface smooth with calloused and broken-nailed hands that were more like paws than human appendages? Even such unthinking creatures would have felt the power of the stone, and, feeling it to be a God—or at the very least, some object descended from a God—might not their mindless polishing have been some obscure act of worship?

Then Garion let his eyes wander over the faces of his companions, the familiar faces of those who had, in response to destinies that had been written large in the stars since the-beginning of days, accompanied him to this place on this particular day. The death of loth had answered the one unanswered question, and now all was in place.

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Cyradis, her face still tearstained and marked by her grief, stepped to the altar to face them. "The time draws nigh," she said in a clear, unwavering voice. "Now must the choices of the Child of Light and the Child of Dark be made. All must be in readiness when the instant of my Choice arrives. Know ye both that your choices, once made, cannot be unmade."

' "My choice was made at the beginning of days-,"' Zandramas declared. "Adown all the endless corridors of time hath the name of Belgarion's son echoed, for he hath touched Cthrag Yaska, which spurneth all other hands save the hand of Belga-rion himself. In the instant that Geran touches Cthrag Sardius, will he become an omnipotent God, higher than all the rest, and he shall have lordship and dominion over all of creation. Stand forth, Child of Dark. Take thy place before the altar of Torak to await the Choice of the Seeress of Kelt. In the instant that she chooses thee, reach forth thy hand and seize thy destiny."

It was the last clue. Now Garion knew what the choice he had made in the deep silences of his mind had been, and he knew why it was so perfectly right. Reluctantly, Geran walked toward the altar, stopped and then turned, his small face grave.

"And now, Child of Light," Cyradis said, "the time hath come for thee to make thy choice. Upon which of thy companions wilt thou lay the burden?"

Garion had little sense of the melodramatic. Ce'Nedra, and even on occasion Aunt Pol, were, he knew, quite capable of extracting the last ounce of theatricality from any given situation, whereas he, a solid, practical Sendar, was more inclined toward matter-of-fact unostentation. He was quite certain, however, that Zandramas somehow

knew what his choice should be. He also knew that, despite her reluctant agreement to leave the Choice in the hands of the Seeress of Kell, the black-robed sorceress was still perfectly capable of some desperate final ploy. He had to do something to throw her off balance so that she would hesitate at the crucial moment. If he appeared to be on the verge of making the wrong choice, the Sorceress would exult and she would think that she had finally won. Then, at the last possible instant, he could make the correct choice. The Child of Dark's momentary chagrin might well freeze her hand and give him time to block her. Carefully, he noted her position and that of Geran and Otrath. Geran stood perhaps ten feet in front of the altar with Zandramas no more than a few feet from him. Otrath was cowering back against the rough stone wall at the back of the grotto.

It would have to be exactly right. He would have to build up an almost unbearable suspense in the mind of Zandramas, then dash her hopes all at once. Rather artfully, he drew his face into an expression of agonized indecision. He wandered among his friends, his face filled with a purely feigned bafflement. He stopped from time to time to look deeply into their faces, even going so far as to occasionally half raise his hand as if on the very verge of choosing the wrong person. Each time he did that, he clearly felt a wild surge of glee coming from Zandramas. She was not even attempting to hide her emotions. Better and better. His enemy by now was no longer even rational.

"What are you doing?" Polgara whispered when he stopped in front of her.

"I'll explain later," he murmured. "It's necessary—and important. You've got to trust me, Aunt Pol." He moved on. When he reached Belgarath, he felt a momentary apprehension emanating from Zandramas. The Eternal Man was certainly someone to be reckoned with, and should the eminence of the Child of Light be added to that—and the potential for divinity, as well—the old man could be a serious adversary.

"Will you move on with it, Garion?" his grandfather muttered.

"I'm trying to push Zandramas off balance," Garion whispered. "Please watch her closely after I choose. She might try something."

"Then you know who it's going to be?"

"Of course. I'm trying not to think about it, though. I don't want her to pick it out of my mind."

The old man made a face. "Do it your way, Garion. Just don't drag it out too long. Let's not irritate Cyradis as well as Zandramas."

Garion nodded and moved past Sadi and Velvet, letting his mind push out toward that of Zandramas as he did. Her emotions were veering around wildly now, and it was clear that she was at a fever pitch. To draw things out any further would serve no purpose. He stopped at last in front of Silk and Eriond. "Keep your face straight," he warned the rat-faced little man. "Don't let Zandramas see any change of expression no matter what I seem to be doing."

"Don't make any mistakes here, Garion," Silk warned. "I'm not looking

for a sudden promotion of any kind.''

Garion nodded. It was nearly over now. He looked at Eriond, a young man who was almost his brother. ' 'I 'm sorry about this,

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Eriond," he apologized in a low murmur. "You probably won't want to thank me for what I'm about to do."

"It's all right, Belgarion." Eriond smiled. "I've known it was going to happen for quite some time now. I'm ready."

And mat clinched it. Eriond had answered the ubiquitous question "Are you ready?" for probably the last time. Eriond, it appeared, was—and probably had been since the day he was bom. Everything now slipped into place to fit together so tightly that nothing could ever take it apart again.

"Choose, Belgarion," Cyradis urged.

"I have, Cyradis," Garion said simply. He stretched out his hand and laid it on Eriond's shoulder. "Here is my choice. Here is the Child of Light."

' 'Perfect!'' Belgarath exclaimed.

"Done!" the voice in Garion's mind agreed.

Garion felt a peculiar wrench followed by a kind of regretful emptiness. He was no longer the Child of Light. It was Eriond's responsibility now, but Garion knew that he still had one last responsibility of his own. He turned slowly, trying to make it look casual. The expression on the light-speckled face of Zan-dramas was a mixture of rage, fear, and frustration. It confirmed mat what Garion had just done had been the right thing. He had made the proper choice. He had never actually done what he tried to do next before, although he had seen and felt Aunt Pol do it many times. This was not, however, a time for random experimentation. Carefully, he sent his mind out again, looking this time not so much for overall emotional responses from Zan-dramas as for specifics. He had to know exactly what she was going to try to do before she could put it into motion.

The mind of the Sorceress of Darshiva was filled with a confused welter of thoughts and emotions. The wild hope Garion's subterfuge had raised in her seemed to have done its work. Zan-dramas floundered, unable to concentrate now on her next step. But step she must. Garion perceived that she simply could not leave the matter wholly in the hands of the Seeress of Kell.

"Go thou then, Child of Light, to stand beside the Child of Dark that

I may choose between ye," Cyradis said.

Eriond nodded. Then he turned and crossed the grotto to stand beside Geran.

"It's done, Cyradis," Poledra said. "All the choices have been made but yours. This is the appointed place and the appointed day. The moment for you to perform your task has arrived."

*'Not quite yet, Poledra," Cyradis said, her voice trembling with anxiety. "The signal that the instant of the Choice hath come must be delivered from the book of the heavens.' *

"But you cannot see the heavens, Cyradis," Garion's grandmother reminded her. "We stand beneath the earth. The book of the heavens is obscured.' *

"I need not go to the book of the heavens. It will come to me."

"Consider, Cyradis," Zandramas urged in a wheedling tone. "Consider my words. There is no possible choice but Belgarion 's son.'"

Garion's mind suddenly became very alert. Zandramas had made a decision. She knew what she was going to do, but she had somehow managed to conceal it from him. He almost began to admire his enemy. She had prepared each of her moves from the very beginning—and each of her defenses in this place, as well—with an almost military precision. As each defense failed, she withdrew to the next. That was why he could not pick her thought from her mind. She already knew what she was going to do, so there was no need for her even to think about it. He could feel, however, that her next move had something to do with Cyradis herself. That was Zandramas' last line of defense. "Don't do that, Zandramas," he told the sorceress. "You know it's not the truth. Leave her alone.'"

"Then choose, Cyradis," the sorceress commanded.

"I may not. The instant hath not yet arrived." The face of Cyradis was twisted with an inhuman agony.

Then Garion felt it. Wave upon wave of indecision and doubt were emanating from Zandramas, all focusing on the blindfolded Seeress. This was the final desperate attempt. Failing to attack them successfully, Zandramas was now attacking Cyradis. ' 'Help her, Aunt Pol,' ' Garion threw the thought out desperately. "Zandramas is trying to keep her from making the Choice."

"Yes, Garion, "Polgarai's voice came back calmly, "I know. "

"Do something!"

' 'It's not time yet. It has to come at the moment of the Choice. If I try to do anything earlier, Zandramas will feel it and take steps to counteract me. "

"Something's happening outside," Durnik said urgently. "There's a light of some kind coming down the corridor."

Garion looked quickly. The light was still dim and indistinct, but it was like no other light he had ever seen.

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"The time for the Choice hath come, Cyradis," Zandramas said, her voice cruel. "Choose!"

"I cannot!" the Seeress wailed, turning toward the growing light, "Not yet! I'm not ready yet!" She stumbled across the floor, wringing her hands. "I'm not ready! I can't choose! Send another!"

"Choose!" Zandramas repeated implacably.

"If only I could see them!" Cyradis sobbed. "If only I could see them!"

And then at last, Polgara moved. "That's easily arranged, Cyradis," she said in a calm and oddly comforting tone. "Your vision has clouded your sight, that's all." She reached out and gently removed the blindfold. "Look then with human eyes and make your choice."

"That is forbidden!" Zandramas protested shrilly as her advantage crumbled,

"No," Polgara said. "If it were forbidden, I would not have been able to do it."

Cyradis had flinched back from even the faint light in the grotto. "I cannot!" she cried, covering her eyes with her hands. "I cannot!"

Zandramas' eyes came suddenly alight. "I triumph!" she exulted. "The Choice must be made, but now will it be made by another. It no longer lieth in the hands of Cyradis, for the decision not to choose is also a choice."

"Is that true?" Garion quickly asked Beldin.

"There are two schools of thought on that."

"Yes or no, Beldin."

"I don't know. I really don't, Garion."

There was suddenly a soundless burst of intense light from the mouth of the passageway leading to the outside. Brighter than the sun, the light swelled and grew. It was so impossibly intense that even the cracks between the stones in the grotto blazed incandescently.

"It has come at last," Garion's inner companion said unemotionally through Eriond's lips. "It is the instant of the Choice. Choose, Cyradis, lest all be destroyed."

"It has come," another equally unemotional voice spoke through the lips of Garion's son. "It is the instant of the Choice. Choose, Cyradis, lest all be destroyed."

Cyradis swayed, torn by indecision, her eyes darting back and forth to the two faces before her. Again she wrung her hands.

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"She cannot!" the Emperor of Mallorean exclaimed, starting forward impulsively.

"She must!" Garion said, catching his friend's arm. "If she doesn't, everything will be lost!"

Again the eyes of Zandramas filled with that unholy joy. "It is too much for her!" the priestess almost crowed. "Thou hast made thy choice, Cyradis," she cried. "It cannot be unmade. Now will I make the Choice for thee, and I will be exalted when the Dark God comes again!"

And that may have been Zandramas' last and fatal error. Cyradis straightened and, eyes flashing, she looked full into the starry face of the sorceress. "Not so, Zandramas," the Seeress said in an icy voice. "What passed before was indecision, not choice, and the moment hath not yet passed." She lifted her beautiful face and closed her eyes. The vast chorus of the Seers of Kell swelled its organ note in the tight confines of the grotto, but it ended on a questioning note.

"Then the decision is wholly mine," Cyradis said. "Are all the conditions met?" She addressed the question to the two awarenesses standing unseen behind Eriond and Geran.

"They are," the one said from Eriond's lips.

"They are," the other said from Geran's.

"Then hear my Choice," she said. Once again she looked full into the faces of the little boy and the young man. Then with a cry of inhuman despair, she fell into Eriond's arms. "I choose thee!" she wept. "For good or for ill, I choose thee!"

There was a titanic lateral lurch—not an earthquake certainly, for not one single pebble was dislodged from the walls or ceiling of the grotto. For some reason, Garion was positive that the entire world had moved—inches perhaps, or yards or even thousands of leagues—to one side. And as corollary to that certainty, he was equally sure that the same movement had been universal. The amount of power Cyradis' agonized decision had released was beyond human comprehension.

Gradually, the blazing light diminished somewhat, and the Saidion's glow became wan and sickly. In the instant of the Choice of the Seeress of Kell, Zandramas had shrunk back, and the whirling lights beneath the skin of her face seemed to flicker. Then they began to whirl and to glow more and more brightly. "No!" she shrieked. "No!"

"Perhaps these lights in thy flesh are thine exaltation, Zandramas," Poledra said. "Even now it may be that thou wilt shine brighter than

any constellation. Well hast thou served the

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Prophecy of Dark, and it may yet find some way to exalt thee.' * Then Garion's grandmother crossed the grotto floor to the satin-robed sorceress.

Zandramas shrank back even more. "Don't touch me," she said.

"It is not thee I would touch, Zandramas, but thy raiment. I would see thee receive thy reward and thine exaltation.'" Poledra tore back the satin hood and ripped the black robe away. Zandramas made no attempt to conceal her nakedness, for indeed, there was no nakedness. She was now no more than a faint outline, a husk filled with swirling, sparkling light that grew brighter and brighter.

Geran ran on sturdy little legs to his mother's arms, and Ce'Nedra, weeping with joy, enfolded him and held him close to her. "Is anything going to happen to him?" Garion demanded of Eriond. "He's the Child of Dark, after all."

"There is no Child of Dark anymore, Garion." Eriond answered the question. "Your son is safe."

Garion felt an enormous wave of relief. Then something that he had felt since the moment in which Cyradis had made her Choice began to intrude itself increasingly upon his awareness. It was that overwhelming sense of presence which he had always felt when he had come face to face with a God. He looked more closely at Eriond, and that sense grew stronger. His young friend even looked different. Before, he had appeared to be a young man of probably not much over twenty. Now he appeared to be about the same age as Garion, although his face seemed strangely ageless. His expression, which before had been sweetly innocent, had now become grave and even wise. "We have one last thing to do here, Belgarion," he said in a solemn tone. He motioned to Zakath and then gently placed the still-weeping Cyradis into the Mallolean's arms. "Take care of her, please," he said.

"For all of my life, Eriond," Zakath promised, leading the sobbing girl back to the others.

"Now, Belgarion," Eriond continued, "give me my brother's Orb from off the hilt of Iron-grip's sword. It's time to finish what was started here."

"Of course," Garion replied. He reached back over his shoulder and put his hand on the pommel of his sword. ' 'Come off," he told the Orb. The stone came free in his hand, and he held it out to the young God.

Eriond took the glowing blue stone and turned to look at the

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Sardion and then down at the Orb in his hand. There was something inexplicable in his face as he looked at the two stones that were at the center of all division. He raised his face for a moment, his expression now serene. "So be it then," he said finally.

And men to Garion's horror, he gripped the Orb even more tightly and pushed his hand quite deliberately, Orb and all, into the glowing Sardion.

The reddish stone seemed to flinch. Like Ctuchik in his last moment, it first expanded, then contracted. Then it expanded one last time. And then, like Ctuchik, it exploded—and yet that explosion was tightly confined, enclosed somehow within some unimaginable globe of force that came perhaps from Eriond's will or from the power of the Orb or from some other source. Garion knew that had that force not been in place, all the world would have been torn apart by what was happening in this tightly confined place.

Even though it was partially muffled by Eriond's immortal and indestructible body, the concussion was titanic, and they were all hurled to the floor by its force. Rocks and pebbles rained down from the ceiling, and the entire pyramidal islet that was all that was left of Korim shuddered in an earthquake even more powerful than that which had destroyed Rak Cthol. Confined within the grotto, the sound was beyond belief. Without thinking, Garion rolled across the surging floor to cover Ce'Nedra and Geran with his armored body, noting as he did so that many of his companions were also protecting loved ones in the same fashion.

The earth continued its convulsive shuddering, and what lay confined on the altar now with Eriond's hand still buried within h was no longer the Sardion but an intense ball of energy a thousand times brighter than the sun.

Then Eriond, his face still calm, removed the Orb from the center of the incandescent ball that once had been the Sardion. As if the removal of Aldur's Orb had also removed the constraint mat had held the Sardion in one shape and place, the blazing fragments of Cthrag Sardius blasted upward through the roof of the grotto, ripping the top off the shuddering pyramid and sending the huge stone blocks out in all directions as if they were no more than pebbles.

The suddenly revealed sky was filled with a light brighter than the sun, a light that extended from horizon to horizon. The

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fragments of the Sardion streamed upward to lose themselves in that light.

Zandramas wailed, an inhuman, animallike sound. The faint outline that was all that was left of her was writhing, twisting. "Wo." she cried, "It cannot be! You promised!" Garion did not know, could not know, to whom she spoke. She extended her hands to Eriond in supplication. "Help me, God of An-garak!" she cried. "Do not let me

fall into the hands of Mordja or the foul embrace of the King of Hell! Save me!''

And then her shadowy husk split apart, and the swirling lights that had become her substance streamed inexorably upward to follow the fragments of the Sardion into that vast light in the sky.

What was left of the Sorceress of Darshiva fell to the floor like a discarded garment, shriveled and tattered like a rag no longer of any use to anyone.

The voice that came from Eriond's lips was very familiar to Garion. He had been listening to it for all his life.

"Point," it said in a detached, emotionless tone, as if merely stating a fact. "Point and game."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The sudden silence in the grotto was almost eerie. Gar-ion rose and helped Ce' Nedra to her feet. * 'Are you all right?' he asked her, his voice hushed. Ce'Nedra nodded absently. She was examining their little boy, a look of concern on her smudged face. Garion looked around. "Is everyone all right?" he asked.

"Is that earthquake finished yet?" Silk demanded, still covering Velvet's body with his own.

"It's passed, Kheldar," Eriond told him. The young God turned and gravely handed the Orb back to Garion.

"Aren't you supposed to keep it?" Garion asked him. "I thought--"

"No, Garion. You're still the Guardian of the Orb."

For some reason, that made Garion feel better. Even in the midst of what had just happened, he had felt an empty sense of loss. Somehow he had become convinced that he would be obliged to give up the jewel now. Covetousness was not a part

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of Canon's nature, but over the years the Orb had become more a friend than a possession.

"May we not go forth from this place?" Cyradis asked, her voice filled with a deep sadness. "I would not leave my dear companion alone and untended."

Durnik touched her shoulder gently, and then they all turned and silently left the shattered grotto.

They emerged from the portal into the light that was more than the light of day. The intense brilliance that had even penetrated the dim

grotto behind them had faded to the point where it was no longer blinding. Garion looked around. Though the time of day was certainly different, there was that peculiar sense that he had been through all of this before. The storm and lightning that had raged over the Place Which Is No More had passed. The clouds had rolled back, and the wind that had swept the reef during the fight with the dragon and the demon Mordja had subsided to a gentle breeze. Following the death of Torak at Cthol Mishrak, Garion had felt in a strange way that he had been witnessing the dawn of the first day. Now it was noon—years later, to be sure—but somehow the noon of that selfsame day. What had begun at Cthol Mishrak was only now complete. It was over, and he felt a vast sense of relief. He also felt a bit light-headed. The emotional and physical energy he had expended since the first light of this most momentous of days had crept slowly over a fogbound sea had left him weak and near to exhaustion. More than anything right now he wanted to get out of his armor, but the thought of the amount of effort that would cost made him almost quail. He settled for wearily removing his helmet. He looked around again at the faces of his friends.

Although Geran could obviously walk now, Ce'Nedra had insisted on carrying him, and she kept her cheek pressed tightly to his, pulling back only long enough to kiss him from time to time. Geran did not seem to mind.

Zakath had placed his arm about the shoulders of the Seeress of Kell, and the look on his face rather clearly indicated that he had no real intention of ever removing it. Garion remembered with a smile how, in the first moments of their openly avowed love for each other, Ce'Nedra had continually wormed her way into a very similar embrace. He walked wearily over to where Eriond stood looking out across the sun-splashed waves. "Can I ask you something?" he asked.

"Of course, Garion."

Garion looked pointedly at Zakath and Cyradis. "Is that more

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or less a part of the way things are supposed to be?" he asked. "What I'm getting at is that Zakath lost someone very dear to him when he was young. If he loses Cyradis now, it might destroy him. I wouldn't want that to happen."

"Put your mind at rest, Garion." Eriond smiled. "Nothing will separate those two. It's one of the things that are preordained. ''

"Good. Do they know?"

"Cyradis does. She'll explain it to Zakath in time."

"She's still a seeress then?"

"No. That part of her life ended when Polgara removed her blindfold. She has looked into the future, though, and Cyradis has a very good memory.''

Garion thought about that for a moment, and then his eyes opened very wide. "Are you trying to say that the fate of the entire universe depended on the choice of an ordinary human being?" he asked incredulously.

"I'd hardly call Cyradis ordinary. She's been preparing for that choice since infancy. But in a way you're right. The Choice had to be made by a human being, and it had to be made without any help. Not even her own people could help Cyradis at that moment."

Garion shuddered. "That must have been terrifying for her. She had to have been desperately lonely."

"She was, but the people who make choices always are."

"She didn't just select at random, did she?"

"No. She wasn't really choosing between your son and me, though. She was choosing between the Light and the Dark."

"I can't see where all the difficulty was then. Doesn't everybody prefer the light to the dark?"

"You and I might, but the Seers have always known that Light and Dark are simply opposite sides of the same thing. Don't worry too much about Zakath and Cyradis, Garion," Eriond said, returning to the original subject. He tapped his forehead with one finger. "Our mutual friend here has made a few arrangements about those two. Zakath's going to be very important for most of the rest of his life, and our friend has a way of encouraging people to do necessary things by rewarding them— sometimes in advance."

"Like Relg and Taiba?"

"Or you and Ce'Nedra—or Polgara and Durnik, for that matter."

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"Can you tell me what it is that Zakath's supposed to do? What could you possibly need from him?"

"He's going to complete what you started."

"Wasn't I doing it right?"

"Of course you were, but you're not an Angarak. You'll understand in time, I think. It's not really very complicated."

A thought came to Garion, and in the instant it emerged he was sure it was absolutely correct. "You knew all along, didn't you? Who you really are, I mean."

"I knew that the potential was there. It didn't really happen until Cyradis made the Choice, though." He looked over to where the others were sadly gathering around Toth's still form. "I think they need us now," he said.

Toth's face was in repose, and his hands, folded across his chest, covered the wound Cthrek Goru had made when Mordja had killed him. Cyradis stood enfolded in Zakath's arms, her face wet with new tears.

"Are you sure this is the right idea?" Beldin asked Durnik.

"Yes," the smith said simply. "You see—"

"You don't have to explain it, Durnik," the hunchback told him. "I just wanted to know if you're sure. Let's build a litter for him. It has more dignity." He made a brief gesture, and a number of smooth, straight poles and a coil of rope appeared beside Toth's body. The two of them carefully lashed the poles together to form a litter and then lifted the mute's massive body onto it. "Belgarath," Beldin said, "Garion, we'll need some help here."

Although any one of them could have translocated Ibth's body into the grotto, the four sorcerers chose instead to carry it to its final resting place in a ceremony as old as mankind.

Since the upward explosion of the Sardion had unroofed the grotto, the noon sun filled the formerly dim cave with light. Cyradis quailed slightly when she saw the grim altar upon which the Sardion had lain. "It seemeth to me so dark and ugly," she mourned in a small voice.

"It isn't really very attractive, is it?" Ce'Nedra said critically. She turned to look at Eriond. "Do you suppose—?"

"Of course," he agreed. He glanced only briefly at the roughly squared-off altar. It blurred slightly and then became a smooth bier of snowy-white marble.

"That's much nicer," she said. "Thank you."

"He was my friend, too, Ce'Nedra," the young God responded.

It was not a formal funeral in any sense of the word. Garion and his friends simply gathered about the bier to gaze upon the face of their departed friend. There was so much concentrated power in the small grot that Garion could not be sure exactly who created the first flower. Tendrils of ivylike vines grew suddenly up the walls, but unlike ivy, the vines were covered with fragrant white flowers. Then, between one breath and another, the floor was covered with a carpet of lush green moss. Flowers in profusion covered the bier, and then Cyradis stepped forward to lay the simple white rose Poledra had provided her upon the slumbering giant's chest. She kissed his cold forehead and then sighed. "All too soon, methinks, the flowers will wither and fade."

"No, Cyradis," Eriond said gently, "they won't. They'll remain fresh and forever new until the end of days."

"I thank thee, God of Angarak," she said gratefully.

Durnik and Beldin had retired to a corner near the pool to confer. Then they both looked up, concentrated for a moment, and roofed the grotto with gleaming quartz that refracted the sunlight into rainbows.

"It's time to leave now, Cyradis," Polgara told the slim girl. "We've done all we can." Then she and her mother took the still-weeping Seeress by the arms and slowly led her back to the passage with the others following behind.

Durnik was the last to leave. He stood at the bier with his hand lying on Toth's motionless shoulder. Finally, he put out his hand and took Toth's fishing pole out of midair. He carefully laid it on the bier beside his friend's body and patted the huge crossed hands once. Then he turned and left.

When they were outside again, Beldin and the smith sealed the passageway with more quartz.

"There's a nice touch," Silk observed sadly to Garion, pointing to the image above the portal. "Which one of you thought of that?"

Garion turned to look. The face of Torak was gone, and in its place the image of Eriond's face smiled its benediction. "I'm not really sure," he replied, "and I don't think it really matters." He tapped his fingers against the breastplate of his armor. "Do you suppose you could help me out of this?" he asked. "I don't think I need it anymore."

, "No," Silk agreed, "probably not. From the look of things, it says you've run out of people to fight."

"Let's hope so."

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It was much later. They had removed the Grolims from the amphitheater and cleaned up the debris that had littered the stone floor. There was very little they could do about the vast carcass of the dragon, however. Garion sat on the lowest step of the stairway leading down into the amphitheater. Ce'Nedra, still holding her sleeping child, dozed in his arms.

"Not bad at all," the familiar voice said to him. This time, however, the voice did not echo in the vaults of his mind, but seemed instead to be right beside him.

"I thought you were gone," Garion said, speaking quietly to avoid waking his wife and son.

"No, not really," the voice replied.

"I seem to remember that you once said that there was going to be a new voice—awareness, I suppose would be a better term—after this was decided."

"There is, actually, but I'm a part of it."

"I don't quite understand."

"It's not too complicated, Garion. Before the accident there was only one awareness, but then it was divided in the same way everything else was. Now it's back, but since I was part of the original, I've rejoined it. We're one again."

"That's your idea of not too complicated?"

"Do you really want me to explain further?"

Garion started to say something but then he decided against it. "You can still separate yourself, though?"

"No. That would only lead to another division."

* "Then how—" Garion decided at the last instant that he didn't really want to ask that question. "Why don't we just let this drop?" he suggested. "What was that light?"

"That was the accident, the thing that divided the universe. It also divided me from my opposite and the Orb from the Sar-dion."

"I thought that happened a long time ago."

"It did—a very long time ago."

"But—"

"Try to listen for a change, Garion. Do you know very much about light?"

"It's just light, isn't it?"

"There's a little more. Have you ever stood a long way from somebody who's chopping wood?"

"Yes."

"Did you notice that he'd chop and that then, a moment or so later, you heard the sound?"

"Yes, now that you mention it, I did. What causes that?"

"The interval is the amount of time the sound takes to reach you. Light moves much faster than sound, but it still takes time to go from one place to another."

"I'll take your word for it."

"Do you know what the accident was?"

"Something out among the stars, I understand."

"Exactly. A star was dying, and it died in a place where that wasn't supposed to happen. The dying star was in the wrong place when it exploded, and it ignited an entire cluster of stars— a galaxy. When the galaxy exploded, it tore the fabric of the universe. She protected herself by dividing. That's what led to all of this."

"All right. Why were we talking about light then?"

"That's what that sudden light was—the light from that exploding galaxy—the accident. It only just now reached this place."

Garion swallowed hard. "Just how far away was the accident?"

"The numbers wouldn't mean anything to you."

"How long ago did it happen?"

"That's another number you wouldn't understand. You might ask Cyradis. She could probably tell you. She had a very special reason to have it calculated rather precisely."

Garion slowly began to understand. "That's it then," he said, excited in spite of himself. "The instant of the Choice was the instant when the light from the accident reached this world."

"Very good, Garion."

' 'Did that cluster of stars that exploded come back again after Cyradis made the Choice? I mean there has to be something to patch that hole in the universe, doesn't there?"

"Better and better. Garion, I'm proud of you. You remember how the Sardion and Zandramas broke up into little flecks of intense light when they blew the roof off the grotto?"

"It's not the sort of thing I'd be likely to forget." Garion shuddered.

"There was a reason for that. Zandramas and the Sardion— or the pieces of them, at any rate—are on their way back toward that 'hole,* as you put it. They're going to be the patch. They'll get bigger along the way, of course."

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"And how long—" Garion broke off. "Another meaningless number, I suppose?"

"Very meaningless."

' 'I noticed some things about Zandramas back there. She had this all worked out, didn't she? Right from the very beginning?''

"My opposite was always very methodical."

"What I'm getting at is that she made all of her arrangements in advance. She had everything in place in Nyissa before she ever went to Cherek to pick up those Bear-cultists. Then, when she went to Riva to steal Geran, everything was ready. She'd even put things in place so that we all suspected the cult instead of her.'"

"She'd have probably made a very good general."

"But she went even further. No matter how good her plans were, she always had a contingency to fall back on in case the original plan failed." A thought came to him. "Did Mordja get her? I mean, she blew all apart when the Sardion exploded, didn't she? Is her spirit still mixed up in those stars, or did it get pulled down into Hell? She sounded so very much afraid just before she dissolved."

"I really wouldn't know, Garion. My opposite and I dealt with this universe, not with Hell—which, of course, is a universe all its own."

' 'What would have happened if Cyradis had chosen Geran instead of Eriond?"

"You and the Orb would be moving to a new address about now."

Garion felt his skin begin to crawl. "And you didn't warn me?" he demanded incredulously.

"Would you really have wanted to know? And what difference would it have made?"

Garion decided to let that pass. "Was Eriond always a God?" he asked.

"Weren't you listening earlier when he explained? Eriond was intended to be the seventh God. Torak was a mistake caused by the accident."

"He's always been around then? Eriond, I mean?"

"Always is a long time, Garion. Eriond was present—in spirit—since the accident. When you were born, he began to move around in the world."

"We're the same age then?"

"Age is a meaningless concept to the Gods. They can be any age they choose to be. It was the theft of the Orb that started

things moving toward what happened here today. Zedar wanted to steal the Orb, so Eriond found him and showed him how to do it. That's what got you moving in the first place. If Zedar hadn't stolen the Orb, you'd probably still be at Faldor's farm—married to Zubrette, I'd imagine. Try to keep your perspective about this, Garion, but in a very peculiar way this world was created just to give you something to

stand on while you were fixing things."

' * Please stop joking. '

"I'm not joking, Garion. You're the most important person who's ever lived—or ever will—with the possible exception of Cyradis. You killed a bad God and replaced him with a good one. You did a lot of floundering around in the process, but you finally managed to get it all done. I 'm sort of proud of you, actually. All hi all, you turned out rather well."

"I had a lot of help."

"Granted, but you're entitled to a bit of conceit—for a moment or two, anyway. I wouldn't overdo it, though. It's not a very becoming sort of thing."

Garion concealed a smile. "Why me?" he asked, making it sound as plaintive and imbecilic as possible.

There was a startled silence, and then the voice actually laughed. "Please don't go back to asking that, Garion."

"I'm sorry. What happens now?"

"You get to go home."

"No, I mean to the world?"

"A lot of that's going to depend on Zakath. Eriond is the God of Angarak now, and despite Urgit and Drosta and Nathel, Zak-ath's the real overking of Angarak. It might take a bit of doing and he may have to use up a large number of Grolims in the process, but before he's done, Zakath is going to have to ram Eriond down the throats of all the Angaraks in the world."

"He'll manage." Garion shrugged. "Zakath's very good at ramming things down people's throats."

"Cyradis will be able to soften that side of him, I expect."

"All right, then. What about afterward? After all the Angaraks have accepted Eriond?"

"The movement will spread. You'll probably live long enough to see the day when Eriond is the God of the whole world. That's what was intended from the beginning."

*' 'And he shall have Lordship and Dominion'?" Garion quoted with a sinking feeling, remembering certain Grolim prophecies.

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"You know Eriond better than that. Can you possibly see him sitting on a throne gloating over sacrifices?"

"No, not really. What happens to the other Gods then? Aldur and the rest of them?"

"They'll move on. They've finished with what they came here to do, and there are many, many other worlds in the universe."

"What about UL? Will he leave, too?"

"UL doesn't leave any place, Garion. He's everywhere. Does that more or less answer all the questions? I have some other things that need to be attended to. There are a number of people I have to make arrangements for. Oh, incidentally, congratulations on your daughters."

"Daughters?"

"Small female children. They're devious, but they're prettier than sons, and they smell better."

"How many?" Garion asked breathlessly.

"Quite a few, actually. I won't tell you the exact number. I wouldn't want to spoil any surprises for you, but when you get back to Riva, you'd better start expanding the royal nursery." There was a long pause. "Good-bye for now, Garion," the voice said, its tone no longer dry. "Be well."

And then the voice was gone.

The sun was slipping down, and Garion, Ce'Nedra, and Geran had rejoined the others near the portal to the grotto. They were all subdued as they sat not far from the vast carcass of the dragon.

"We ought to do something about her," Belgarath murmured. "She wasn't really a bad brute. She was just stupid, and that's not really a crime. I've always felt rather sorry for her, and I'd sort of hate to just leave her out here in the open for the birds to pick over."

"You've got a sentimental streak in you, Belgarath," Beldin noted. "That's very disappointing, you know."

"We all get sentimental as we get older." Belgarath shrugged.

"Is she all right?" Velvet asked Sadi as the eunuch returned with Zith's little bottle. "You took quite a long time."

"She's fine," Sadi replied. "One of the babies wanted to play. He thought it was funny to hide from me. It took me awhile to locate him."

"Is there any real reason for us to stay here?" Silk asked. "We could light that beacon, and maybe Captain Kresca could pick us up before dark."

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"We're expecting company, Kheldar," Eriond told him.

"We are? Whom are we expecting?"

"Some friends are planning to stop by."

' ' Your friends or ours? ' '

"Some of each, actually. There's one of them now." Eriond pointed out to sea.

They all turned to look.

Silk suddenly laughed. "We should have known," he said. ' 'Trust Barak to disobey orders.' '

They all looked out at the gently rolling ocean. The Seabird looked a bit the worse for weather, but she wallowed through the waves ponderously on a starboard tack that was taking her on a course past the reef. "Beldin," Silk suggested, "why don't we go down to the shore and light a signal for him?"

"Can't you do it yourself?"

"I'll be happy to—just as soon as you teach me how to set fire to rocks."

"Oh, I hadn't thought of that, I guess."

' 'Are you sure you're not older than Belgarath? Your memory seems to be slipping a bit, old boy."

"Don't belabor it, Silk. Let's go see if we can signal that oversized barge into shore."

The two of them started down to the edge of the water.

' 'Was that arranged?' ' Garion asked Eriond.' ' Barak showing up, I mean?"

"We had a hand in it, yes," Eriond admitted. "You're going to need transportation back to Riva, and Barak and the others are sort of entitled to find out what happened here."

"The others, too? Is that all right? I mean, at Rheon Cyradis said—"

"There's no problem now.' ' Eriond smiled. "The Choice has been made. There are quite a number of people on their way to meet us, actually. Our mutual friend has a passion for tying up loose ends."

"You've noticed that already, I see."

The Seabird hove to on the lee side of the reef, and a longboat put out from her starboard side to glide across what seemed to Garion to be a molten stretch of water made golden by the setting sun. They all went down to the shore to join Silk and Beldin as the longboat ran smoothly toward the shore of the reef.

"What kept you?" Silk called across the intervening water to Barak, who stood, his beard aflame in the light of the setting sun, in the prow of the boat.

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Barak was grinning broadly. "How did things turn out?" he shouted.

"Quite well, actually," Silk called back. Then he seemed to think of something. "Sorry, Cyradis," he said to the Seeress. "That was insensitive of me, wasn't it?"

"Not entirely, Prince Kheldar. My companion's sacrifice was made willingly, and methinks his spirit doth rejoice in our success even as we do."

They were all in the boat with Barak, Garion saw. Mandor-allen's armor gleamed just behind the huge Cherek. Hettar, lean and whiplike, was there, and Lelldorin, and even Relg. Barak's son Unrak was chained in the stern. Unrak had grown, but the restraints upon him were puzzling.

Barak placed one huge foot on the gunwale, preparing to leap from the boat.

"Careful," Silk told him. "It's deep right there. There are a fair number of Grolims who found that out the hard way."

"Did you throw them out into the water?" Barak asked.

"No. They volunteered."

The longboat's keel grated on the wave-eroded stones of the amphitheater, and Barak and the others clambered out. "Did we miss very much?" the big man asked.

"Not really," Silk replied with a shrug. "It was just your average, run-of-the-mill saving of the universe. You know how those things are. Is your son in trouble?" Silk looked at Unrak, who seemed a bit crestfallen in his chains.

"Not exactly that," Barak replied. "Along about noon, he turned into a bear, that's all. We sort of thought it was significant."

"It runs in your family, I see. But why chain him now?"

"The sailors refused to get into the longboat with him until we did."

"I didn't follow that at all," Zakath murmured to Garion.

"It's a hereditary sort of thing," Garion explained. "Barak's family members are the protectors of the Rivan King. When the situation demands it, they turn into bears. Barak did it several times when I was in danger. It appears that he passed it on to Unrak—his son."

"Unrak's your protector now? He seems a little young, and you don't really need that much protection."

"No. He's probably Geran's protector, and Geran was in a certain amount of danger back there in the grotto."

"Gentlemen," Ce'Nedra said then in a triumphant voice,

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"may I introduce the Crown Prince of Riva?" She held Geran up so that they could see him.

' 'He's going to forget how to walk if she doesn't put him down one of these days," Beldin muttered to Belgarath.

"Her arms should start getting tired before too much longer," Belgarath said.

Barak and the others crowded around the little queen even as the sailors who had been rowing reluctantly removed the chains from Barak's son.

"Unrak!" Barak roared, "Come here!"

"Yes, father." The boy stepped out of the boat and came forward.

"This young fellow is your responsibility," Barak told him, pointing at Geran. "I'll be very cross if you let anything happen to him."

Unrak bowed to Ce'Nedra. "Your Majesty," he greeted her, "you're looking well."

"Thank you, Unrak." She smiled.

"May I?" Unrak asked, holding out his arm toward Geran. "His Highness and I should probably get to know each other."

"Of course," Ce'Nedra said, giving her son to the youthful Cherek.

"We've missed you, your Highness." Unrak grinned at the little boy he held in his arms. "The next time you plan one of these extended trips, you should let us know. We were a little worried."

Geran giggled. Then he reached out and tugged on Unrak's scarcely fledged red beard.

Unrak winced.

Ce'Nedra embraced each of their old friends in turn, bestowing kisses at random. Mandorallen, of course, was weeping openly, too choked up to even deliver a flowery greeting, and Lelldorin was in virtually the same condition. Relg, peculiarly, did not even shrink from the Rivan Queen's embrace. Relg, it appeared, had undergone certain philosophical modifications during the years of his marriage to Taiba.

"There seem to be a few strangers here," Hettar noted in his quiet voice.

Silk smacked his forehead with an open palm. "How remiss of me," he said. "How could I have been so forgetful? This is Lady Poledra, Belgarath's wife and Polgara's mother. The rumors about her demise appear to have been exaggerations."

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"Will you be serious?" Belgarath muttered as their friends greeted the tawny-haired woman with a certain awe.

"Not a chance," Silk said roguishly. "I'm having too much fun with this, and I'm just starling to get wanned up. Please, gentlemen," he said to their friends, "let me get on with this. Otherwise the introductions are likely to last until midnight. This is Sadi. You should remember him—Chief Eunuch in the palace of Queen Salmissra."

"Formerly Chief Eunuch, Kheldar," Sadi corrected. "My Lords." He bowed.

"Your Excellency," Hettar replied. "I'm sure there'll be all sorts of explanations later."

"You all remember Cyradis, of course," Silk went on, "the Holy Seeress of Kell. She's a little tired just now. She had to make a fairly important decision about noon today."

"Where's that big fellow who was with you at Rheon, Cyradis?" Barak asked her.

"Alas, my Lord of Trellheim," she said. "My guide and protector gave up his life to insure our success."

"I'm deeply sorry," Barak said simply.

"And this, of course," Silk said in an offhand voice, "is his Imperial Majesty, Kal Zakath of Mallorean. He's been rather helpful from time to time."

Garion's friends looked at Zakath warily, their eyes filled with surprise.

"I'd assume that we can set aside certain unpleasantnesses from the past," Zakath said urbanely. "Garion and I have more or less resolved our differences."?

"It pleaseth me, your Imperial Majesty," Mandorallen said with a creaking bow, "to have lived to see near-universal peace restored to all the world."

"Thy reputation, the marvel of the known world, hath preceded thee, my Lord of Mandor," Zakath replied in an almost perfect Mimbrate dialect. "I do perceive now, however, that reputation is but a poor shade of the stupendous reality."

Mandorallen beamed.

"You'll do just fine," Hettar murmured to Zakath.

Zakath grinned at him. Then he looked at Barak. "The next time you see Anheg, my Lord of Trelheim, tell him that I'm still going to send him a bill for all those ships of mine he sank in the Sea of the East after Thull Mardu. I think some reparations might be in order."

"I wish you all the luck in the world, your Majesty—" Barak

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grinned "—but I think you'll find that Anheg's very reluctant to ; open the doors of his treasury."

"Never mind," Garion said quietly to Lelldorin, who had drawn himself up, pale-faced and furious at the mention of Zakath's name.

"But—"

;, "It wasn't his fault," Garion said. "Your cousin was killed in a battle. Those things happen, and there's no point in holding grudges. That's what's kept things stirred up in Arendia for the last twenty-five hundred years."

"And I'm sure you all recognize Eriond—formerly Errand," Silk said once again in a deliberately offhand manner, ' 'the new '(God of Angarak."

"The what? Barak exclaimed.

"You really should try to keep abreast of things, my dear Barak," Silk said, buffing his nails on the front of his tunic. ; "Silk," Eriond said reprovingly.

"I'm sorry." Silk grinned. "I couldn't resist. Can you find it in your heart to forgive me, your Divinityship? " He frowned. ' 'That's really very cumbersome, you know. What is the correct form of address?"

"How about just Eriond?"

Relg had gone deathly pale and he almost instinctively fell to his knees.

"Please don't do that, Relg," Eriond told him. "After all, you've known me since I was just a little boy, haven't you?"

"But—"

"Stand up, Relg," Eriond said, helping the Ulgo to his feet. > "Oh, my father sends his best, by the way." v Relg looked awed.

,, "Oh, well," Silk said wryly, "we might as well get it out

into the open, I suppose. Gentlemen," he said, "I'm sure you all remember the Margravine Liselle, my fiancée."

"Your^{onc}^c?" Barak exclaimed in amazement.

"We all have to settle down sometime." Silk shrugged.

They gathered around to congratulate him. Velvet, however, did not look pleased.

"Was something the matter, dear?" Silk asked her, all innocence.

"Don't you think you've forgotten something, Kheldar?" she asked acidly.

"Not that I recall."

"You neglected to ask me about this first."

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"Really? Did I actually forget that? You weren't planning to refuse, were you?"

"Of course not."

"Well, then--"

"You haven't heard the last of this, Kheldar," she said ominously.

"I seem to be getting off to a bad start here," he observed.

"Very bad," she agreed.

They built a large bonfire in the amphitheater not too far from the huge carcass of the dragon. Dumik had rather shamefacedly translocated a sizable stack of driftwood in from various beaches here and there on the reef. Garion looked critically at the stack. "I seem to remember a number of very wet evenings when Eriond and I spent hours looking for dry firewood," he said to his old friend.

"This is sort of a special occasion, Garion," Dumik explained apologetically. "Besides, if you'd have wanted it done this way, you could have done it yourself, couldn't you?"

Garion stared at him, then he suddenly laughed. "Yes, Dur-nik," he admitted, "I suppose I could have at that. I don't know that we have to tell Eriond, though."

"Do you really think he doesn't know?"

They talked until quite late. A great deal had happened since they had last seen each other, and they all had a lot of catching up to do. Finally, one by one, they drifted off to sleep.

It was still a few hours before dawn when Garion came suddenly awake.

It was not a sound that had awakened him, but a light. It was a single beam of intense blue that bathed the amphitheater in its radiance, and it was soon joined by others that streamed down from the night sky in great glowing columns, red and yellow and green and shades for which there were no names. The columns stood in a semicircle not far from the edge of the water, and there in the center of their rainbow-hued light, the pristine white albatross hovered on seraphlike wings. The incandescent forms that Garion had seen before at Cthol Mishrak began to appear in the columns of pure light. Aldur and Mara, Issa and Nedra, Chaidan and Belar, the Gods stood, their faces filled with the joy of welcome.

"It's time," Poledra sighed from where she sat enfolded in Belgarath's arms. She firmly took his arms from about her shoulders and rose to her feet.

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"No," Belgarath protested in an anguished tone, his eyes filled with tears. "There's time yet."

"You knew this was going to happen. Old Wolf," she said gently. "It has to be this way, you know."

"I'm not going to lose you twice," he declared. He also rose. "There's no longer any meaning to any of this." He looked at his daughter. "Pol," he said.

"Yes, father," she replied, rising to her feet with Durnik at her side.

"You'll have to look after things now. Beldin and Durnik and the twins wilt help you."

' 'Will you orphan me in one single stroke, father?'' Her voice was throbbing with unshed tears.

"You're strong enough to bear it, Pol. Your mother and I are not displeased with you. Be well."

"Don't be foolish, Belgarath," Poledra said firmly.

"I'm not. I won't live without you again."

"It's not permitted."

"It can't be prevented. Not even our Master can prevent me now. You won't leave alone, Poledra. I'm going with you." He put his arms about his wife's shoulders and looked deeply into her golden eyes. "It's better this way."

"As you decide, my husband," she said finally. "We must act now, however, before UL arrives. He can prevent it, no matter how much you bend your will to its accomplishment."

Then Eriond was there. "Have you really considered this, Belgarath?" he said.

"Many times in the last three thousand years, yes. I had to wait for Garion, though. Now he's here, and there's nothing to hold me any longer."

"What would make you change your mind?"

"Nothing. I won't be separated from her again."

"Then I'll have to see to that, I suppose." .

"That's forbidden, Eriond," Poledra objected. "I agreed to this when my task was laid upon me."

"Agreements are always subject to renegotiation, Poledra," he said. "Besides, my father and my brothers neglected to advise me of their decision, so I'll have to deal with the situation without their advice."

"You can't defy your father's will," she objected.

"But I don't know my father's will as yet. I'll apologize, of course. I'm sure he won't be too angry with me, and no one stays angry forever—not even my father—and no decision is

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irrevocable. If necessary, I'll remind him of the change of heart he had at Prolgu when Gorim persuaded him to relent."

"That sounds awfully familiar," Barak murmured to Hettar. "It looks as if the new God of Angarak has spent a little too much time with our Prince Kheldar.'"

"It might be contagious," Hettar agreed.

An impossible hope had sprung up in Canon's heart.

"May I borrow the Orb again, Garion?" Eriond asked politely,

"Of course." Garion almost snatched the Orb from the pommel of the sword and offered it to the youthful God.

Eriond took the glowing jewel and approached Belgarath and his wife. Then he reached out with it and gently touched it to each of their foreheads. Garion, knowing that the touch of the jewel meant death, leaped forward with a strangled cry, but it was too late.

Belgarath and Poledra began to glow with a blue nimbus as they looked deeply into each other's eyes. Then Eriond handed the Orb back to the

Rivan King.

"Won't you get into trouble about this?" Garion asked.

"It's all right, Garion," Eriond assured him. "I'm probably going to have to break all kinds of rules in the next several years, so I might as well get into practice."

A deep organ note came from the incandescent columns of light at the edge of the water. Garion looked quickly at the assembled Gods and saw that the albatross had become so intensely bright that he could not bear to look at it.

And then the albatross was gone, and the Father of the Gods stood where it had hovered, and he was surrounded by his sons. "Very well done, my Son," UL said.

"It took me a little while to perceive what thou hadst in thy mind, Father," Eriond apologized. "I'm sorry to have been so dense."

"Thou art unaccustomed to such things, my Son," UL forgave him. "Thy use of thy brother's Orb in this was unanticipated, however, and most ingenious." A faint smile touched the Eternal Face. " 'Even had I been inclined not to relent, that alone would have forestalled me."

"I thought such might be the case, Father."

"I pray thee, Poledra," UL said then, "forgive me my cruel-seeming subterfuge. Know that the deception was not meant for thee, but for my son. He hath ever been of a retiring nature, reluctant to exercise his will, but his will shall prevail upon this

.world, and he must learn now to unleash it or to restrain it as

^*eemeth him best."

"It was a test, then, Most Holy?" Belgarath's voice had a slight edge to it.

: "All things which happen are tests, Belgarath," UL explained calmly. "Thou mayest take some satisfaction in the ;V knowledge that thou and thine espoused wife did very well in

'tias. It was the decisions of you two which compelled my son /to make his. Still do you both serve even now, when all seems

complete. And now, Eriond, join with me and my brothers. Let

us go apart a ways that we may welcome thee unto this world

which we now deliver into thy hands."

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The sun had risen, a golden disc hanging low on the eastern horizon. The sky was intensely blue and the light breeze blowing steadily in from the west touched the tops of the waves with white. There was still the faint, damp smell of the previous day's fog lingering on the stones of the strangely shaped pyramid that jutted up out of the sea to form the center of the reef.

Garion was light-headed with exhaustion. His body screamed for rest, but his mind skittered from impression to thought to image and back again, keeping him awake but all bemused on the very edge of sleep. There would be time later to sort out everything that had happened here in the Place Which Is No More. And then he rearranged his thinking about dial. If ever there was a place that was, it was Korim. Korim was more eternally real than Tol Honeth, Mal Zeth, or Val Alorn. He gathered his sleeping wife and his son closer in his arms. They smelled good. Ce'Nedra's hair had its usual, flowerlike fragrance, and Geran smelled like every little boy who had ever lived—a small creature probably at least marginally in need of a bath. Garion's own need for bathing was, he concluded, somewhat more than marginal. Yesterday had been very strenuous.

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His friends were gathered in strange little groupings here and there around the amphitheater. Barak, Hettar, and Mandorallen were talking with Zakath. Liselle sat with a look of abstract concentration on her face, combing Cyradis' hair. The ladies all seemed quite determined to take the Seeress of Kell in hand.

Sadi and Beidin sprawled on the stones near the carcass of the dragon, drinking ale. Sadi's expression was polite, but it

revealed that he was consuming the bitter brew more out

of politeness than from any sense of gusto. Unrak was exploring, and close on his heels was Nathel, the slack-faced young

King of the Thulls. The Archduke Otrath stood alone near the now-sealed portal to the grotto, his face filled with apprehensive dread. Kal Zakath had not yet seen fit to discuss certain matters

With his kinsman, and Otrath was obviously not looking forward to their conversation. Eriond was talking quietly with Aunt Pol, Dumik, Belgarath, and Poledra. The young God had a strange

; .^nimbus of pale light about him. Silk was nowhere in sight.

And then the little man came around the shoulder of the pyramid. Behind him, on the far side of the peak, rose a column of dark smoke. He came down the stairway to the floor of the amphitheater and crossed to where Garion was sitting.

"What were you doing?" Garion asked him. ;*'• "I set out a signal for Captain Kresca," Silk replied. "He i; knows the way back to Perivor, and I Ve seen Barak navigate in | confined waters before. Seabird's meant for the open sea, not I for close quarters."

^ "You'll hurt his feelings if you tell him that, you know." £*: "I wasn't planning to tell him." The rat-faced little man i sprawled on the stones beside Garion and his family, v "Did Liselle have that little chat with you as yet?" Garion | asked.

;•' "I think she's saving it up. She wants to have plenty of un-; interrupted time for it. Is marriage always like this? I mean, do you always live in perpetual apprehension, waiting for these conversations?"

"It's not uncommon. You're not married yet, though."

"I'm closer to it than I ever thought I'd be."

"Are you sorry?"

"No, not really. Liseile and I are suited for each other. We

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have a great deal in common. I just wish she wouldn't keep tilings hanging over my head is all." Silk looked sourly around the amphitheater. "Does he have to glow like that?" he asked, pointing at Eriond.

"He probably doesn't even know he's doing it. He's new at this. He'll get better at it as he goes along.'"

"Do you realize that we're sitting around criticizing a God?"

' 'He was a friend first, Silk. Friends can criticize us without giving offense."

"My, aren't we philosophical this morning? My heart almost stopped when he touched Belgarath and Poledra with the Orb, though.'"

' 'Mine, too,' Garion admitted, ' 'but it appears he knew what he was doing." He sighed.

"What's the problem?"

"It's all over now. I think I'm going to miss it—at least I will just as soon as I get caught up on my sleep."

"It has been a little hectic for the past few days, hasn't it? I suppose that if we put our heads together, we can come up with something exciting to do."

"I know what I'm going to be doing," Garion told him.

"Oh? What's that?"

"I'm going to be very busy being a father."

"Your son won't stay young forever, Garion."

"Geran isn't going to be an only child. My friend up here in my head warned me to expect large numbers of daughters."

"Good. It might help to settle you down a bit. I don't want to seem critical, Garion, but sometimes you're awfully flighty. Hardly a year goes by when you're not running off to some corner of the world with that burning sword in your hand."

"Are you trying to be funny?"

"Me?" Silk leaned back comfortably. "You're not going to have all that many daughters, are you? What I'm getting at is that women are only of childbearing age for just so long."

"Silk," Garion said pointedly, "do you remember Xbell, that Dryad we met down near the River of the Woods in southern Tolnedra?"

"The one who was so fond of men—all men?"

"That's the one. Would you say that she's still of childbearing age?"

"Oh, my yes."

"Xbell is over three hundred years old. Ce'Nedra's a Dryad, too, you know."

•,. "Well, maybe you'll get too old to—" Silk broke off and ^looked at Belgarath. "Oh, dear," he said. "You have got a bit &of a problem, haven't you?"

A It was almost noon when they boarded the Seabird. Barak lad agreed, although somewhat reluctantly, to follow Captain :fe';-Kresca to Perivor. After the two men had met and inspected ff each other's ships, however, things went more smoothly. Kresca vf.'had been lavish in his praise of Seabird, and that was always a /.-way to get on the good side of Barak.

I As they weighed anchor, Garion leaned on the starboard rail |; gazing at the strange-looking pyramid sticking out of the sea l with a pillar of greasy smoke rising from the amphitheater on I its north side.

f "I'd have given a great deal to have been there," Hettar said S quietly, leaning his elbows on the rail beside Garion. ' 'How was l:it?"

•;| "Noisy," Garion told him.

•: "Why did Belgarath insist on burning that dragon?"

"He felt sorry for her." ,,, "Belgarath's funny sometimes."

"i . "He is indeed, my friend. How are Adara and the children?" ^
"Fine. She's with child again, you know." " "Again? Hettar, you two are almost as bad as Relg and : Taiba."

"Notquite," Hettar said modestly. "They're still a few ahead

• trfus."Hefrownedcritically,hishawklikefaceoutlinedagainst ^ (he sun. "I think somebody's cheating, though. Taiba keeps

•;, having babies in twos and threes. That makes it very hard for ^ Adara to keep up.''

y, "I wouldn't want to point any fingers, but I'd suspect that

'; .Mara's been interfering there. It's going to take awhile to

\$ repopulate Maragor." He looked over to where Unrak stood

in the bow with his shadow, Nathel, just behind him. "What's

that all about?" he asked.

; *Tm not sure," Hettarsaid. "Nathel's a pathetic sort of boy, and I think Unrak feels sorry for him. I gather diere hasn't been too much kindness in Nathel's life, so he'll even accept pity. He's been following Unrak around like a puppy ever since we picked him up." The tall Algar looked at Garion. "You look tired," he said. "You should get some sleep."

"I'm exhausted," Garion admitted, "but I don't want to get my days and nights turned around. Let's go talk with Barak. He seemed just a bit surly when he came ashore."

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"You know how Barak is. Missing a fight always makes him discontent. Tell him some stories. He likes a good story almost as much as he likes a good fight."

It was good to be back among his old friends again. There had been a sort of emptiness in Garion since he had left them behind at Rheon.

The absence of their burly self-confidence had been part of it, of course, but even more than that, perhaps, had been the camaraderie, that sense of good-natured friendship that lay under all the apparent bickering. As they started aft to where Barak stood with one beefy hand on the tiller, Garion saw Zakath and Cyradis standing on the lee side of a longboat. He motioned to Hettar to stop and laid one finger to his lips.

"Eavesdropping isn't very nice, Garion," the tall Algar whispered.

' 'It's not exactly eavesdropping,' ' Garion whispered back. ' 'I just need to be sure that I won't have to take steps."

"Steps?"

"I'll explain later."

"And what will you do now, Holy Seeress?" Zakath was asking the slim girl, his heart in his voice.

"The world lies open before me, Kal Zakath," she replied a little sadly. "The burden of my task hath been lifted, and thou needst no longer address me as 'Seeress,' for, indeed, that burden hath also been lifted. Mine eyes are now fixed on the plain, ordinary light of day, and I am now no more than a plain, ordinary woman."

"Hardly plain, Cyradis, and far from ordinary."

"Thou art kind to say so, Kal Zakath."

"Let's drop that 'Kal,' shall we, Cyradis? It's an affectation. It means King and God. Now that I Ve seen real Gods, I know just how presumptuous it was of me to encourage its use. But let's return to the point. Your eyes have been bound for years, haven't they?"

"Yes."

"Then you haven't had occasion to look into a mirror lately, have you?"

"Neither occasion nor inclination."

Zakath was a very shrewd man and he fully realized when the time had come for extravagance. "Then let mine eyes be thy mirror, Cyradis," he said. "Look into them and see how fair thou art."

Cyradis blushed. "Thy flattery doth quite catch my breath away, Zakath-

;>,• "It's not exactly flattery, Cyradis," he said clinically, lapsing into his usual speech. "You're by far the most beautiful I Ve ever met, and the thought of having you go back to Jtall--or anywhere else, for that matter--leaves a vast emptiness & my heart. YouVe lost your guide and your friend. Let me Become both for you. Return with me to Mal Zeth. WeVe got jfttuch to discuss, and it may take us the rest of our lives." tt Cyradis turned her pale face away slightly, and the faintly

*\$tiumphant smile which touched her lips said quite clearly that /Jhe saw a great deal more than she was willing to reveal. She : gamed back to the Mallorean Emperor, her eyes innocently wide. y*Wouldst thou indeed take some small pleasure in my com-%J»ny?" she asked. "f'; "Thy company would fill my days, Cyradis," he said.

*>/. "Then gladly will I accompany thee to Mal Zeth," she said, ; ^forthou art now my truest friend and dearest companion." ^' Garion motioned with his head, and he and Hettar went on aft.

"What were we doing?" Hettar asked. "That seemed like a

private conversation." |^"It was," Garion told him. "I just needed to be sure that it |p0k place, that's all. I was told that it was going to happen, but

*lf lce a little verification now and then."

; Hettar looked puzzled.

"Zakath's been the loneliest man in the world," Garion told ^him. "That's what made him so empty and soulless—and so ^dangerous. That's changed now. He isn't going to be lonely imymore, and that should help him with something he has to

* "Garion, you're being awfully cryptic. All I saw was a young lady rather skillfully wrapping a man around her finger.'' 1 "It did sort of look that way, didn't it?"

Early the next morning, Ce'Nedra bolted from her bed and nm up the stairs to the deck. Alarmed, Garion followed her. "Excuse me," she said to Polgara, who was leaning out over the rail. Then she took her place beside the ageless woman, and the two of them stood for some time retching over the side. "You, too?" Ce'Nedra said with a wan smile. Polgara wiped her lips with a kerchief and nodded. Then the two of them embraced each other and began to laugh.

"Are they all right?" Garion asked Poledra, who had just

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come up on deck with the ubiquitous wolf pup again at her side "Neither one of them ever gets seasick."

"They aren't seasick, Garion," Poledra said with a mysteri ous smile.

"But why are they—"

' 'They're just fine, Garion. More than fine. Go on back down to your cabin. I 'll take care of this--''

Garion had just awakened, and his mind was a little foggy. So it was

that it was not until he was halfway down the stairs before it slowly dawned on him. He stopped, his eyes very wide. "Ce'Nedra?" he exclaimed. "And Aunt Pol?" Then he, too, began to laugh.

The appearance of Sir Mandorallen, the invincible Baron of Vo Mandor, in the court of King Oldorin caused an awed silence. Because of Perivor's remote location, Mandorallen's towering reputation had not reached the island, but his very presence—that overpowering sense of his nobility and perfection—stunned the king's court. Mandorallen was the ultimate Mimbrate, and it showed.

Garion and Zakath, once again in full armor, approached the throne with the stupendous knight between them. "Your Majesty," Garion said with a bow, "it pleaseth me beyond measure to announce that our quest hath come to a happy .and successful conclusion. The beast which plagued thy shores is no more, and the evil which beset the world is quelled for good and all. Fortune, which sometimes doth bestow blessings with open-handed generosity, hath also seen fit to reunite my companions and me with old and well-loved friends—most of whom I shall present to thee anon. A keen awareness, however, of a fact that, me-thinks, will be of supreme importance to thee and to thy court doth impell me to present at once a puissant knight from far-off Arendia, who doth ever stand at the right hand of his Majesty, King Korodullin, and who, doubtless, will greet thee in kinship and love. Your Majesty, I have the honor to present Sir Mandorallen, Baron of Vo Mandor and the paramount knight in all the world."

"You're getting better at that," Zakath said quietly.

"Practice," Garion said deprecatingly.

"Lord King," Mandorallen said in his resonant voice, bowing to the throne, "gladly do I greet thee and the members of thy court, and dare to call ye all kinsmen. I presume to bear thee warmest greetings from their Majesties, King Korodullin and Queen Mayaserana, monarchs of well-loved Arendia, for,

doubtless, as soon as I return to Vo Mimbire and reveal that those who were once lost are now joyfully found again, their Majesties' eyes will fill to overflowing with tears of thanksgiving, and they shall embrace thee from afar, if needs be, as a brother, and, as great Chaldan gives me strength, shall I presently return to thy magnificent city with missives top-filled with their regard and affection which shall, methinks, presage a soon-to-be accomplished reunion—may I dare even hope, a reunification—of the dissevered branches of the holy blood of sacred Arendia."

"He managed to say all that in one sentence?" Zakath murmured to Garion with some awe.

"Two, I think," Garion murmured back. "Mandorallen's in his element here. This is liable to take awhile—two or three days, I'd imagine."

It did not take quite that long, but almost. The speeches of the nobles of Perivor were at first somewhat rudimentary, since the members of King Oldorin's court had been taken by surprise by Mandorallen's sudden appearance and had been rendered almost tongue-tied by his eloquence. A sleepless night spent in fevered

composition, however, remedied that. The following day was given over to flowery speeches, an extended banquet, and assorted entertainments. Belgarath was prevailed upon to present an only slightly embellished account of the events that had transpired on the reef. The old man rather judiciously avoided references to some of the more incredible incidents. The sudden appearance of divinities in the middle of an adventure story sometimes stirs skepticism in even the most credulous audience.

Garion leaned forward to speak quietly to Eriond, who sat across the banquet table from him. "At least he protected your anonymity," he said quietly.

"Yes," Eriond agreed. "I'll have to think of some way to thank him for that,"

"Restoring Poledra to him is probably all the thanks he can handle right now. It's going to come out eventually though, you know-your identity, I mean."

"I think it's going to need a bit of preparation, though. I'll need to have a long talk with Ce'Nedra, I think."

"Ce'Nedra?"

"I want some details on how she got started when she raised the army she took to Thull Mardu. It seems to me she began on a small scale and then worked her way up. That might be the best way to go at it--"

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"Your Sendarian background is starting to show, Eriond." Garion laughed. "Durnik left his mark on both of us, didn't he?" Then he cleared his throat a little uncomfortably. "You're doing it again," he cautioned.

"Doing what?"

"Glowing."

"Does it show?"

Garion nodded. "I'm afraid so."

"I'll have to work on that."

The banquets and entertainments lasted well into the night for several days, but since nobles are not customarily early risers, this left the mornings free for Garion and his friends to discuss all that had happened since they had separated at Rheon. The accounts of those who had remained at home were filled with domesticity--children, weddings, and affairs of state. Gar-ion was quite pleased to hear that Brand's son Kail was managing the Kingdom of Riva probably at least as well as he might have himself. Moreover, since the Murgos were preoccupied with the Mallolean presence in southeastern Cthol Murgos, peace by and large prevailed among the western kingdoms, and

trade flourished there. Silk's nose began to twitch at that information.

"This is all well and good," Barak rumbled. "But could we possibly skip over what's happening back home and get down to the real story? I'm dying of curiosity."

And so they began. No attempt to gloss things over was permitted. Every detail was savored.

"Did you really do that?" Lelldorin asked Garion at one point after Silk had luridly described their first encounter with Zandramas, who had assumed the form of the dragon in the hills above the Arendish plain.

"Well," Garion replied modestly, "not her whole tail, only about four feet of it. It seemed to get her attention, though."

"When he gets home, our splendid hero here is going to look into the career opportunities available in the field of dragon-molesting. "

Silk laughed.

' "But there aren't any more dragons, Kheldar," Velvet pointed out.

"Oh, that's all right, Liselle." He grinned. "Maybe Eriond can make a few for him."

"Never mind," Garion told him.

Then, at a certain point in the narrative, they all had to see

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Zith, and Sadi rather proudly displayed his little green snake and her wriggling brood.

"She doesn't look all that dangerous to me," Barak grunted.

"Go tell that to Harakan." Silk grinned. "Liselle threw the little dear into his face at Ashaba. Zith nipped him a few times and absolutely petrified him."

"Was he dead?" the big man asked.

"I've never seen anybody any deader."

' "You're getting ahead of the story," Hettar eluded.

"There's no way we're going to be able to tell you about everything that happened in one morning, Hettar," Durnik said.

"That's all right, Durnik," Barak said. "It's a long way back home. We'll have plenty of time at sea."

That afternoon, by more or less popular demand, Beldin was obliged to repeat the performance he had given prior to their departure for the

reef. Then, simply to demonstrate some of the gifts of his companions, Garion suggested that they adjourn to the tournament grounds to give them more room. Lelldorin showed the king and his court some of the finer points of archery, culminating the demonstration by showing them an entirely new way to pick plums from a distant tree. Barak bent an iron bar into something resembling a pretzel, and Hettar put them into a state verging on stunned amazement by a dazzling display of horsemanship. The culmination of the affair did not come off too well, however. When Relg walked through a solid stone wall, many ladies fainted, and some of the younger members of the audience fled screaming.

"They don't seem to be ready for that yet," Silk said. Silk had resolutely turned his back when Relg had approached the wall. "I know I'm not," he added.

About noon a few days later, two ships entered the harbor from different directions. One of the ships was a familiar Cherek war boat, and General Atesca and Bureau Chief Brador disembarked from the other. Grelidik led King Anheg and Emperor Varana down the gangway of the war boat.

' 'Barak!' ' Anheg roared as he came down the gangway. ' 'Can you think of any reason I shouldn't take you back to Val Alorn in chains?"

"Testy, isn't he?" Hettar observed to the red-bearded man.

"He'll calm down after I get him drunk." Barak shrugged.

"I'm sorry, Garion," Anheg said in a booming voice. "Varana and I tried to catch him, but that big scow of his moves faster than we thought."

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"Scow?" Barak protested mildly.

"It's all right, Anheg," Garion replied. "They didn't arrive until after everything was finished."

"You got your son back, then?"

"Yes."

"Well, trot him out, boy. We all invested a lot of effort in trying to find him for you."

Ce'Nedra came forward carrying Geran, and Anheg enfolded them both in a bear hug. "Your Majesty," he greeted the Rivan Queen, "and you, your Highness." He grinned and tickled the little boy. Geran giggled.

Ce'Nedra tried a curtsy.

"Don't do that, Ce'Nedra," Anheg told her. "You'll drop the baby."

Ce'Nedra laughed and then smiled at Emperor Varana. "Uncle," she said.

"Ce'Nedra," the silvery-haired emperor replied. "You're looking well." He squinted at her. "Is it my imagination, or are you putting on a little weight?"

"It's just temporary, uncle," she replied. "I'll explain later."

Brador and Atesca approached Zakath. "Why, your Imperial Majesty," Atesca said to his emperor in feigned surprise. "Imagine meeting you here—of all places."

"General Atesca," Zakath said to him, "don't we know each other well enough to ignore these subterfuges?"

"We were worried about you, your Majesty," Brador said. "Since we were in the vicinity anyway . . ." The bald man spread his hands.

"And just what were you two doing in this vicinity? Didn't I leave you back on the banks of the Magan?"

"Something came up, your Majesty," Atesca put in. "Ur-von's army fell all apart, and the Darshivans seemed to be distracted. Brador and I seized the opportunity to bring Peldane and Darshiva back into the empire, and we've been pursuing the remnants of the Darshivan army all over eastern Dalasia."

"Very good, gentlemen," Zakath approved. "Very, very good. I should take a vacation more often."

"Tfcis was his idea of a vacation?" Sadi murmured.

"Of course," Silk replied. "Fighting dragons can be very invigorating."

Zakath and Varana had been eyeing each other speculatively.

"Your Imperial Majesties," Garion said politely, "I should probably introduce you. Emperor Varana, this is his Imperial

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Majesty, Kal Zakath of Mallorea. Emperor Zakath, this is his Imperial Majesty, Ran Borune XXIV of the Tolnedran Empire."

"Just Varana will do, Garion," the Tolnedran said. "We've all heard a lot about you, Kal Zakath," he said, extending his hand.

"None of it good, I'm sure, Varana." Zakath smiled, shaking the other emperor's hand warmly.

"Rumors are seldom accurate, Zakath."

"We have much to discuss, your Imperial Majesty," Zakath said.

"Indeed we do, your Imperial Majesty."

King Oldorin of Perivor appeared to be in a state verging on nervous prostration. His island kingdom, it seemed, was quite suddenly awash with royalty. Garion made the introductions as gently and, he hoped, as painlessly as possible. King Oldorin mumbled a few greetings, almost forgetting his thees and thous. Garion drew him to one side. "This is a momentous occasion, your Majesty," he said. "The presence in one place of Zakath of Mallorean, Varana of Tolnedra, and Anheg of Cherek doth presage the possibility of tremendous steps toward that universal peace for which the world hath longed for eons. *'

"Thine own presence doth not diminish the occasion, Bel-garion of Riva."

Garion bowed his acknowledgment. "Though the courtesy and hospitality of thy court are the marvel of the known world, your Majesty," he said, "it were foolish of us not to seize this opportunity in so noble a cause. Thus I implore thee that my friends and I may closet separately for some time to explore the possibilities of this chance meeting, although it seemeth to me that chance hath had but small part in this coming to pass. Surely the Gods themselves have had a hand in it."

"I am certain of it, your Majesty," Oldorin agreed. "There are council chambers on the topmost floor of my palace, King Belgarion. They are at the immediate disposal of thyself and thy royal friends. I have no doubt that momentous things may emerge from this meeting, and the honor I shall accrue that it is to take place beneath my roof doth overwhelm me quite."

It was an impromptu meeting that was held in the upper chambers of the palace. Belgarath, by common consent, presided. Garion agreed to look after the interests of Queen Porenn, and Durnik to those of King Fulrach. Relg spoke for Ulgo—and Maragor. Mandorallen represented Arendia, and Hettar spoke

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for his father. Silk stood in for his brother, Urgit. Sadi spoke for Salmissra, and Nathel spoke for the Thulls, although very seldom. No one was particularly interested in taking the part of Drosta lek Thun of Gar og Nadrak.

Right at the outset there was, to Varana's obvious disappointment, an agreement that matters of trade be excluded from the discussion, and then they got down to business.

About midway through the second day, Garion leaned back in his chair, only half listening as Silk and Zakath haggled incessantly over a peace treaty between Mallorean and Cthol Mur-gos. Garion sighed pensively. Only a few days ago, he and his friends had witnessed—and participated in—the most momentous Event in the history of the universe, and now they sat around a table deeply involved in the mundane matters of international politics. It seemed so anticlimactic somehow, and yet Garion knew that most of the people in the world

would be far more concerned about what happened around this table than what had happened at Korim—for a while, anyway.

Finally, the Accords of Dal Perivor were reached. They were tentative, to be sure, and couched in broad generalities. They were subject, of course, to ratification by those monarchs not actually present. They were tenuous and based more on goodwill than on the rough give-and-take of true political negotiation. They were nonetheless, Garion felt, the last, best hope of mankind. Scribes were summoned to copy from Beldin's copious notes, and it was decided that the document should be issued over the seal of King Oldorin of Perivor as host monarch.

The ceremony of the signing was stupendous. Mimbrates are very good at stupendous ceremonies.

Then, on the following day, came the good-byes. Zakath, Cyradis, Eriond, Atesca, and Brador were to depart for Mal Zeth while the rest of them were to board the Seabird for the long voyage home. Garion spoke at some length with Zakath. They both promised to correspond and, when affairs of state permitted it, to visit. The correspondence would be easy, they both knew. The visits, however, were far more problematical.

Then Garion joined his family while they took their leave of Eriond. Garion then walked the young and as-yet-unknown God of Angarak down to the quay where Atesca's ship waited. " WeVe come a long way together, Eriond," he said.

"Yes," Eriond agreed.

"You've got a lot ahead of you, you know."

"Probably more than you can even imagine, Garion."

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"Are you ready?"

"Yes, Garion, I am."

"Good. If you ever need me, call on me. I'll come to wherever you are as quickly as I can."

"I'll remember that."

"And don't get so busy that you let Horse get fat."

Eriond smiled. "No danger of that," he said. "Horse and I still have a long way to go."

"Be well, Eriond."

"You, too, Garion."

They clasped hands and then Eriond went up the gangway to his waiting

ship.

Garion sighed and made his way to where Seabird was moored. He went up the gangway to join the others as they watched Atesca's ship sail slowly out of the harbor, veering slightly around Grelidik's ship, which waited with the impatience of a leashed hound.

Then Barak's sailors cast off all lines and rowed out into the harbor. The sails were raised, and Seabird turned her prow toward home.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The weather held clear and sunny, and a steady breeze filled Seabird's sails to drive her northwesterly in the wake of Grelidik's patched and weatherbeaten war boat. At Unrak's insistence, the two vessels were making a side trip to Mishrak ac Thull to deposit Nathel in his own kingdom.

The days were long and filled with sunshine and the sharp smell of brine. Garion and all his friends spent most of those days in the sunny main cabin. The story of the quest to Korim was long and involved, but those who had not been with Garion and the others wanted as much in the way of detail as they could possibly get. Their frequent interruptions and questions led to extended digressions, and the story jumped back and forth in time, but it proceeded, albeit at a frequently limping pace. There was much in the story that an average listener might have found incredible. Barak and the others, however, accepted it. They had spent enough time with Belgarath, Polgara, and Garion to

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know that almost nothing was impossible. The only exception to this rule was Emperor Varana, who remained adamantly skeptical—more on philosophical grounds, Garion suspected, than from any real disbelief.

Unrak gave Nathel some very extended advice before the King of the Thulls was deposited in a seaport town in his own kingdom. The advice had to do with the need for Nathel to assert himself and to break free of the domination of his mother. Unrak didn't look all that optimistic after the young Thull departed.

The Seabird turned her course southward then, still following Grelidik's wake as they ran along the barren, rocky coast of Goska in northeastern Cthol Murgos. "That's disgraceful, you know that?" Barak said to Garion one day, pointing at Grelidik's vessel. "It looks like a floating shipwreck."

"Grelidik uses his ship rather hard," Garion agreed. "I've sailed with him a few times."

"The man has no respect for the sea," Barak grumbled, "and he drinks too much."

Garion blinked. "I beg your pardon?" he said.

"Oh, I'll be the first to admit that I take a tankard of ale now and then, but Grelidik drinks at sea. That's revolting, Garion. I think it might even be irreligious."

"You know more about the sea than I do," Garion admitted.

Grelidik's ship and Seabird sailed through the narrow strait between the Isle of Verkat and the southern coasts of Hagga and Gorut. Since it was summer in the southern latitudes, the weather continued fair and they made good time. After they had passed through the dangerous cluster of rocky islets strung down from the tip of the Urga peninsula, Silk came up on deck. "You two have taken to living up here," he observed to Garion and Barak.

"I like to be on deck when we're in sight of land," Garion said. "When you can see the shoreline slipping by, it gives you the sense that you're getting somewhere. What's Aunt Pol doing?"

"Knitting." Silk shrugged. "She's teaching Ce'Nedra and Liselle how it's done. They're creating whole heaps of little garments."

"I wonder why," Garion said with a perfectly straight face.

"I've got a favor to ask, Barak," Silk said.

* 'What do you need? *'

"I'd like to stop at Rak Urga. I want to give Urgit a copy of those accords, and Zakath made a couple of proposals at Dal Perivor that my brother really ought to know about."

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"Will you help chain Hettar to the mast while we're in port?" Barak asked him.

Silk frowned slightly, then he seemed to suddenly understand. "Oh," he said. "I'd sort of forgotten that. It wouldn't be a very good idea to take Hettar into a city full of Murgos, would it?"

"A bad idea, Silk. Disastrous might come even closer."

"Let me talk with him," Garion suggested. "Possibly I can calm him down a bit."

"If you can manage that, I'll have you come up on deck and talk to the next gale we run into," Barak said. "Hettar's almost as reasonable as the weather where Murgos are concerned."

The tall Algar, however, did not, in fact go stony-faced and reach for his saber at the mention of the word "Murgo." They had told him about Urgit's real background during the voyage, and his hawklike face became alive with curiosity when Garion rather hesitantly told him of the plan to stop at Rak Urga. ' 'I 'll control my instincts, Garion," he promised. "I think I'd really like to meet this Drasnian who's managed to become the King of the Murgos."

Because of the hereditary and by now almost instinctive animosity between Murgos and Alorns, Belgarath advised caution in Rak Urga. "Things are quiet now," he said. "Let's not stir them up. Barak, run up a flag of truce, and when we get to within hailing distance of the wharves, I'll send for Oskatat, Urgit's Seneschal."

"Can he be trusted?" Barak asked dubiously.

"I think so, yes. We won't all trek up to the Drojim, though. Have Seabird and Grelidik's ship pull back out into the harbor after we go ashore. Not even the most rabid Murgo sea captain would attack a pair of Cherek war boats in open water. I'll keep in touch with Pol, and we'll send for help if the occasion arises."

It took some fairly extensive shouting between ship and shore to persuade a Murgo colonel to send to the Drojim Palace for Oskatat. The colonel's decision may have been tipped in that direction when Barak ordered his catapults loaded. Rak Urga was not a very attractive town, but the colonel quite obviously didn't want it burned to the ground.

"Are you back already?" Oskatat bellowed across the intervening water when at last he arrived on the wharf.

"We were in the vicinity and we thought we'd pay a call," Silk said lightly. "We'd like to speak with his Majesty if possi-

ble. We'll control these Alorns if you can keep your Murgos leashed."

Oskatat gave a number of very abrupt commands that were accompanied by some fairly grisly threats, and Garion, Belgarath, and Silk took to Seabird's longboat. They were accompanied by Barak, who had left Unrak in charge, and by Hettar and , Mandorallen.

"How did it go?" Oskatat asked Silk as the party, accompanied by a contingent of King Urgit's black-robed household guard, rode up from the harbor to the Drojim.

"Things turned out rather well," Silk smirked.

"His Majesty should be pleased to hear that."

They entered the garish Drojim Palace, and Oskatat led them down a smoky, torch-lit hall toward the throne room. "His Majesty has been expecting these people," Oskatat said harshly to the guards. "He will

see them now. Open the door."

One of the guards seemed to be new. "But they're Alorns, Lord Oskatat," he objected.

"So? Open the door."

"But—"

Oskatat coolly drew his heavy sword. "Yes?" he said in a deceptively mild tone.

"Ah—nothing, my Lord Oskatat," the guard repeated. "Nothing at all."

"Why is the door still closed then?"

The door was quickly snatched open.

"Kheldar!" It was a ringing shout, and it came from the far end of the throne room. King Urgit bolted down the steps of the dais, flinging his crown over one shoulder as he ran. He caught Silk in a rough embrace, laughing uncontrollably. "I thought you were dead," he crowed.

"You're looking well, Urgit," Silk said to him.

Urgit made a slight face. "I'm married now, you know," he said.

"I was afraid Praia might get you eventually. I'm getting married myself shortly."

"The blond girl? Praia told me about how she felt about you. Imagine that, the invincible Prince Kheldar, married at last."

"Don't make any large wagers on it just yet, Urgit," Silk told his brother. "I may still decide to fall on my sword instead. Are we sort of alone here? We've got some things to tell you, and our time's a bit short."

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"Mother and Praia are here," Urgit told him, "and my stepfather here, of course."

"Stepfather?" Silk exclaimed, looking at Oskatat in surprise.

"Mother was getting lonely. She missed all the playful abuse Taur Urgas used to bestow on her. I used my influence to marry her off to Oskatat. I'm afraid he's been a terrible disappointment to her, though. So far as I know, he hasn't knocked her down a single flight of stairs or kicked her in the head even once."

"He's impossible when he's like this," Oskatat apologized for his king.

"Just brimming over with good spirits, Oskatat." Urgit laughed. "By Tbrak's boiling eye, I've missed you, Kheldar." Then he greeted Garion and Belgarath and looked inquiringly at Barak, Mandorallen, and Hettar.

"Barak, Earl of Trellheim," Silk introduced the red-bearded giant.

"He's even bigger than they say he is," Urgit noted.

"Sir Mandorallen, Baron of Vo Mandor," Silk went on.

"The Gods' own definition of the word 'gentleman,' " Urgit said.

"And Hettar, son of King Cho-Hag of Algaria."

Urgit shrank away, his eyes suddenly fearful. Even Oskatat took a step backward.

"Not to worry, Urgit," Silk said grandly. "Hettar came all the way through the streets of your capital, and he didn't kill even one of your subjects.'"

"Remarkable," Urgit murmured nervously. "You've changed, Lord Hettar," he said. "You're reputed to be a thousand feet tall and to wear a necklace of Murgo skulls."

"I'm on vacation," Hettar said dryly.

Urgit grinned. "We aren't going to be unpleasant to each other, are we?" he asked, still slightly apprehensive.

"No, your Majesty," Hettar told him, "I don't think we are. For some reason, you intrigue me."

"That's a relief," Urgit said. "If you find yourself getting edgy, though, be sure to let me know. There are still a dozen or so of my father's generals lurking about the Drojim. Oskatat hasn't found a reason to have them beheaded yet. I'll send for them, and you can settle your nerves. They're just a bother to me anyway." He frowned. "I wish I'd known you were coming," he said. "I've wanted to send your father a present for years now."

Hettar looked at him, one eyebrow raised.

"He did me the greatest service any man can ever do for another. He ran his saber through Taur Urgas' guts. You might tell him that I tidied up for him afterward."

"Oh? My father doesn't usually need to be tidied up after."

"Oh, Taur Urgas was dead enough all right," Urgit assured

him, "but I didn't want some Grolim to come along and acci-

, dentally resurrect him, so I cut his throat before we buried him.'

*

"Cuthis throat?" Even Hettar seemed startled by that.

"From ear to ear," Urgit said happily. "I stole a little knife when I was about ten, and I spent the next several years sharpening it. After I slit his weasand, I drove a stake through his heart and buried him seventeen feet deep—head down. He looked better than he had in years with just his feet sticking up out of the dirt. I paused to enjoy that sight while I was resting from all the shoveling."

"You buried him yourself?" Barak asked.

"I certainly wasn't going to let anybody else do it. I wanted to be sure of him. After I had him well planted, I stampeded horses across his grave several times to conceal the spot. As you may have guessed, my father and I were not on the best of terms. I take some pleasure in knowing that not a single living Murgo knows exactly where he's buried. Why don't we go join my queen and my mother? Then you can tell me your splendid news—whatever it is. Dare I hope that Kal Zakath rests in the arms of Torak?"

"I wouldn't think so."

"Pity," Urgit said.

As soon as they found out that Polgara, Ce'Nedra, and Velvet were still on board Seabird, Queen Praia and Queen Mother Tamazin excused themselves and left the throne room to renew old acquaintances.

"Find seats, gentlemen," Urgit said after they had left. He sprawled on his throne with one leg cocked up over the arm. "What are these things you wanted to tell me, Kheldar?"

Silk sat down on the edge of the dais and reached inside his tunic.

"Please don't do that, Kheldar," Urgit told him, shying away. "I know how many daggers you carry."

"Not a dagger this time, Urgit," Silk assured him. "Only this." He handed over a folded parchment packet.

Urgit opened it and scanned it quickly. "Who's Oldorin of Perivor?" he asked.

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' 'He's the king of an island off the south coast of Mallorea,' ' Garion told him. "A group of us met in his palace."

"Quite a group, I see," Urgit said, looking over the signatures. He frowned. "I also see that you spoke for me," he said to Silk.

"He protected your interests rather well, Urgit," Belgarath assured him. "The details we hammered out are mostly generalities, you'll notice, but it's a start."

"It is indeed, Belgarath," Urgit agreed. "I notice that no one spoke for Drosta."

"The King of Gar og Nadrak was unrepresented, your Majesty," Mandorallen told him.

"Poor old Drosta." Urgit chuckled. "He always seems to get left out. This is all very nice, gentlemen, and it might even insure a decade or so of peace—provided you promised to let Zakath have my head on a plate to decorate some unimportant room in his palace at Mal Zeth with."

"That's the main thing we came to discuss with you," Silk told him. "Zakath returned to Mal Zeth when we all left Peri-vor, but I talked with him for quite a while before we separated, and he finally agreed to accept peace overtures."

"Peace?" Urgit scoffed. "The only peace Zakath wants is eternal peace—for every living Murgo, and I'm at the top of his list."

"He's changed a bit," Garion told him. "He has something more important on his mind right now than exterminating Mur-gos."

"Nonsense, Garion. Everybody wants to exterminate the Murgos. Even / want to exterminate them, and I'm their king."

"Send some ambassadors to Mal Zeth," Silk advised him. "Give them enough power to negotiate in good faith."

' 'Give a Murgo power? Kheldar, are you out of your mind?' *

"I can find some trustworthy men, Urgit," Oskatat assured him.

"In Cthol Murgos? Where? Under some damp rock?"

"You're going to have to start trusting people, Urgit," Belgarath told him.

"Oh, of course, Belgarath," Urgit said with heavy sarcasm. "I sort of have to trust you, but that's because you'll turn me into a frog if I don't."

"Just send your ambassadors to Mal Zeth, Urgit," Silk said patiently. "You may be pleasantly surprised at the outcome."

"Any outcome that doesn't leave me without my head would

be pleasant." Urgit squinted shrewdly at his brother. "You've got something else on your mind, Kheldar," he said. "Go ahead and spit it out."

"The world's right on the verge of breaking out in a bad case of peace," Silk told him. "My partner and I have been on a wartime

footing for years now. Our enterprises are very likely to collapse if we don't find new markets—and markets for peacetime goods. Cthol Murgos has been at war for a generation now."

"Longer than that, actually. Technically, we've been at war since the ascension of the Urga Dynasty—which I have the distinct displeasure of representing."

"There must be quite a hunger for peacetime amenities in your kingdom then—little things, like roofs for the houses, pots to cook in, something to cook in them—things like that."

"I'd imagine so, yes."

"Good. Yarblek and I can ship goods to Cthol Murgos by sea and turn Rak Urga into the largest commercial center on the southern half of the continent."

"Why would you want to? Cthol Murgos is bankrupt."

"The bottomless mines are still there, aren't they?"

"Of course, but they're all in territories controlled by the Malloreans."

"But if you conclude a peace treaty with Zakath, the Malloreans will be leaving, won't they? We'll have to move fast on this, Urgit. As soon as the Malloreans withdraw, you'll have to move in, not only with troops, but also with miners."

"What do I get out of it?"

"Taxes, brother mine, taxes. You can tax the gold miners, you can tax me, and you can tax my customers. You'll be rolling in money in just a few years."

"And the Tolnedrans will swindle me out of all of it in just a few weeks."

"Not too likely." Silk smirked. "Varana's the only Tolne-dran in the world who knows about this, and he's on Barak's ship out in the harbor right now. He won't get back to Tol Honeth for several weeks."

"What difference does that make? Nobody can make a move of any kind until I conclude a peace treaty with Zakath, can they?"

"That^ not entirely true, Urgit. You and I can draw up an agreement guaranteeing me exclusive access to the Murgo market. I'll pay you handsomely for it, of course, and the agreement will be

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perfectly legal—and ironclad. I've drawn up enough trade agreements to be able to see to that. We can hammer out the details later, but the important thing right now is to get something down in writing with

both our names on it. And then, when peace breaks out, the Tolnedrans will swarm down here. You can show them the document and send them all home again. If I've got exclusive access, we'll make millions. Millions, Urgit, millions!"

Both of their noses were twitching violently now.

"What sort of provisions would we want to put in this agreement of exclusivity?" Urgit asked cautiously.

Silk grinned broadly at him and reached inside his doublet again. "I've taken the liberty of drawing up an interim document," he said, pulling out another parchment, "just to save time, of course."

Sthiss Tor was still a very unattractive city, Garion noticed as Barak's sailors moored Seabird to the familiar wharf in the Dras-nian trade enclave. The hawsers were no sooner tied off than Silk leaped across to the wharf and hurried up the street. "Is he likely to have any trouble?" Garion asked Sadi.

"Not too likely," Sadi, who was crouched down behind a longboat, replied. "Salmissra knows who he is, and I know my queen. Her face doesn't show any emotion, but her curiosity is very strong. I've spent the last three days composing that letter. She'll see me. I can practically guarantee that. Could we go below, Garion? I'd really rather not have anybody see me."

It was perhaps two hours later when Silk returned accompanied by a platoon of Nyissan soldiers. The platoon leader was familiar.

"Is that you, Issus?" Sadi called out through the porthole of the cabin in which he was hiding. "I thought you'd be dead by now."

"Hardly," the one-eyed assassin said.

"You're working at the palace now?"

"Yes."

"For the queen?"

"Among others. I take on a few odd jobs for Javelin now and then."

"Does the queen know about that?"

"Of course. All right, Sadi. The queen's agreed to a two-hour amnesty for you. We'd better hurry. I'm sure you'll want to be gone from here before those two hours run out. The queen's

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fangs start to itch every time she hears your name, so let's go—unless you'd like to reconsider and start running right now."

"No," Sadi said. "I'll be right up. I'm bringing Polgara and Belgarion with me, if that's all right."

"That's up to you," Issus said with an indifferent shrug.

The palace was still infested with snakes and with dreamy-eyed eunuchs. A pimply-faced official with broad hips and a grotesquely made-up face met them at the palace door. "Well, Sadi," he said in a piping soprano voice, "I see youVe returned."

"And I see youVe managed to stay alive, Y'sth," Sadi replied coldly. "That's a shame, really."

Y'sth's eyes narrowed with undisguised hatred. "I'd be a little careful about what I say, Sadi," he squeaked. "You're not Chief Eunuch anymore. As a matter of fact, I may soon hold that position myself."

"May the heavens defend poor Nyissa then," Sadi murmured,

"You've heard of the queen's command that Sadi be given safe conduct?" Issus asked the eunuch.

"Not from her own lips."

"Salmissra doesn't have lips, Y'sth, and you've just heard about it—from me. Now, are you going to get out of our way? Or am I going to have to slit you up the middle?"

Y'sth backed away. "You can't threaten me, Issus."

"I wasn't threatening you. I was just asking a question." Then the assassin led the way up the polished stone corridor leading to the throne room.

The room they entered was unchanged and probably unchangeable. Thousands of years of tradition had seen to that. Salmissra, her coils stirring restlessly and her blunt, crowned head weaving sinuously in front of her mirror, occupied the throne.

"Sadi the eunuch, my Queen," Issus announced with a bow. Issus, Garion noted, did not prostrate himself before the throne as did other Nyissans.

"Ah," Salmissra hissed, "and the beautiful Polgara and King .Belgarion. You've fallen in with important people since you left nay service, Sadi."

. , "Pure.chance, my Queen," Sadi lied glibly. ^ "What is this vital matter that impelled you to risk your life by coming into my presence again?"

">" "Only this, Eternal Salmissra," Sadi replied. He set his red leather case on the floor, opened it, and removed a folded parch-

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ment. He casually kicked a groveling eunuch in the ribs. "Take this

to the queen," he commanded.

"You're not enhancing your popularity here, Sadi," Garion cautioned quietly.

"I'm not running for public office, Garion. I can be as disagreeable as I choose to be."

Salmissra quickly perused the Accords of Dal Perivor. "Interesting," she hissed.

"If I am sure your Majesty can see the opportunities implicit in those accords," Sadi said. "I felt it was my responsibility to make you aware of them."

"Of course I can see what's involved, Sadi," she said. "I'm a snake, not a cretin."

"Then I'll bid you good-bye, my Queen. I've performed my last duty to you."

Salmissra's eyes had gone flat with concentration. "Not just yet, my Sadi," she said in a whisper that was almost a purr. "Come a little closer."

"You gave your word, Salmissra," he said apprehensively.

"Oh, do be sensible, Sadi," she said. "I'm not going to bite you. It was all a ploy, wasn't it? You had discovered the possibility that these accords might be in the making and you deliberately set out to have yourself disgraced so that you could pursue them. Your negotiations on my behalf were brilliant, I must say. You have done very well, Sadi—even if your actions involved deceiving me. I am well pleased with you. Would you consent to resume your former position here in the palace?"

"Consent, my Queen?" he blurted almost boyishly. "I'd be overjoyed. I live but to serve you."

Salmissra swiveled her head around to regard the prostrated eunuchs. "You will all leave me now," she commanded them. "I want you to go throughout the palace and spread the word that Sadi has been rehabilitated and that I've reinstated him. If anyone cares to dispute my decision, send him to me, and I'll explain it to him."

They stared at her, and Garion noticed that not a few faces were filled with chagrin,

"How tiresome," Salmissra sighed. "They're too delighted to move. Please drive them out, Issus."

* "As my Queen desires," Issus said, drawing his sword. "Did you want them all to survive?"

"A few of them, Issus—the more nimble ones."

The throne room was vacated almost immediately.

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"I cannot sufficiently thank your Majesty," Sadi said.

"I'll think of a way, my Sadi, First of all, we'll both pretend that the motives I suggested a moment ago were genuine, won't we?"

"I understand perfectly, Divine Salmissra."

"After all," she added, "we must protect the dignity of the throne. You will assume your former duties and your former quarters. We'll think of suitable honors and rewards later." She paused. "I've missed you, my Sadi. I don't think anyone can ever know how much." Her head moved slowly around, and she regarded Polgara. "And how did your encounter with Zan-dramas go, Polgara?" she asked.

"Zandramas is no longer with us, Salmissra."

"Splendid. I never really liked her. And is the universe restored again?"

"It is, Salmissra."

"I think I'm glad of that. Chaos and disruption are irritating to a snake, you know. We're partial to calm and to order."

Garion noticed that a small green snake had slithered out from under Salmissra's throne to approach Sadi's red leather case, which lay open and forgotten on the marble floor. The little snake reared up to regard the earthenware bottle. He was purring seductively.

"And did you recover your son, your Majesty?" Salmissra asked Garion.

' 'We did, your Majesty.'

"Congratulations. Give my regards to your wife."

"I will, Salmissra."

"We must leave now," Polgara said. "Good-bye, Sadi."

"Good-bye, Lady Polgara." Sadi looked at Garion. "Goodbye, Garion," he said. "It's been a lot of fun, hasn't it?"

"Yes, it has," Garion agreed, shaking the eunuch's hand.

"Say good-bye to the others for me. I rather imagine we'll all see each other from time to time on state business, but it won't be exactly the same, will it?"

"No, probably not." Garion turned to follow Aunt Pol and Issus from the throne room.

"A moment, Polgara," Salmissra said.

"Yes?"

"YouVe changed many things here. At first, I was very angry with you, but now IVe had time to reconsider. Everything's turned out for the best after all. You have my thanks."

Polgara inclined her head.

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"Congratulations on your forthcoming blessing," Salmissra added.

Polgara's face gave no hint of surprise at the Serpent Queen's perception of her condition. "Thank you, Salmissra," she said.

They stopped off in Tbl Honeth to deliver Emperor Varana to the palace. The heavy-shouldered professional soldier seemed a bit abstracted, Garion noticed. He spoke briefly with a palace functionary as the group moved toward his quarters, and the official scurried away.

Their farewells were brief, almost abrupt. Varana was, as always, the soul of courtesy, but he obviously had other things on his mind.

Ce'Nedra was fuming as they left the palace. She was, as she almost always was now, carrying her young son and was absently running her fingers through his blond curls. "He was almost rude," she said indignantly.

Silk looked down the broad marble drive leading up to the palace. Spring was approaching in these northern latitudes, and the leaves were beginning to appear on the huge old trees lining the drive. A number of richly dressed Tolnedrans was almost running up the drive toward the palace. "Your uncle—or brother, whichever you want to call him—has something very important to attend to just now," the little man told Ce'Nedra.

* "What could possibly be more important than common courtesy?"

"Cthol Murgos, at the moment."

"I don't understand."

"If Zakath and Urgit work out a peace treaty, there'll be all sorts of commercial opportunities in Cthol Murgos."

"I understand that," she said tartly.

"Of course you do. You're a Tolnedran, after all."

"Why aren't you doing something about it?"

"I already have, Ce'Nedra." He smiled, polishing a large ring on the front of his pearl-gray doublet. "Varana may be very cross with me when he finally finds out what I've done to him."

"What exactly did you do?"

"I'll tell you once we're back out to sea. You're still a Borune and you might have some residual family loyalties. I wouldn't want you to spoil the surprise for your uncle.

They sailed north along the west coast, and then up the River Arend to the shallows a few leagues west of Vo Mimbire. Then

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they took to horse and rode through spring sunshine to the fabled city of the Mimbrate Arends.

The court of King Korodullin was thunderstruck by Mandor-allen's announcement that Mimbrate Arends had been discovered on the far side of the world. Courtiers and functionaries were sent scurrying off to various libraries to compose suitable replies to the greetings sent from King Oldorin.

The copy of the Accords of Dal Perivor delivered to the throne by Lelldorin, however, evoked troubled expressions on the faces of several of the more seasoned members of the court. "I do fear me, your Majesties," one elderly courtier observed to Korodullin and Mayaserana, "that our poor Arendia hath once more fallen behind the rest of the civilized world. Always in the past have we taken some comfort in the well-nigh eternal strife between Alorn and Angarak and the more recent conflict between Mallolean and Murgo, thinking perhaps that their discord in some measure excused ours. This scant comfort, methinks, will not be available to us. Shall we let it be said that only in this most tragic of kingdoms doth rancor and rude war still prevail? How may we hold up our heads in a peaceful world so long as childish bickering and idiotic intestine war do mar our relationships with each other?"

"I find thy words highly offensive, my Lord," a stiff-necked young baron denounced the old man. "No true Mimbrate could ever refuse to heed the stern urgings of honor."

"I speak not of Mimbrates only, my Lord," the old man replied mildly. "I speak of all Arends, Asturians as well as Mimbrates."

"Asturians have no honor," the baron sneered.

Lelldorin immediately went for his sword.

"Nay, my young friend," Mandorallen said, restraining the impetuous youth. "The insult hath been delivered here—on Mimbrate soil. Thus it is my responsibility—and pleasure—to answer it." He stepped forward. "Thy words were perhaps hasty, my Lord," he said politely to the arrogant baron. "I pray thee, reconsider them."

"I have said what I have said, Sir Knight," the young hothead declared.

"Thou hast spoken discourteously to a revered counselor of the king," Mandorallen said firmly, "and thou hast delivered a mortal insult unto our brethren of the north."

"I have no Asturian brethren," the knight declared. "I do not deign to acknowledge kinship with miscreants and traitors."

Mandorallen sighed. "I pray thee, forgive me, your Maj-

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esty," he apologized to the king. "Mayhap thou wouldst have the ladies withdraw, for I propose to speak bluntly."

No force on earth, however, could have dragged the ladies of the court from the throne room at that time.

Mandorallen turned back toward the insolently sneering baron. "My Lord," the great knight said distantly, "I find thy face apeline and thy form misshapen. Thy beard, moreover, is an offense against decency, resembling more closely the scabrous fur which doth decorate the hinder portion of a mongrel dog than a proper adornment for a human face. Is it possible that thy mother, seized by some wild lechery, did dally at some time past with a randy goat?"

The baron went livid and he spluttered, unable to speak.

"Thou seemeth wroth, my Lord," Mandorallen said to him in that same deceptively mild tone, "or mayhap thine unseemly breeding hath robbed thy tongue of human speech." He looked critically at the baron. "I do perceive, my Lord, that thou art afflicted with cowardice as well as lack of breeding, for, in truth, no man of honor would endure such deadly insult as those which I have delivered unto thee without some response. Therefore, I fear I must goad thee further." He removed his gauntlet.

As all the world knew, it was customary to hurl one's gauntlet to the floor when issuing a challenge. Mandorallen somehow missed the floor. The young baron staggered backward, spitting teeth and blood. "Thou art no longer a youth, Sir Mandorallen," he raged. "Long hast thou used thy questionable reputation to avoid combat. Methinks it is time for thee to be truly tried."

"It speaks," Mandorallen said with feigned astonishment. "Behold this wonder, my Lords and Ladies—a talking dog."

The court laughed at that.

"Let us proceed to the lower court, my Lord of Fleas," Mandorallen continued. "Mayhap a pass at arms with so elderly and feeble a knight shall give thee entertainment."

The next ten minutes were very long for the insolent young baron. Mandorallen, who could undoubtedly have split him down the middle with one stroke, toyed with him instead, inflicting numerous painful and humiliating injuries. None of the bones the great knight broke were

absolutely essential, however, and none of the cuts and contusions were incapacitating. The baron reeled about, trying desperately to protect himself as Mandorallen skillfully peeled his armor off him in chunks and pieces. Finally, apparently growing bored with the whole business, the champion

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of Arendia broke both of the young man's shinbones with a single stroke. The baron howled with pain as he fell.

"Prithee, my Lord," Mandorallen chided, "modulate thy shrieks of anguish, lest thou alarm the ladies. Groan quietly, and it please thee, and keep this unseemly writhing to a minimum." He turned sternly to a hushed and even frightened crowd. "And," he added, 'should any other here share this rash youth's prejudices, let him speak now, ere I sheath my sword, for truly, it is fatiguing to draw the weapon again and again.' He looked around. "Let us proceed then, my Lords, for this foolishness doth weary me, and presently I shall grow irritable."

Whatever their views were, the knights of the royal court chose at that point to keep them to themselves.

Ce'Nedra gravely stepped out into the courtyard. "My knight," she said proudly to Mandorallen. Then her eyes sparkled with mischief. "I do perceive that thy prowess doth remain undiminished even though cruel eld doth palsy thy limbs and snow down silvery hair upon thy raven locks."

"Eld?" Mandorallen protested.

"I'm only teasing, Mandorallen." She laughed. "Put away your sword. No one else wants to play with you today."

They bade farewell to Mandorallen, Lelldorin, and Relg, who intended to return to Taiba and their children in Maragor from Vo Mimbire.

"Mandorallen!" King Anheg bellowed as they rode away from the city. "When winter gets here, come up to Val Alorn, and we'll take Barak and go boar-hunting."

"I surely will, your Majesty," Mandorallen promised from the battlements.

"I like that man," Anheg said expansively.

They took ship again and sailed north to the city of Sendar to advise King Fulrach of the Accords of Dal Perivor. Silk and Velvet were to sail north on Seabird with Barak and Anheg, and the rest of them planned a leisurely ride across the mountains to Algaria and from thence down into the Vale.

The farewells at wharfside were brief, in part because they would all see each other again shortly, and in part because none of them wanted to appear overemotional. Garion took his leave of Silk and Barak in particular with a great deal of reluctance. The two oddly matched men had been his companions for more than half his life, and the prospect

of being separated from them

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caused him an obscure kind of pain. The earthshaking adventures were over now, and things would not ever really be the same.

"Do you think you can stay out of trouble now?" Barak asked him gruffly, obviously feeling the same way. "It upsets Mere! when she wakes up in the morning to find that she's been sharing her bed with a bear."

"I'll do my best," Garion promised.

"Do you remember what I told you that time just outside Winold--when it was so frosty that morning?" Silk asked.

Garion frowned, trying to remember.

"I said that we were living in momentous times, and that now was the time to be alive to share in those events."

"Oh, yes, now I remember."

"I've had some time to think about it, and I believe I'd like to reconsider." Silk grinned suddenly, and Garion knew that the little man did not mean one word he said.

"We'll see you at the Alorn Council later this summer, Gar-ion," Anheg shouted across the rail as Seabird prepared to de-pan. "It's at your place this year. Maybe if we work on it, we can teach you to sing properly."

They left the city of Sendar early the next morning and took the high road to Muros. Although it was not, strictly speaking, necessary, Garion had decided to see his friends at home. The gradual eroding of their company as they had sailed north had been depressing, and Garion was not quite ready yet to be separated from all of them.

They rode across Sendaria in late-spring sunshine, crossed the mountains into Algaria, and reached the Stronghold a week or so later. King Cho-Hag was overjoyed at the outcome of the meeting at Korim, and startled at the results of the impromptu conference at Dal Perivor. Because Cho-Hag was far more stable than the brilliant but sometimes erratic Anheg, Belgarath and Garion went into somewhat greater detail about the astonishing elevation of Eriond.

'He always was a strange boy,' * Cho-Hag mused in his deep, quiet voice when they had finished, "but then, this entire series of events had been strange. We've been privileged to live in important times, my friends."

"We have indeed," Belgarath agreed. "Let's hope that things quiet down now—for a while, at least."

' 'Father," Hettar said then,' 'King Urgit of the Murgos asked me to convey his appreciation to you."

"You met the Murgo King? And we're not at war?" Cho-Hag was amazed.

"Urgit's not like any other Murgo youVe ever met, Father," Hettar told him. "He wanted to thank you for killing Taur Urgas."

"That's a novel sentiment coming from a son."

Garion explained Urgit's peculiar background, and the normally reserved King of Algarria burst out in peal after peal of laughter. "I knew Prince Kheldar's father," he said. "That's exactly the kind of thing he would have done."

The ladies were gathered about Geran and about Adara's growing brood of children. Garion's cousin was at the ungainly stage of her pregnancy, and she sat most of the time now with a dreamy smile on her face as she listened to the inexorable changes nature was imposing on her body. The revelation of the dual pregnancies of Ce'Nedra and Polgara filled Adara and Queen Silar with wonder, and Poledra sat among them, smiling mysteriously. Poledra, Garion was sure, knew far more than she was revealing.

After about ten days, Durnik grew restless. "WeVe been away from home a long while, Pol," he said one morning. "There's still time to put in a crop, and I'm sure we'll need to tidy up a bit—mend fences, check the roof, that sort of thing."

"Anything you say, dear," she agreed placidly. Pregnancy had notably altered Polgara. Nothing seemed to upset her now.

On the day of their departure, Garion went down to the courtyard to saddle Chretienne. Although there were plenty of Algar clansmen here in the Stronghold who would have been more than willing to have performed the task for him, he feigned a desire to attend to it himself. The others were engaged in extended farewells, and Garion knew that about one more goodbye right now would probably reduce him to tears.

"That's a very good horse, Garion."

It was his cousin Adara. Her face had the serenity that pregnancy bestows upon women, and looking at her convinced Garion once again just how lucky Hettar really was. Since he had first met her, there had always been a special bond and a special kind of love between Garion and Adara. "Zakath gave him to me," he replied. If they confined their conversation to the subject of horses, he was fairly certain that he'd be able to keep his emotions under control.

Adara, however, was not there to talk about horses. She put one hand gently to the back of his neck and kissed him. "Farewell, my kinsman," she said softly.

"Good-bye, Adara," he said, his voice growing thick. "Good-bye."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

King Belgarion of Riva, Overlord of the West, Lord of the Western Sea, Godslayer, and general all-round hero, had an extended argument with his co-ruler, Queen Ce'Nedra of Riva, Imperial Princess of the Tolnedran Empire and Jewel of the House of Borune. The subject of their discussion hinged on the question of just who should have the privilege of carrying Crown Prince Geran, Heir to the Throne of Riva, hereditary Keeper of the Orb, and, until recently, the Child of Dark. The conversation lasted for quite some time as the royal pair rode with their family from the Stronghold of the Algars to the Vale of Aldur.

Ultimately, albeit somewhat reluctantly, Queen Ce'Nedra relented. As Belgarath the Sorcerer had predicted, Queen Ce'Nedra's arms had at last grown tired of continually carrying her young son, and she relinquished him with some relief.

"Make sure he doesn't fall off," she warned her husband.

"Yes, dear," Garion replied, settling his son on Chretienne's ;ineck just in front of the saddle.

"And don't let him get sunburned."

Now that he had been rescued from Zandramas, Geran was a good-natured little boy. He spoke in half phrases, his small face very serious as he tried to explain things to his father. Very importantly, he pointed out deer and rabbits as they rode south, and he dozed from time to time, resting his blond, curly head against his father's chest in absolute contentment. He was restive one morning, however, and Garion, without really thinking about it, removed the Orb from the pommel of his sword and gave it to his son to play with. Geran was delighted, and with a kind of bemused wonder he held the glowing jewel between his hands to stare with fascination into its depths. Often he would hold it to his ear to listen by the hour to its song. The Orb, it appeared, was even more delighted than the little boy.

"That's really very disturbing, Garion," Beldin chided. "You've turned the most powerful object in the universe into a child's plaything."

"It's his, after all—or it will be. They ought to get to know each other, wouldn't you say?"

"What if he loses it?"

"Beldin, do you really think the Orb can be lost?"

The game, however, came rather abruptly to an end when Poledra reined

in her horse beside the Overlord of the West.

"He's too young to be doing this sort of thing, Garion," she said reprovingly. She reached out her arm and a curiously twisted and knotted stick appeared in her hand. "Put the Orb away, Garion," she said. "Give him this to play with instead."

"That's the stick with only one end, isn't it?" he said suspiciously, remembering the toy Belgarath had once shown him in the cluttered tower—the toy that had occupied Aunt Pol's mind during her babyhood.

Poledra nodded. "It should keep him busy," she said.

Geran willingly gave up the Orb for the new toy. The Orb, however, muttered complaints in Garion's ear for the next several hours.

They reached the cottage a day or so later. Poledra looked rather critically down from the hUltop above it. "You've made some changes, I see," she said to her daughter.

"Do you mind, mother?" Aunt Pol asked.

"Of course not, Polgara. A house should reflect the character of its owner."

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"I'm sure there are a million things to do," Durnik said. "Those fences really need attention. We'll have hundreds of Algarrows in the dooryard if I don't mend them."

"And I'm sure the cottage needs a thorough cleaning," his wife added.

They rode down the hill, dismounted, and went inside. "Impossible," Polgara exclaimed, looking about in dismay at the negligibly thin film of dust lying over everything. "We'll need some brooms, Durnik," she said.

"Of course, dear," he agreed.

Belgarath was rummaging through the pantry.

"None of that now, father," Polgara told him crisply. "I want you and Uncle Beldin and Garion to go out there and clear the weeds out of my kitchen garden."

' 'What?' he demanded incredulously.

"I'll want to plant tomorrow," she told him. "Open the ground for me, father."

Garion, Beldin, and Belgarath rather disconsolately went out to the lean-to where Durnik kept his tools.

Garion looked with a sense of defeat at Aunt Pol's kitchen garden, which seemed quite large enough to provide food for a small army.

Beldin gave the ground a few desultory chops with his hoe. "This is ridiculous!" he burst out. He threw down his hoe and pointed one finger at the ground. As he moved the finger, a neat furrow of freshly plowed earth moved resolutely across the garden.

"Aunt Pol will be angry," Garion warned the hunchback.

"Not if she doesn't catch us," Beldin growled, looking at the cottage where Polgara, Poledra, and the Rivan Queen were busy with brooms and dustcloths. "Your turn, Belgarath," he said. "Try to keep the furrows straight."

"Let's see if we can coax some ale from Pol before we rake it," Beldin suggested when they had finished. "This is hot work—even doing it this way."

As it happened, Durnik had also returned to the house briefly to refresh himself before returning to the fence line. The ladies were busily wielding their brooms, stirring up the dust, which, Garion observed, stubbornly settled back on places already swept. Dust was like that sometimes.

"Where's Geran?" Ce'Nedra suddenly exclaimed, dropping her broom and looking around in dismay.

Polgara's eyes went distant. "Oh, dear," she sighed. "Dur-

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nik," she said quite calmly, "go fish him out of the creek, please."

"What?" Ce'Nedra almost screamed as Dumik, moving rapidly, went outside.

"He's all right, Ce'Nedra," Polgara assured her. "He just fell into the creek, that's all."

"That's all?" Ce'Nedra's voice went up another octave. -

"It's a common pastime for Hide boys," Polgara told her. "Garion did it, Eriond did it, and now Geran's doing it. Don't worry. He swims rather well, actually."

"How did he learn to swim?"

"I haven't the faintest idea. Maybe little boys are born with the ability—some of them, anyway. Garion was the only one who tried drowning."

"I was starting to get the hang of swimming, Aunt Pol," he objected, "before I came up under that log and hit my head." |j Ce'Nedra stared at him in horror, and then she quite suddenly /'broke down and began to cry.

Dumik was carrying Geran by the back of his tunic when he returned.

The little boy was dripping wet, but seemed quite happy, nonetheless. "He's really very muddy, Pol," the smith noted. "Eriond used to get wet, but I don't think he ever got this muddy."

"Take him outside, Ce'Nedra," Polgara instructed. "He's dripping mud on our clean floor. Garion, there's a washtub in the lean-to. Put it in the dooryard and fill it." She smiled at \ Geran's mother. "It's about time for him to have a bath anyway. For some reason, little boys always seem to need bathing. Gar-; ion used to get dirty even while he was asleep." \ On one perfect evening, Garion joined Belgarath just outside j the cottage door. "You seem a bit pensive, Grandfather. What's r the problem?"

"I've been thinking about living arrangements. Poledra's going to be moving back into my tower with me."

"So?"

"We're probably going to become involved in a decade or so of cleaning-and hanging window curtains. How can a man took out at the world with window curtains in his way?"

"Maybe she won't make such an issue of it. Back on Perivor, Ac said that wolves aren't as compulsively tidy as birds are."

"She lied, Garion. Believe me, she lied." TVra guests rode up a few days later. Despite the fact that it was almost summer now, Yarblek still wore his shabby felt over-

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coat, his shaggy fur hat, and a disconsolate expression. Vella, the overwhelmingly sensual Nadrak dancer, wore her usual tight-fitting black leather.

"What are you up to, Yarblek?" Belgarath asked Silk's partner.

"This wasn't my idea, Belgarath. Vella insisted."

"All right," Vella said in a commanding voice, "I haven't got all day. Let's get on with this. Get everybody oat of the house. I want witnesses to this."

"What exactly are we witnessing, Vella?" Ce'Nedra asked the dark-haired girl.

"Yarblek's going to sell me."

"Vella!" Ce'Nedra exclaimed, outraged. "That's revolting!- ''

"Oh, bother that," Vella snapped. Bother was not precisely

the word Vella used. She looked around. "Are we all here?"

"That's everybody," Belgarath told her.

"Good." She slid down from her saddle and sat cross-legged on the grass. "Let's get down to business. You-Beldin, or Feld-egast, or whatever you want to call yourself—one time back in Mallorea, you said you wanted to buy me. Were you serious?"

Beldin blinked. "Well—" he floundered. "I suppose I was, sort of."

"I want a yes or a no, Beldin," she said crisply.

"All right then, yes. You're not a bad-looking wench, and you curse and swear rather prettily."

"Good. What are you prepared to offer for me?"

Beldin choked, his face going suddenly red.

"Don't dawdle, Beldin," she told him. "We haven't got all day for this. Make Yarblek an offer."

"*Are you serious?" Yarblek exclaimed.

"I've never been more serious in my life. How much are you willing to pay for me, Beldin?"

"Vella," Yarblek protested, "this is absolute nonsense."

"Shut up, Yarblek. Well, Beldin? How much?"

"Everything I own," he replied, his eyes filled with a kind of wonder.

"That's a little unspecific. Give me a number. We can't haggle without a number,"

Beldin scratched at his matted beard. "Belgarath," he said, "'have you still got that diamond you found in Maragor that time before the Tolnedran invasion?'"

"I think so. It's somewhere in my tower, I believe."

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"So's half the clutter in the world."

"It's in the bookcase on the south wall," Poledra supplied, "'behind that rat-chewed copy of the Darine Codex."

"Really?" Belgarath said. "How did you know about that?"

"Remember what Cyradis called me at Rheon?"

"The woman who watches?"

"Does that answer your question?"

"Would you lend it to me?" Beldin asked his brother. "I suppose

'give' would be a better word. I doubt that I'll ever be in a position to repay you."

"Certainly, Beldin," Belgarath said. "I wasn't really using it anyway.'"

"Could you get it for me?"

Belgarath nodded, and then he concentrated, holding out his hand.

The diamond that suddenly appeared in his hand was almost like a chunk of ice, except that it had a definite pinkish cast to it.

It was also somewhat larger than an apple.

"Torak's teeth and toenails!" Yarblek exclaimed.

"An" would th' two of ye, consumed with greed though ye may be, consider this triflin' thing a suitable price fer this be-guilin' wench yer both so set on sellin'?" Beldin said, lapsing into Feldegast's brogue and pointing at the stone resting on Belgarath *s hand.

"That's worth a hundred times more than has ever been paid for any woman since time began," Yarblek said in an awed tone.

"Then that ought to be about the right price," Velta said triumphantly. "Yarblek, when you get back to Gar og Nadrak, I want you to spread that word around. I want every woman in the kingdom for the next hundred years to cry herself to sleep every night just thinking about the price I brought."

"You're a cruel woman, Vella." Yarblek grinned.

"It's a question of pride," she said, tossing her blue-black hair. "There, now, that didn't take too long at all, did it?" She rose to her feet and dusted off her hands. "Yarblek," she said, "have you got my ownership papers?"

"Yes."

"Get them and sign me over to my new owner."

"We have to divide up the price first, Vella." He looked mournfully at the pink stone. "It's really going to be a shame to split that beauty," he said.

"Keep it," she said indifferently. "I don't need it."

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"Are you sure?"

"Oh, no, Durnik, I'm not going to die. I'm just going to change a

bit. You two say good-bye to the twins for me. Explain

things to them. Enjoy your good fortune, Yarblek, but I still think I got the better of that bargain. Garion, try to keep the world running."

"Eriond's supposed to take care of that."

"I know, but keep an eye on him. Don't let him get into trouble."

Beldin didn't say anything to Ce'Nedra. He simply kissed her rather noisily. Then he also kissed Poledra. She regarded him fondly, her golden eyes filled with love.

"Good-bye, old cow," he said at last to Polgara, slapping her familiarly on the bottom. He looked meaningfully at her waist. "I told you that you were going to get fat if you kept eating all those sweets."

She kissed him then with tears in her eyes.

"An' now, me darlin'," he said to Vella, "let's be walkin' a bit apart. There's much t' be said before we leave.'" Then the two of them walked hand in hand up toward the top of the hill. When they reached it, they stopped and spoke together for a while. Then they embraced and exchanged a long, fervent kiss, and then, while they were still locked in each other's arms, they shimmered and seemed almost to dissolve.

The one hawk was very familiar. The bands on his wings were electric blue. The other hawk, however, had lavender bands on her wings. Together, they thrust themselves into the air and rose in an effortless spiral up and up through the glowing air. Higher and higher they spun in that formal wedding dance until they were no more than a pair of specks winging up and out over the Vale,

And then they were gone, never again to return.

Garion and the others remained at the cottage for another two weeks. Then, noting that Polgara and Durnik were beginning to show signs of wanting to be alone, Poledra suggested that the rest of them go on to the Vale. Promising to return that evening, Garion and Ce'Nedra took their son and the nearly grown wolf pup and accompanied Belgarath and Poledra down into the heart of the Vale.

They reached Belgarath's familiar squat tower about noon and started up the stairway to the circular room at the top. "Watch that step," the old man said absently as they climbed. This time, however, Garion stopped, letting the rest go on ahead. He reached down, heaved up the stone slab that was the step, and looked under it. A round stone about the size of a hazelnut lay

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under the slab. Garion removed the stone, put it in his pocket, and replaced the slab. He noticed that the other steps were worn in the

center, but this one was not, and he wondered just how many centuries—or eons—the old man had been stepping over it. He went on up, feeling rather pleased with himself.

"What were you doing?" Belgarath asked him.

"Fixing that step," Garion replied. He handed the old man the round pebble. "It was rocking because this was under it. It's steady now."

"I'm going to miss that step, Garion," his grandfather complained. He stared at the pebble, frowning. "Oh," he said, "now I remember. I put this under die step on purpose."

"Whatever for?" Ce'Nedra asked him.

"It's a diamond, Ce'Nedra." Belgarath shrugged. "I wanted to find out how long it would take to grind it down to a powder.'" "

"A diamond?" she gasped, her eyes widening.

"You can have it, if you'd like," he said, tossing it to her.

Then, taking into account her Tolnedran heritage, Ce'Nedra performed an act of sheer unselfishness. "No, thanks, Belgarath," she said. "I wouldn't want to separate you from an old friend. Garion and I can put it back where it was when we leave."

Belgarath laughed.

Geran and the young wolf were playing together near one of the windows. There was a fair amount of maiding involved in their play, and the wolf was cheating outrageously, seizing every chance to lick Geran's neck and face, which always sent the little boy into uncontrolled giggling.

Poledra was looking around at die cluttered circular room. "It's good to be home," she said. She was fondly caressing the back of the owl-clawed chair. "I spent almost a thousand years perched on this chair," she told Garion.

"What were you doing, Grandmother?" Ce'Nedra asked her. Ce'Nedra had begun, perhaps without realizing it, to mimic Garion's customary forms of address.

"Watching him," the tawny-haired woman replied. "I knew that eventually he'd get around to noticing me. I didn't really think it would take him all that long, though. I really had to do something out of the ordinary to get his attention.'" "

"Oh?"

"I chose this form," Poledra said, touching one hand to her breast. "He seemed more interested in me as a woman than he did when I was an owl—or a wolf."

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"There was something I always meant to ask you," Belgarath said. "There weren't any other wolves around when we met. What were you doing out there?"

"Waiting for you."

He blinked. "You knew I was coming?"

"Of course."

"When was that?" Ce'Nedra asked.

"Just after Torak stole the Orb from Aldur," Belgarath replied, his mind obviously on something else. "My Master had sent me north to advise Belar of what had happened. I took the form of the wolf to make better time. Poledra and I met somewhere in what's now northern Algaria." He looked at his wife. "Who told you I was coming?" he asked her.

"No one had to tell me, Belgarath," she replied. "I was born knowing you'd come—someday. You certainly took your time about it, though." She looked around critically. "I think we should tidy up a bit here," she suggested, "and those windows definitely need some curtains."

"See?" Belgarath said to Garion.

There were kisses and embraces and handshakes and a few tears—although not really very many of those. Then Ce'Nedra picked up Geran, and Garion the wolf, and they started down the stairs.

"Oh," Garion said when they were halfway down, "give me the diamond. I'll put it back where it belongs."

"Wouldn't an ordinary pebble work just as well, Garion?" Her eyes were suddenly calculating.

"Ce'Nedra, if you want a diamond so badly, I'll buy you one."

"I know, Garion, but if I keep this one I'll have two."

He laughed, firmly took the diamond from her tightly clenched little fist, and returned it to its place under the step.

They mounted their horses and rode slowly away from the tower in the bright sunshine of a spring noon. Ce'Nedra held Geran, and the wolf scampered alongside, dashing out from time to time to chase rabbits.

After they had gone a little way, Garion heard a familiar whisper of sound. He reined Chretienne in. "Ce'Nedra," he said, pointing back at the tower, "look."

She looked back. "I don't see anything."

"Wait. They'll be out in a moment."

"They?"

"Grandmother and Grandfather. There they come now."

"W-

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Two wolves bounded out through the open door of the tower and ran across the grassy plain, matching stride for stride as they ran. There was a kind of unbridled freedom and an intense joy in the way they ran.

"I thought they were going to get started with the cleaning," Ce'Nedra said.

"This is more important, Ce'Nedra. Much, much more important."

They reached the cottage just as the sun was going down. Durnik was still busy in the fields, and they could hear Polgara singing softly in the kitchen. Ce'Nedra went inside, and Garion and the wolf crossed the field to join Durnik.

The meal that evening consisted of a roast goose and everything that went with it: gravy, dressing, three kinds of vegetables, and freshly baked bread, still hot from the oven and dripping with butter.

"Where did you get the goose, Pol?" Durnik asked.

"I cheated," she admitted calmly.

"Pol!"

"I'll explain it some other time, dear. Let's eat it before it all gets cold."

After supper they sat near the fire. They didn't really need a fire—indeed, the doors and windows were even open—but fire and hearth were a part of home, sometimes necessary even when not, strictly speaking, needed.

Polgara held Geran, her cheek against his curls and a dreamy look of contentment on her face. "Just practicing," she said quietly to Ce'Nedra.

"There's no way you could ever forget that, Aunt Pol," the Rivan Queen said. "You've raised hundreds of little boys."

"Well, not quite that many, dear, but it never hurts to keep one's hand in."

The wolf lay sound asleep on the hearth before the fire. He was making small yipping noises, however, and his feet were twitching.

"He's dreaming." Durnik smiled.

"I wouldn't be surprised," Garion said. "He spent the whole time while we were coming back from Grandfather's tower chasing rabbits. He didn't catch any, though. I don't think he was really trying."

"Speaking of dreaming," Aunt Pol said, rising to her feet. "You two and your son and your puppy will want an early start in the morning. Why don't we all go to bed?"

They arose at first light the next morning, ate a hearty breakfast, and then Durnik and Garion went out to saddle the horses.

The farewells were not prolonged. There was no real need for extended farewells among these four, because they would never really be apart. There were a few brief words, a few kisses, and a gruff handshake between Durnik and Garion, and then the Rivan King and his family rode up the hill.

Halfway to the top, Ce'Nedra turned in her saddle. "Aunt Pol," she called, "I love you."

"Yes, dear," Polgara called back, "I know. I love you, too."

And then Garion led the way on up the hill and toward home.

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It was raid-autumn. The Alorn Council had taken place at Riva late that summer, and it had been boisterous, even rowdy. It had been attended by many who would not normally have been present. Non-Alorn rulers—and their queens—had virtually outnumbered the Alorn monarchs. Ladies from all over the west had descended upon Ce'Nedra and Polgara, showering them with congratulations, and young children had gathered about Geran, attracted by his sunny disposition—and by the fact that the little boy had somehow discovered a long-unused route to the pastry kitchen and all the treasures contained therein. If the truth were to be known, there was very little in the way of business conducted that year. And then, as always, a series of late-summer storms announced that the meetings were at an end and it was time for the visitors to begin thinking seriously about going home. This had always been the advantage of holding the council in Riva. Although guests might prefer to linger, the

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steady march of the seasons persuaded them that it was time to depart.

Affairs had settled down in Riva. There had been a wild celebration when the king and his wife had at last returned with Crown Prince Geran, but no people, no matter how emotional, could celebrate forever, and after a few weeks things had returned to normal.

Garion spent most days closeted with Kail now. Many decisions had been made in his absence. Although, almost without exception, he approved of Kail's handling of those matters, he still needed to be briefed on them and some of those decisions needed to be ratified by the royal signature.

Ce'Nedra's pregnancy was proceeding along expected lines. The little queen bloomed and swelled and became increasingly short-tempered. The peculiar hungers for exotic foods that sometimes beset ladies in that delicate condition were not nearly as much fun for the Rivan Queen as they were for most other ladies. There has long been a suspicion in the male half of the population that these gastronomical yearnings are nothing more than a peculiar form of entertainment for their wives. The more exotic and unobtainable a given food might be and the more extreme the lengths to which a doting husband must go to put his hands on it, the more the ladies would insist that they would absolutely die if it were not provided in abundance. Gar-ion privately suspected that the whole business involved little more than a desire for reassurance. If a husband proved willing to disassemble the known world to obtain strawberries out of season or strange seafoods normally found only in waters half a world away, it was a sure sign that he still loved his wife, despite her disappearing waistline. It was not nearly as much fun for Ce'Nedra, because each time she made a seemingly impossible request, Garion simply stepped into the next room, created the foodstuff in question on the spot, and presented it to her— usually on a silver platter. Ce'Nedra grew increasingly sulky about the whole business and finally gave up on it entirely.

And then late on a very frosty autumn evening, an ice-coated Mallorean ship entered the harbor, and her captain delivered a packet of neatly folded parchment bearing the seal of Zakath of Mallorean. Garion thanked the seaman profusely, offered him and his crew the hospitality of the Citadel, and then immediately carried Zakath's letter to the royal apartment. Ce'Nedra was sitting by the fire, knitting. Geran and the young wolf were lying together on the hearth, both of them dozing and twitching slightly

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as they dreamed. The two always slept together. Ce'Nedra had finally given up the idea of trying to keep them separate at night, since no door in the world could be effectively locked from both sides.

"What is it, dear?" she asked as Garion entered.

"We just received a letter from Zakath," he replied.

"Oh? What does he say?"

"I haven't read it yet."

"Open it, Garion. I'm dying to find out what's happening in Mal Zeth."

Garion broke the seal and unfolded the parchment. "For his Majesty,

King Belgarion of Riva," he read aloud, "Overlord of the West, Godstayer, Lord of the Western Sea, and for his revered Queen, Ce'Nedra, co-ruler of the Isle of the Winds, Princess of the Tolnedran Empire, and Jewel of the House of Borune—from Zakath, Emperor of all of Angarak.

"I hope this finds you both in good health and I send greetings to your daughter, whether she has already arrived or if her birth be still impending. (I have not, I hasten to assure you, become suddenly clairvoyant. Cyradis said once that she was no longer blessed with her vision. I have come to suspect that she was not entirely truthful on that score.)

"A great deal has happened here since we parted. The imperial court, I suspect, was more than a little pleased by the alteration in my personality which was the direct result of our journey to Korim and by what happened there. I must have been an impossible ruler to deal with. This is not to suggest that all here in Mal Zeth has become a fairy tale of good feeling and felicity. The general staff was mightily upset when I declared my intention to conclude a peace treaty with King Urgit. You know how generals are. If you take their favorite war away from them, they snivel and complain and pout like spoiled children. I had to step on a few necks quite firmly. Incidentally, I recently promoted Atesca to the position of commander-in-chief of the armies of Mallorea. This also enraged the other members of the general staff, but no one can please everybody.

' 'Urgit and I have been in communication with each other, and I find him to be a rare fellow—quite nearly as droll as his brother. I think we'll get on well together. The bureaucracy very nearly went into collective apoplexy when I announced the autonomy of the Dalasian Protectorates. It's my feeling

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that the Dais must be permitted to go their own way, but many members of the bureaucracy have vested interests there, and they sniveled and complained and pouted almost as much as the generals did. That came to an abrupt halt however, when I announced my intention to have Brador conduct a thorough audit of the affairs of every bureau chief in the government. The sound of a massive divestiture of all holdings in the protectorates was well-nigh deafening.

"Rather surprisingly, an ancient Grolim arrived at the palace shortly after we returned from Dal Perivor. I was about to send him away, but Eriond insisted rather firmly that he remain. The old fellow had some unpronounceable Grolim name, but Eriond changed it to Pelath for some reason. The old boy has a sweet disposition, but he sometimes speaks very strangely. The language he uses sounds very much like that of the Ashabine Oracles or the Mallorean Gospels of the Dais. Very peculiar."

"I'd almost forgotten that," Garion interrupted his reading.

"What's that, dear?" Ce'Nedra asked him, looking up from her knitting.

"Do you remember that old Grolim we met in Peldane? That night when the chicken bit you?"

"Yes. He seemed like a very nice old man."

"He was more than that, Ce'Nedra. He was also a prophet, and the Voice told me that he was going to become Eriond's first disciple."

"Eriond has a very long arm, hasn't he? Keep reading, Garion."

"Cyradis, Pelath, and I have conferred extensively with Eriond and we've all agreed that his status should remain concealed for the time being at least. He is such an innocent that I don't want to expose him to the depths of human depravity and chicanery just yet. Let's not discourage him so early in his career. We all remembered Torak and his overpowering hunger for worship, but when we offered to worship Eriond, he just laughed at us. Did Polgara perhaps leave something out when she was raising him?"

"We did make one exception, however. A group of us, accompanied by the third, seventh, and ninth armies, visited Mal Yaska. The Temple Guardmen and Chandim attempted to flee, but Atesca rather effectively rounded them up. I waited

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until Eriond was off for his morning ride on that unnamed horse of his and spoke quite firmly with the assembled Gro-lims. I didn't want to cause Eriond any distress, but I indicated to the Grolims that I would be most unhappy if they did not change their religious affiliation forthwith. Atesca stood at my side, playing with his sword, so they immediately got my drift. Then, with no warning at all, Eriond appeared in the Temple. (How does that horse of his move so fast? The last time he had been observed that morning, he had been more than three leagues from the city.) He told them that black robes were not really all that attractive and that white ones would become them much more. Then, with no more than a faint smile, he actually changed the color of every Grolim robe in the temple. So much for his anonymity in that part of Mallorean, I'm afraid. Next he told them that they'd no longer need their knives, and every dagger in the place disappeared. Then he extinguished the fires in the sanctum and decorated the altar with flowers. I have since been advised that these trifling modifications are universal here in Mallorean. Urgit is presently investigating to determine if similar conditions prevail in Cthol Murgos. Our new God, I think, will take a bit of getting used to.

' 'To make it short, the Grolims all fell down on their faces. I still suspect that at least some of those conversions may have been fraudulent, so I 'm not contemplating a demobilization of the army just yet. Eriond told them to get back on their feet and go out and care for the sick, the poor, the orphaned, and the homeless.

"On our way back to Mal Zeth, Pelath pulled his horse in beside mine, smiled that sickeningly sweet smile of his at me, and said, 'My

Master believes that it's time for you to change your status, Emperor of Mallorean.* That gave me a bit of a turn. I was about half afraid that Eriond might suggest that I abdicate and take up shepherding or something. Then Pelath went on. 'My Master believes that you've delayed something for quite long enough.'

"Oh?" I said cautiously.

'The delay is causing the Seeress of Kell a certain distress. My Master strongly suggests that you ask her to marry you. He wants that settled before anything comes along to interfere.'

'So, when we got to Mal Zeth, I made what I thought was a very sensible proposal—and Cyradis turned me down flat!

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I thought my heart would stop. Then our mystic little Seeress waxed eloquent. She told me—at great length—what she thought of sensible. I've never seen her behave that way before. She was actually passionate, and some of the words she used, though archaic, were hardly flattering. I had to look some of them up, they were so obscure."

"Good for her," Ce'Nedra said fiercely.

"Just to make peace," the letter went on, "I fell to my knees and made a fatuous and embarrassingly gushy proposal, and she was moved by my eloquence to relent and accept me."

"Men!" Ce'Nedra snorted.

"The cost of the wedding very nearly bankrupted me. I even had to borrow money from one of Kheldar's business associates—at an outrageous rate of interest. Eriond officiated, of course, and having a God perform the ceremony really nailed down the lid on my coffin. At any rate, Cyradis and I were married last month, and I can truly say that I've never been happier in my life."

"Oh," Ce'Nedra said with that familiar catch in her voice, 'dial's just lovely.' She went to the handkerchief. "There's more," Garion told her. "Keep going," she said, dabbing at her eyes.

"The Angarak Malloreans were not really pleased that I had chosen to marry a Dal, but they're wisely keeping their displeasure to themselves. I've changed a great deal, but not that much. Cyradis is having some difficulty adapting to her new status, and I simply cannot convince her that jewels are a necessary adornment for an empress. She wears flowers instead, and the slavish imitation of the ladies of the court has caused universal despair in the hearts of the jewelers here in Mal Zeth.

"I was going to have my distant cousin, the Archduke Otrath, shortened by the length of his head, but he's such a pathetic foot that I discarded the idea and sent him home instead. Following a suggestion your friend Beldin made in Dal Perivor, I ordered the

cretin to set his wife up in a palace in the City of Melcene and never to go near her again for the

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rest of his life. I understand that the lady is something of a scandal in Melcene, but she probably deserves some recompense for putting up with that silly ass for all those years.

"That's about all from here, Garion. We're really hungry for news of all our friends and we send them our warmest greetings and affection.

"Sincerely, "JCstf Zakath and Empress Cyradis

"Note that I'm deleting that ostentatious prefix. Oh, by the way, my cat was unfaithful to me again a few months ago. Would Ce'Nedra like a kitten?—or maybe one for your new daughter? I can send two, if you'd like. "Z"

In the early winter of that year, the Rivan Queen grew increasingly discontent, a discontentment and a waspish temper almost in direct proportion to her increasing girth. Some ladies might be uniquely suited for pregnancy; the Rivan Queen was uniquely not. She was snippy with her husband; she was short with her son; and on one occasion she even made an awkward attempt to kick the un-offending young wolf. The wolf nimbly dodged the kick, then looked with some puzzlement at Garion. "Has one somehow given offense?" he asked.

"No," Garion told him. "It is only that one's mate is in some distress. The time of her whelping is approaching, and this always makes the shes of the man-things uncomfortable and short-tempered. "

"Ah," the wolf said. "The man-things are very strange."

"Truly," Garion agreed.

It was Grelidik, naturally, who delivered Poledra to the Isle of the Winds in the middle of a howling blizzard.

"How did you find your way?" Garion asked the fur-clad seaman as the two of them sat before the fire in the low-beamed dining hall with tankards of ale in their hands.

"Belgarath's wife pointed the way." Grelidik shrugged. "That's a remarkable woman, do you know that?"

"Oh, yes."

"Do you know that not one man in my whole crew, took a single drink while we were at sea? Not even me. For some reason, we just didn't want any.'"

' * My grandmother has strong prejudices. Will you be all right here? I want to go up and have a chat with her."

"That's all right, Garion." Grelidik grinned, patting the nearly full ale keg affectionately. "I'll be just fine." Garion went upstairs to the royal apartments. The tawny-haired woman sat by the fire, idly stroking the young wolf's ears. Ce'Nedra was sprawled rather awkwardly on a divan.

"Ah, there you are, Garion," Poledra said. She sniffed the air rather delicately. "I notice you've been drinking." Her tone was disapproving.

"I had one tankard with Grelidik."

* 'Would you please sit over there on the other side of the room then? One's sense of smell is quite acute, and the odor of ale turns one's stomach."

"Is that why you disapprove of drinking?"

"Of course. What other reason could there be?" 1 "I think Aunt Pol disapproves on some sort of moral grounds."

"Polgara has some obscure prejudices. Now then," she went on seriously. "My daughter is in no condition to travel just now, so I'm here to deliver Ce'Nedra's baby. Pol gave me all sorts of instructions, most of which I intend to ignore. Giving birth is a natural process, and the less interference the better. When it starts, I want you to take Geran and this young wolf here and go to the extreme far end of the Citadel. I'll send for you when it's all over."

"Yes, Grandmother."

"He's a nice boy," Poledra said to the Rivan Queen.

"I rather like him."

"I certainly hope so. All right, then, Garion, just as soon as the baby's born and we're sure everything's all right, you and I are going to return to the Vale. Polgara's a few weeks behind Ce'Nedra, but we really don't have too much time to waste. Pol wants you to be there when she gives birth."

"You have to go, Garion," Ce'Nedra said. "I only wish / could."

Garion was a bit dubious about leaving his wife so soon after she was delivered, but he definitely did want to be in the Vale when Aunt Pol had her baby.

It was three nights later. Garion was having a splendid dream that involved riding down a long, grassy hill with Eriond. "Garion," Ce'Nedra said, nudging him in the ribs. "Yes, deaf?" He was still about half asleep.

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"I think you'd better go get your grandmother."

He was fully awake immediately. "Are you sure?"

"I've been through this before, dear," she told him.

He rolled quickly out of bed.

"Kiss me before you go," she told him.

He did that.

"And don't forget to take Geran and the puppy when you go off to the other end of the building. Put Geran back to bed when you get there."

"Of course."

A strange expression came over her face. ' 'I think you'd better hurry, Garion," she suggested.

Garion bolted.

It was nearly dawn when the Queen of Riva was delivered of a baby girl. The infant had a short crop of deep-red hair and green eyes. As it had for so many centuries, the Dryad strain bred true. Poledra carried the blanket-wrapped baby through the silent halls of the Citadel to the rooms where Garion sat before a fire and Geran and the wolf slept in a tangle of arms, legs, and paws on a divan.

"Is Ce'Nedra all right?" Garion asked, coming to his feet.

"She's fine," his grandmother assured him, "a little tired is all. It was a fairly easy delivery."

Garion heaved a sigh of relief, then turned back the corner of the blanket to look at the small face of his daughter. "She looks like her mother," he said. People the world over always make that first observation, pointing out the similarities of a newborn to this parent or that as if such resemblances were somehow remarkable. Garion gently took the baby in his arms and looked into that tiny red face. The baby looked back at him, her green-eyed gaze.unwavering. It was a familiar gaze. "Good morning, Beldaran," Garion said softly. He had made that decision quite some time ago. There would be other daughters, and they would be named after a fair number of female relatives on both sides of the family, but it somehow seemed important that his first daughter should be named for Aunt Pol's blond twin sister, a woman who, though Garion had seen only her image and then only once, was still somehow central to all their lives.

"Thank you, Garion," Poledra said simply.

"It seems appropriate somehow," Garion told her.

Prince Geran was not too impressed with his baby sister, but boys seldom are. "Isn't she awfully little?" he asked when his father woke him to introduce them. •

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"It's the nature of babies to be little. She'll grow."

"Good." Geran looked at her gravely. Then, apparently feeling that he should say something nice about her, he added, "She has nice hair. It's the same color as mother's, isn't it?"

"I noticed that myself."

The bells of Riva pealed out that morning in celebration, and the Rivan people rejoiced, although there were some, many perhaps, who secretly wished that the royal infant might have been another boy, just for the sake of dynastic security. The Rivans, kingless for so many centuries, were nervous about that sort of thing.

Ce'Nedra, of course, was radiant. She expressed only minimal dissatisfaction with Garion's choice of a name for then-daughter. Her Dryad heritage felt rather strongly the need for a name beginning with the traditional "X." She worked with it a bit, however, and came up with a satisfactory solution to the problem. Garion was fairly certain that in her own mind she had inserted an "X" somewhere in Beldaran's name. He decided that he didn't really want to know about it.

The Rivan Queen was young and healthy, and she recovered from her confinement quickly. She remained in bed for a few days—largely for the dramatic effect on the stream of Rivan nobility and foreign dignitaries who filed through the royal bedchamber to view the tiny queen and the even tinier princess.

After a few days, Poledra spoke with Garion. "That more or less takes care of business here," she said, "and we really should get started back to the Vale. Polgara's time is coming closer, you know."

Garion nodded. "I asked Gredrik to stay," he told her. "He'll get us back to Sendaria faster than anybody else can."

"He's a very undependable man, you know."

"Aunt Pol said exactly the same thing. He's still the finest sailor in the world. I'll make arrangements to have horses put on board his ship."

"No," she said shortly. "We're in a hurry, Garion. Horses would only slow us down."

"You want to run all the way from the coast of Sendaria to the Vale?" he asked her, a little startled.

"It's not really all that far, Garion." She smiled.

"What about supplies?"

She gave him an amused look, and he suddenly felt very foolish.

Garion's good-byes to his family were emotional, though

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brief. "Be sure to dress warmly," Ce'Nedra instructed. "It's winter, you know."

He decided not to tell her exactly how he and his grandmother intended to travel.

"Oh," she said, handing him a parchment sheet, "give this to Aunt Pol."

Garion looked at the sheet. It was a rather fair artist's sketch, in color, of his wife and daughter.

"It's quite good, isn't it?" Ce'Nedra said.

"Very good," he agreed.

"You'd better run along now," she said. "If you stay much longer, I won't let you go at all."

"Keep warm, Ce'Nedra," he said, "and look after the children."

"Naturally. I love you, your Majesty."

"I love you, too, your Majesty." He kissed her and his son and daughter and quietly left the room.

The weather at sea ^fejjlusterly, but the militantly impetuous Grelidik paid almost no atpntion to weather, no matter how foul. His patched and decidedly scruffy-looking ship ran before the wind across a stormy sea under far more sail than even a marginally prudent sea captain would have crowded onto his masts, and two days later, they reached'the coast of Sendaria.

"Any empty beach will do, Grelidik," Garion told him. "We're in sort of a hurry, and if we stop at Sendar, Fulrach and Layla will tie us up with congratulations and banquets."

"How do you propose to get off a beach without horses?" Grelidik asked bluntly.

"There are ways," Garion told him.

"More of that sort of thing?" Grelidik said with a certain distaste.

Garion nodded.

"That's unnatural, you know."

"I come from an unnatural sort of family."

Grelidik grunted disapprovingly and ran his ship in close to a

windswept beach bordered on its upper edge with the rank grass of a salt flat. "Does this one suit you?" he asked.

"It's just fine," Garion said.

Garion and his grandmother waited on the windy beach with their cloaks whipping around them until Grelidik was well out to sea. "I suppose we can get started now," Garion said, shifting his sword into a more comfortable position.

"I don't know why you brought that," Poledra said.

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"The Orb wants to see Aunt Pol's baby." He shrugged.

"That may just be the most irrational thing I've ever heard anyone say, Garion. Shall we go?"

They shimmered and blurred, and then two wolves loped up the beach to the bordering grass and ran smoothly inland.

It took the two of them a little more than a week to reach the Vale. They stopped only rarely to hunt and even more infrequently to rest. Garion learned a great deal about being a wolf during that week. Belgarath had given him a certain amount of instruction in the past, but Belgarath had come into wolf hood when he had been full grown. Poledra, on the other hand, was the genuine article.

They crested the hill overlooking the cottage one snowy evening and looked down at the tidy farmstead with its fence lines half buried in snow and the windows of the cottage glowing a warm, welcoming yellow.

"Are we in time?" Garion asked the golden-eyed wolf beside him. -j|
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"Yes," Poledra replied. "On^suspects, however, that the decision not to burden ourselves with the beasts of the man-things was wise. The time is very close. Let us go down and find out what is happening."

They loped on down the hill through swirling snowflakes and changed back into their own forms in the dooryard.

The interior of the cottage was warm and bright. Polgara, more than a little ungainly, was setting places for Garion and her mother at the table. Belgarath sat near the fire, and Durnik was patiently mending harness.

"I saved some supper for you," Aunt Pol told Garion and Poledra. "We've already eaten."

"You knew we'd get here this evening?" Garion asked.

"Of course, dear. Mother and I always stay more or less in constant contact. How's Ce'Nedra?"

"She and Beldaran are just fine." He said it in an offhand sort of way. Aunt Pol had surprised him often enough in the past. Now it was his turn.

She almost dropped a plate, and her glorious eyes grew wide. "Oh, Garion," she said, embracing him suddenly.

"Does the name please you? Just a little?"

"More than you could ever know, Garion."

"How are you feeling, Polgara?" Poledra asked, removing her cloak.

"Fine—I think." Aunt Pol smiled. "I know about the pro-

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cedure, of course, but this is the first time I've experienced it personally. Babies spend a great deal of time kicking at this stage, don't they? A few minutes or so ago, I think mine kicked me in three separate places at once."

"Maybe he's punching, too," Durnik suggested.

"He?" She smiled.

"Well—the word's just for the sake of convenience, Pol."

"If you'd like, I could have a look and tell you if it's a he or a she," Belgarath offered.

"Don't you dare!" Polgara told him. "I want to find out for myself."

The snow let up shortly before daybreak, and the clouds blew off by midmorning. The sun came out, and it glittered brightly on the new-fallen blanket of white around the cottage. The sky was intensely blue, and, though it was cold that day, the bitter chill of midwinter had not yet set in.

Garion, Durnik, and Belgarath had been banished from the house at dawn, and they wandered about with that odd sort of uselessness men usually feel in such circumstances. At one point they stopped on the bank of the small stream that threaded its way through the farmstead. Belgarath looked down into the clear water, noting a number of dark, slim shapes just below the surface. "Have you had time to do any fishing?" he asked Durnik.

"No," Durnik said a bit sadly, "and I don't seem to have the enthusiasm for it I used to."

They all knew why, but none of them mentioned it.

Poledra brought their meals to them, but firmly insisted that they remain outside. Late in the afternoon, she put them to work boiling water over Durnik's forge, which sat in the toolshed.

"I've never seen any reason for this," Durnik confessed, lifting another steaming kettle from his forge. "Why do they always need boiling water?"

"They don't," Belgarath told him. Belgarath was comfortably sprawled on a woodpile and was examining the intricately carved cradle Durnik had built. "It's just a way to keep the menfolk out from underfoot. Some female genius came up with the idea thousands of years ago, and women have been honoring the custom ever since. Just boil water, Durnik. It makes the women happy, and it's not that big a chore."

The moon had been rising late, but the stars touched the snow with a fairy light, and all the world seemed somehow bathed in a gentle blue-white glow. It was, of all nights, among the closest

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to perfect Garion had ever seen, and all of nature seemed to be holding its breath.

Garion and Belgarath, noting Durnik's increasing edginess, suggested that they walk to the top of the hill to settle their suppers. They had both observed in the past that Dumik usually banished uncomfortable emotions by keeping busy.

The smith looked up at the night sky as they trudged through the snow toward the top of the hill. "It's really a special sort of night, isn't it?" He laughed a little sheepishly. "I suppose I'd feel that way even if it were raining," he said.

"I know I always do," Garion said. Then he, too, laughed, his breath steaming in the chill night air. "I don't know what twice qualifies as much of an always, though," he conceded, "but I know what you mean. I was feeling sort of the same way myself earlier." He looked beyond the cottage across the snowy plain lying white and still beneath the icy stars. "Does it seem very, very quiet to you two, as well?"

"There's not a hint of a breeze," Durnik agreed, "and the snow muffles all the sound." He cocked his head. "Now that you mention it, though, it does seem awfully quiet, and the stars are really bright tonight. There's a logical explanation for it, I suppose."

Belgarath smiled at them. "There's not a single ounce of romance in either one of you, is there? Didn't it ever occur to you that this might just be a very special night?"

They looked at him oddly. '

"Stop and think about it," he said. "Pol's devoted most of her life to raising children that weren't hers. I've watched her do it, and I could feel an obscure kind of pain in her each time she took a new baby in her arms. That's going to change tonight, so in a very real sense this is a special night. Tonight Polgara's going to get a baby of her very own. It may not mean all that much to the rest of the world, but I think it does to us."

"It does indeed," Durnik said fervently. Then a thoughtful expression came into the good man's eyes. "I've been sort of working on something lately, Belgarath."

"Yes. I've heard you."

"Doesn't it seem to you that we're all sort of coming back to the places where we started? It's not exactly the same, of course, but things sort of feel familiar."

"I've been thinking sort of the same thing," Garion admitted. "I keep getting this strange feeling about it."

"It's only natural for people to go home after they've been on

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a long journey, isn't it?" Belgarath said, kicking at a lump of snow with one foot.

"I don't think it's that simple, Grandfather."

"Neither do I," Durnik agreed. "This seems more important for some reason."

Belgarath frowned. "I think it does to me, as well," he admitted. "I wish Beidin were here. He could explain it in a minute. Of course none of us would understand the explanation, but he'd explain it all the same." He scratched at his beard. "I've found something that might explain it," he said a bit dubiously.

"What's that?" Durnik asked him.

"Garion and I have had an extended conversation over the last year or so. He'd noticed that things kept happening over and over again. You probably heard us talking about it."

Durnik nodded.

"Between us, we came up with the notion that things kept repeating themselves because the accident made it impossible for the future to happen."

"That makes sense, I guess."

"Anyhow, that's changed now. Cyradis made her Choice, and the effects of the accident have been erased. The future can happen now."

"Then why is everybody going back to the place where he started?" Garion asked.

"It's only logical, Garion," Durnik told him quite seriously. "When you're starting something—even the future—you almost have to go back to the beginning, don't you?"

"Why don't we just assume that's the explanation," Belgarath said.

"Things got stopped. Now they're moving again, and everybody got what he deserved. We got the good things, and the other side got the bad ones. It sort of proves that we picked the right side, doesn't it?"

Garion suddenly laughed.

"What's so funny?" Durnik asked him.

"Just before our baby was born, Ce'Nedra got a letter from Velvet-Liselle. She's managed to push Silk into naming a day. It's probably what he deserves, all right, but I imagine his eyes get a little wild every time he thinks about it."

"When's the wedding?" Durnik asked.

"Next summer sometime. Liselle wants to be sure that everybody can be in Boktor to witness her triumph over our friend."

"That's a spiteful thing to say, Garion," Durnik reproved.

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"It's probably the truth, though." Belgarath grinned. He reached inside his tunic and drew out an earthenware flagon. "A touch of something to ward off the chill?" he offered. "It's some of that potent UIgo brew."

"Grandmother won't like that," Garion warned.

"Your grandmother isn't here right now, Garion. She's a little busy at the moment."

The three of them stood atop the snowy hill looking down at the farmstead. The thatched roof was thick with snow, and icicles hung like glittering jewels from the eaves. The small panes of the windows glowed with golden lamplight that fell softly out over the gently mounded snow in the dooryard, and the ruddy glow from the forge where the menfolk had spent the afternoon boiling unneeded water came softly from the shed. A column of blue woodsmoke rose straight and unwavering from the chimney, reaching so high that it seemed almost to be lost among the stars.

A peculiar sound filled Canon's ears, and it took him awhile to identify it. It was the Orb, and it was singing a song of unutterable longing.

The silence seemed almost palpable now, and the glittering stars seemed to draw even closer to the snowy earth.

And then from the cottage there came a single cry. It was an infant voice, and it was not filled with that indignation and discomfort so common in the cries of most newborns but rather with a kind of wonder and ineffable joy.

A gentle blue light suddenly came from the Orb, and the longing in its note turned to joy.

As the song of the Orb faded, Durnik drew in a deep breath. "Why don't we go down?" he said.

"We'd better wait a bit," Belgarath suggested. "There's always some cleaning up to do at this point, and we should give Pol a chance to brush her hair."

"I don't care if her hair's a little mussed," Dumik said.

"She does. Let's wait."

Strangely, the Orb had renewed its yearning melody. The silence remained as palpable as before, broken now only by the thin, joyous wail of Polgara's baby.

The three friends stood on the hilltop, their breath steaming in the cold night air as they listened to that distant, piping song.

"Good healthy lungs," Garion complimented the new father.

Durnik grinned briefly at him, still listening to the cry of his child.

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And then that single cry was not alone. Another voice joined in.

This time the light that burst from the Orb was a sudden blaze of blue that illuminated the snow around them, and its joyous song was a triumphant organ note. -"I knew it!" Belgarath exclaimed with delight.

"Two?" Durnik gasped. "Twins?"

"It's a family trait, Durnik." Belgarath laughed, catching the smith in a rough embrace.

"Are they boys or girls?" Durnik demanded.

"What difference does it make right now? But we might as well go on down there and find out, I suppose."

But as they turned, they saw that something seemed to be happening in the vicinity of the cottage. They stared at the single shaft of intensely blue light descending from the starry sky, a shaft that was soon joined by one of a paler blue. The cottage was bathed in their azure light as the two lights from the heavens touched the snow. Then those lights were joined by other lights, red and yellow and green and lavender and a shade Garion could not even put a name to. Last, the lights from the sky were joined by a single shaft of blinding white. Like the colors of the rainbow, the lights stood in a semicircle in the dooryard, and the brilliant columns from which they had descended rose above them to fill the night sky with a pulsing curtain of many-hued, shifting light.

And then the Gods were there, standing in the dooryard with their song joining with that of the Orb in a mighty benediction.

Eriond turned to look up the hill at them. His gentle face glowed with a smile of purest joy. He beckoned to them. "Join us," he said,

"Now it is complete." UL's voice was also joyous. "All is well now."

Then, with the God-light bathing their faces, the three friends started down from the snowy hilltop to view that miracle, which, though it is most commonplace, is a miracle nonetheless.

And so, my children, the time has come to close

the book. There will be other days and other stories,

but this tale is finished.

About the Author

David Eddings was born in Spokane, Washington, in 1931 and was raised in the Puget Sound area north of Seattle. He received a Bachelor of Arts degree from Reed College in Portland, Oregon, in 1954 and a Master of Arts degree from the University of Washington in 1961. He has served in the United States Army, worked as a buyer for the Boeing Company, has been a grocery clerk, and has taught English. He has lived in many parts of the United States.

His first novel, *High Hunt* (published by Putnam in 1973), was a contemporary adventure story. The field of fantasy has always been of interest to him, however, and he turned to *The Belgariad* in an effort to develop certain technical and philosophical ideas concerning that genre.

Eddings currently resides with his wife, Leigh, in the Southwest.