

KIRIKO MOTH

# The Cronnex

### a tale in four parts



by Crewin Greenaway

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In memory of Peter, For love of Neathe

Trewin Greenawan)



### Welcome...

tranger, did you just ring the bell? Well, of course you did — another young traveler, sore of foot, come to immerse himself in that great tale of magic and true love called... *The Cronnex*, you say? Yes, it is called that by ordinary folk. However, for initiates into the arcane powers, it's more properly named... Stay, though. Now that my old eyes have adjusted to the light, I see that you are no student of the stars, but a simple star-struck student, instead.

Still, you've made the pilgrimage, and we can't all be raised to the higher sphere. So, yes, I give you leave to enter — after you wash your hands and face in the fountain just behind you. And I'll have to take that knapsack, and that knife, and... my, what an empty purse you have! Don't you know that there's an entry fee? How else am I to earn my crust of bread and cannikin of ale? Ah, well. I'm an old man, weak in the knees and going soft in the head. I tell you what — give me a kiss, lad, and I'll let you in.

My faith! That was a nice one, and no mistake. Were I a year or two younger, I'd give you a squeeze in return... just where, I'll let you guess. Now, come along. We'll put your possessions on this shelf. Take a seat at the reading table and I'll bring you the first of the volumes. We close, mind you, as soon there's not enough daylight to make out the letters. You can read, can't you? Good. Good. Don't be offended. Many a visitor has to pay me to read the story to them. Those are feast days for me, I'll tell you!

Well, if you're settled, I think I'll go take that spot you've warmed for me on the stoop. And when you leave, if you find me asleep there by the door, give me a shake. We'll lock up and I'll show you a warm, safe place to spend the night.

# JESSAN

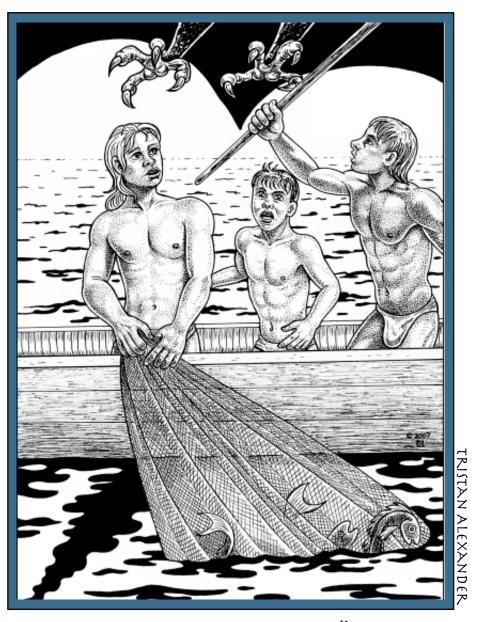
BEING VOLUME ONE OF

## THE CRONNEX



#### BY TREWIN GREENAWAY

ART BY TRISTAN ALEXANDER



ATTACK OF THE SKALGÜR



## For John ~ most admirable of writers, for encouraging and nurturing...

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## GLOSSARY

**Note**: although this glossary will help you reconnect names with characters and places you encountered earlier in the story and then forgot, reading it may also spoil certain turns of the plot To avoid this, don't read it through until you've finished the entire first volume

### Personæ

Gesryma Great Mother of Blessed Name A major supernatural being who controls the Great Wheel

Ra'asiel the Opposing One A major supernatural being who is the opposite of Gesryma, and considered the Lord of Chaos and Ruler of the Dead

Jessan the Nithaial Galgaliel

**Niccas** the *Nithaial Elimiel* 

hezzakal wizard ruler of Cytheria

Jaçazal demon necromancer, watcher of Wethrelast

Maerdas the One Who Cannot Be Named, formerly the Nithaial Elimiel, now Lord of Gorzungâd

**Che Ouardian Circle** a secret society of mages, healers, scholars, and alchemists, devoted to sustaining the memory of the *Nithaial* and to protecting and nurturing them when they next return



Alfrund herbalist, Jessan's twerë, beloved of Fendal

Anisor master herbalist, member of the Guardian Circle, teacher of Alfrund

Azraham, son of Mehadam Ruler of all the Lhennad, seven hundred years ago—one of a line of kings long dead and forgotten

Faryn fisherboy, Jessan's twerë

Fendal sailmaker, beloved of Alfrund

Fyroll apprentice of Anisor

Feldor innkeeper in Nilfred, brewer of exceptional ale

hestal male apprentice of Fendal

Orannell fisherman, seer

**Grysta** wise woman, finder of *Galgaliel*, Jessan's adoptive grandmother, member of the Guardian Circle

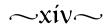
Matheas apprentice of Anisor and former apprentice of Porphoras

Onna granddaughter and assistant of Grysta

Orien mage, member of the Guardian Circle, appointed instructor and guardian of Jessan

Peta & Pelun Jessan's adoptive parents

Porphoras high master alchemist, member of the Guardian Circle, appointed instructor and guardian of Niccas



Prince Caelas military commander, lover of Jessan

Che Summoner a minion of Maerdas, a human who has been adapted to serve as a conduit of fell powers, including the ability to mentally find and "summon" particular mortals, usually to their doom

Syllis fisherboy

Celo shop boy, lover of Jessan

**Cheor** apprentice of Anisor

Cimon former apprentice of Anisor, twerë of Alfrund

Collar An old man who once guided pilgrims to Wethrelad

Unnar apprentice of Anisor

Wendma female apprentice of Fendal

Dwinsa mule, shipmate then companion of Jessan and Alfrund.

Skalgür pterodactyl-like flying beasts large enough and clever enough to prey on humans as well as other game. They are unable to launch themselves into the air from the ground so must roost in high places, which limits their spread.

**Strykul** attack beasts, usually controlled by a Demon Lord They move on two legs at great speed, have ravening jaws, and can spray a nerve poison that renders humans incapable of defending themselves.

Cejj the boat in which Jessan and company sail from Gedd to the southern kingdom of Pharros.

#### Places

Che Kingdom the setting of this story It hasn't been given a name because it really doesn't have one. Its inhabitants call it by a word that translates into something like "Our Blessed Place"; outsiders call it "That Place to the North of Us," or by another, which has come into use more recently, that means "That Wretched and Rather Scary Place to the North of Us."

**Corzungâd** the fortress castle that is the home of Maerdas.

**Gostranar** the meeting place of all the four spirits.

**Ernfardast** the home of the spirit of earth. Also called the Deep Dwelling.

Faeystirran the home of the spirit of fire.

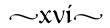
Sondaram the home of the spirit of water.

Wethrelad the home of the spirit of air.

Wisferon, the Holy Wood surrounding Gostranar.

Ciprics a city on the border with Pharros.

Cytheria a small free city surrounded by mountains that once served as a seaport for The Kingdom but is now considered an evil place. It is ruled by the sorcerer Hezzakal.



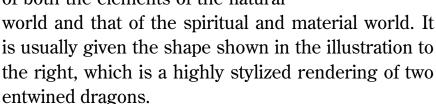
- **Che Faïward Jslands** a small group of islands in the Western Sea claimed by The Kingdom.
- Fleara the river that runs through the Valley of Death and limits access to Wethrelast.
- **Gates of Karn** a fort guarding the one pass through the mountains that separate the seacoast around Gedd from the rest of The Kingdom.
- Gedd The Kingdom's only current seaport. Since that country does very little sea trade, Gedd has never been an important place, and is usually considered no more than a large town.
- heref the major seaport of Pharros.
- Lorithar one of The Kingdom's three great cities, home of Poriphar and Niccas, and close by to Gorzungâd.
- Lydvel the Faïward Island on which *mythral* is mined.
- Plains of the Libernad the area just east of the mountains that divide the seacoast from the rest of The Kingdom.
- **Nilfred** the last town before the hills leading to the Valley of Death and the Wall of the World.
- **Placemon** one of The Kingdom's three great cities, home of Anisor.
- **Pharros** the country just to the south of The Kingdom
- Carrusor the third and greatest city of The Kingdom, where

sits the palace of the King.

Wall of the World the great range of mountains that form the western border of the kingdom.

#### Cerms

Cronnex the sigil of the *Nithaial* and a symbol for the essential harmony of both the elements of the natural



- enkiridion an autographic, or handwritten, book for the use of the owner only, as of herbs and potions, secret spells, and the like.
- mythral a metallic substance that is easily worked and can serve as a conduit for the natural spirits, magical spells, and other forms of force Mined in Lydvel.
- Che Nithaial half-mortal intermediaries between humans and Gesryma, Great Mother of Blessed Name. Their purpose is to serve the Great Balance and keep human life in harmony with the will of the immortals. They appear as human twins, and so are sometimes called the *Irin*. Each embodies various aspects of the Great Powers One, whose arcane name is *Galgaliel*, reigns under the sign of the sun, and is master of the powers of air and water. The

other, whose arcane name is *Elimiel*, reigns under the sign of the moon, and is master of the powers of earth and fire. If the *Nithaial* fail, the Great Wheel grinds to a halt, and men enter the period that we would call history but that the ancients saw as a fall into chaos.

telesma perfectly formed diamonds that necromancers and others permeate with esoteric powers which can then be tapped for a specific purpose, such as for farseeing or skrying. However, the results can be misinterpreted, especially by those unpracticed in using the stones.

twerë, twerën are terms relating to a relationship between two humans, no matter the gender, that permits the public acknowledgment of profound emotional ties that exist apart from kinship or matrimony. These may or may not be sexual in expression, but if they are, the act is considered appropriate and blessed. It is perhaps best defined as friendship raised to a higher power and given important legal status. The two participants are called *twerë* and the relationship itself to be the state of *twerën*.

Vstherüd a magical artifact that gives its possessor immortal life Furthermore, anyone who has possessed it for a period of time can continue to draw from its force, although in an increasingly diminutive amount, if it is stolen or lost However, it cannot keep its bearer from being killed or injured; only the aging of bodily processes is affected.

# PART ONE FLIGHT

## Chapter 1



HE SKALGÜR WAS ALMOST OVERHEAD before we noticed it. And even then, it was the shadow we saw, floating across the sea. We were hauling in the net, heavy with the weight of fish, busy with that and keeping our balance in our small boat. Although neither Syllis, Faryn, nor I had ever seen a skalgür in our lives entire, we dared give it only a momentary glance. We knew even that risked the feel of old Grannell's switch. He hunched all day at the tiller, the slender, stinging strip of wood in his hand, waiting for another chance to wield it.

The beast was the size of our boat at least, with leather wings the size of a sail. Its beak was as long as a spear. I heard that one would seize a solitary fisherman if it could approach him unawares. It would carry him off and drop him into the sea, waiting for him to drown. Then it would pluck him out of the water and bear the body back to its cliff side aerie, for although skalgür fish they cannot swim. However, they were never known to approach a craft with more than

one person aboard.

This one hadn't heard these stories, for it circled our boat, wheeling just above our heads. Then, suddenly, it swooped down at us with a terrifying speed. I watched, paralyzed by terror, as the dagger-tipped claws stretched for my face. Just before it struck, it shrieked, the sound so loud it scorched my ears, and swerved away. Faryn had taken a swing at it with an oar. The skalgür changed course in a second, swerving just beyond the oar's reach, rose up, and circled back, leaving us gagging in its foul reek.

By now, though, I was flat on the bottom of the boat, with Syllis holding me as tight as any limpet. Grannell had grabbed the other oar, and was brandishing it at the skalgür while he abused it with a long stream of oaths. It circled us again and, as suddenly as it had attacked, abandoned us, sweeping swiftly off across the waves.

I got to my feet somewhat shakily but Syllis remained on his knees, absorbing all he could of the creature as it shrank before his eyes to little more than a black, flapping dot. There was a swishing sound and then a yelp of pain. He leaped to his feet, a bright red welt burning across his naked back.

Syllis was the youngest among us, only eleven years of age. Grannell thought twice before laying onto Faryn, who was seventeen and had threatened the old man with a drubbing it he wasn't careful. I myself was nearing sixteen years and still earned my share of blows, but was better than Syllis at gauging Grannell's moods. The boy at least

had learned not to complain or, worse, to try dodging one, lest he bring on a flood of them, with a string of curses to keep them company.

Still, a blow from Grannell was such a common event Syllis paused only long enough to begin helping Faryn and me haul in the fish before exclaiming, "To think I saw a skalgür!"

"To think you almost saw a skalgür make off with Jessan," Faryn replied, winking at me as he did. "*That* would have been a story to tell your grandchildren."

"Twas an omen, that was, and no fucking mistake," muttered Grannell. The switch had now been set aside for his club, which he used to stun the bigger fish before they thrashed their way out of the boat. He repeated the sentence, emphasizing each word with a swing of the club. At each thud a fish quivered and lay still.

Grannell was a crabbed, ugly man, mean and querulous, with as few teeth as he had hairs. But he knew where the fish were better than any man in the village, and he owned the boat. I glanced at Faryn and he at me. "What sort of omen, Grannell?" he asked.

"What sort of omen?" Grannell squinted up at us. "Ask *him*," he continued, glaring at me. "What is it about *him* that got a *fucking* skalgür to attack a *fucking* boat with four of us in it? A thing that's never been *fucking* heard of before?

"What *sort* of fucking omen?" he muttered, leaning over and spitting into the water. "No omen is a *good* omen,

that's all I fucking know." He ended the conversation with a swing of his club, dispatching another fish.

Shortly thereafter Grannell ordered us to haul up the sail. This afternoon there was a brisk breeze to bring us in, for which Faryn and I gave silent thanks. Otherwise we two would have to row the boat back, no easy task when, like today, it was full of fish.

Now, instead, we could rest. Faryn sat back against the side of the boat and spread out his arms along its edge. I took my familiar place beside him, and he dropped one arm around my shoulder, ruffling my hair as he did so.

He and I were what is called *twerën*, which means a closeness that differs both from being lovers and being friends, and so permits such displays of open affection—to be someone's *twerë* has nothing to do with any lack of interest in girls.

For Faryn this was indeed so, but for me..., well, half my waking hours were spent wishing that in a year or two, when he had his own boat, no one would man it but he and I. In truth, I ached for him. But I knew to show it would be unseemly and risk making me the fool. I had no desire to be laughed at, certainly not by him. So I closed my eyes and felt the heat of his body and the weight of his arm and tried to ignore the hunger that cried for more.

he tale I have to tell actually begins a few weeks after our encounter with the skalgür. But, when I think back, it seems fit to start with Grannell's talk

of omens. He was famously weather-wise, a sign of his gift, however slight, for foreseeing.

My name is Jessan, spoken son of Pelun, the village metal smith. "Spoken" means that I'm a foundling, and, in truth, it was Peta who claimed me, since she was unable to have children of her own. Pelun humored her but he never felt any fondness for me, and there was no question I would follow in his trade. Nor could I have if I wanted to, for I was slight and slender, and smithwork is for the broad and strong.

It was rare about me to be a found child, it was rare about me to know my letters. I was taught them as a child by Grysta, my mother's mother, a wise woman who up until a few years ago came to our village for a month every winter to instruct me. Finally, it was rare about me to be almost sixteen and still have no apprenticeship.

My place on Grannell's boat was as Faryn's *twerë*, as was accepted and which Grannell gained by, since I worked hard for no pay. In a place larger than our village I might have found some fit between my nature and the world of work, but here there was nothing. Faryn would become a fisherman and I might fish with him all my life, but it wouldn't be my work, because I lacked any calling to it.

Because of this, while no one shunned me, no one knew what to make of me either, and so most made nothing at all. Only Faryn truly enjoyed my company. Although untutored and unlettered, he was curious and quick of mind, and it was perhaps my very difference which drew him to me—not merely (as some supposed) that in a small village boys our age were in short supply.

It was Faryn, not I, who proposed we swear the oath of *twerën*. His life, he said simply, was empty without me, and he had no wish to hide that. This happened when he was thirteen and I eleven, and this great gift to me still brings me to tears. For afterwards, those in our village *did* know what to make of me—I was Faryn's *twerë*. And since he was well regarded and, as the son of drowned fisherman and the head of his family, some of his status was reflected onto me.

So things stood on the day that my life changed for ever. It started out like any other summer morning—I arose at sunrise and hurried to the fishing boat. We fished as usual, and then headed back to shore with our catch, the same breeze hurrying storm clouds right behind us. In fact, we left off fishing early, Grannell's bones warning him of bad weather coming, and quickly.

The rain was falling by the time we tied the boat to the shambling dock and carried the fish into the shed. There we quickly cleaned it so that Grannell could sell it to the villagers who were already hurrying in to have first pick. Afterwards, I sluiced the floor with sea water to clean it and, as best I could, washed the stink of it from my hands and arms before heading up the path to home.

When I came in, I found my father sitting at the table with a small pile of silver coins before him, small ones, to be sure, but more than I'd ever seen in my life before. My mother was bending over the fire, stirring our supper, porridge as it always was, sometimes with a bit of meat. I set beside her on the hearth the unsold fish that Grannell had tossed me in my payment for the day's work. Peta would wrap it in the fragrant broad leaves of the clutchfast vine and bake it in the coals, a welcome addition to our meager fare.

Usually she greeted me with a quiet smile, but this day she had such a stricken look on her face that I stepped back in surprise. "Peta!" I said, "what's wrong?"

She opened her mouth, but before she could speak, my father said from the table, "I'll tell him." And to me, he commanded, "Jessan, come here." I crossed the room to him. Pelun was so large that even sitting on a stool he could look me eye to eye.

He stared at me for a moment, and then spoke. "A stranger came to me in the smithy today and said his name was Osfalt, a trader by occupation. He told me he desired to take you on as a bondslave and would pay me well for a term of five years. As is my right, I accepted his offer, and you will leave with him in the first of the morrow."

I was stunned. "A stranger?" I stammered. "What would he want of me?"

Pelun smiled mirthlessly. "A question that came to my mind, as well. But he needs a pack boy, and even you can carry a burden along a trail."

I looked over at my mother. Tears streamed down

her face but she said nothing. Pelun saw my glance and added, "At Peta's urging I took you in, despite the ill bodement such a deed brings to a house. Things might have been different if you hadn't become a shame to us — and likely soon to become even more of one."

I made as if to reply and he added, "Don't anger me by any attempt to deny it. You've never even tried to conceal your desire for Faryn, which shames us and insults his mother, a decent woman. What, after all, can you offer him or anyone, except the tricks of a pleasure boy?"

He waved me away, saying, "Go eat your supper, then gather your things together. Peta will give you a cloth to bind them in. The trader will come for you at the break of dawn. Be ready for him — and be gone." He then turned his back and never spoke to me again.

After supper, I gathered together my small collection of clothing, bundled it up in the piece of cloth my mother gave me, then sank in despair onto the coarse sack stuffed with leaves I called a bed. Like everyone else in our village, we turned in at sundown and woke with the dawn; burning a light at night, even the poor waxberry candles we used, was considered an extravagance—as was burning wood for heat when we could be warming ourselves instead beneath our coarse wool blankets.

My parents slept in an alcove to one side of the fireplace where they could take advantage of its lingering heat. Soon I heard Pelun's harsh snores, announcing he was dead to the world until the cock's crow at sunrise. And Peta, even if she lay awake, would hear nothing else. Quietly I left my bed, lifted the latch to the door, and slipped into the night.

Fortunately, the rain had eased for the moment or I'd have been soaked through by the time I reached the small house at the other side of the village where Faryn lived alone with his mother. When his father had drowned the boat had been lost as well, which is why he was forced to work for old Grannell until he managed to build one of his own. His door, like ours, had no lock, and the latch string still hung outside.

Once I stepped in and closed the door, everything became pitch black again, but I knew well enough where he slept. I cautiously made my way to his bed and stood there silently for a moment, listening to the soft movement of his breath. I then slid into bed beside him, pressing my body against his, something that even in my dreams I'd never dared to do.

I felt, rather than saw, his eyes open. I put my hand over his mouth and whispered, "It's me, Jessan."

He pulled my hand away from his mouth and whispered back, "Who *else* would it be? What are you doing here?" I was relieved that he sounded only puzzled, and answered, "Pelun has sold me as a bondslave to a trader. I'm to leave here for good as soon as the sun comes up."

There was a long silence while Faryn digested this. Finally, he sighed and said, "Well, little one, something like

this had to come, sooner or later. Pelun's loathing of you was obvious to everyone." He reached over and stroked my cheek, whispering, "I'll miss you, my sweet *twerë*."

"Not as much as I'll miss you," I whispered back. I held him tightly for a long time. Then I began to slip out of his bed, tears streaming down my face. But Faryn seized my hand, and pulled me back. "Not so fast, little squirrel," he whispered, "the night is far from over yet."

He took me in his arms, stroked my hair, and kissed me on the lips. My body was flooded with such desire that I was shaken to my core. However, I was completely ignorant of lovemaking, with man or woman, and I thought Faryn knew little more than I. But he clearly knew something. He sat up, pulled off his own nightshirt, and lifted mine until it was bunched up around my arms. Then he lay back down and guided my hand to his sex. At the same time he tenderly began to stroke my own, and I shivered with sensations I'd never felt before.

In the end, we spent the night together, holding each other tightly. After Faryn spent, he fell into a deep sleep, but I didn't close my eyes all night. I was full of anguish and joy at once and thoughts chased themselves endlessly through my mind. I thought of what Pelun had said about me and wondered if it were true. Did I want a life of nothing else but what I'd just experienced? It was easy to believe. What else was there? I knew of nothing.

These thoughts burnt my heart as I lay there, and

did so as I straightened my shirt and slipped back into the grey-pink early light. The birds were just beginning to twitter as I returned to my own bed, and the roosters would be crowing any moment. Indeed, Peta had only just started stirring among the ashes for glowing embers to start the breakfast fire, when the trader Osfalt came and pounded on our door.

Traders were infrequent visitors to our distant village, the last of several scattered along the northern coast. No one possessed money to spend on distant goods and, apart from salt fish, there was nothing here to sell. Still, there was a market inland for it and some fishermen here were skilled in preparing it.

Among these, the foremost was Grannell, who, it was rumored, had a clay pot full of copper and silver coins buried beside his hearth. Of course, Pelun, as the only smith for leagues around, was no pauper, either. Whatever he thought of me as a son, I hadn't failed to notice the pleasure he took in the little pile of coins he had come by in this transaction. I wished him the pleasure of them.

Such thoughts only made me the more suspicious of Osfalt, who was, all told, a fearsome sight. He had an untraderly gruffness about him, which suited his matted black beard, his flapping robes of dirty brown cloth, dripping with rain, and a patch over one eye he revealed when he pulled back his hood. He glared about the room until he fixed his eyes on me, scrambling out of my bed and struggling into

my day shirt.

"Come, boy, come," he growled. "We have far to go and the weather is bad."

"Let him have his breakfast first," Peta pleaded, gesturing at the mound of cold porridge she had saved for me from last night's supper bowl.

The trader glanced at it and sniffed. "He can take a fistful and eat it along the way," he answered shortly, and seizing me by the shoulder, dragged me outside into the drizzle. There stood two wooden carrying frames, packed solidly with bundles of dried fish. Osfalt gestured to mine, and I fastened my own little bundle of clothing to it.

I wasn't unfamiliar with these things, and squatted down under the shoulder pieces. When I stood up the frame rose with me, and Osfalt fastened a strap around my waist to hold it in place. It was heavy and stank of fish and I wondered how far I could carry it before I collapsed along the track.

Someone gently touched my arm. It was Faryn. He took my hand and pressed something in it, saying, "I meant to give you this at your coming of age day week after next." I closed my fingers around it, not daring to look at it lest I burst into tears. He kissed me, looked me in the eyes, said, "Remember me," and was gone.

Meanwhile, the trader had taken up his own frame, which was clearly lighter than my own. He seized his staff where it lay against our house and, even as Peta was handing me my wedge of cold porridge, he was setting off down

the path that left the village and headed south between the forest and the sea.

Peta kissed my cheek and released me, and I hurried after Osfalt, so confined by the frame I couldn't have turned my head if I'd wanted to. But I was struggling too hard to keep pace with my new owner—driven off to an unknown world without the chance of even a farewell glance at the one I was being forced to leave behind.

## Chapter 2



at his fast pace and I was afraid I would end up choking on my piece of gruel if I failed to finish it while I still had some wind. So, gobble it down I did, only opening my other hand to view Faryn's gift after the last morsel was on its way to my belly.

This was soon enough, and when I examined my present I discovered it was a miniature dolphin, cunningly carved of wood and rubbed with oil to give it a soft glow. Faryn had also inserted a tiny plug in it of a different, darker wood, the end of which had a hole drilled in it so that I could tie it around my neck. The dolphin is a sign of good luck to fishermen and others who go to sea, and the wish that came with this one warmed my heart. I held it tightly in my hand for a league or so before I finally tucked it safely away in my pocket.

The road, at least the part that led to our village, was little more than a path, for most trade along the coast was done by boat. This was so much the case that I'd never in my life

seen a horse and only rarely a pack mule. Only the poorest of pedlars would arrive by foot, shouldering a pack frame.

In any case, for lack of such travel, the track was too narrow for two to walk abreast and talk, at least if they were both loaded with packs. Not that the trader showed the slightest inclination to chat. But if I'd been able, I'd have tried anyway. If he was to be the only person I was to know in the world, I wished I might get to know him better or at least have him answer some questions.

For one thing, I'd begun to wonder what had happened to the pack boy who had preceded me. It was unlikely one had come with the trader to our village—for if so, what happened to him?—and if not, had Osfalt expected to hire one when he got there? He couldn't be very bright if he had—a fact that, admittedly, went along with his general dishevelment. Had I been taken as a bondslave by an idiot? This was worrisome and could be resolved by getting him to speak a single sentence, if it were long enough.

Engrossed in such thoughts, I failed to notice a root reaching across the path, tripped on it, and, with a cry, pitched forward onto the ground, the back on top of me. I'd hardly time to grasp what had happened before Osfalt, who had spun around at my cry, was yanking me to my feet. I'd badly stubbed my toes and skinned my knee.

The trader expressed not a word of sympathy. He merely glanced at my wound, which was already oozing blood, and when he saw that I was now limping because of

my mashed toes, he merely stepped to the side of the path, pulled out an evil-looking knife, and hacked a length from a sapling. This he thrust in my hands to use as a makeshift staff and then gestured for me to precede him.

I soon understood why he had chosen to walk behind me, for the moment I began to lag from his fast pace he struck my pack with his own staff to urge me onward. And so I hobbled along, as league followed upon league, miserable and in pain. And soaking wet, too, from the soft rain, I should add, although the sun had begun to break through the clouds, and, as the next hour passed, chased them all away.

This part of the path, which was the furthest I'd ever travelled on it before, passes around a point, where the land extends out into the sea. As we approached its tip, I began to hear a loud sound, as if someone was pounding on an enormous drum. What made this even stranger was that it seemed to be coming from the sea. Since we had a clear view of the water through the trees, it was only a matter of time before its source came into view—a huge war galley, with both a sail and two long ranks of oars, one above the other. These moved swiftly and rhythmically in unison, propelling the galley along at great speed. The drum was setting the rowers' pace.

It was an utterly amazing sight. I'd never seen such a ship for there was no reason for one to come up our coast, since beyond our village the mountain range came down to the sea and the kingdom, we knew, did not extend beyond it. It was trimmed with red paint and black, and a large witch eye had been painted on this side of the prow, matched, I guessed, with one on the other side. These were things no one I knew would dare put on a boat, for they were meant to cast a spell of misfortune upon any who gazed on them. "An evil thing to paint even on a war ship, for it does not discriminate friend from enemy," I thought to myself, but unintentionally spoke the words aloud.

"Those on that ship have no friends and don't care what you think of them, boy," Osfalt answered, adding with heavy sarcasm, "If you have gazed at this fearsome thing to your heart's content, we had best be on our way—and quickly."

Of course, I hadn't in the least seen as much as I wished, but I took his meaning and reluctantly tore my eyes away from the ship. Even as he spoke, I had just laid eyes on the squad of soldiers standing on the deck and could see cages in which large dark shapes were pacing back and forth—what exactly, the ship was too far out to sea to make out.

This time, the trader took the lead. Our brief rest had given me back some strength and something else to think about besides my aching feet. So I was better able to keep up with him, especially since he was tiring himself. This stretch of the track wandered from the sight of the ocean and into a dark wood. Since all the large trees near our village had long been felled for lumber, I'd never encountered so many crowded together, letting so little sunlight through their leaves that no underbrush could grow beneath them. The air grew stuffy

and smelled of baked wood, and the path, although carpeted with dead leaves, was ruptured everywhere both by a tangle of tree roots and by rocks that these had thrust to the surface.

I was now dizzy with tiredness and feared that I might actually faint. Furthermore, I was drenched in sweat and the villainous weight of the pack ate into my shoulders. When we finally came to a stream, I decided, permission or no, to slip off the pack and fling myself down to drink.

But the trader had anticipated this and grabbed me by the arm. "Not here, not yet," he hissed. He held me tightly for a moment while he looked both up and down the trail, cocking his head and listening carefully. He them pulled me away from the path and into the forest. Now the way was truly rough and it was all I could do to keep my balance, the weight of the pack threatening to topple me as we clambered between the trees. The trader clung to my arm, at once supporting me and propelling me along.

We went like this for several minutes, me dragging more with every step, until I could hear the splashing of falling water, We stepped out of the trees into a clearing, beyond which a rocky ledge barred our way. A small waterfall tumbled over it a little to the side of this, forming a pool bordered by mossy rocks. From this ran the stream that we had just encountered where it crossed our path.

As I stared at all this, the trader said in a different, lighter voice, "Go and drink and then clean your wounds."

Needing no further urging, I pulled off my shirt and stepped carefully into the pool, which, as I waded in, rose above my waist. The cold water felt delicious to my hot and tired body, and I drank my fill from the falling water. Then I fell backwards and floated in the pool, only my head above the water.

The trader was watching me with amusement. Then, as I watched, he, too, cast off his robes, revealing an astonishingly young and supple body. But that was only the first of the surprises. He pulled the filthy patch from his eye and then, with both hands, yanked off the beard, and then the matted tangle of grey, greasy hair.

What emerged from all this was a young man only a few years older than Faryn, with a slender, well-knit body, close-cropped brown hair, and an appealingly lively face.

He waded in the pool, laughing at my astonishment. As I had, he went to the waterfall and drank, then turned, dived into the water and swam over to me. His eyes were still sparkling from his laughter.

"Alfrund, herbalist, at your service," he said.

My mouth opened, but it was so full of questions that none could squeeze their way past the others. He laughed again. "Not now," he said. "Enjoy this rest, because it must be a short one." And with that he stood up and waded back to where our packs and clothing lay. He opened them up, one by one, and emptied them onto the ground, until slabs of salt fish lay all about. He also removed both his knife, well sheathed, and a small pouch from his robes, setting these

beside with my bundle of clothing.

Alfrund gathered together a small pile of twigs and removed a firestone from his pouch. He stroked it with a pointed piece of iron and soon had a small fire burning brightly. He began ripping his robe into strips and fed the fire with this, then the sacks, then the beard and the wig, which gave off an awful stench. He backed away, holding his nose, and gestured at me to come out of the water.

When I came to him, he smiled at me and said, "And your name is...?"

"Jessan, fisherboy," I replied, adding, "at *your* service."

He laughed and, extracting from his pouch a folded piece of paper, offered it to me, saying, "Well, then, to prove you are who you say, read this—for the true Jessan, I have been told, knows his letters."

I took the note without speaking and opened it. I was half afraid that my reading skills had left me from long disuse, but I parsed these simple words easily enough.

Dear Jessan, the person who gives you this note is to be trusted as you would trust me. Do as he says without too many questions, for he has not been told many answers. I will explain everything when my old eyes are eased by the sight of you. Your loving granny, Grysta

I passed the note to Alfrund after I finished it. In even those few words I clearly heard the sound of Grysta's voice, which greatly eased my fears. Alfrund read the note, smiled, and dropped it into the fire.

"Jessan," he said, "I have other clothes hidden for us on the far side of the pool. Is there anything in your bundle that you treasure and wish to keep?"

I thought of the sorry collection of ragged stuff it held and shook my head. "I own nothing of any value at all."

"You will soon find that *that* is not true," Alfrund said, picking up and opening my bag and looking inside, "although this stuff...." He tipped its contents into the fire, tossed it in as well, and reached down for my long shirt, my only piece of clothing.

"Ha," he said, reaching into its single pocket, "you will at least want to keep *this*."

A curse upon my head; I'd forgotten Faryn's gift! "Thank you," I said, reaching over and taking the little carving. "If that had gone into the fire, so would have my heart."

"We had better find you some twine, then," Alfrund said as he gave it to me, "to fasten it safely around your neck. Was that the gift from the one who kissed you goodbye?"

"Faryn," I replied. "My twerë."

"It was a good gift for a parting," Alfrund said, adding, "I mean both the dolphin *and* the kiss."

he fire burnt hotly and then went out, for fabric does not last long in flames. Alfrund and I quickly covered it over with stones, which he had been gathering for that purpose. Then we waded across the pool. He halted me at its further side, while we were still in the water. He drew a small cloth bag from his pouch and opened it, revealing a pungent-smelling crushed herb.

He held this out to me, and when I took it, he reached down and scooped up a small amount of water in one hand and with the other took a generous pinch from the bag, which he sprinkled into his cupped palm. He then mixed it with his finger until it became a sort of green sludge.

This he began wiping on his body, not thickly, but in wet smears. He replenished the paste as he needed to, applying it most generously in his arm pits and around his groin. On a burlier man the result might have inspired fear, but on one as slight as Alfrund, who in build was much like me, it would more likely inspire laughter, and I couldn't help smiling.

"Smile all you want," he said, "for I'm sure you will wear it with more grace than I."

"I'm to do this, *too*?" I asked. He nodded and retrieved the bag from my hand. "This is dogbane," he said. "Dogs cannot bear it and are compelled to avoid it. It will throw the dogs that are now pursuing us off our trail."

"Dogs?" I asked.

"I fear so," he answered. "You saw them caged on the war galley. They have probably already been sent to hunt us down. They are frightening animals, but those who command them are more terrifying still."

I looked at him in astonishment, my mind swarmed with questions. But, as before, Alfrund cut them short, saying, "Jessan, I know you are desperate for explanations. But the more I tell you the more I put your life in danger. Please let Grysta guide you and trust me and my silence. I will explain everything the moment I can. Meanwhile," and here he gestured with the little sack of dogbane, "hand me the carving and get to work."

So it was that I bent down, caught some water in my cupped palm, made a paste with dogbane, and began a new life. When wet, the dogbane was slick and rubbed easily onto my body. As I smeared it about as I'd seen him do, the scent of it seemed almost revolting, and I hoped it would fade when it began to dry. Still, those huge black creatures had been scary enough when I'd seen them pacing in their cages.

The thought that they were even now racing down the track in hot pursuit.... Stinking to high heaven was nothing if the stench would shake them from our trail. I began to shiver, not only out of fear but because the sun had crossed over us and begun its descent, and its warmth was ebbing with it.

"That's good enough," Alfrund said, pulling the drawstrings to close the bag and returning it to his pouch. "The paste will quickly dry and our new clothing is near." He led me to the rock ledge and we followed it a short way into the forest to a small cave where Alfrund had left two leather packs well covered with brush.

He passed one to me and the first thing I found inside was a long shirt of broadcloth, which I quickly slipped

over my head. It was coarsely woven but clean and nicely fitting, and I felt it made some compensation for the dogbane.

The next item I pulled out, a small and flimsy pair of pants made of soft material, puzzled me, for I'd never seen the like. "What are these?" I asked Alfrund, holding them up.

He glanced over. "You *are* a bumpkin," he said. "Those are small pants, to be worn under your other clothing. In the parts where we are headed, not to wear them is to mark yourself as, well, *easy*."

Stung by the word "bumpkin," I answered, "Well, I don't need them, then, because the general opinion in my village is that I *am* easy."

Alfrund laughed. "I already know that," he said, "having seen the sticky residue from your last lovemaking on your belly. It takes more than a cold swim to sluice *that* away."

I felt myself blushing furiously. "I..., you...," I stammered, but before I could put any words together, Alfrund came over and put his hands on my shoulders.

"Jessan," he said apologetically, "I forgot we hardly know each other. I'm truly sorry. You will find me a merciless tease—but I mean nothing by it other than expecting to be paid back in my own coin. In fact, I was glad to discover that you had someone with whom to say a sweet goodbye. I imagined your life in that village to have been all loneliness and gloom."

I looked back into his eyes and realized that there

were tears in mine. "His name is Faryn. I had just that one time with him. And now...." I lowered my head. Alfrund squeezed my shoulders and said, "Then I'm doubly sorry and shall now go wash my mouth with dogbane."

I smiled slightly and answered, "No! You smell bad enough already." I pushed him away and we returned to our dressing. Or, rather, thinking I was dressed, continued to rummage through my pack. In it I was delighted to find a pair of leather sandals, which were strongly made and laced up over my calves.

In our village, common dress for men and women was a long shirt, differing only in length—being short for children, longer for men, and longer still for women. Our dress clothes were exactly the same, except of slightly finer cloth and decorated with embroidery, especially the women's. In bitter cold weather we wore thick woolen leggings and bound our feet in pelts. Leather, since we didn't raise cattle, was an almost unknown luxury, and no one owned a pair of sandals that were a match to these.

Alfrund was dressed as I, except that his shirt was made of much finer stuff and, since he had achieved manhood, it was clasped around his waist with a leather belt. To this he was fitting his knife sheath and fastening his pouch, when he noticed me attempting to puzzle out the lacing of the sandals.

"Let me show you," he said, coming over, "but first...." He drew out his knife and cut a short length from the end of their leather thongs. "Here," he continued, "string your dolphin on this and I will tie it around your neck."

As I did so, he squatted down to tie up my sandals, only to immediately exclaim, "What sort of herbalist am I? Sit on this stone and lift up your leg so that I can examine it." He began to carefully probe around the scraped area on my knee with the tips of his fingers. The gash had long stopped bleeding but the area around it had turned a dark purple, edged with yellow.

"This must be sore, I know, but the wound is clean and a scab is forming; we needn't worry about it," Alfrund said, moving his attention to my foot. He gently moved my toes back and forth as I winced from the pain. "No bones broken, happily," he said, "but it will still make for painful walking. Nothing can be done about that now, because we want to leave no scent but the dogbane. But tonight I will concoct a poultice that will greatly ease the hurt."

e headed back to the track, cutting through the forest so that we would reach it far beyond the stream and so some distance from where we had turned off it before. Alfrund had brought out a small bundle that contained thin rounds of coarse flatbread that is eaten by travelers and many people in winter, which is why it is made with a hole in the middle, allowing quantities of it to be hung on a length of twine from the rafters, out of reach of mice and hungry children.

So we gnawed on these for a bit. Then Alfrund asked,

"How far before this have you traveled from your village?"

"Not even as far as here," I replied.

"I'm not surprised," he said. "If you have wondered why we have yet to meet a single soul in our travels, it is because no one in their right mind would do so. The mountains often come right down to the sea, and villages like yours are scattered far and wide in the steep narrow valleys between the spurs. We are sticking to this track because our enemy will think we plan to soon steal a boat and they will be wasting time watching for us out at sea. At least on foot we have a chance to hide if they come along behind us.

"We are heading now for the only place of any consequence in these parts, the trading town and seaport called Gedd where your Grysta lives. We have friends waiting for us there, and other things as well, for we have a great distance to travel, and all this is merely the beginning of our journey."

I took hold Alfrund's arm. "I know I'm not to ask questions," I said, "but I think I deserve at least the answer to one. Am I not still your bondslave?"

Alfrund laughed. "I hope that hasn't been on your mind all this time! No. That was just an arrangement that I knew your stepfather would be quite happy to accept." He placed his hand on top of my head, as if blessing me. "Consider yourself now unbound and unenslaved."

I sighed. "I suppose I should be happy to be released so easily. But, in truth, I was just starting to think that having you as my master might not be such a bad thing, at all. So what then am I?"

Alfrund glanced at me. "Somewhere between what you were and what you are to become. There are worse places to be. However, if I cannot yet tell you who you are, I can tell you what to *say* you are, should anyone ask: my apprentice. You may have to play that role for some time, so once we reach Gedd we will begin to take it seriously. I think you have a quick mind and a good dose of herbalist learning won't do you any harm."

Alfrund let me ponder on this a bit and then seized my shoulder. "Look ahead," he said. "We are about to emerge from this bit of forest back into the open, for now the track runs for leagues along the shore. So, from this point on, *no talking*. And no thinking, either. Just keep your eyes and ears open. If we are lucky enough to get any warning at all, it will likely require all our alertness to recognize it in time."

## Chapter 3



and silently along. Alfrund's injunction not to think turned out to be unnecessary. Even more than when we had started my thoughts were a maze of confusion, although thankfully without the murk cast by the fiction of the mysterious trader and the dread that came to finding myself in servitude to him.

Even the role of pretend apprentice was a very different thing from being a bondslave, and learning about the powers of plants and the way these could be combined had immediate appeal to me, even if the alternative hadn't been lugging packs of salt fish from one village to the next.

Of course, I was reminded constantly by Alfrund's caution and alertness that we were in some kind of danger, and that this was somehow attached to me. But what was happening to me was so much a mystery that thought broke against it, and I was content to concentrate on moving silently and conserving my strength. The soreness in my foot

had ebbed from the gentle manipulation of Alfrund's hands, and while it still hurt, I was no longer forced to limp. Even with the sandals, I was very careful where I stepped.

The sun was still in the western sky when our path emerged from the deep forest and rejoined the coast. Not too far away it began to edge its way around a steep rocky spur that reached out into the sea. Indeed, in some places I could see that the way had been hacked out of the stone itself, and I longed to ask about this. Why would anyone bother to put so much work into a passage that saw so little traffic? But I knew I wouldn't be answered and probably receive a withering glance as well, so I kept my peace.

Before we ventured out onto the spur, Alfrund paused and searched both the sea and the land behind us, for we would be very visible once we began. The ledge itself was narrow and slippery, and here and there rockweed clung to it, indicating that it was under water at high tide. This, I understood, was why we couldn't wait until dark.

Another reason became evident once we had started making our way across it—the distant baying of dogs. They were far off, I knew; sound travels far over water. But the sound of it still chilled my heart. The tide still had at least an hour to rise before it would cover the ledge. If the dogs did pick up our scent again, they could easily be here by then.

We quickly hurried along the spur and passed around its point. There we found the way dipped back into a little cove and then out to sea again, around a second spur which looked even steeper than the one we were on now.

"That one we have to climb over," Alfrund said, breaking the silence at last, "using steps carved into the stone. And just beyond that is a village, so we will wait here until the night comes, for otherwise we will be seen."

"And what if someone comes along while we wait here?" I asked. Or the dogs, I thought to myself, but thought it bad luck to even say.

Alfrund nodded. "I've thought of that," he said. "Follow me." And he led me up the side of the cliff, climbing with both our hands and feet. We hauled ourselves to a shelf that was wide enough for us to make ourselves comfortable and high enough to keep us from being seen from below.

Alfrund pulled out a traveling cloak from his bag and spread it on the ground before our feet. "You have one, too," he said. "Get it out and it will cover us a bit, and perhaps we can sleep a little. We have come a long way, and we have far to go again once the dark arrives."

I found my own cloak and we lay down together, and pulled it over us, using our sacks as pillows. Alfrund looked into my eyes and I into his, which were a light hazel color flecked with green. He kissed me gently and said, "roll over, little apprentice, and try to sleep. I will hold you tightly and guard your dreams." I did as he directed and, to my surprise, held fast in his arms, fell into a deep, sweet sleep. It lasted until the dark had come and longer, for Alfrund meant to wait until the last of the villagers were soundly asleep.

It was hours later when Alfrund gently shook me awake. The moon was up, or at least a thick slice of it, and its faint light shimmered on the water. The air had turned cool, and I was reluctant to let go of the cloak that covered me. When I did, I gave a gasp, for on the inside of my left arm something faintly glowed. At first I thought it was only a patch of moonlight, but I moved my arm deep into the shadow of cliff rock and still it shimmered.

"Look," I whispered, showing it Alfrund.

He took my arm, examined the mark, then pulled my sleeve down to cover it. "Haven't you seen it before?" he asked. "It first appears only under moonlight."

I shook my head. "In our village, we don't go out after dark," I said. This wasn't quite true, but the moon was hidden last night by rain clouds. Otherwise, when I'd visited Faryn, we'd have both seen it then.

"But *you* know what it is," I said, not asking, because I could see that he did.

He nodded. "It's the Cronnex or, rather, at this point, half of it, as you can tell from the missing part. If things go as we hope, it will eventually be made whole. The Cronnex appears when its bearer first comes into manhood, as you obviously are. And nothing more will I tell you about it, for now. But it is a sign—and the reason that I have come for you and why we're being hunted."

I shivered and wrapped myself tightly in my cloak.

Alfrund stood up. "We must go. By now everyone in the village ahead is surely fast asleep."

"What about the dogs?" I asked. "Won't they wake them all back up the moment we approach?"

He reached down and helped me up. "You forget the dogbane," he said. "Dogs see with their noses, not their eyes. With our dark cloaks we will be all but invisible to them. And our scent won't only repel them but frighten them. They may whimper a bit as we pass, but nothing more, I promise."

And so it proved. We slipped in silence by the sleeping houses, keeping to the shadows, and soon came to where the trail began at the other side of the village. Then we picked our way as best we could until the sky brightened and faint light began to make its way through the trees. When we came to another stream, Alfrund gave us each another round of bread, and we sat out of sight of the path and dipped it in the stream to moisten it, which made it much more palatable. Last night I'd been too tired to notice it but I was starving. I eyed the remaining rounds hungrily.

Alfrund noticed this and broke one in half and passed me one part. He didn't eat the other, but wrapped up the package and put it in his pack. I felt guilty—but not so much that it kept me from eating it.

"Are we low in food?" I asked.

"Somewhat," he said. "I'd planned to buy bread in your village, but I found none for sale, only dried fish. I should have saved some of that, I suppose."

I could tell from the sound of his voice that he was making a joke but I failed to see the humor. Many a time out fishing we had chewed on a hunk of dried fish and considered ourselves well fed. But I said nothing.

After we had finished eating, he took the small sack of dogbane out of his pack. "We will use up the rest of this to refresh what is on us already," he said. "Not for what comes after us, I think, but for what awaits us ahead."

Again we wet our bodies in the cold water, and again each of us made a paste of it and rubbed it carefully over our bodies. While I worked it over my legs, I said, "since once we start I can't talk or think, would you answer me one question while we do this?"

"Ask it," he said, "and I'll see."

"Yesterday, you played the trader and made me play the pack boy all the way to the stream. We could have at least emptied the packs and moved much more quickly—and saved me the pain of that fall. Did you think someone would follow us from the village?"

He shook his head. "I'd have heard them. Though if someone had, it would have been a very bad sign, and most likely we wouldn't have gotten this far. In any case, there's a long answer to your question and a short one, and the latter is the one I'll give you now. It was safer for you to continue believing that you were merely a pack boy for as long as possible. Once the war ship passed us the danger did, too, but by then we were almost in the forest. For which I thank the Four Powers, for that beard itched so much that I could hardly bear it."

I laughed. "So that's why you kept hurrying me along with your staff. I do wish I could see you again, and look more closely. You bewitched us all."

He shook his head. "I'm no master of disguise. But I have learned that strangers are objects of curiosity at a distance, but up close up they are so unsettling that they are hard to see clearly. Even so, I was grateful that the weather allowed me to stay mostly hooded. In fact, it was a poor plan, but I could think of none better."

He got up and I with him. "Now be true to your word," he said, "no talking, no thinking, at least until we rest again." And again we set off at a fast but silent pace, swiftly passing through the trees. The leagues passed, the sun traveled across the sky, and eventually we came to the place where the next mountain spur reached out into the sea.

This time, however, we didn't make our way out onto it. The sun was now sinking in the west, and Alfrund wanted us to cross around it in the dark, before the moon rose. So, instead, we found a small hollow in the woods where we could lie until then and perhaps get some rest.

It was just as well that we did this, for we had hardly settled in when our ears caught the sound of rowing galley's drum—the ship was moving back down the coast from its visit to my village. I wanted to rise up enough to see it, but when I began to stand up, Alfrund pulled me immediately back down.

"Jessan," he said, "there may be those aboard the galley who can sense our presence by divining. I want you to sit next to me and quiet your mind as best you can." I sat down and he wrapped his arm around me and pulled me toward him until our heads touched gently. "Concentrate on the pleasantness of this, as if we were sleepy lovers," he added, and gave me a squeeze.

I was tired and I found that I was able to sink into a state that seemed half asleep. The drum grew louder and louder, but I kept my awareness of it at a distance, even when it seemed to be pounding right beside my head. Then the sound slackened, faded, and suddenly vanished, as it passed beyond the point.

I felt Alfrund's arm slacken its hold. "I think that went well," he said. "Now, lie down, put your head on my lap, and get some sleep."

I spread out my cloak and lay down on it, as he had told me to. I already suspected he hadn't slept one wink the night before, and that he wasn't going to, now. "We could at least lie together as we did last night," I said.

He looked down at me and replied, stroking my hair,

"If I did that, I'd be tempted to sleep, and that might be dangerous. All this silence behind us bothers me."

"Isn't it *good*?" I asked. "I was so glad to see the galley returning from whence it came. Don't you think all this might mean that they have lost our trail?"

His face grew suddenly sad. "No," he said. "Our adversary is not only vastly more powerful than us but at least as clever—certainly at this sort of game. We will be truly lucky to outwit them, but outwit them we must. How, though, remains to be seen."

These words, spoken so matter-of-factly, filled me with fear. I felt a surge of hopelessness. I knew almost nothing and it seemed each bit I learned was more frightening than the one before. It was partly tiredness, but my eyes began to stream with tears.

"Oh, Jessan," Alfrund said, "I'm so sorry. We are both tired and I'm not thinking clearly. It may be that this lack of pursuit is indeed a good sign. But because I have told you as much as I have, I will tell you what I fear, so you can see that it is so much and not more."

He lifted my head out of his lap, and eased down beside me. He then let me settle again beside him, lying in the crook of his arm. "Our pursuers," he said, "will have sent a large galley with soldiers to your village, along with a pack of war dogs, to pursue us from there. Whether or not the dogs can pick up our scent, our pursuers will know we have come this way, simply because there's no good way over the

mountains from anywhere along this coast. Sooner or later, to escape their clutches, we have to get to Gedd.

"That means that they are coming after us along the coast. But once the dogs failed to trap us, they have to be more careful, because if they get too close behind us, they might scare us into the woods to hide and let them pass. In fact, I did briefly consider doing so, but we would slowly starve. Wild berries and small game are all very well, but they wouldn't sustain us for long.

"So right now our pursuers' plan is not to try and catch us, but just keep us moving ahead of them along the path. Because...."

"Because," I said, now understanding, "others are also waiting ahead of us, at one of the spurs where we must pass and have nowhere to hide."

He nodded, then said nothing for a bit. "It will be at the last one," he added finally. "It is the longest and hardest to get around and, unlike the ones we are passing now, it is far too steep to climb over."

"And so what do we do?" I asked in a small voice.

"Be smart, be brave, and try not to piss in our britches," he answered, tweaking my nose. "We'll figure it out. Now try to sleep. Every minute you manage to do so will be as valuable in a few hours as any piece of gold."

I thought sleep impossible to even imagine, but I was bone weary and comforted by his closeness, my face pressing against his lap. And so I did sleep, for three or four hours, until the sun was well down. When he shook me awake, it was so dark that we had a hard time finding our way back to the road.

For road it had become. No longer a path, our way was now wide enough for a cart to travel on, although the ride would have been a jolting one. And when the way came out of the woods and began to make its way around yet another cliff that jutted into the sea, I found that the passage around it was also wider and, apart from the blackness, easier going. Alfrund and I were able to walk abreast, moving swiftly, as the waves smashed onto the rocks just below our feet. It was only when we came to the point where it abruptly curved back to the coast on the other side that we proceeded with caution, easing ourselves around it a step at a time, our backs pressed against the cliff.

From there we had a long view, most of it of nothing but blackness. Woods met the track again when it reached the shore, and stretched away into the darkness. But beyond these, farther still, there was a blaze of light where watch fires had been set burning.

The furthest of these seemed to be burning out at sea, but I knew that in reality it had been lit on the road where it passed around the final spur. Of course, it was a warning to any who came that the way was blocked, but, as Alfrund had explained, that was its purpose. It was the anvil; behind us came the hammer.

We paused for the briefest moment to take all this in,

and then hurried on our way. When we came to the woods, despite the darkness we didn't wait for the arrival of the moon but we continued on, using switches of wood like blind men to feel our way.

## Chapter 4



E REACHED THE END OF THE WOOD just as the moon slipped over the mountains. The path had climbed a small rise once it exited the woods and from there we could look down on the village. It was larger than any we had passed so far, at least twice the size of my own. But that wasn't what caught our eye. Bonfires burnt at regular distances on the beach, each of them attended by soldiers who sprawled beside them on the shingle.

These seemed mostly to be asleep. Their job of patrolling the shore had been assigned to a pack of war dogs, who wandered randomly about, crisscrossing the beach. Apart from that brief glimpse of them pacing in their cages, I'd never seen such dogs before. The few that populated our village were small, spindly creatures that poked through the rubbish and barked at rats.

These creatures, on the other hand, stood five spans high. With their huge square heads lifted, they could look me eye to eye, and I wasn't short. They were densely muscled and had a supple, rangy step. Clearly, they could move as fast as the wind. The very sight of them struck terror in my heart.

I clutched at Alfrund's hand. "What now?" I whispered. For the first time the reality of our situation was plain to me and I understood Alfrund's constant worry. It suddenly seemed to me as it must have seemed to him that we had expended so much effort to escape the frying pan only to find ourselves thrown into the fire.

Alfrund squatted down by the side of the way and was silent for some time. Finally, he whispered, "We have only one chance. I like it little and you will like it less, but I see no other way. You see all the boats pulled up upon the beach? The one closest to us is a very small one and I think I see an oar sticking out of it. You must go down as quietly as possible, face down the war dogs, protected by the dogbane, and silently push it out to sea. Then bring it over to the shore here, where I can join you.

"Meanwhile I will make my way down and find a place where you can bring it close in. I will then strike a small light so you can easily find me, and we will try to pass the last spur by sea. Gedd is not far beyond it and once we are on land we will have a good chance to get there, since the land on that side is full of fields and paths, very different from here."

"I can't do this," I said. "I don't think I could even take one step toward the beach. Besides, I thought you were here to rescue me. Why can't you go down and get the boat?"

"Because," Alfrund said patiently, "I have many skills, but mastering a boat is not one of them. While I was floundering about, a host of fire arrows would bring me down, and that would be the end of everything."

"I still can't do it," I said, my voice quavering. "I just can't."

"I'm prepared for that, too," Alfrund answered. He took my hand and placed a small sachet in it. "This contains a potion strong enough to kill us both. If you prefer, we can swallow it now and defeat them at least that much. It should be painless and quick. You will never know what devastation such a decision will cause, but even so, it would be better than for either of us to be caught alive."

He sighed. "I know you didn't ask for this fate, while I, at least, sought out my part of it. But in this instance, everything comes down to you. You and you alone must decide what shall be. And you must think carefully, because it would be better to die now than to be torn apart by the dogs, or worse, held captive by them until you are seized and brought to Him."

"Him?" I asked.

"The one who seeks you and whose name cannot be spoken," Alfrund said grimly. "Enough about that. Think this over and tell me your decision. I'm ready to accept it, no matter what you choose." o be honest, the idea of dying right there drew me strongly. At least it would be quick and certain, and since I knew nothing about what was happening, I had nothing to draw from to give me strength. If I'd been alone, I think death would have been most welcome. But I was with Alfrund, and it was the close warmth of his body that made me wish to live. It seemed a little thing to help me, but it was all I had.

"Hold me and kiss me for a moment," I said, "before I go."

We both stood. He put his arms around me and kissed me long and tenderly, but with enough force so that our tongues met and the blood in my body, which before had seem icy cold, grew hot, and I could feel my heart beat.

I handed my pack to Alfrund, wrapped my cloak around me, pulling the hood over my head, and began to make my way down to the beach.

If the dogs heard me, they gave no sign. It flashed in my mind that like the village dogs, these, too, might be repulsed so by the dogbane as to pretend to ignore my presence. But it was a vain hope.

They had been trained to know where to patrol and where not, and it wasn't until I stepped onto the shingle and into the faint light of the nearest watch fire that they paid me any notice. The soldiers at the fire were clearly asleep, because even when the dogs bounded in my direction, no one stirred. Nor did the dogs bark. Perhaps this, too, was train-

ing, but more likely the dogbane affected them at least that much, confusing them and thus keeping them silent until they found out more.

At this point, I made a dangerous if understandable mistake. I should have kept my eyes strictly on the boat. But I was too afraid of the dogs to do so, and so turned and backed toward it, my eyes fixed on them. For a time I stepped slowly backwards, with the dogs advancing a bit each time I did. It was as if the scent of the dogbane drew a circle around me, which the dogs would not yet cross. Their eyes glowed like hot coals and their lips were drawn back in a snarl, showing huge teeth. And while they didn't bark, they made a groaning sound, the product of the strain between the repulsion of the dogbane and their urgent desire to rip me to shreds.

Each step I took grew smaller because each time I moved the circle shrank and the dogs pressed closer. The reason, I suddenly realized, when my nostrils caught a bitter stench, was the smell of my own fear. It was oozing from every pore and gradually drowning out the scent of the dogbane. When I realized this, I stood frozen to the ground, paralyzed by fear.

In a moment they had edged so close that the thick, animal stench of their breath filled my nostrils and made my knees weak. The dog directly in front of me was staring at me with such ferocity that, despite myself, our eyes locked. As they did, I felt simultaneously the intensity of the animal's desire to attack and, from within myself—but totally uncon-

nected to *me*—an equally powerful response. It reached into the dog's brain and commanded it to *sit*.

These dogs were highly trained. The force of the order, which it obeyed at once, was so strong that it actually sat back on its haunches, as if stunned. This I saw only out of the corner of my eye, for the moment the command had been given, my attention was wrenched away from that dog and turned to the one next to it, which responded in the same way. And again this was done, and again. Each time another of the dogs was subdued, the ferocity of all the others ebbed as well. Those who hadn't been affected yet began to whine and look about, ears perked, their faces wrinkled with uncertainty. Finally, the whole pack of them sat before me on the sand with lowered heads.

Just then, a soldier shouted from the far end of the beach and began running in our direction. The sound of his voice instantly broke my trance. Already I'd backed almost to the prow of the boat. In two steps I had it in my hands. The tide was high and so I needed to give it only one great shove to move it into the water. I splashed into the water after it and swung one foot over the side, shoving off with the other to swing the prow around so it would face the open sea.

The soldier was now wading hurriedly through the water in an attempt to head me off. I could hear him but I now knew better than to look. Instead, I did what I had to do—seize the oar and start heading away from shore. This was the type of boat with a single long oar, requiring the

rower to stand on a small platform near the stern and work it with a twisting motion that never brought it out of the water. I quickly moved to the platform, unshipped the oar, and began frantically to row—all of which took but a moment of time but it was by far the longest and most agonizing single moment of my life.

And for good reason. If the soldier had known how to swim he could've had me or at least grabbed hold of the boat. But at the last moment he shrank from launching himself into the water, and lost. I left him swearing viciously behind me as his companions came splashing up. I could only pray there were no bowmen among them, but it wouldn't do any good to look back and see. I worked the oar and used such concentration as I still had to peer into the darkness ahead.

As I did so, my mind began to clear, and I realized how right Alfrund had been. If it'd been *he* who ventured out, even if he had managed to survive the dogs, he could never have mastered the boat. It would have swung around in drunken circles—as had happened to me the first time I tried to row one—and he would have either capsized, been captured, or both.

Now that I was some distance out, I allowed myself a brief glance behind me. Most of the soldiers had gathered around the pack of dogs, which still sat in a half circle and refused to move. Others stood at the water's edge, scanning the darkness for some sign of the boat and where it was going. Good luck to them. This way of rowing makes no splashes and so no noise, which is exactly why fishermen prefer it. Once I was sure I was beyond the light of their fires, I turned toward the shore where Alfrund was waiting. Even with the faint moonlight, they would see nothing on the dark water.

After a bit I worked back towards the land, keeping out just far enough to keep clear of the rocks that lay close to shore. I made my way slowly along until I saw the flicker of a tiny light. Then, with just a few strokes of the oar, I came close enough for Alfrund to wade out and toss in the bags. Luckily, it occurred to me that he might be no better at getting in a boat than he was at rowing one, and braced myself—otherwise he would have tipped us all over with a mighty splash.

"By witness of the Great Mother!" I said as I threw my weight on one side to right the boat, "you are a sad excuse for a boatman." The relief of having him close again was so palpable I could almost have shouted for joy.

"I told you as much," he answered. He lowered himself into the bow, clinging to each side. When he was firmly wedged in, he added, "Even so, I've never felt such relief when you suddenly appeared out of the starlight. If I dared to stand up, I would hug you until you begged me to stop."

"I would only beg for more," I answered, laughing, "because I can hardly believe I'm here, myself. Did you see what happened with the war dogs?"

"No," Alfrund said. "I knew I had to start back and

find a way to the shore at once, for I knew in the dark it would be a tricky business." He paused for a moment, before adding, "And, to tell the truth, I'm too much of a coward to have stood there and watched. If the dogs had attacked you I think I simply would have lost my mind."

After this, we were both silent for a while. Alfrund's words stunned me. I had been so much aware of what I risked that it hadn't even occurred to me until that moment to think of what he had in compelling me to go. I wanted to talk to him about what had happened with the war dogs, but at the moment, speaking was beyond me, at least if I didn't want to completely break down.

So I rowed in silence, taking the boat carefully around the bay, a good distance from the shore. It was far too dark to make out the outline of the last spur of rock, but I was guided by the watch fire that blazed there on the road that led around it. We moved along smoothly, since no current ran against us, and the tide was still at high ebb, so it drew us neither out to sea or, worse, toward the shore.

"You handle this boat nicely, little fisherboy," Alfrund said. "I'm glad to be in your hands."

"It feels good to me, too," I answered. "At last I know something and you don't. And, that being so, I suggest you wrap up in both our cloaks and get some sleep. There's nothing you can do now to keep us safe, and it'll take us some time to get around the point." I reached down, picked up my cloak where I dropped it, and tossed it toward him in the bow.

Alfrund retrieved the cloak and pulled it over him. "I misspoke," he said. "You're not a fisherboy, you're a prince. But don't let me sleep too long. We must talk about what lies ahead before we reach the shore."

In a few moments I caught the sound of a soft snore, and I knew for certain that he never slept when we had lain together previously, for otherwise I would have learned that sound already. Tonight, it melted my heart, and my ears drank it in as I worked the oar.

Back and forth, back and forth it went, and the sea slipped by. Even so, the edge of the spur grew only slowly nearer. Distances are difficult to gauge in the dark, and it proved surprisingly far away. Since the sea was calm, I'd taken the boat out enough so that we could pass the point without coming close to shore—such points of land are often home to unpredictable and treacherous currents.

The hours of the night passed. I rowed, Alfrund slept, and my mind wandered, since I was under no injunction not to think while we were out at sea. My thoughts were many and half-formed, partly because I was tired and partly because I had nowhere to chase them.

With each stroke of the oar, my sleeve slipped back and revealed the glowing emblem on my arm. And so I wondered about that and what it foretold. Surely it must foretell *something*, for Alfrund knew about it and wasn't at all surprised when it appeared. It seemed magical, but I knew nothing whatsoever about magic, so that thought led nowhere.

Then there was Alfrund himself. He had swept me away from everything I knew and more and more I was feeling swept off my feet as well. I *ached* to make love to him—or, more honestly, yearned to learn from him how to *make* love. It seemed like a wish come true I hadn't even known to ask that I might become his apprentice and his lover. However, even before we shared our first kiss I already could sense sadness in the tenderness he showed me, and I was afraid that taste of bittersweet would get stronger each time I sipped from the cup.

I also thought about this town that was our destination, Gedd, or rather the simple fact that it had a name. If our village had one I'd never heard it and Alfrund had never said it, or mentioned one for any of the villages we had passed through. I was moving from a world where places were named for what they were—the village, the sea, the mountain—and into one where such things had personal names all their own, just as people did. This seems an ordinary thing to me now, looking back. But then I marveled at it, for it hinted at how large the world might really be.

And all the while my mind refused to return to what happened with the attack dogs. Some door within me had been flung open and I was simply unable to either shut it again or look to see what awaited me inside.

## Chapter 5



Y NOW I HAD BEEN ROWING FOR A LONG TIME, but the night was longer still. The moon had passed overhead, the stars shone brightly. I'd decided to wake Alfrund when we came near enough to the point to hear the waves breaking at its foot, for I didn't know how wide it was or how far Gedd would be once we passed beyond it. My only concern now was that the sun would rise before we had safely reached the shore.

As I stared ahead, I began to see a pinprick of light. It didn't flicker like the bonfire still kept alive by the soldiers guarding the road around the point, but burned with a steady fierceness. At first I thought it might be a star hovering right at the horizon, but soon I realized that even as I watched, it grew larger... and larger still. It must be on a ship that was moving toward us, and moving quickly, for now it seemed to increase in size and brightness each time I pulled the oar.

"Alfrund," I said, gently, not wanting to wake him yet if he were still deep in sleep. But he stirred at once and sat up in the bow. He yawned deeply and then turned to see how far we had progressed.

"We are almost there," I said. "But I called you because of that light that shines so brightly beyond the point. I have never seen anything so piercingly bright. And see how fast it's moving toward us, despite the fact that there's no wind at all."

Alfrund gingerly shifted his position until he was facing forward and stared. What had been a pinprick in the black sky when I first saw it was now the size of a small round pebble, and you could now see a halo faintly glowing around it.

After a moment of silence, Alfrund said, "Jessan, close your eyes for a moment and let your mind go blank. Then tell me what you sense."

It was a hard thing when rowing to close your eyes and harder still to clear your mind of thought, knowing that each stroke might be edging us off course. A rower in total blackness cannot help but go in a circle. But I did what he asked. At first I sensed nothing. But after a few seconds I began to pick up a kind of quivering, and when I focused on it, I shuddered, for it felt as though my mind were being pressed against a tangle of worms.

"Did you feel that, too?" I asked. "It's revolting."

"No, not yet," Alfrund answered. "You'd be more sensitive to it than I. But I know what it is."

I could sense the fear in his voice, although he spoke softly. I shivered. "Is it the light?" I asked.

"No," Alfrund said. His voice was somber. "That is what is called fellfire, a blend of noxious things that burns as bright as sunlight. What you see is a war galley rowing toward us at full speed. The fellfire is kept in a large, heavy metal drum, fixed on the top of a mast. Once lit, it will burn there for hours, and so hotly that the drum itself eventually glows red. In fact, such a mast is always hinged, so that if the drum begins to burn its way free, sailors can quickly tip it into the sea. A dangerous thing to have on a ship, but when sea battles are fought at night it can give a crucial edge.

"However," he continued, "what you sensed in your mind is something entirely different. It means that they have sent a Summoner after us, a human whose mind has been corrupted by magic. The Unnameable One can use it from a great distance to troll men's minds, sending out a mass of psychic strands to feel about for their presence.

"The Summoner sometimes uses this power to draw men to him against their will—hence his name; other times he uses it to find and lock onto the mind of someone his master seeks. He knows you are on the water somewhere near, and he is reaching out to find you and reel you in."

My heart sank and I slumped onto the small rowing platform, burying my head in my arms.

"Jessan!" said Alfrund sharply. "Stop it! This is very different from your encounter with the war dogs. I truly believe that you can defeat the Summoner. You have powers that you don't yet know you possess. They are there inside you and now you must try to tap them. He won't be expecting that you are even aware of them yet, so he won't be prepared for their use."

I lifted my head. I listened to these words, but only half—my eyes were fixed on the flame. By now it had grown to the size of a pullet's egg. As I looked I could see the double bank of long oars on each size of the galley, pulling it along. I could also see the darker red of the glowing drum from which the fellfire emitted its blazing light.

Alfrund turned and looked at it, too. "Do you see the glowing haze around the fire?" he eventually asked. "It glows faintly but it is clearly visible."

"Yes," I answered, "I saw it even earlier. Is that part of its magic?"

"Fellfire is not magical," Alfrund answered, "but alchemical, a mere manipulation of the natural order. And that haze is not part of it, in any case. *You* should know what it is, fisherboy."

"Mist!" I said, understanding at once. "Morning is coming and bringing it from off the sea." Sure enough, when I looked in the direction of the open water, the stars were no longer visible. A flash of hope surged through me.

Alfrund turned and faced me. "All we have to do is stall them a bit," he said, "and again the task must be done by you. I curse myself for not learning to row this boat instead of sleeping the hours away like a fool. But there it is—once again tonight you must do it all.

"Ordinary men are easy prey to those psychic tentacles, but you are not ordinary at all. If it weren't for the fellfire, you could simply help us stay out of their way, and, especially, keep our distance from them. For once we get closer they will be stronger and more dangerous.

"However, the fellfire makes everything more complicated. They are using it as well as the Summoner to search for us, and you can be sure there are keen-eyed spotters positioned everywhere—up the sailing mast, at the bow, along both sides of the ship. If we row in close to shore to escape their eyes, we risk being wrecked on the rocks. If we row out to sea, we would surely be lost in the mist, and once the sun burnt it off we would be spotted and caught at once.

"So our best chance is to play cat and mouse with them and see if we can't lure them far enough out to sea so they become lost in the mist themselves. To do that, you'll have to trick the Summoner. I can explain *what* you must do but I haven't a hint as to *how*—the simplest powers you possess are beyond my understanding.

"But, essentially, you must go into yourself until you can not only sense those probing strands but make them so palpable that you can manipulate them yourself. Then, go to the one furthest from you in the direction of the open water, and let it, for the merest part of a moment, become aware of you. Then withdraw from that inner space *at once*. Do you have any comprehension of what I'm saying?"

"I think so," I said. I had to go past that door that had

opened inside me into whatever it was that lay beyond it.

"Do you think you can do it?"

I barely heard the question. Already, I was feeling my way toward it. As I did, tiny particles of understanding came flowing out of it, forming into something I could feel and so, perhaps, use. In the encounter with the war dogs, it had, so to say, used itself, leaving me to look on. This time, I was to take control and wield it myself—and the thought excited me. I became aware at last that Alfrund was waiting for an answer.

"Yes," I said. "I believe I can."

"Then," Alfrund said, with a sigh of relief, "you had better get started. Turn the boat toward the open water, give it a few good turns of the oar, go into yourself—and try."

nce I had the boat moving out to sea, I sat down on the rowing platform, closed my eyes, and let my mind grow blank. This time it was hardly necessary to do even that; the moment my mind turned into itself, I could feel the strands all about me, blindly groping for contact.

The more I concentrated, though, the more palpable they became, until it seemed that I could see them—a mass of writhing, translucent tentacles. Then, by focusing even more intently, I found I could extend a part of my mind out among them. In this manner, I reached out to the one that was furthest out to sea and, as Alfrund had directed, mentally brushed against it.

I hadn't expected to actually feel anything, and I shud-

dered when I touched a soft, flabby exterior, and, in that split second, felt something pulsating inside it, as if it were full of maggots. The thought of this *thing* groping inside my mind nauseated me, and I instinctively jerked back as first that tentacle and then the ones near to it began wildly thrashing about. Quickly I pulled away from them, drawing myself back into normal consciousness.

"Look," Alfrund whispered, when he saw my eyes had opened. The galley was shifting direction, moving further out to sea. It was now so close and the fellfire burning so fiercely that from the light reflected back from the water, I could see the bright war paint that covered its sides, the large evil eye drawn on its sharply pointed prow. And I sensed, rather than saw, the Summoner himself standing on the ship's raised stern, his head held rigid, his mind straining to find me, his arm raised, his finger pointing.

"Well done, little apprentice, well done. Now row out further for a few minutes and we will do it again."

As I rowed, Alfrund wrapped his cloak around his body and pulled the hood over his head. He then tossed mine to me and gestured that I should pause for a moment and do the same. The dark brown-gray of the fabric would make us that much harder to find in the gathering fog.

And the fog was gathering. Tendrils of mist were now floating above the water; the stars were vanishing bit by bit above our heads. This was so much so, in fact, that I feared if we went much further we would never find our way back to shore. Landsmen had a weak grasp of the dangers of the sea, but I knew them full well, and told Alfrund so.

"Very well," he replied. "Try our trick one more time, and then we will edge back toward the shore."

Again I shipped the oar, sat down on the platform, gathered my wits together, and entered my mind. I wasn't unprepared to find the Summoner waiting for me, and it was good that I was. For the tentacles had greatly increased in number and were far thicker in size. They pulsated with their nauseating contents, and I realized that once they found a mind they didn't so much seize hold of it as break apart inside it, letting loose a swarming mass of psychic maggots that would suck the life out of every thought.

There was so little space to maneuver between them that at first the best I could do was to avoid their touch. But then some deeper awareness reached me: within this inner world my size wasn't predetermined; I could shrink myself smaller or make myself larger as I needed. I willed myself smaller and smaller, until I became like the tiny fish who can move at will between the strands of fishing net without any fear of getting caught.

I also discovered that, like that tiny fish, I could actually swim within this inner space as if I were under water. While I still had a sense of direction, I sent myself in the direction of the open water, gliding over and around the tentacles, on and on, until I covered a good distance, and found that they had shrunk in size to what they had been the

first time I'd encountered them. I was outside the area of the Summoner's most intensive search.

This time I seized hold of two of them and quickly, lightly tied them into a knot. This, I instantly realized, had been foolishly bold, for the Summoner now knew that I was playing with him, not he with me. Suddenly all his attention, all his energy was focused on this one spot. The tentacles came from all directions and wove themselves together like a thick, very thick, strand of rope, with its interstices filled with even smaller filaments.

However, I had shrunk myself still more and, moving quickly, managed to flit through these strands as they pulled together into a thick rope. This thrashed about like a snake and when it failed to find its prey, it began to spread out again, but this time the same tiny filaments multiplied themselves, so there was no space small enough for me to pass through.

I could only swim ahead of them and as I did so I became aware that I was nearing exhaustion. I hadn't expected that this interior world would make demands on my body that were at least equal to that of the physical world. My failing strength caught me unawares. I no longer had the strength to dart about; I could barely move fast enough to keep ahead of the expanding net, and, soon, not even fast enough for that.

At first, when it caught me, it was woven so fine that I felt almost nothing. But it felt me. And as I watched the fila-

ments grew thicker and my ability to cast them away grew less. I was now so tired that I barely cared that the Summoner had finally trapped me; it was only some animal hatred of being caught that kept me feebly struggling, postponing the end for another second more.

hen, all of a sudden, as if a storm tide had changed, the Summoner's presence crumbled. His net flailed, curled in onto itself, shrinking so fast that it swept me with it into his own mind, just as he had wished to be in mine. Alas, I knew no mischief to work there and was too tired to do so even if I had.

Instead, I merely looked through his eyes. And what I saw was that the vast iron drum that held the fellfire was slowly toppling over. So absorbed in capturing me had the crew become that they had failed to notice that its heat had finally charred the supporting mast to where it no longer had the strength to support it.

The crew raced to release the hinge that would send it overboard, but they were too slow. Down it fell, crashing onto the deck, sending gobs of burning liquid flying in all directions. But it didn't stop there. In mere seconds it burned its way through the deck itself and fell down among the rowers. Screams of pain and terror filled the air along with the putrid smell of burning flesh.

The fellfire pot burnt through that deck, too, and fell to the bottom of the boat, turning the bilge that floated there into a burst of burning, suffocating steam. But even that water was not enough to extinguish it. The pot burnt its way through the hull of the boat and sank into the sea, a glowing orb that sank and sank and still did not go out. And, water gushing through the hull, the galley sank down after it.

The air was full of the screams of the rowers, chained to their seats, until the water closed over them. Then a deathly scramble began on the top deck, as those who were still alive fought each other for a place on the galley commander's gig. Then the Summoner must have felt my presence in his own brain and shut me off, even as a great cataclysm sent shock waves through the deep psychic sea. The galley had gone down.

I found myself alone in a great silence and realized I was lost and no way of finding my way back. I didn't even know what to search for—some sort of hole through which starlight could be seen? If so, by now the starlight was obscured by mist.

How had I gotten out before? I'd entered for so short a time it had been like ducking my head in water and then lifting it out again. But when I had swum off, passing over and through the long weaving lines of tentacles, I'd let go of my connection to the outer world.

Still, what did it matter? I was so tired, so drowsy, and this was such a perfect place to rest. I floated in a great void, unaware if I were moving up or down or sideways, or moving at all. Sleep flowed through me and I embraced it completely. It was so sweet and I needed it so much. I felt my

consciousness, like the last breath of a drowning man, form into bubbles and float away. And I had no idea even in which direction they'd gone.

## PART TWO

## Chapter 6



wiped with a wet cloth, the smell and taste of bitter herbs, and, further off, the sound of soft conversation. I couldn't make out the words but I thought I knew both voices. At the same time, I dimly realized that this couldn't be. One voice belonged to my childhood and the other had come into my life only recently. I could almost, almost, put a name to it. But, no, the word slipped away as I sank back into the vast and shimmering depths.

Then, later—how much, I did not know—I felt something also familiar, the warmth of another body, lying next to my own. Even in my sleep, this felt good to me, and I began to shift myself, so that I was pressing against it instead of merely lying up against it. For awhile this was enough. But then I began to yearn to touch it, to move my hand across it. I had hands, still, surely, somewhere...it was just a matter of remembering how to use them.

As I puzzled over this I heard a voice speaking softly

in my ear and this time I *could* make out the words. "Little apprentice," the voice said, "where are you? Come out, come out, and play with me."

I smiled. I knew this voice. I felt its owner's fingers caress the side of my face. They ran down my neck and stroked my chest. My body quivered to that touch.

"Don't stop," I whispered. "Don't stop."

"I would never want to," the voice replied. And the fingers wandered down to my stomach and came up my other side, explored the other side of my face, and finally began to gently caress my hair.

"Alfrund," I said. "Alfrund." I was so pleased to remember his name that I smiled again, a radiant smile that spread across my entire face.

He leant down and kissed me, first on my mouth, and then on my cheeks, my eyebrows, my forehead. Then he opened his lips and gently sucked on the end of my nose, making me laugh.

"Can you open your eyes?" he asked. "It's been a long time since I've looked into them."

"I would rather reach over and touch your face," I whispered. "I miss the feel of it and every other part of you. But I seem to have forgotten how. Does that seem strange?"

"No," Alfrund answered softly. "You've been long asleep. You're waking up slowly, and at first everything will seem like a part of a dream. In sleep, you walk without moving your legs, see without opening your eyes, and grasp

without moving your hands, and so it is for you now. But not, I think, for long."

Although I wasn't aware I'd dozed off again, I knew that someone else was tending me, wiping my body with a moist hot cloth scented with smithta and another herb I couldn't place. Then my head was lifted up and a tiny bit of some potion trickled between my lips.

I swallowed. The smell of the person who was doing this was so familiar that it shook memories out of my mind the way a wind scatters autumn leaves.

My eyes fluttered open. "Grysta," I whispered. "Grysta." Her hair now was white, but bound in the same braids, and coiled tightly on the top of her head. As a child, I was allowed to brush her long hair when she had let it down for washing. Her face was filled with wrinkles but her gray eyes were still calm and clear. My hand moved and found her old one and held it tightly. "Does this mean I'm dead?"

Grysta burst out laughing. "Are we met in the Hall of the Hallowed?" she asked. "Not yet, little one, not yet. But, yes, it's your Grysta, who dandled you when you were a baby and came again to teach you your letters when you were a wee bit older. I've lived here in Gedd all my life except for those visits to you and my daughter and that metal smith of hers at the village at the end of the world."

"Is that it's name?" I asked. It seemed a fitting one.

"Your village?" She sniffed. "No. As far as I know, it has no name. I call it that because that's where it is. Although

it will have a name soon enough, once the word is spread out that *you* came from it."

I thought she meant the Summoner and his allies, and I shuddered. When Alfrund had said that they would start searching for me there and then follow us up the coast, I'd no idea who "they" were or what this might mean. Now I had some inkling, and it made my heart sick. I fought off these thoughts, and still holding Grysta's hand, asked her where Alfrund was.

Her eyes hardened slightly. "That scoundrel," she said, "is away for the moment. Whenever he's here I have to keep myself from hugging him one moment and wringing his neck another."

I looked at her in astonishment. "He saved my life, Grysta, and more than once."

She snorted. "And you saved *his*, and more than once. He put you at terrible risk, with one crackbrained scheme after another. If he hadn't got you here safely at last I would have roasted him in my hearth and basted him with his precious dogbane until he was brown and crisp."

"Well," said a voice, "I can think of several herbs that would do me more justice—but then, Grysta, you were never much of a cook."

Alfrund came in and sat down on the edge of the bed. "Our patient has improved a mite since I watched over him last." He ruffled my hair. "I just hope he isn't still so weak in the head that he believes the wicked things about

me that you've been stuffing into his ears."

Grysta shook her head. "I can't say wicked things about someone who brought my grandson two whole leagues from the shore to here without raising the alarm. But," she added, glancing over at him, "you're right. I'm sorely tempted to."

Alfrund laughed. "And I'd deserve them, or most. Let's see if things don't go smoother from here on."

Grysta shook her head and sighed. "If only they don't go worse still," she said.

Suddenly there was a voice calling from below. Grysta opened the door and called down an answer. "I'm needed as a midwife," she said, "and so I shall leave you two alone." She gave Alfrund a warning glance and then turned to me.

"One last thing, I have a young helper, named Onna," she told me. "She is about your age and I think that you'll like her. But please remember that she knows *nothing* about you—remember to keep it that way. This isn't because she can't be trusted but because it would be foolish to put her in any more danger than she already is, simply by being in the same house as you.

"I've told her that you had been helping Alfrund gather herbs up in the hills above the town, where you were bitten by a poison snake. She's very talkative so it should be easy to avoid her questions by asking her another, yourself. I'm constantly shushing her, so she'll be more than happy to make up for lost time."

A second shout came up and she bent over, kissed my forehead, and hurried out, closing the door behind her. Alfrund listen to her footsteps down the stairs for a second and then began to remove his clothes. That done, he climbed into bed with me and we wrapped ourselves around each other.

I wasn't sure what I wanted more, to burrow up against him or to touch every part of his body with my hands and my mouth. I felt like a dog who has just discovered an intoxicating scent and immediately rubs his body all over it.

Gradually I calmed down, and was content to lie in his arms, kissing his mouth and stroking his sex with my hand, and he stroked mine. My urgency was such that, in what seemed but a moment and with my whole body quivering, I spent in juddering spurts. And, after some gentle but persistent coaxing, guided by his hand, Alfrund did, too. Then a sweet contentment flowed through us both, and we lay still in each other's arms.

fter a while, though, my curiosity overcame me, and I said into his ear, "I've so much to ask you and now that you're in my power, you must answer all my questions."

He smiled. "Ask away, and I'll reply to any that don't lead to sadness. I'm in no mood right now for that."

"Fair enough," I said. "Why does my Grysta call you a scoundrel? And, for that matter, how is it that you know her at all?"

"Hmm," he said. "Grysta thinks lowly of me right now for two reasons, one more important than the other. That one is that I encouraged you—ordered you, really—to use powers that you don't yet understand and can't control. When you didn't come out of that second trance on the boat, we both knew we might well have lost you. As it is, you've been unconscious for ten days, and so eaten nothing all that time, and—as you'll remember—not that much before."

"I don't feel hungry," I said, "except for you. It was when you laid down beside me that I first felt any urge to return from that place. Grysta says you carried me here from the boat, but how did you get the boat to land?"

Alfrund laughed. "Well, to tell the tale correctly, let's start when you went into the second trance. I've no idea what you did but you lured the war galley deeper and deeper into the fog, until all I could see was the ball of fell fire, and even it had become a mere hazy glow.

"At that point, I thought, 'enough is enough,' and called you. I thought my voice alone would pull you out of your trance. When you didn't respond, I crawled to the stern of the boat and gave you a shake. You simply fell over on your side. Your eyes were wide open, your skin was cold—you seemed so close to death that it tore my heart. I think I'll never be so happy again in my life when finally, yesterday, you spoke to me and smiled."

He kissed me then, holding my head with his hand. Then he lay back and sighed. "Anyway, as I looked helplessly at your inert form, there was the sound of a terrible crash, followed by shouts and screams. The great drum of fellfire had been kept flaming for too long and had burnt its way free of the mast. It fell down onto the war galley and in mere moments had set the ship on fire. It then proceeded to blaze its way down through it, deck by deck, and sink it."

"I saw it all," I said. "I had found my way into the Summoner's head and watched it through his eyes."

Alfrund looked at me in shock. "Well, you were busy in that trance of yours," he said. "Please don't tell Grysta this or I'll really find myself on that spit. Anyway, although I was astonished and relieved by the sinking of the war galley, I would easily have swapped that to have you back. I've never been more frightened. There I was, alone in the dark and fog with you slumped in a heap before me, in a boat that I didn't know how to row, with no idea of where to take it if I could."

I hugged him close. "We each faced our worst terrors that night alone," I said softly. "For me it was the war dogs, and for you, being adrift at sea."

Alfrund glanced at me. "The dogs were more terrifying than the Summoner?" he asked. "I would have thought that *he* would have relegated the dogs to a distant second."

I shook my head. "No, the Summoner was different. He certainly did frighten me, but with him I somehow knew I could fight back. I felt that the moment you explained to me what was happening in my mind and what I had to do. From then on, I was learning too much to feel as afraid as I was

before the dogs. The very thought of them terrifies me still." I put my arm around him and asked, ""Then what?"

"Before the galley sank," Alfrund continued, "the Summoner must have cast a thought to someone ashore. Because after awhile, I began to hear the muffled tolling of the Great Bell of Gedd. It's housed in a tower at the harbor, and it's rung when the fog comes in unexpectedly, to guide boats safely to the harbor. The Lord of the Fort couldn't send any rescue boats out, so he had the bell rung in the hope that it would help any survivors find their way back.

"When I worked that out, I decided I would have to just learn to row. I'd already closed your eyes; now I wrapped you up safely in our cloaks. Now I slipped the oar into that device that holds it, gingerly balanced myself on the platform, and tried to remember exactly what I'd seen while I'd been watching you in the dark."

I smiled. "You didn't watch me for long, unless you did so between snores."

He smiled in return. "I slept like a log, for a bit," he admitted, "but some sense of danger woke me a bit before you spoke to me. All was quiet, though, and I was content to watch you working the oar in the starlight. You were so graceful at it and so sure and it eased my eyes to watch it." He fell silent for a moment, and I closed my eyes. His words had sent a glowing warmth throughout my body.

Finally, I said, "I would give anything to have seen *you* at that oar."

"And I would happily give anything to prevent *you* from ever doing so," he retorted. "In any case, it turned out not to be as difficult as all that. What *is* hard is not pitching yourself over the side while you're doing it. I can swim, it's true, but I didn't fancy my chances at getting safely back in the boat without tipping it over and tossing you into the water as well.

"Still, I kept my footing and eventually I grew skilled enough to move the boat forward instead of around in circles. Even so, it took me a long time to make the shore, and I know it was thanks to amazing luck, because the direction of a sound isn't at all easy to fix in the fog."

"True enough," I said. "I really *am* amazed. I'll never again think of you as a clueless landsman...just as a sorely inept seaman."

Alfrund gave me a poke. "I accept your commendation. Lucky yet again, I found the shore before I found Gedd and so was able to beach the boat unnoticed and carry you and our packs ashore.

"Of course, I'd no idea where we were. I left you hidden in some shrubbery (praying I'd be able to find you again on my return!) and slipped away to do some scouting. By then, morning had come, light was sifting through the haze, and it wouldn't be long before the fog went back out to sea. But, lucky yet a third time, I came across a pasture with a pony grazing in it, with his bridle hanging on the gate.

"He was a gentle beast and consented to be led away.

I returned to shore, draped you over the pony, covered you with a cloak, and shouldered the packs. At a casual glance, I would appear to be a trader, early on the road. I found the path, followed it to the main road to Gedd, and soon had my bearings. Grysta's house is on the outskirts of the town, and so I made my way there without alarm. If there were patrols out, I never encountered any."

"And the pony?" I asked.

Alfrund nudged me. "I'm no horse thief!" he said, with mock indignation. "Grysta knew the beast and its owner, and brought it back to its paddock. When asked, she said that she had found it wandering by itself, and suspected some boys had 'borrowed' it for an early morning ride. So, the pony's well, I'm well, and most importantly, you are, too."

"But suddenly very hungry," I said. "Do you think Grysta has anything in the house I could eat—right now?"

"If she hasn't, then horses can fly," Alfrund answered. Rising from the bed, he pulled on just his shirt. "It will only be a question of hot or cold, wet or dry, sweet or salty, flesh or fish."

I considered for a second and said, "I choose them all."

e returned after a bit, bearing a spoon and a large glazed earthen bowl of steaming broth. "There's a lot more down there, as well," he said, setting the bowl down on a small table beside me. "But let's start with this. Grysta left it simmering on the back of the stove for you, and you'll find it soothing and filling, and it may be all that your

empty stomach can handle right now."

He put his arm behind me and gently lifted me into a sitting position, and packed pillows behind me. When I protested, he shushed me. "Be glad I'm not allowing myelf the pleasure of feeding you, spoonful by spoonful, as Grysta would. But having felt your hand on my shaft, I know it now has some strength in it."

"Well, so did your shaft—*then*," I answered. "But my hand is like your shaft—*now*."

Alfrund laughed as he sat beside me and held out the bowl. "Give it a try," he said, "and let's see. Perhaps you'll find it strengthens you everywhere."

Cautiously, I took up the spoon and dipped it into the soup. My hand did shake slightly as I lifted it up, but not enough to scatter soup on my bedclothes. I took a little sip, for it was quite hot. It had a rich meaty flavor edged with herbs and it was very good.

For a while, mouthful quietly followed mouthful. But after a bit, as the spoon headed back to the bowl, I glanced up at Alfrund and said, "You said there were two reasons that Grysta was angry with you. What's the other?"

Alfrund blew through his lips and looked away. "She thinks it's not right for me to be sleeping with you. She believes that you're not yet old enough for this, at least with someone my age, but also that it's an impertinence for me to do so, given who you are."

I put the spoon back into the bowl and waved the

soup away. "Your apprentice, you mean," I said angrily.

Alfrund took the spoon, dipped it into the soup, and held it up to my lips. "I won't talk to you if you don't keep eating," he said. "I did promise to answer your questions but I'll do so only if *you* promise to listen to my answers."

Somewhat sulkily, I opened my mouth for the spoon, and after he fed me, he continued, "If you were simply my apprentice, she would still have the first objection, but perhaps feel it less strongly—all the more so because she knows me so well.

"But you must already be aware that you're meant for something other than the quiet life of an herbalist. We do have our share of quacksalvers, but our profession hasn't yet attained such ill repute that soldiers and war dogs are sent to capture or kill us."

I sipped from the spoon and watched it return to the bowl. I could have fed myself, but now that I knew I could, I preferred having Alfrund do it. It comforted me against what I was hearing.

"Grysta can't stop us," I said finally. "I won't let her."

"No, she can't," he agreed. "But that doesn't mean we shouldn't consider what she thinks, or at least respect it enough to not rub our lovemaking in her face while we're staying in her house."

He lifted another spoonful of soup to my lips as he said this, so I had to get it down before I replied, which made me at least consider what he had said. It seemed that the

more urgently I wanted an answer to a question, the more confused it made me when I got it. So I said nothing at all, but merely gestured with my hand that I had eaten enough.

Alfrund set the bowl aside and laid a hand on mine. "Jessan," he said, "when you said you had questions for me, I honestly thought they would have to do with why we are resting here and what will be happening to us next. I just wasn't prepared to start talking about you and me."

I turned my head toward the wall but I heard his words. It was true. I had barely given those things a moment's thought. My need for Alfrund had overpowered everything. When I turned my head back to look at him, my eyes were full of tears.

"Fisherboy!" he whispered, "don't break my heart." He reached over and gently touched the carved dolphin that still hung around my neck. "You're at the very brink of the age of choice. If it were you and Faryn sharing this bed, Grysta would think nothing of it—a thing between two boys.

"But when it is you and me there, she has reason to worry. And she also has spent enough time in company to know that in the ordinary course of events I wouldn't even be drawn to someone as young as you."

He was going to say something more, but the words failed to come. He bit his lip and closed his eyes. When he opened them again, they, too, were full of tears. "Why does any of this matter?" he said. "The truth is that I love you very deeply."

"I love you very deeply, too," I said. "But when *I* say those words I give you my heart. When *you* say them, I feel you shifting yours beyond my reach."

"I know," he said softly. He put the bowl of soup on the little table beside me, stood up, and began pulling on the rest of his clothing. "I'm going to take a short walk to let my thoughts settle. As Grysta has already told you, Onna is below, so you won't be left here alone. I'll tell her you're sleeping, so she won't bother you. But she'll come immediately if you call. And, if need be, she'll know where to find me."

He looked down at me and smiled. "You may not believe it," he said, "but all I have to do is look at you to know that a minute from now you'll be sound asleep." He leant over, kissed me on the lips, and went out, closing the door quietly behind him.

Alfrund was right. My confusion and anger were already fading into a distant blur. The time I spent in the void wasn't real sleep, it seemed, but something else; my body, my mind, both needed the healing of plain, familiar slumber and it was sweet to surrender to it.

## Chapter 7



HEN I AWOKE A FEW HOURS LATER, I found myself entirely alone. The bedroom felt empy without Alfrund, and I thought of calling out his name. Instead, I propped myself up on one elbow and reached over for the bowl of broth. It was still half full and, setting aside the spoon, I drank it all straight down. This time all it did was whet my appetite.

Cautiously, I eased my legs over the side of the bed. I wasn't sure that I could get to my feet. Using the bedside table as an aid, I pushed myself up. My legs were a little shaky, but still I could stand, even pull on my shirt. I took the bowl, stepped out into the small corridor, and went down the stairs at the end of it, taking the steps one at a time.

There were two doorways at the bottom of the stairwell. One opened onto Grysta's dispensatory. Inside, four small windows let in the bright sunlight, which spilled onto a large table covered with various items of her trade—a large stone mortar and pestle, iron instruments of a use unknown

to me, bottles of potions and jars full of dried herbs, roots, and mushrooms. All this perfumed the air with a pleasant spicy and herbal scent, the very aroma, I realized, that Grysta had carried with her when she had come into my sickroom.

At the far end of the table was a carved wooden stand holding a large, leather-bound tome; several other smaller books were piled up on a shelf affixed to the wall. Large bunches of drying herbs hung from the ceiling beams, as did the skeletons of several beasts, including a fox, a rabbit, and a seal. Finally, a small, waist-high fireplace had been built into the far wall. In it stood several iron pots formed in various shapes, but all standing on short legs so that they could be set directly onto the burning coals.

There was no one in the room, however, so I stepped through the second doorway into the kitchen. It was also empty, but a fire burned gently in its large fireplace. I pulled a stool over to the hearth, sat down, and, too tired from my trip to hunt for the ladle, looked with helpless longing at the contents of the cooking pot that hung over the coals.

As I did so, a door on the other side of the room swung open, and a comely girl, fair of complexion and clearly possessing a spirited temper, came in, bearing a load of laundry.

"Oh!" she said, surprised.

"You must be Onna," I said. She had Grysta's eyes and determined chin, so I knew that she was something other than just a helper. "From your looks, I would also guess that you're Grysta's granddaughter," I said.

"Yes, I am," she said, laughing. "I hope you mean that as a compliment."

"Oh, I do," I said. "After all, I'm..." I was going to say "her grandson," but realized, a little too late, that I was doing exactly what Grysta had warned me *not* to.

"Jessan, Alfrund's assistant, who was bitten by that awful snake," she said, helpfully finishing my sentence for me. "Alfrund said that he then killed it with a stick, which was brave of him. But then he left it where it died, which was foolish, since it would have been of much value to us. But, then, he is only an herbalist, and so knows pathetically little of the healing arts."

"Nor do I," I answered, a little nettled, despite the fact that all this was a fiction. "I see you share Grysta's low opinion of him."

"Alfrund?" she said, surprised. "No, I like him very much, little as we see of him. Since his return, he's spent most of his time with you, or with Fendal, his lover."

I stared at her in astonishment, speechless. Onna saw my shock but misread it.

"Well," she said, "you're his assistant, surely you know that he prefers men to women." She looked at me more closely. "As, if you will forgive the impertinence, I think you do, also."

"Really, Onna, you're a dangerous person to be near, if one wishes to keep things to oneself," I answered, my voice

breaking. "Yes, what you say is true. But Alfrund has told me nothing about this, this...Fendal."

"Well, then, you haven't asked him," she answered, oblivious to the quaver in my voice, "because, given the least encouragement, he speaks of nothing else." She emptied the laundry basket onto the table, asking as she did, "What do you two talk about then, wandering the wild land together?"

"Mostly, we were busy warning each other to watch out for snakes," I answered, and she laughed again.

"Well," she said, "it was seemly that he didn't." For all Onna's perception, the obvious reason that Alfrund might not have told me about Fendal didn't seen to have occurred to her. Like many girls, she looked upon boys of her own age as little more than children. "Seemly, indeed!" I muttered, but her mind had gone on to other things.

"Jessan!" she exclaimed, "I totally forgot! The fact that you've been delirious for days means you've missed all the exciting news!"

"So, tell me, then," I answered, happy to change the subject.

"Well," she said, "I'm really the *last* to hear anything, because Grysta keeps me close by here. But it seems that a fierce demon warrior has appeared out of nowhere, singlehandedly killing a whole pack of war dogs and somehow sinking a battle galley, with a Summoner on board."

"Did the Summoner drown?" I asked.

"No," she answered. "Although I don't believe that

such can walk on water, as some say. But as he has been seen since, I imagine they just fished him from the sea."

"And is everyone in a state of terror?" I asked.

It was her turn to look at me in surprise. "Where do *you* come from?" she asked. "Everyone in Gedd except for those well paid by the Lord of the Fort to love him are *thrilled*. Demon warrior?" She lowered her voice. "If such as that truly appeared here, the Lord of the Fort would welcome him like a brother, not hunt him like a stag."

"Do they say what he looks like?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I imagine him as looking much like Fendal, large and strong and brave. It bothers me not that Alfrund prefers men, but it grieves me that Fendal does. I would marry him in an instant, given the chance."

May your wish soon turn true, I thought to myself. Onna, however, turned red at the boldness of her statement and turned her head aside. "Here I am gabbing like an old crone," she said, "and you just out of your sick bed. In fact, I'll get a good scolding from Grysta for letting you out of it— although how I could've prevented it I don't know."

"I'll scurry back up before she returns," I promised. "I just came down for some company and some more of that wonderful soup."

"Oh! I *am* blind," Onna cried. She hurried over to where the ladle was kept, came and took the bowl from me, and filled it to the brim.

"Grysta calls it 'the broth from the never-emptying

pot," Onna said, as I began to gingerly spoon the steaming liquid down. "Of course it's never-emptying because she keeps putting more good things into it, but the pot has been there, simmering away, always full, ever since I was a babe. And welcome it is to many who come here in need of healing."

"You may see me empty the whole thing today," I said, "for I surely mean to." And, indeed, my hunger had returned in full force. Seeing this, Onna went and tore me a good chunk of soft, newly baked bread, something I'd rarely eaten, since in my village, bread was baked not to eat but to last. I pulled off chunks of the piece Onna had given me and dipped them into the broth while she companionably folded up the laundry. In such a manner I finished this first bowl and then a second one after it.

Sated for the moment, I began to feel tired again, or perhaps the import of what Onna had said had been slowly sinking in, for I felt deeply sick at heart. "I think I'll return to my sick bed for a bit," I said, "although I'm glad to have met you and hope we can talk alone together soon again."

She gave me a sweet smile. "That would make me very happy," she said. "Alfrund is very stingy in sharing his herbal lore. Perhaps I can wheedle answers to some of my questions from you."

Onna's company, I could see, enjoyable as it was, had pitfalls at every side. I stood up and made my way slowly across the room. Despite the warming broth, I felt as though all my strength had ebbed. I waved away Onna's offer of help,

but had there not been a bannister affixed to the stairs, I might've had to accept it. I half dragged myself, half climbed up the steps, and fell into my bed. I wrapped myself in the blankets, and, again, fell instantly asleep.

This time I didn't wake until night had come. Even so, the room wasn't dark—a candle had been set burning on the table beside my bed. I could hear the sound of voices downstairs, Grysta and Alfrund mostly, with an occasional comment from Onna. There was also the enticing smell of cooking fowl.

I lay there and listened, although I couldn't often make out the words. Once again, I didn't want to think, because every thought only brought me pain. But not only pain—that was what made it so difficult. In the past several days I'd had the happiest moments of my life and the absolute worst ones, and they all seemed entangled together, with no way to free the one from the other.

Onna's matter-of-fact way of speaking of Fendal had done more than hurt me. It had flung open a door into a wider world that I knew nothing about, the one where Grysta and Alfrund went about their ordinary lives, completely detached from me. I hadn't known even that Grysta was still alive, let alone hale and obviously a person of some presence in this place.

And Alfrund—I'd foolishly been thinking he and I were lovers in all but name, while in reality, he was a complete stranger. I didn't know even the simplest things about

him. Fate had thrust us together—and there again I still didn't know why or how. I'd clung to him, and he, it seemed, to me. But now that the wild storm had abated and the life raft had floated safely to shore, what then? What *now*? Tears began to stream down my face, and soon I was sobbing uncontrollably, my face buried in the blankets.

There were footsteps on the stairs and someone came in the door, but I was powerless to control my sobs. Alfrund, for it was he, set something down on the small table by the candle, and then lay down beside me on the bed. It's true that I felt a stab of anger against him but my need for him was greater, and I wrapped my arms around him.

He said nothing for a while but caressed my head and neck. Eventually, my sobs subsided and the tears, although they still filled my eyes, no longer streamed down to wet my pillow.

Alfrund reached over me to a small pile of cloths that Grysta had used to wipe my face when I lay unconscious. "Here," he said. "Blow your nose."

I took the cloth, held it up, and did so, with a loud honking noise that set us both giggling. I wiped my face and dropped the cloth to the floor beside the bed.

"I'm so miserable," I said.

"So I've guessed," Alfrund said. "And no doubt in part because of Onna's innocent prattle. The existence of Fendal must have come as something of a shock, after our time together." I nodded dumbly. "I blame only myself," I said. "I've been so foolish." I began sobbing again. "And it hurts so *much*."

Alfrund reached over and took another clean cloth. "Take this, wipe your face, and listen to me. I've come to give you the second answer to your question, having received Grysta's permission to do so."

"My question?" I asked, blinking the tears from eyes. "Which one? I've so many of them."

"Well, you'll get answers to them all, but only one at a time. This afternoon you asked me why Grysta called me a scoundrel. And I said there were two answers, and that the first was that I'd gotten you to use powers that you didn't know you had and couldn't control."

"And," I responded bitterly, "the second was that you were cheating on Fendal?"

Alfrund gave me a gentle shake. "Hush," he said. "It's true that Grysta's quite fond of Fendal, but she's also quite aware that he can take of himself. In fact, he knows all about you and has only sympathy for you."

"If that's meant to make me feel *better*," I said, "it's only making me feel *worse*."

"Do you want to go on playing the jilted schoolboy?" Alfrund asked, "or do you want to understand where we are right now and where together we might continue?"

I squeezed his arm. "I'm sorry, Alfrund," I said. "Strangely, I think I'm actually saying these things because

I'm beginning to feel better, talking to you."

Alfrund squeezed me back. "Good," he said. "What I'm about to tell you may not cheer you up but it may at least set your heart at rest."

He turned on his back so that he could look up at the ceiling and gather his thoughts. "If Grysta had spoken her thoughts to me, which she hasn't, she would think that it would be dangerously frivolous of me to entertain thoughts of becoming your lover, and certainly of any declaration of intended wedlock—a state, by the way, which for somewhat similar reasons doesn't exist between Fendal and myself.

"But, as it happens, I've been only lightly tempted by such thoughts. Because the truth is that what you find in me, a feeling of great comfort and security in the arms of someone stronger, I feel with Fendal. And while he can always provide that for me, it will only be a short time that I can provide it for you—a time that may already be coming to a close."

I began to protest, but he hushed me. "Hear me out, Jessan," he said. "Even so, in the short time that we've known each other, I've come to love you deeply and with all my heart. But you, and mostly for reasons you don't yet understand, can't offer me what I need from a lover. Fortunately, there is an alternative, one that allows me to be a lover of Fendal and yet remain true to you."

"Twerë," I groaned.

"Twerë," he agreed. "The word means a connection

between two people of any sex that has the strength of love but binds neither to the other. It's often used merely to mean 'more than friends,' but, in truth, it marks out a very different thing. It means an attachment that fate, nature, circumstance has kept from ultimate consummation, but that can't be ignored. If you pledge to be my *twerë*, it means you accept with all your heart that fate forbids us to be lovers but, at the same time, that fate hasn't the power to stand in the way of our feelings for each other. And that's what I can offer you. Do you care to offer it to me?"

I lay there in silence, holding Alfrund's hand tightly, to let him know I wasn't rejecting his offer. But I needed time to think. What he was saying, which is what I'd feared in my heart all along, was that we were never destined for each other, that my life would not be his life, that my image of us, herbalists and lovers together, was not to be.

I couldn't even argue that in time I'd grow to be the lover he needed and wanted—not because I felt I would fail to convince him, but that in my heart I suspected that what he had just said was true. Clearly, fate was pushing me somewhere, and doing so fast and hard, and it wasn't into Alfrund's arms.

So what I was offered instead was the promise that those same arms would be there when I needed them. To be *twerën* was to be in a state of absolute fealty to another. Spouses could be unfaithful to each other because marriage was a fact as well as a promise. Between *twerëi*, the bond was

purely an acknowledged statement of the heart.

Twerëi could sleep together without guilt, it's true, but that was the least the relationship had to offer. Really, it didn't lie somewhere between friend and lover, but between brother and lover. It made a bond as strong as blood, one that demanded respect, not censure, from others.

When I'd become Faryn's *twerë*, I was innocent of all this. For me, then, it was a way for us to say that we loved each other while allowing Faryn to still be one who was attracted to girls and me one who was attracted to boys. It set us away from all that, so that we could share a tenderness without it constantly clouding our lives. But it also meant a bonding far deeper than I'd then seen, and I felt a sudden pang. Here, Faryn had been way ahead of me.

Needless to say, my thoughts were not nearly as articulate as I have made them here, writing in recollection, but I *have* conveyed, I think, their progress and shape.

"Yes," I said finally, "I will be your *twerë*. Wherever fate may take us, I promise in this always to be true."

Alfrund heaved a great sigh and took me in his arms. "And I promise it to you. For now and forever, under the sign of Gesryma, the Great Mother of Blessed Name." And so it would prove to be.

n my own village, a declaration of *twerën* was a private matter although it was always publicly acknowledged. But in Gedd, as apparently elsewhere, it was a matter of some ceremony. Grysta, to my surprise, showed nothing but

happiness for me, and she and Onna at once began planning for the event, which was to happen as soon as I had gained back my strength.

In this intervening time, I also met Alfrund's lover. From Onna's description, I'd imagined a warrior prince in plain clothing, but this wasn't really so. Fendal's solidity was as much a matter of presence as physique; he had an imperturbable solidity about him, strong, quiet, and kind. When they stood together, Alfrund suddenly appeared much more like me—young, even skittish, with his emotions worn plain for all to see.

His simple happiness in the presence of Fendal couldn't fail to move me, and it also made me fond of Fendal. He, in turn, was completely unfazed by me, and embraced me warmly when we met. He was a sailmaker by trade, and he spent his days sewing seams in huge sheets of canvas, with the help of several assistants, who bustled about in the large sail yard, where the cloth was spread for tempering by the sun and rain.

The ceremony finally took place about two weeks after Alfrund and I had made our private vows. No one, of course, attended besides ourselves, Grysta, Onna, and Fendal, along with two of his apprentices with whom I'd become friendly, Wendma and Hestal.

The night before the ceremony, Grysta had presented me with a tunic woven of soft fabric from many colors, in which I felt unbelievably handsome. Even so, I was quite

nervous when we gathered together. This was partly because it is, I had learned, customary for each *twerë* to present the other with something for wearing and remembrance. Of course, I had no such object and neither the money nor the opportunity to obtain one. And Alfrund would hardly embarrass me by giving me something when I couldn't receive something in return.

To my surprise, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, Fendal presented us each with a narrow bracelet of beaten gold, with Alfrund+Jessan engraved on the inside of each, so that the names would always touch our skin. This gift brought tears to my eyes, which began to stream down my face when Alfrund and I faced each other and repeated the same vows we had made to each other in bed. I spoke softly; he spoke firmly, and then we kissed.

Grysta and Onna had prepared a small feast, and we sat and ate roast pig and honeycake and drank dark ale until late into the night. Since this wasn't a marriage, Alfrund didn't lift me up and carry me up the stairs to my bedroom—but he did stay after the others left and went to bed with me, where we made love gently and long and slept in each other's arms. It was a day of great happiness with only the smallest edge of regret to limn it round.

After that, Alfrund did spend some nights with me, but he spent many more with Fendal—which, as Onna would no doubt have said, if asked, was but seemly. On the nights I slept alone, I did so with one hand clutching the bracelet

around my other wrist. On those nights, I had strange, dark dreams of which, usually, I remembered nothing when I woke the next morning, but sometimes the bedding would be drenched in sweat.

## Chapter 8



BVIOUSLY, in recounting the *twerën* ceremony, I have leapt a bit ahead in my narrative. But, in truth, little happened during the time leading up to it that merits description. As my health returned, I began to chafe more and more at being housebound. Or, to say it another way—it was only as I grew stronger that I learned that I *was* housebound.

"We're worried that someone has been brought here from your village to point you out," Alfrund explained, when I moaned about not being allowed to explore the town. "And there is a public warrant for your arrest, with a hefty reward attached. So there is a steady stream of suspects being dragged before the Lord of the Fort on the off chance of winning an instant fortune."

"So they know I'm still alive?" I asked.

"Fortunately, no." We were sitting at the kitchen table, sharing a pitcher of ale, and Alfrund paused to swallow some. "On the other hand, they don't know that you're dead, either. And they dare not assume it, as much as they might hope it to be so, lest they find their own heads stuck on the end of a pole."

I shuddered as I sipped some of my own ale. Drinking it was a new experience for me—like all pleasures of the civilized—and the little bit I had already imbibed was going to my head. "So what was it that sent you flying from here to rescue me, just ahead of the warship?" I asked. "Do you have a spy at the fort?"

"No, you have Fendal to thank for that," Alfrund replied, "and even so, it was a great stroke of luck. For if the Lord of the Fort had decided to send a squad of soldiers on horseback to seize you—as he well could have—we would've been unable to do anything.

"However, by the grace of the Great Mother, he decided to divert one of the war galleys from its patrol to the Faïward Islands to go instead—and Fendal noticed the construction of dog cages aboard it when delivering some new sails. He told me of this when he returned home and I set off to your village less than an hour later."

"I can see the reasoning behind it," I said. "Why have soldiers fetch me when he could send the very fort instead. Once they had me onboard, I was as good as locked in one of his dungeons."

Alfrund nodded thoughtfully. "Yes, and that way he could also send the Summoner to identify you. I can't see that twisted creature racing on horseback from morn to

night along the rough track to your village."

These words surprised me. "Really!" I said. "I imagine the Summoner to be a powerful man."

Alfrund, who had been staring thoughtfully at the table, glanced up at me. "No," he replied, "it's the force that works through him that's powerful, not he. The Summoner may have been a strong man once, but his body has become as corrupted as his mind. Beneath the black cloak he wears he is as white and soft as a wood grub."

I thought of the white groping strands that had been searching for my mind, and the image of those combined with the man who cast them affected me so strongly that I thrust the ale away.

"You make me want to vomit," I said, weakly. Then, to change the subject, "Why didn't you yourself come get me by horseback?"

"I might have," he replied, "if I'd had to race the warship. But, thanks to Fendal, I knew it would be days before it was ready to head up the coast. And there were several reasons why a horseback rescue wasn't such a great idea, starting with the attention it would draw. I had invested much time and effort to make myself an object of little interest, an herbalist who arrives in Gedd every year to gather seaside herbs and sell those he has brought over the mountains to healers such as Grysta."

"You, Grysta, Onna, Fendal...," I murmured. "So many already drawn into my fate, and it's hardly begun to

unfold..."

"And many more still," Alfrund said, "as you will learn. Even so, the fact that we're all free and—so far as I can tell—unwatched, means that the Unnameable One found you without any of us betraying you, knowingly or not. And how this could have happened is a plague on my mind. After all, the war galley was sent *directly* to your village. They *knew*. At first, I thought that the Summoner had somehow tracked you down, but after our adventure with him at sea, I'm sure his range doesn't reach that far."

"That's true," I answered. "For he is seeking me here in Gedd, and doing a very poor job of it."

Alfrund shot me a glance. "You can avoid his casts?" he asked. "Even when you sleep?"

"Yes," I answered. "That part of me doesn't sleep."

Alfrund sighed. "Very well. But the mystery of how they found you still remains." He shook his head in puzzlement. "Did any strangers visit your village before I arrived?" He asked. "Or did anything at all happen that seemed out of the ordinary at the time?"

By now, my stomach had settled itself. I had retrieved my mug of ale and his question caught me in mid-swallow. The image of the attacking skalgür appeared so vividly that I choked on the ale, spewing it all over the table in a violent fit of coughing.

"Jessan!" Alfrund cried, leaping up. He seized hold of my shoulders and gradually I got my breath back. As I did so, he let go of me, saying, "By my name, I swear I'll not be taking you to any taverns with me."

"You had no intention of doing so, anyway!" I gasped out, "but it wasn't the ale that did that, it was *you*." And I told him about the skalgür, how nothing like that had ever been known to happen before, and how old Grannell had said it was an omen connected to me. Then I told him I had had enough ale and enough talking and would he come up to bed with me? And, of course, he did.

o the days passed. From little hints dropped by Grysta, it seemed we were waiting for someone—and until he arrived, there would be no further explanations and, worse, nothing else to be done but wait. Fortunately, soon after the conversation related above, Alfrund arrived one morning with the means to end my boredom entirely.

It came in the form of a large leather satchel. He brought me to the bedroom, and after we had kissed and shared embraces, he sat me down on the bed and opened it before me. It had been made for him some time ago by Fendal and was expertly done, honeycombed with tiny pockets, almost every one of them holding a small canvas sachet. Each of these, in turn, had a small piece of stiff paper stitched into its seam, upon which could be written its contents.

Alfrund then showed me a cunningly hidden compartment in the back of the satchel from which he extracted a small volume bound in leather. I'd never before held a book of any sort. When Grysta had come to teach me to read and

write and do sums, we did all our work with a slate. In truth, I didn't even know what a book was, and held it dumbly until Alfrund showed me how one opened it and turned the pages.

My embarrassment, however, quickly turned to astonishment. This was a book written by Alfrund himself. At the top of each page, he had written the name of an herb, simple, or potion, where he had found it or how he had concocted it, and what he had discovered—or been taught, or had read—that it was to be used for.

Every herbalist had to create such a volume for himself, since nothing like it could be bought, and the few tomes on the subject available for consultation existed in carefully guarded collections, to which one had to be very fortunate, persistent, and well-connected to get permission to study.

All this Alfrund explained to me, and as he did, the book seemed to become more fragile and valuable with every word. If I were his apprentice, I would have been told to save my coins and have a papersmith make such a book for me and to fill it in myself, with my own wits, and no ready access (unless secretly taken) to the master's own. Thus, each book would be a genuine record of each herbalist's experience, capacity to absorb lore, and, in the number and length of the entries, pursuit of his or her craft.

Such a volume was called an *enkiridion*, and it was the most valuable thing in an herbalist's possession, so much so that many carried it always in a secret pocket sewn into their clothing. Alfrund didn't go quite that far, but it was incredibly precious to him. Only when he had come to find me, had he left it, and then in the care of Fendal.

Grysta, of course, had her own *enkiridion*, one much bulkier than Alfrund's, for she was both older than he and ranged wider in her studies. Even more importantly (in Alfrund's view), Grysta had, over the years and by whatever means, obtained the *enkiridia* of other herbalists, some recently composed and others written in centuries past. Although she gave Alfrund no access to her own book, these she *did* permit him to study, and this fact was one that often kept him in Gedd on his travels to this side of the mountains.

Indeed, it's because of these stays that he had come to meet Fendal and become his lover. The sailmaker had come to Grysta's for a salve for badly chapped hands. Grysta had been out and Alfrund had concocted one and rubbed some of it into Fendal's palms...and, as they say, one thing progressed to another.

In any case, as his *twerë*, Alfrund gave me complete access to his own *enkiridion*, and, indeed, encouraged me to fill my time by carefully studying it and seeking out in the satchel each herb as I read about it—or at least such that were currently in his possession. For, of course, he had encountered far more than he could carry with him, even when dessicated. And there were others that were too dangerous to carry, or too valuable—which could amount to the same thing.

It was a precious gift, and I accepted with alacrity, although with the secret fear that little of Grysta's teachings

had stuck with me. I could eke out the meaning of simple letters, inn signs, and the like, but I was far from ready to read and understand such writing as this.

So it was that I returned to my tutoring with Grysta each morning when she was able to teach me, and in the afternoons, sprawled on my bed, I pored over the pages of Alfrund's *enkiridion*. How I loved that book. He'd written it in a hundred different places, by firelight as he camped, on the eating tables of inns as local gossip buzzed around him, at Grysta's worktable just below me, and at other places I could only guess at and that Alfrund himself had already forgotten.

The handwriting was tiny, for each page was small, and crowded, because no item of interest about an herb or root or berry was deemed too minor to leave out. Naturally, the pages had no order, because items had been entered as they were encountered. The only way to learn where something was listed was to know where in the book it was. Perhaps, if I'd a hundred books to study, this would have been a chore, but with just one, it was simply one part of the lesson.

At first, because of this fact, and the similar difficulty in finding the sachet holding the herb I was currently studying among its many companions, my progress was slow. But after a bit I found that I was absorbing the contents of these pages like a dry cloth dropped in a pail of water. In a few weeks, I could keep up with Onna when we discussed this lore. Then, gradually, my knowledge began to outstrip hers, although I was tactful enough to not let her realize it.

I should explain here that what I mean by "knowledge" isn't the number of herbs I knew or some similarly tedious boast. The essential quality of a good herbalist is the ability to recognize correspondences—qualities in one particular herb or simple that could be melded with or enhanced by those of another. To accomplish this requires not only an acute sense of smell and taste but a sensitivity of mind that can tease out latent qualities that others would either not notice or be too easy to dismiss.

Of course, there were simple formulas that did such things that had long been a part of folk wisdom and which need only be remembered and effectively concocted. I learned these first of all. But as I did so, I began to realize that the many different items gathered together in Alfrund's satchel were like words assembled in a lexicon or, rather, the components of a mysterious language.

Once I apprehended this, it became a language I longed to speak and haltingly began to do so. Instead of flowing from the mind to the tongue, however, it flowed instead mostly to the hands. I became practiced in the making of cathartics, restoratives, palliatives, calmatives, medicaments, and all the others that are the stock of the herbalist's trade.

Most of these were therapeutic, naturally, but some had been composed purely for pleasuring the body or the emotions. Conversely, there were not a few that proffered various degrees and sorts of malignancy. I found that I'd a gift for seeing connections that Alfrund hadn't spelled out, sensing a range of possible relationships between very different-seeming substances. I was soon like a child prattling off sentences made from words that not so long ago had been painfully absorbed one by one.

Onna certainly outdistanced me in the practical matters of this art. She was quite generous in teaching me how ingredients had to be ground—sometimes, actually pulverized—in order to blend well with others; how a salve was concocted and how it differed from an unguent; why some potions were made of alcohol and others with water and still others of milk or the juices of certain fruits.

One day Grysta returned to find us lying on the floor helplessly giggling, the result of an herb called thrithma, which caused intoxication if it were burnt and the smoke enhaled. As we lay there together, I suddenly understood why men were drawn to women; that their difference, which until then had only confounded me, was actually the source of their attraction.

However, this amazing realization was of little use to me, since Grysta gave Onna a sound scolding and sent me to my bedroom with the order not to show my face again until supper, and then only if she then felt like feeding me any.

I thought she would complain to Alfrund and let him be the one to speak to me, but she didn't. He was well aware of how engrossed I'd become in his *enkiridion* but he hadn't guessed how far I'd traveled through it on my own. He naturally assumed that I would learn at the pace he himself did, and that there would be some time to go before either of us would profit from discussing my studies.

Ordinarily, I would have displayed what I'd learned for no other reason than to earn his praise, but I didn't. This was partly because some inner voice warned me that I should reveal this with some delicacy, just as I had with Onna, and partly it was because my absorption was so real and complete that such vanity found no room to grow. Instead, I knew that soon enough I would exhaust what I could extract from his book on my own. Then it would be time to turn to him—and to Grysta—not to show off what I had mastered, but to seek their help in learning more.

## Chapter 9



NE DAY, as I was sitting in Grysta's workroom, studying one of the volumes she kept there, a soft knock sounded on the outside door. I was startled, but not frightened. There had been no concerted hunt for me in Gedd, in the sense of soldiers being sent from door to door.

Instead, the Lord of the Fort had waited for the Summoner to recover and then had set him to that task. For some time now, I had been aware of his castings moving in the inner space around me. But I was aware of them long before they had a chance to become cognizant of me. I simply wrapped a shroud of silence about my mind and let them pass me by.

Even so, my first instinct was to withdraw and let Onna deal with the visitor, as she or Grysta had always done before, when someone had come seeking the wise woman's ministrations. But today the house was silent; for once I was there alone. So, when the knock sounded again, this time a little louder, curiosity overcame caution—all the more so because my studies had already made me innocently confident of my skills and I was growing more and more desirous to put these to the test. After all, no one had specifically ordered me *not* to greet callers, so I went to see who was there.

Cautiously, I cracked the door and peered out. Before me stood nothing more threatening than a tired old man wrapped in a soiled robe and carrying a staff. We looked at each other for a bit until I remembered my courtesy. I opened the door fully and bowed my head. "You stand at the doorstep of Grysta the Wise," I said. "However, she isn't here. Might I be of assistance in some way?"

"Indeed, you could," the old man replied, "if you know anything of poultices and such, for my feet pain me greatly. I've come a long way from over the mountains, and I'm too old to bear such traveling easily."

"Enter, then," I said, "for I can help you."

I brought him into the kitchen and sat him in a chair. I fetched a basin, poured in some hot water from the kettle that sat in the embers in the fireplace, which I tempered with some cool water from the drinking pitcher.

I brought this to where he sat, placed this on the floor, and sat down beside it. Removing his sandals, I took each of his feet in my hand and ran my fingers down the bottom of it. Despite the hardness of the skin and the thickness of its calluses, I could sense the heat from the inflammation that was causing the tenderness and pain.

I gently set the old man's feet into the basin, got up, and went into Grysta's workroom. There I assembled a few simple herbs and a fistful of certain berries which have the power to sooth muscles with a penetrating warmth. I crushed these in a mortar, then pounded the result and the simples into a powder. Finally, I worked in enough fragrant nut oil to produce a salve. This I put into a small clay bowl and brought it back into the kitchen.

Again I squatted down, this time lifting out the feet and carefully drying them with a cloth. I drew over a stool so that as I rubbed the salve into each foot, I could rest it there off the floor. This was soon done. I took the basin, emptied it into the slop hole in the yard outside. When I returned, I drew up another stool companionably and sat down.

"We will need to let your feet rest a bit," I said, "while the salve does its work."

The old man regarded me with sharp but not unfriendly eyes. "My name is Orien," he said, "and I'm most grateful for your considerate and, I do think," and here he wriggled his toes, "efficacious attention."

I flushed slightly with pleasure, both because of the compliment and the apparent success of my first healing attempt. "Ours is calling as well as a craft," I answered modestly. "No herbalist would do anything less."

"Maybe so," he answered, "but that doesn't lessen my thanks." He paused and shook his head. "My memory constantly fails me. I seem to have already forgotten your name." I met his gaze. "My name is Jessan," I said. "I'm an apprentice of Alfrund the herbalist."

"Ah," he said, "I've heard high praise of your master, all the more unusual because he is so young. If, of course, we're talking of the same Alfrund."

"Most likely," I answered, smiling at this notion. "Do you think there are many?"

He cocked his head to one side and met my smile with a slight one of his own. "Not that I know. But you went about your business so expertly that at first I took *you* for Alfrund, yourself. But then I thought, he can't be that young."

"So, you expected to meet him here?" I asked, this time visibly flushing from the compliment.

"I was told I would find him here, yes," he answered. "But I have other business in Gedd. Did I mention that I'm a pilgrim?"

"No," I replied, "only that you came from over the mountains."

"And over the mountains beyond those, as well," he said. "I've come to visit what remains of Sondaram, once a great temple by the sea. A certain number of us do this, spacing our visits over time, for we believe our worshipping there sustains its consecration, even though its walls have long been torn down and its ruins plundered."

He lifted his feet from the stool and tentatively pressed them against the floor. "I think I'm healed enough to make it there; it's only a league or so away. Why not come with me? I can tell you've never been there, and it's something you should see at least once in your life."

I hesitated. "I shouldn't leave the house unattended," I said.

"Oh!" Orien replied, misunderstanding me, "are you the house servant here?"

"No," I said. "Onna is that." I decided not to explain that it was *I* who needed the attending. Instead, after a moment's hesitation, I continued, "On second thought, I think I shall accept your invitation, if this place truly is close by." I still hadn't been outside once since I'd come here, which was now almost a month. This excursion seemed harmless enough, since it would take us away from Gedd, not into it.

"Well," said Orien, "don't expect me to trot. But even at my stately pace we will be back in, at most, a few hours. You will find, if you're the right person, that even as a ruin, Sondaram is a hard place to leave."

espite his words, Orien moved with long strides, assisted with a staff, which I hadn't previously noticed, since he had left it inside the door when he had come in the house. It was a finer thing even than Alfrund's, decorated with intricate carving and inlaid with a silvery metal that looked not unlike untarnished silver.

Orien caught me glancing at it. "An old man must have his staff, and since mine is always with me, I decided it should be a fine one."

He passed it over to me. It was surprisingly light for

its size and had an odd balance which I might not have noticed had I not taken hold of it in the middle. Ridges were carved there that seemed especially designed to provide a sure grip. Holding it firmly, I swung the staff first to the left and then to the right. It moved so quickly that it hummed, and with such force that I almost lost control, barely avoiding giving Orien a glancing blow on his side.

He reached out a hand and took it from me. "I think I'd better take that back," he said. But when, somewhat shamefacedly, I opened my mouth to apologize, Orien waved the words away.

"There's no blame meant for you," he said. "I forgot that when my staff finds itself in younger hands, it can get rather frisky. I fear the poor thing has become rather bored with me."

"It's a weapon then," I said.

Orien shrugged. "Over time, it has shown itself to have many purposes. And, yes, one of them is the ability to protect an old man from the occasional scoundrel or footpad. As you saw, it has quite a bit of strength all by itself, necessary when you grow as feeble as I."

"You don't look in the least feeble to me," I said. "In fact, the more I look at you, the less old you seem, too." And this was so. Orien was thin and craggy of feature, with a slight stubble of beard. But he was more wiry than skinny, and there was none of the flaccidity about him that is the inescapable mark of the truly elderly.

"Old I surely am," Orien replied, although obviously not in the least put out by my observation. "As to my strength, I meant mostly compared to what I once was. I can still give a villain a good knock when I need to, staff or no."

We walked on for a bit. The way we had been following had already left the last house behind and now had turned up sharply through a grove of trees. When we left it behind us, I saw we were on a small ridge, but high enough to reveal all of Gedd spread out before our feet.

When Alfrund had called Gedd a town, I'd imagined something like our village, only say, four times as large. But to my innocent eyes, Gedd seemed enormous. It contained a mass of houses and other buildings, leading down to the sea, where there were docks and warehouses and ships at anchor. And, over to one side, on a small peninsula that jutted out into the water, the stone walls of the fort. Even at this distance it looked foreboding, with its high stone walls.

I stared at all this and then asked Orien, "Why did Alfrund call Gedd a town when it's so very large? Do I misunderstand the word?"

"Not really," Orien answered. "Gedd might, by some, be called a city—most probably by those who live here. After all, it's a prosperous seaport and a major producer of salt, one of the kingdom's most desired necessities. If you look over to the left, you will see the salt works spread out beside the sea."

I looked to where he pointed, but saw nothing but

what seemed to be a series of large puddles, glistening in the sunlight. I asked Orien if he meant these.

"Yes," he said. "Those 'puddles' are actually vast shallow pools, carved out of rock. They are filled with sea water, which is then evaporated by the sun, leaving behind the coarse grains of salt, which are swept up into piles and shoveled into sacks.

"In fact, that's the reason for the fort. The soldiers are not here to protect us but to keep us from the salt, which is a monopoly of the king's. The profits from its sale, everywhere in the kingdom, go directly to his treasury. Great effort is expended to keep others from secretly harvesting salt, smuggling it over the mountains, or stealing it from the great mule trains that carry it over them to the kingdom proper."

"However, to get back to your question. Size isn't all that distinguishes a city from a town. Gedd has no scholars, few priests, and fewer temples. There is no palace here, no monuments, no scriptoriam, no high academy, indeed, not one morsel of grandeur or beauty."

He shot a glance at me. "In short, it is considered a negligible and inferior appendage to our great kingdom... and that, it has turned out, is a very lucky thing for *you*."

My mouth fell open in surprise. But before I could form the words to ask him what he meant, he seized hold of my shoulder and directed my attention to the sight that had now appeared directly before us. "Behold," he said, "the ruins of Sondaram!"

We had crested the ridge and Gedd, even as Orien was dismissing it, had fallen out of sight behind us. On this, the far side, the sea came much further in, forming a steep-sided bay, with sheer cliffs falling down to the water. At their edge, just below us, on a great ledge of rock, was the place at which Orien now pointed with his staff.

From his description, I'd expected nothing but a jumble of rocks. But though the place was in ruins, it was not without majesty. A flight of stone steps led up to what had once been a great portico; beyond this, among the tumbled walls, were the remnants of a great hall, its vast floor of colored tile glittering brightly in the sun. And beyond that, at the side closest to the sea, enough remained of a great tower for the sight of it to still take your breath away.

Orien setting the pace, we hastened down to it, along a way that, I saw, was still paved with stone. When we came to the place itself, Orien laid his hand on my arm and bade me stop. "What you are about to see me do," he said, "is my obligation, not yours. Don't attempt to imitate me. Once we're inside, I'll explain everything."

He then took a few steps to what must have been the entrance, fell to his knees, and prostrated himself. He remained there silent for several minutes and then rose again to his feet.

He then lifted his staff above his head and spoke an incantation made up of words I didn't understand. But their effect was immediate. The spirit of the place made itself known. There was no visible manifestation of this, but it felt as though a great beast had been awakened and had lifted its head. The air was charged with an alert presence that I could feel was focused entirely on me.

Orien then turned to me and gestured that I should precede him up the stairs. When I hesitated, wanting him to go first, he said simply, "Sondaram is aware of your arrival, as you yourself have probably sensed. It will now let no one enter unless by your leave. Go ahead of me and give your assent."

So I went to this invisible doorway and passed through. As Orien approached behind me, I felt a glancing query, as light as a feather, pass over my mind. It sought not so much to get my assent as to align *its* awareness of the mage with my own. From now on, at any given moment, it would treat Orien as I would wish it to.

With each step I took, my awareness of the force around me deepened. Here, the place that I had entered to struggle against the Summoner was no longer just inside me, but all around me as well. This time, my eyes were open, I could see the world as it was outside Sondaram's boundaries. But I was also in a state of heightened consciousness, aware of a world beyond the physical swirling around me.

The flash of fear that had come to me at the thought of the Summoner ebbed away as quickly as it had come. The force thickened about me with each step I took, the way water feels when you dive deeply into the sea. In fact, like the sea, the force began to enfold me, take hold of me, and lift me up. I lifted my arms over my head and I rose gently into the air, up and up, so high that even in my exhilaration, some part of me began to lose its nerve. Instinctively, I lowered my arms until they reached out horizontally from my shoulders, my hands pointing outwards, my palms down.

As I did so, the upward movement stopped. Now, instead, the great current passed through me, pulsing through my entire body, cleansing it, strengthening it, and opening my mind. I had no visions and heard no voices. Instead, I felt as I'd awakened from a dream, and what before had been murky was now clear, what before had been weak was now shown the way to become strong.

Eventually, I drew my arms in and crossed them on my breast. The flow stopped and I floated where I was and drank in a great stillness, not an emptiness but a fullness that held me steady and safe. It was far deeper than any lover could provide, except that there was no heart beating next to mine, which is, in the end, the most precious thing there is.

I had no sense of passing time but, mindful of what had happened before, I lowered my arms and pointed to the ground below me. Slowly I sank until my toes touched the cold stone. My legs, however, were not strong enough to hold me up, and I came to rest crosslegged on the floor. I raised my hands, palms up, and the force drifted away, although I knew that it merely waited for me to summon it again.

As I sat there weakly, I saw that I was in some sort of circle, demarcated from the rest of the floor by a surface of translucent, softly shimmering blue stones. I lifted my eyes and saw Orien standing just beyond the boundary. He reached out a hand to me, and I realized that he couldn't—or wouldn't—enter this circle to help me up. So, rather ignominiously, I crawled to its edge on my hands and knees. When I crossed over the border onto the rubble-strewn floor, the force immediately began to flow again behind me. I could actually see it, a fountain of visible air, tinted the lightest possible blue, flowing upwards in a state of continual flux.

## Chapter 10



PULLED MYSELF into a sitting position again, and Orien sat down beside me. He put his arm around me, for I was shivering slightly, and as he did so I realized I was completely naked. Surprised, I looked around for my shirt. I had no recollection of taking it off.

Orien's arm slightly quivered; he was laughing. "Don't waste the effort," he said. "The force immediately reduced it to shreds and cast it out." He poked at something with his staff that looked like a particularly clean sort of dust. I picked some up and looked at it dumbly: it was the fabric of my shirt, reduced to the finest fluff.

I turned to look at Orien, who was himself regarding me gravely. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"I think so," I said. "Why am I so exhausted?"

"For the same reason that walking through a raging storm is tiring," he replied. "But you will find that your spirit will soon strengthen to the point where you simply take pleasure in it. Which is just as well, for you will eventually spend a good deal of time enveloped by it."

I sighed. But it was true—I did feel my strength returning. Even so, I wasn't in any hurry to get up. I stared at Orien. "Who am I?" I asked. "And for that matter, who are *you*?"

"Well, as to *me*... well, my name you already know. But others would call me the Mage Orien, for that is *what* I am."

I looked at his staff and smiled. "Many purposes,' indeed," I said. "But, ashamed as I am to say this, I don't know what makes one a mage. Is it the same as being a wizard?"

Orien looked pained. "Since we should get to your first question, which is by far the most important one, I'll explain, but briefly. A mage is akin to a magician, in that he is, I am, mortal, and have acquired my powers, such as they are, through study and practice. The difference is that between a warrior lord and a common soldier. Mages belong to a brotherhood of initiates; we're bound by oath never to use our powers for mere personal aggrandizement nor to aid or abet evil.

"Wizards, on the other hand, are brought into being by given magical powers otherwise impossible for humans to obtain. You may eventually learn to create them yourself. Because they are a threat to He Who Cannot Be Named, they have been hunted down and exterminated. Some may still survive, but if so it is because they have hidden themselves well and taken care not meddle in the affairs of men."

Orien sighed. "And to save you from asking, the demonic race has its own users of power that mimic those of

men, but are named sorcerers instead of wizards, necromancers instead of magicians, and warlocks instead of mages. They are all dangerous and fell, but none are of any concern to us now."

I could see that Orien was impatient to turn the subject to me, but I felt certain dread at what I would hear. I got to my feet and crossed the great expanse of polished floor, to where it looked over the sea. With each step I could feel the great power of this place shimmer around me. Orien arose and came with me, and we stood together looking out across the water. On it, here and there, was a scattering of fishing boats, and I felt a great yearning to be standing in one, hauling in the net.

"And the Summoner?" I asked. "What about him?"

Orien made a dismissive gesture. "A lowly creature. A man enslaved, channeling the force of his master. Such rarely live long or sink into gibbering madness, since the weight of the power that uses them is too great for their bodies or minds to bear. Very soon, you will find them no threat at all."

I nodded, refraining from speaking my thought, which was that, as I'd said to Alfrund about another matter, if those words were meant to reassure me, they had done no such thing.

"Are you ready now to hear about yourself?" Orien asked gently. "After all, you did ask me to tell you."

I looked at him, our eyes meeting. "Am I ready to

hear what you have to tell me?" I asked.

Orien sighed. "I can't answer that with certainty," he said. "What I do know is that now you're in more danger not knowing than you're at risk from what you're about to hear. Hearing it will change you forever, it's true, but you already knew, even before what happened here this afternoon, that you were on a path of destiny very different from any other." He gestured toward my arm, where to my surprise, the Cronnex glowed, visible even in the bright sunlight that reflected off the sea.

"In the confines of this place, and others like it, the sign shows plainly, always. It does so because it signifies your sovereignty over this place, the physical manifestation of your domain. In fact, as you shall see, your very presence here will cause it to heal itself, to call back into being, bit upon bit, almost all that was torn down, except for the few parts that were contributed by the labor of men."

Strangely, this news gave me great pleasure, even as it startled me. I found I greatly desired to see Sondaram given back its physical solidity so it could reflect the great power of the site. As my mind formed this thought, a great groaning was heard, a heavy cloud spilled out of the fissures, the broken places, the gaps between stones. We were blinded, and instinctively I pulled a blanket of force around us to protect us both. There was a great rumbling, shaking the very earth beneath our feet, like boulders plummeting in an avalanche down a mountainside.

Indeed, it seemed as if we were in the middle of such, for in the murk, massive shapes tumbled about us and there was a shrieking of stone set firmly against stone. Then a cool breeze blew off the ocean, the cloud of dust flitted away, and we found ourselves standing in a great domed room, beside an opening, framed by a great arch, that gave access to a garden, lined with stone walkways, with a great view of the sea.

Even as we stood there, a fountain appeared and began gurgling; trees took root and grew, spread out branches, and produced a haze of fragrant yellow blossoms. My first thought, when my amazement faded sufficiently for thoughts to form, was that I wanted to walk these paths with my arm around Alfrund and his around me, and my head leaning against his shoulder.

This thought, with the accompanying slight swelling of my member, reminded me that I was standing here with nothing on. Embarrassed, I turned to hide it, but Orien, who had other thoughts on his mind and not even noticed this tumescence, took me by the shoulder and led me two steps through the arch. He directed my attention to the far corner of the building, which, unlike everything else, was still a ruin.

"That," Orien said, "is the tower of this place. Standing on it, you can see Gedd, if you wish, and far out over the ocean. When Wethrelad and Gostranar have also been restored, the tower attached to each will simultaneously come into being. This will, among other things, allow you to pass from one to another of them in a moment of time. But their

purpose, above all, is to let you get high enough so that all the power you feel here can be focused and used with unimaginable force. Think of the tower as a funnel and you as the spout."

"Why do both the palaces have to be restored before this tower appears?" I asked.

Orien shrugged. "I don't know. But if the tower *had* just now appeared, your enemy would know and immediately dispatch a great army, to raze everything on this side of the mountains and kill every living being. And you could do nothing yet to prevent it. So perhaps the fact that it alone remains in ruins is a sign that you haven't yet attained all the power that is yours to wield."

He turned back into the great room. As I entered it beside him, a great blue flame rose from the floor in its center, reaching up to the roof of the dome. As we came closer, I saw that it was not a flame at all, for it pulsed rather than flickered and it began a span or so above the floor. So did the power of Sondaram manifest itself.

I stepped into it and felt it surge about me. As Orien had predicted, the experience was already less draining, and I could sense the reverse would soon be true. It was like running a long distance. The first time, at the end, your legs shook, pain stabbed in your side, and you gasped for breath. But as time passed, the same distance brought out the strength that had grown within, and at the end you felt not tired but glorious.

I stepped back out. "We should go back," I said. "More time than we allowed for has passed and Grysta and Alfrund will be worried about me."

Orien snorted. "Grysta and Alfrund know full well where you are and who you are with. And time has not passed. Inside these walls it moves at a pace determined by you. When we step outside Sondaram, you will find the sun in almost the same place as when you stepped in.

"However, if you need some time to rest, explore your palace for a room comfortable for sleep. I will wait here and be ready to continue when you are refreshed."

These words stung a little because they touched on a truth that I had attempted to hide—I felt I had experienced enough for one day. Orien and Onna, I thought, would get along together famously. But it was true that a good rest was just what I did need. And, almost as much, I was curious to see more of this place. I looked around, this time not toward the sea, but in the direction from which we had originally come.

The entryway to the room in which we were now standing had on one side a grand stairway that rose to the next floor, its steps made of thick slabs of a shiny black stone shot through with glowing streaks of yellow and red. I climbed these and discovered that they led to a gallery that circled the great dome and into which opened a series of rooms, each one possessing an elaborately worked wooden door. These had no latch strings but instead a heavy silver ring that, when turned, allowed the door to be swung open.

Each of these rooms was empty of furnishings or anything else, such objects apparently being the things "contributed by the labor of men" that Orien had said the magic would not restore. Well, all this stonework was fine enough, but right now I would gladly give a column or two for a soft bed and a blanket in which to wrap myself.

I found none, however, and eventually chose a room where the narrow windows looked out to the north, letting in a soft and soothing light. I crossed it to the darkest corner and began to lie down on the floor. But as I did, I felt the force rising up to meet me. Of course, I lay on top of it, as if it were a mattress. So floating comfortably an arm's length above the flagstones, I rested my head on one of my arms and fell almost instantly into a deep, dreamless sleep.

When I next opened my eyes again, I had no idea how long this had gone on, for the light was exactly the same as it had been when I had closed them. But I felt fully refreshed and strong enough, if still not particularly willing, to learn my fate. I stood up and headed down the glowing flight of stairs to Orien.

found him in the great room, sitting on one of the marble ledges that ran around its side. He was staring at the great shimmering display in the center of the room. "Do you know," he asked me, when I sat down beside him, "what would happen if I were to stick my arm into that."

"I suppose it would do just what does to me," I answered, "flow around you. And, if you commanded it, lift you

up. After all, you are a mage."

"It would eat my flesh down to the bone in an instant," he said, "and if I left it there still, devour the bone as well. Even though I am, as you say, a mage, and a very powerful one."

I stared at the mass of ethereal, pulsating blue in confusion. It had never for one second occurred to me that it might be dangerous, not in the sense that Orien described. Unlike water, you could breathe in it, but like water, if you stayed immersed in it too long you could drown.

"You would have warned me," I said at last, "if it were dangerous." But as I said these words I realized that once I had felt the force I had forgotten Orien's very presence. It had drawn me to it as mother drew a son. And then I realized what he meant. "And Alfrund?" I asked.

"The same as me. And, as well, Grysta, the Lord of the Fort, the Summoner, anyone else on this side of the mountains—and on the other side of them as well, save one, or maybe two beings who are not unlike you."

I asked the question I most dreaded the answer to. "Am I not human then?"

"No," Orien said quietly. "You are not. You look like us, you experience the same emotions, you even, mostly, think like us. But that is just to make it possible for you to follow your destiny, which is deeply entwined with our own. You are one of the *Nithaial*, or the Intermediaries, as they were also called, between mortals and Gesryma, the Great

Mother of Blessed Name.

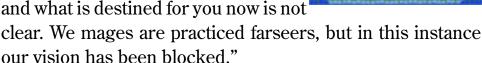
"Now there is one other thing you should know about yourself. Since the beginning of things, there have always been two of you, *Galgaliel*, the one of light, and *Elimiel*, the one of darkness. You Jessan, are the light one, and we now seek everywhere for your darkling twin."

"There is another of ... of me?" I asked.

Orien nodded. "So we dearly hope," he said. He pointed down to the floor, paved with tiny tiles. These, over and over again, repeated an emblem, half of which was displayed upon my inner arm. "The Cronnex," he said. "You are one half; he is the other. You play the day to his night. Yours are the powers of air and water; his of earth and fire.

In the old days, either in your separate palaces or together at Gostranar, your shared home, your role would have been to watch over and shepherd all human life."

He sighed and shook his head. "But these are not the old days, and what is destined for you now is not



"Does Alfrund know all this about me?" I blurted out. "Is that why he refused to become my lover?"

Orien smiled. "Ah, Jessan, always putting the important things first. I actually have no idea what Alfrund knows,

but I don't doubt that he suspects enough to understand he couldn't offer you that.

"Even so, he loves you, and sees you as a charming boy who also just happens to be about to come into great powers. As, in her way, does Grysta. Unlike them, I knew what you are before I met you, and so as much as you have charmed me, too, I look upon you in fear and trembling, and so perhaps see you more clearly."

"Don't say that," I said hotly. "It's just nonsense. I may have these powers, but I am still Jessan."

Orien raised an eyebrow. "It ill befits an old warrior and mage such as myself to sit trembling in your presence, but that is just how I feel. Tell me, if you believe otherwise, where I should draw the line between the Jessan who washed my feet and rubbed them with salve and the Jessan who stepped lightly into that manifestation of elemental power we see before us and instinctively bent it to his will?" He lay his hand upon my knee and added, "I humbly suggest that you might consider being a little afraid of you, yourself."

He stood up. "I think you have heard enough from me for one day, as much as there is left to tell." He looked at me then, and smiled. He went to his shoulder bag, which he had left with his staff, and from it, after rummaging a bit, withdrew a folded garment. "Here," he said, "put this on. It is my nightshirt, and so will look a little strange, but not like strolling through town with nothing on at all."

After I had pulled it on, we walked around Sondaram

for one last time, and I absorbed of it what I could. When we stepped onto the plaza that spreads outside it, I found that, just as Orien had predicted, the sun had hardly moved. I had also thought that great doors would close behind us when we left, but that was not so. They did not need to do so.

When we reached the top of the ridge, I turned back for a final look. It glittered in colors as brightly as the sea, as fragile-seeming as a jeweled box. When I mentioned this to Orien he said, "Jessan, nothing can enter Sondaram without your permission. And to harm the place they have to kill you first. Even then, as you have seen, the damage is only an illusion."

"Wouldn't it be wiser for me to stay here then?" I asked.

"No!" Orien said vehemently, "the wise thing is to get you as far from Sondaram as fast as possible. There is nothing your enemy would like better than to pen you in here and wait until you were driven mad by the confinement. You might kill thousands of them, which would itself make you ill from effort, but your enemy has no shortage of warriors, believe me. They would come and come until their bodies were heaped about as high as the hills. And they would still come. Sondaram is an abode of peace, not war, or at least not until its tower is raised."

After this exchange, I gave up any effort of conversation, wishing only to be as far away from Orien for the rest of the day as I possibly could. And perhaps he sensed this, for he told me when we reached Grysta's door that he had other business to attend to and would not come to the house until the following day.

Naturally, though, he left me with a cheerful parting. "The reappearance of Sondaram will hardly go unnoticed; the Lord of the Fort will soon post a guard there—I would be surprised if a squad is not hurrying through Gedd already. And now that he knows for certain you didn't drown, he will be considering what he should do next. It would be just as well for you to return to being strictly the Jessan who is Grysta's grandson and Alfrund's *twerë*."

"I don't know how to be anything else," I said shortly, and went in and slammed the door.

## PART THREE MASTER OF SONDARAM

## Chapter 11



NNA'S SMILING welcome soon made my heart easier. "I'm here by myself," she said, "concocting a potion for what I don't know. As always, Grysta was as long in instruction as she was short in explanation."

"Let me wash the dust from myself," I said, "and I'll be glad to help you."

I cleaned up and went to the work table and examined the various items that Onna had spread out upon a clean cloth. There were one or two I had not seen before, but I recognized them from their description in Alfrund's *enkiridion*. Even if had not known their names, I would have known their purpose from smelling and tasting them, in conjunction with the others.

"Hmm," I said. "Silverrot, millengrass, vitrion, pallfew, waterfrond, and ...," I picked up a tiny vial, removed the glass stopper, and sniffed. "Tincture of hythmalast! Grysta must mean to treat something serious, if she calls for

something so rare and costly. Did she also have you make a scorb to burn in all the rooms?"

Onna looked at me in astonishment, her mouth open. "Yes," she said. "First thing of all. It's already been compounded and sent off with a boy."

"Some sailor has brought the black pox with him to a wayhouse down by the docks," I said. "I'll wager there's a bonfire of mattresses and clothing right now. And this will be going to the illhaven, where those who were stricken have been taken. If she didn't tell you all this, she must have been in too much of a hurry."

Onna shook her head but said nothing. We worked silently, grinding the ingredients separately and then sifting them carefully together. A fire was already burning under a small, three-legged cauldron and within it a small amount of water seethed. Together we lifted the heavy onyx mortar and poured in its contents, letting it gently simmer together until it produced a thick, livid tea.

As we worked, the boy returned, ready for his second delivery. Onna bade him sit and gave him a cake. We lifted the cauldron from the heat and strained its contents through a coarse muslin cloth into a large flask. I took the ends of the cloth and twisted them together tightly, to extract every bit of the liquor that I could. Onna picked up the flask gingerly, for its contents were still quite hot, and wrapped it up carefully in a length of linen and bound it tightly with twine.

"Drop this," she said to the boy as she handed it over,

"and Grysta will nail your hide to the wall there and, when it's dried, grind it into powder and use it in potions." The boy's eyes widened as he looked to the spot where she pointed. He then giggled nervously and scuttled out the door.

"She probably would, too," Onna said, with a sigh, and sank down on a stool. I selected some calmatives from among the herbs and brewed us each a cup of tea. As it steeped before us, she went on, "You have already far outstripped me in my studies. I know you're quick, but it's also because you're Alfrund's *twerë*, and so he gives you full access to his *enkiridion*."

I glanced over to where Grysta's *enkiridion* sat on its stand at the end of the work table. Onna saw me do so and said, "Don't think I haven't thought of it often enough. But I'm not made to keep a lie, let alone tell one, and if I were caught I could never live down the disgrace."

"No," I agreed. "It would be too hard to keep apart what you'd been taught and what you'd found out on your own. Grysta would spot such things at once."

A thought came into my head but before I could broach it, we heard the sound of the door latch click, and Alfrund came into the room. He set a pitcher of ale down on the table and put his hands on my shoulders and squeezed them.

"Fendal and his apprentices are celebrating the birthday of one of their number, which means drinking a lot of ale, singing a lot of songs, and wrestling each other for silly prizes. So I hoped I could find some dinner here and a quiet place to sleep."

"For supper, we have only cold pigeon pie," Onna said. "But I imagine you'll find that your bed is warm enough," kicking me under the table as she did so. This caused me to blush furiously, and to feel totally foolish for doing so, especially because I gave her the extra pleasure of seeing her jape's success.

She might also have said, although I was glad she didn't, that Alfrund might not find his bed all that quiet, either. And, indeed, it wasn't, not for some time. But eventually we settled in together, and faces close to each other, whispered for a bit before sleeping.

"Riddle me this," Alfrund said. "I come here and find you in a nightgown. I know I didn't provide you with one—it would have been a total waste of cloth and tailoring. Is it one of Grysta's? Did something happen to your shirt? Or are you trying to pass for an old man, with your hem below your knees?"

I told him what had passed this day, remembering as well that I would now need a new shirt.

"Don't worry about that," Alfrund said. "You can have a spare one of mine." He was silent as he mulled over what I had told him. Then he spoke again, putting his finger exactly on what was troubling me the most about the day. "That Orien is a prickly fellow. I'm glad he's not *my* teacher."

Instead of replying, I just snuggled even closer to

Alfrund. I kissed him and said, "Are you glad to have *me* as your student?"

I could feel his smile in the dark. "How could I not be? I give you my *enkiridion* and a few days later you're taking in patients. I'm glad you had sufficient humility at least not to charge for your services. I imagine by now Orien's feet have swollen to the size of melons."

I punched him gently. "You wish," I said, "although if I'd known what was in store for me I'd have dug out a potion to do just that, or worse."

"Perhaps something that would have shrunk his staff," Alfrund said. "As I remember, it's rather a long one."

"Well, longer than yours anyway," I said. And when he punched me back, added in an injured tone, "Well it is, and done all over with metal tracery, which *yours* certainly isn't."

"No wonder wizards have no lovers," Alfrund said, adding, "But seriously, did he explain everything?"

I groaned. "That I'm Jessan, one of the *Nithaial*?" I answered. "Honestly, I much preferred my old title, Jessan, Village Slut."

Alfrund caressed my chest. "Foolish boy. As we've just seen, the two occupations aren't exactly incompatible. In any case, you haven't turned out to be all that successful at the former. Two conquests in all—Faryn and me—that won't get you much of a reputation."

I giggled. "That's because I forget and kept wearing

that undergarment you gave me. But now it, too, is all thread and dust."

"So, you switched to a nightshirt," Alfrund said. "Lovers will be trailing after you through the streets."

I snorted, and said, "As if I'm ever allowed to set foot on them."

"That will change tomorrow, sweet boy," Alfrund replied. "When first we met I promised you some new and finer clothing, and I think it's time to do so. Tomorrow we'll go together and do some quiet shopping. With care, we will be back before Orien appears at our doorstep wanting another foot kneading."

"He'd better not," I said drowsily, already drifting off to sleep. But then I remembered my desire to walk with Alfrund in the garden at Sondaram, and lifted my head out of his armpit to tell him about it. But as I did so, I realized he was already lost in dreams. It could wait. With a contented sigh, I snuggled closer and followed him there.

he following morning, I woke to find that Alfrund had laid out a spare shirt and, I noticed, another pair of short pants beside it. I pulled them on and went down to join him and Onna at breakfast. We shared a large bowl of hot porridge, which still to me seemed—the portion, the hotness— a great luxury.

Then Alfrund and I made our way into the heart of Gedd, to the shops, the bustling open market, the many taverns, shrines, bakeshops, craftsmen, and the like. Soon we were buried in the throng that bustled here and there, many wearing the garb of their trade or profession.

There were also soldiers there in plenty, but they were mostly standing in small groups, talking among themselves. Alfrund had already pointed out that they had only the vaguest idea of what I looked like, even if they had been ordered to watch for me. One lad among hundreds, that was all I was. I also realized with a smile that with the reappearance of Sondaram, what they sought now was a nascent *Nithaial*. *He*, no doubt, wore robes of viridian and a circle of fire burned fiercely above his head.

Indeed, the town was abuzz with that news and from the conversations we overheard, I gathered that the townsfolk were evenly divided between those who saw this as a sign of hope and those said it foreshadowed the advent of great troubles. No doubt they were both right. I recollected Orien's frowning face and wondered if any here considered that their fate would contain as much of the one as the other.

Alfrund took my arm and drew me into a hosier's shop, where my legs were measured for leggings, both in a deep viridian weave, for dress, and in supple doeskin, for travel. We then went to a tailor for some britches, to wear above the leggings, and to a bootmaker, for boots to tuck them into. The tailor was also to make me some different shirts, of finer stuff than what I had ever worn before, and shorter, since they, too, would be tucked into the britches, not worn hanging over them.

Finally, we went to a leathersmith, for Alfrund wanted to purchase me a belt, as gift for my soon-to-happen Sixteenth Day, when I assumed the responsibilities of a man. For most, the only outward change in dress on that day was the donning of a belt, which boys were not permitted to wear.

I hesitated for some time, hovering between this possibility and that, finally accepting the one Alfrund chose for me, which was composed of many thin leather strands, deftly woven together. The belt buckle would be obtained elsewhere, and would be a surprise.

As Alfrund and the leathersmith bargained for the price, I began to finger a handsome bleached leather vest, lined with silken fabric and ornamented with stitching in the dark red color called dragon's blood. The leathersmith paused in his haggling and said, "You have a fine eye. I made that for a merchant's son who died of the pox before it could be delivered. If it fits, you can have it for a song, since some would think it ill-omened, innocent though it is."

I couldn't help but slip it on, even while saying, "It's both beyond our means and beyond my station."

The leathersmith raised his eyebrows. "As the apprentice of a master herbalist?" And to Alfrund, he added, "I can smell your trade upon your clothing, sir, though you don't wear your robe."

Then to both of us, he said, "This is not mere fancy dress. I've worked several pockets into it, both inside and out, both visible and hidden. It can hold much without any

ugly bulging: well hidden, you might say..., should that ever prove necessary."

At this, the spark caught and I knew that the "merchant" the leathersmith had mentioned was in truth a smuggler, who had no doubt been caught before he was able to claim it. If it had been for his son, it was out of the hope that soldiers might not search the boy as thoroughly.

The leathersmith whispered a price in Alfrund's ear, and either because he thought it looked good on me or just to see my eyes sparkling, he accepted. The leathersmith showed me the hidden pockets, which were very cleverly done, and I wore it proudly out of the shop.

"You're a generous master, Alfrund," I said. "Thank you."

"And you are very welcome, comely boy. It pleases me that I can afford such things that set your beauty off."

I found myself blushing furiously again. Alfrund laughed and kissed me, then reached into his purse and brought out several coins, both silver and copper.

"Here," he said. "I just remembered that I've an errand to run that I'd better do alone. Go buy yourself something that catches your eye. Then wait for me at the inn across the way. It's called the Ship Master's Rest, and it's a quiet and safe place, as I know well. We will then go home together." And so we embraced and parted.

I slipped the coins into my pocket. There was something I had wanted to buy, but without money hadn't been

able to imagine how I could. Fortune was smiling on my plan, and that would have made me happy, were I not so happy already. It took me some time to find the shop, for it was probably the only one in all of Gedd, a stationer and a papersmith.

I told the boy at the counter that I was seeking a plain bound book with empty pages. He was about my age and had large brown eyes, tousled black hair, and pale smooth skin. I felt a flutter in my heart, or maybe somewhere else, as I spoke to him.

"I haven't seen you before," he said, "and I thought I knew every boy in Gedd who has his letters. There aren't many. My name's Telo."

"Mine's Jessan," I answered. "And you're right. I recently came over the mountains with my master, who's an herbalist. But how did you know I have my letters? Sometimes I'm not so sure myself."

Telo smiled. "Because I saw you reading the titles of the few typeface books I've encouraged my father to buy from the even fewer traders who deign to carry them."

I picked up one and opened it, not knowing what such a thing might be. But I saw at once that the print, so small and perfect, had been made by no hand, but by some ingenious device.

"That *is* quite amazing," I said. "And there's a market for such in Gedd?"

"You sound like my father," Telo answered. "Of

course not. Or, rather, *I'm* the market, although I can't afford to actually purchase any. It's my great desire to become a maker of such books, although how I cannot imagine. But at least now I can hold one and caress it."

He sighed and turned his back. "A book of blank pages. We have many such. Small or large, leather bound or wood and cloth?"

"Small but thickish," I answered. "Something easy to fit in a girl's hand."

Telo turned his head and glanced at me. "Well, I've misread you after all."

"No," I answered. "You're right in that, too. This girl is but a friend." We smiled at each other.

"This should be perfect," he said, selecting a small volume bound in a fabric with a pattern of twining leaves.

"More so even than you can imagine," I answered. I pulled out my handful of coins.

"Have I enough to purchase this and also one of these typeface books, as well?"

"Yes, you have, and a little more," he answered, scanning my collection. "Which one would you like?"

"You select one," I answered, "since I know nothing of such things."

Telo went through them one by one, and finally selected a slim one with leather binding, its title impressed in gold leaf. "This one," he said, "for not only is it a pleasure to hold and look at, but tells tales that are also enjoyable to read."

He handed it to me and took the proper coins from my hand.

I put the rest of the coins back in my pocket and then offered the book to him. "This is yours," I said, "for the forfeit of a kiss."

His face suddenly lit up with joy. "A kiss you would've had anyway, for I was just working up the nerve to ask for it. But this...." He shook his head and tears came into his eyes.

He then seized my hand and drew me around the counter. "My father's at work in the shop above our heads," he said, "and we have at most two or three customers a day." He led me past the curtain that concealed it into the back of the shop, a drab and dusty place.

Telo seized my head with both hands and kissed me deeply. He then took my hands and guided them under his shirt, where I encountered no undergarment. I clutched at the warm softness of his buttocks and pulled him toward me, our kissing never stopping. His hands had found my underclothing, but he simply tugged at the drawstring and let them fall around my legs. He took hold of my sex, which was already erect and began to stroke it.

I pulled my face away from his. "Don't!" I said. "It will make a terrible mess."

He laughed. "Well, you *are* an innocent. There's a simple solution to that." And he went down on his knees and took me in his mouth. I was amazed. Why hadn't Alfrund taught me this? How good it felt. My body shivered all over when he began to also gently stroke the purse which hung

beneath. It took but a moment more for me to find release. Telo swallowed all that came.

"What does it taste like?" I asked.

He stood up and said, "There's an easy way to find out," and kissed me with an open mouth.

"Good enough to want some more," I said, once he had stopped.

"Then you must help yourself," Telo answered, "and you'll find I'm quite generous with it."

His words strangely excited me and, stepping out of my undergarment, I knelt down and examined him. His staff was delicate, even when swollen, with a narrow, tapered head. From its opening, some liquid already oozed, and, tentatively, I licked it up. Telo's sex quivered and he gave a little moan.

Encouraged, I took it in my mouth. I hadn't really been able to properly watch what he had done with mine, the sensations were too strong. But my instinct was to treat it gently but hotly, licking at the head and then moving it in my mouth, pressing it against my tongue. Telo put his hands upon my head to guide me and, moaning all the while, moved his hips back and forth.

He was, I took note, much more active than I'd been. What I had merely taken, he was actively helping himself. And so it was very soon that I felt a pumping within his purse and his liquid pulsate into my mouth.

I had not expected so much, and almost panicked before I realized I had only to swallow, and swallow again. Even as I did his tool went limp in my mouth. I gave it a final suck, caressed everything with my tongue, and somewhat dizzily got back to my feet. I looked at Telo. His face was aglow and his eyes were glazed. He seemed to be struggling to bring himself back to consciousness.

"Telo!" I whispered. "Are you all right?"

"Much more than that!" he answered, his speech slightly slurred. "I'm floating on air."

Indeed, he seemed half drunk. Clearly, I had lots more to learn about this sort of osculation.

"I've a suspicion," I said, "that if you ever learn this imprinting, you'll make a book with some fine tales in it."

He laughed. "I don't do this with every customer," he answered, giving me another kiss, "just with most."

We went back into the front of the shop. He wrapped the book of blank pages I had bought in a piece of paper and handed it to me. "Fare thee well, Jessan. I hope to sell you many such."

"Telo," I said, stroking his face. "Fare thee well, also. You have taught me better than any schoolmaster the advantages of pursuing my reading." We smiled again at each other and I turned to leave. But just as my hand fell on the latch, Telo called me back. He was emerging from the back of the shop.

"Don't forget this," he said, extending my undergarment, which I had left where it had fallen on the floor, "although I can't imagine why you bother with it."

## Chapter 12



HEN I ENTERED the Ship Master's Rest, I looked about and saw Alfrund waiting in a distant corner, even as he saw me. When he did so, he drained his flagon and rose from the table, flinging some coppers onto it as he did so.

"All that time," he said, "and you carry nothing."

I had slipped the small volume into one of the pockets in my vest. It occurred to me that my plan might not meet Alfrund's approval, and that it would be best to confront him with it after—rather than before—it had been carried out.

"Have you seen this new style of book, in which the words are somehow imprinted with a device?" I asked.

"I'm familiar with them," Alfrund said. "But they're of no use to anyone in my trade and even less to a practitioner of magic."

"Why so?" I asked. "They seemed ingenious things to me."

"Ingenious, without doubt," he said, "but they're

dead things nonetheless. What value is writing when you don't have the writer's own hand before you? It would be like listening to someone talking in another room. You may hear what they say, but think how much would be lost—the facial expressions, the gestures, even the tone of voice. If I sent you a letter, would you rather I penned it myself, or had one these machines imprint it instead."

"The former," I answered, for it was clearly true.

"There you are," Alfrund said. "And in a book, the difference is many times greater. A book of spells that is not written by the magician who cast them is not worth the paper upon which they appear. That's why we herbalists will always write out our books ourselves."

"In any case, I spent most of your coins on such a book, and then presented it to the clerk who sold it to me, since he desired it so much." We were walking along as we talked and had already passed out of the market area into the quiet lanes that bordered it.

Alfrund looked at me quizzically. "That was a princely gift to give a stranger. And did he offer you a princely reward?"

I flushed. "Yes, although all I asked for in return was a simple kiss." And then I explained exactly what the gift had been.

Alfrund gave a shout. "Jessan!" he said. "With a shop boy no less. Goddess Mother give me strength—to think I've restrained myself with you because of your innocence."

"You know of this method?" I asked, surprised.

Alfrund groaned. "Your shop boy did not invent it, idiot. And did you think of what it was you fed him, O *Nithaial*? No doubt, he is right now discovering he can make his rod rise and fall by simply passing his hands above it."

I giggled. "Telo would require no magic for that act, I assure you. But," I went on more seriously, remembering his drunken condition, "do you really think...?"

"For that," Alfrund replied, "you'll have to ask Orien, and I hope to be there when you do. And, behold, is that not he standing at our door?"

It was, and when we reached and greeted him, he said, "Onna invited me in, of course, but I told her I would wait for you here. We need to have some words without worrying that she might overhear them."

"Let us go to the house of Fendal then," Alfrund said. "He'll be busy at work, and we can freely use his living space."

Naturally, it was not as simple as that, for hospitality demanded that Fendal send out for ale, and then to drink some with us. But after that he left us to our own counsel, closing the door to the sail yard behind him.

"What exactly does this Fendal know?" Orien asked.

"As much as I choose to tell him," Alfrund answered, "whether you approve or not. He's my lover, and I trust him easily as much as I trust you."

Orien raised his eyebrows. "I meant no offense," he

said, "but these are dangerous matters."

Alfrund nodded in agreement. "Dangerous to know, and dangerous to not know. Fendal is brave and true, and deserves to learn what trouble he has been cast into, by no choice of his own. It may affect him soon enough."

"Very well," Orien said. "What you say is true, although that doesn't mean it's wise. But now, listen carefully. We're again in the same situation that you faced when you went up the coast to rescue Jessan."

"I feared as much," Alfrund said. And then he turned to me. "The same mountains that crowd your village against the sea isolate Gedd from the rest of the kingdom. There's but one pass, and the king maintains a great fort there, the Gates of Karn, where soldiers carefully check all who pass through.

"This, of course, is to restrain smuggling, which flourishes nonetheless. But it's one thing to find a sack of salt or some other thing brought by ship up the coast from the land of Pharros, and another to find you."

"Why did we not leave for that at once," I asked, "when they still thought I might be drowned?"

Orien answered. "First, there was the necessity of reawakening Sondaram. As dangerous as that was, it would be even more dangerous to try to return later to do so. Secondly, our enemy is no fool. He has long stationed extra troops at the Gates of Karn, just in case you might slip through His net here.

"Once Sondaram sprang into existence, He no doubt decided to have the gate shut and come here Himself."

Alfrund turned white. "Say not so," he whispered.

Orien looked grim. "That is my fear," he said. "Although He does not travel much these days. His powers remain intact, but after almost a thousand years His physical condition weakens. He was never meant to last so long."

There was silence in the room for a while. Finally, I gathered up my courage and asked, "Can you not tell me who my enemy is?"

Orien sighed. "I thought you might have already guessed," he said. "He Whose Name Cannot Be Said. But of course you don't know who that designates or why He has such a name. He's your predecessor and in His creation some dreadful error was made."

Alfrund interrupted him. "Orien, perhaps it would be best to start from the beginning. Even many in Gedd know nothing of this history, since it's to risk death to tell it."

The mage nodded. "As we know it, at the creation of man, The Great Mother also made the Twin Guardians, the *Nithaial*, to watch over us, guiding us when necessary and protecting us both from the fell forces that already roamed this world and, as needed, from ourselves, for we proved easily seduced by such.

"As I've already told you, control of the great forces was divided between you, mostly because one person, even of spirit birth, couldn't contain them all and still be able to relate to humans as closely as was needed. But this was also a precaution, so that one twin could counter the other, if this became necessary.

"Well, for eons this never happened, and when it did, the unimaginable happened. The twin who is The Unnameable One ate the soul of the other, thinking in doing so He would attain all four powers. It's believed He hoped to become the equal of the Great Mother, to overthrow her and become a god in her stead.

"This is not what happened. To His astonishment and rage, He lost both His own powers instead of gaining those of His twin. And that might have been that, but Ra'asiel, God of the demons and, once, husband of the Great Mother, saw this as an opportunity to extend His influence over the world of men.

"Ra'asiel appeared before Him and granted Him great powers, including rule of the demon race, who now gladly serve Him. Conversely, magicks once only practiced by demons have been adopted by men, and such as warlocks and necromancers have appeared among us.

"He has used these powers to become the ruler rather than the guardian of men, reducing the king to little more than a lackey. The race of our kings is a proud one, and this greatly chafes at them, but they have well learned to hide it, for they have no other choice."

Orien paused for a swallow of ale, wiped his face with his sleeve, and continued. "The story grows only worse.

For while the normal life span of your kind is five hundred years, He has already lived twice that. And He spends this time frantically searching for some fell magic that will allow him to live forever. The lives of men would be far worse if He were not so obsessed—and they'll become far worse if He ever succeeds.

"Now, after His first five hundred years had passed, a new pair of twins appeared, as if none of this had happened. He tracked them down and ate their souls as He had His brother's. And so He'll continue to do until we men find a way to keep them safe from Him until they're strong enough to try to bring Him down."

The room seemed to have grown darker as Orien told this tale, and it may have indeed have done so, or it may have been terror draining the blood from head. I felt as if I might faint. I closed my eyes for a bit, looking for the power to overcome my fear.

I found some, at last, and opened my eyes again. "And why is He called 'He Who Has No Name'?" I asked.

"Because He has cast spells that bring death to anyone who speaks it aloud," Alfrund said somberly. "To know a name is to have power over the possessor of it, and so He has done His best to stamp out all memory of it. To speak it is to die, to write it is to die, and to know it without speaking it is very dangerous indeed. All this, of course, was to keep one such as you from ever learning it."

"So," I said, "that means that after a thousand years,

no one knows it anymore."

"True," Alfrund said.

"False," Orien said. "We mages aren't so easily cowed. We have that discipline and we learned the name letter by letter, each one a year apart, so that they remain in separate parts of our mind." He looked at me. "When the time comes, I'll spell it out to you."

"When will that be?" I asked. "I need every weapon I can use, and as soon as possible."

Orien looked at me in surprise. "A moment ago I thought you might faint from fear," he said.

I nodded. "And a few days ago, I might have done so. But, as you see, today I did not. When we're alone, I'd like you to start spelling it out to me."

"Very well," Orien assented. "I've no good argument against it. But meanwhile we must decide what to do next."

"Leave at once," Alfrund said. "Obviously. The question is how. I've spent many days trying to discover if the smugglers have other routes over the mountains. But none will speak to me if I wouldn't reveal my purpose, and to do that—well, the reward for Jessan is so great that it would overcome the scruples of any man, let alone a smuggler's."

Orien nodded. "I feared as much. Our possibilities are to go over the mountains or around them, and each is fraught with danger."

"Can't we go under them?" I asked in jest.

Orien smiled grimly. "Don't think I haven't consid-

ered that, too," he said. "But the kobold have never mined these mountains, only those to the east. And if there are demon underways, which I doubt, we would be well advised to keep our distance from them. The demons would be almost as happy as The Unnameable One to get hold of you."

"So it's by sea then," Alfrund said, his heart visibly sinking.

Orien nodded. "Although that way, too, is full of risk. The people of Pharros aren't completely under His dominion yet, and don't wish to be. They'll do nothing to provoke Him, least of all helping us. And getting there is not easy. It's a long sail. I've bought us a boat that, with luck, is large enough to carry us there, but I've yet to locate a sailor that I would trust to do so.

"If worst comes to worst, we will try it on our own. I'm familiar with the ways of boats, as is, of course, Jessan. But it would be very risky, and must be done only as a last resort. When we have word that The Unnameable One approaches the Gates of Karn, we will sail regardless. But not until then. I think we have at least a week yet."

"You have someone up there, then," Alfrund said.

"Yes," Orien answered, "a king's messenger. He regularly rides from the Gates of Karn to the fort here and back again, carrying dispatches. In this instance, I almost—almost—wish we had a Summoner at our beck and call."

He turned to me and added, "You do have friends, more than you would believe. Even after this great time, many still yearn for your return, and will do what they can in aid of it.

"Meanwhile," he continued, getting to his feet, "I think it best for me to not return with you to Grysta's house," he said, "as much as I would like to greet her. Even someone as thick-headed as our Lord of the Fort will eventually notice my presence and have me watched. And I imagine, after Sondaram's rebirth, the Unnameable has already used the Summoner to order him to do so. Our enemy knows nothing of you, yet, Alfrund, and I would dearly like to keep it that way."

"I pray it's still true," Alfrund said.

Orien then took my shoulder, bent over, and whispered in my ear, "M, as in 'murderer.' There's the first letter. Remember it well."

## Chapter 13



LFRUND WALKED ME TO GRYSTA'S DOOR, but left me on the doorstep with a kiss. I had expected this—Fendal had given him a look when we emerged from his living place that, quiet as it was, spoke volumes. And if Alfrund and I were soon to sail to Pharros, Fendal deserved all the time alone with him he could get.

Even so, to be left after our meeting with Orien gave me a pang in the heart. But I remembered the volume in my vest, touched it, and felt better. I went into the house and up the stairs to my room, where I laid on the bed, those of our purchases I had carried home with me.

Before I could do more, Grysta came to the stairwell and summoned me down to supper. When I entered the kitchen, I found Grysta, herself, bent over a cauldron of fragrant fish stew, and Onna laying the table. When she saw my new vest she exclaimed with delight and begged to try it on. I slid it off and passed it to her, knowing the book was safely on my bed. Onna slipped into the vest and being almost as slender as I, made quite a fair appearance in it, as even Grysta admitted. So I gave Onna leave to wear it for the evening, which delighted her very much.

When the meal came to table, we sat down on our stools to eat, Onna coming last, since she had to lift the now empty cauldron out of the flames and set it on the side of the hearth to cool for scrubbing. As she came to the table, for what reason only the Sacred Forces will ever know, she put her hand into one of the pockets of the vest. Then, with a puzzled look, she drew out and examined what she had found there.

My heart sank. It was my undergarment, forgotten since Telo had handed it to me and I had stowed it away. Fortunately, she was standing behind Grysta, who, already bent over her bowl, was busy eating. Onna held the garment up on the tip of one finger and feigned astonishment. "Jessan!" she silently mouthed and, with her other hand, wagged her finger at me sternly.

Yet another time that day I found myself scarlet. "Onna!" I mouthed back, nervously casting an eye at Grysta, and then through gritted teeth, "Please!"

"I hope at least they're *yours*!" she said quite out loud, as she shoved them back into the vest and came and settled on her stool. Grysta glanced at her quizzically, but said nothing, nor did she later when, periodically, Onna and I would burst into giggles while eating our supper.

It was customary for Grysta, who saw little of me

during the day, to ask about what I had been about, but this conversation ended on the day before. She knew very well what I had been up to that day, and did not wish to talk about it in the presence of Onna.

This night, however, studiously keeping my eye from catching hers, I told Grysta about Alfrund and my trip to the market and most of what we had purchased and where. Grysta, who despite her slight size, had a good appetite, kept her eyes on her spoon, but nodded as I spoke to show that she was listening. I dared mention that the whole town was talking about nothing else but the sudden reappearance of Sondaram.

Grysta lifted her head and gave me a sharp look. "I don't doubt it," she said, "although to what purpose I don't know, since the soldiers prevent anyone from climbing the hill to see it."

"The fishermen can see it clearly from the sea," Onna said, "and they say it sparkles on its cliff as if built entirely of precious stones."

"Yes, and no doubt they also believe that the floors within are paved with ginger cakes," Grysta tartly replied. "If a great narwhal emerged from the ocean depths and swam beside them, their teeth would still be chattering with fear. But let something of far greater omen appear on land and all they can do is stare with their hearts aflutter."

Onna then did catch my eye, conveying in a glance that if she had been offered the opportunity, she would have happily reacted the same way.

I smiled. I did wish that Onna knew who I was, because I was tired of deceiving her and, even more, I wanted very much to ask Grysta some questions. I often had time with Onna alone but almost never with Grysta, whose day was full of constant demand for her services.

As it happened, though, this evening Onna, who usually slept in a small room adjoining the kitchen, had been given leave to spend the night at home. She had a new baby brother she greatly wished to see.

This I found out when Grysta stopped the table talk by telling Onna to finish up her soup and do her chores, or she'd have no time left when she went home for anything but sleep. "And," she added shortly, "I expect to find you here when I come down the stairs in the morning, with the fire started and the floor tiles scrubbed."

Onna gave me another look, but dutifully got up and began gathering the soup bowls for the washing pan. I rose myself and carried the slops out for her, tossing them into the darkness. I returned to the kitchen just in time to bid her a good night as she hurried out, her arms clutching the vest tightly to her.

"I may never wear that vest again," I said to Grysta.

She smiled but shook her head. "Onna is honest to a fault. You touched her vanity, which little does, not in this house. You were good to let her wear it."

"I've grown quite fond of her," I answered, "and see

why you have, too. She's anxious to learn, skilled at what she does, and would be observant to a fault were she not so sweetly tempered."

Grysta glanced at me. "Yes, Onna misses little," she said. "I hope you haven't revealed anything about yourself to her."

"She's happy to think I'm Alfrund's apprentice," I answered, "although she clearly knows more about him than I do."

Grysta snorted. "You've hardly hidden the subject of *your* conversations with him. Do you even know how he practices his trade?"

I blushed and shook my head. "I don't even know whether to call it a 'trade' or an 'art."

"That's a different matter," Grysta said. "A magician, for instance, professes an art, not a trade, because the power he exercises comes from study, not from handwork. Whereas a leathersmith studies not at all except through observing his master cut and sew.

"Healing, however, is both an art and a trade. Like magic, it requires mastery of what is called natural logic, knowing the inner connections that bind the things of this world together, the way verbal logic construes words into argument."

"Oh!" I said. "As where extract of bindle has strong affinity with metal of birius, although one is a plant and the other smelted from a mineral?"

Grysta was taken aback. "Alfrund has already taught you *that*?" she asked.

"No," I answered. "Alfrund hasn't had time to teach me much of anything. But I noticed this when I examined them alone, and confirmed it when I held them in my hand together. In spirit, they were brother and sister."

Grysta sighed and shook her head. "If I had brought you up," she said, "I would now be your apprentice. You frighten me, Jessan."

"Grysta!" I cried. "Everyone says that. I hate it! If I become someone to inspire fear, it will be because everyone keeps pushing me to be so. It's as if I could raise my hands like so and cry 'flash, lightning, flash!' and a bolt would strike down from the sky."

Even as I did this, drawn perhaps by my burst of anger, a sense of force surged from my body. Outside the house came a flash of light so brilliant that it flooded through the windows and momentarily blinded us. At the same time we were deafened by what sounded like the heavens being torn asunder.

I turned white as a sheet and closed my eyes. Orien's admonition that perhaps I should learn to fear myself came immediately into my mind. I seized one hand with the other and clutched them together. "I don't want this!" I cried.

Grysta reached over and pried one hand free and held it in her soft, warm one. My own felt cold as ice.

"Jessan, Jessan," she said softly. "No one gets to

choose their doom. It's given to you, and you must do your best with it. Yes, yours is an especially hard one, but mostly because you live among those who have no way to share it. You're like a boy who has been raised by sheep and sent to live among wolves. If you keep insisting you're only a sheep, you'll end up as nothing but a meal."

I squeezed her hand and sighed. "That's the best explanation of my plight I've heard so far," I said. "Perhaps because in it I'm the boy, not one of the wolves."

I put my free elbow on the table and rested my head in my hand, continuing to hold hers with my other. "Grysta," I asked, "do you remember the day when I was born?"

"No," Grysta replied, "because if you were born, I wasn't there to see it. But I do remember the exact day that I found you. It was, as you already know, this month, the month of holy Lytha, and the day was the 12th. I was sound asleep in my bed when a voice woke me. 'Grysta,' it said, 'make haste to Sondaram, for a babe cries for you there.'

"Well! I've never been one to tipple at my own potions, so I knew at once that this was a serious business! Of course, I was still too mazy from sleep to yet know what. Even so, I was cautious enough to take a masked lantern with me, one that would do no more than throw some light beneath my feet. It wouldn't have been wise to signal the sentries at the fort that someone was climbing up to the ruins of Sondaram in the middle of the night!

"Now, even as a girl I knew those ruins like the back

of my hand, and the darkness made no difference. I was certain that my destination was the center of what was once the great hall. And, sure enough, when I reached that place, there you were, naked and unhappy, wailing away, surrounded by flickering blue light. I wrapped you up in a soft cloth and hugged you to me and you stopped crying at once. And, at that moment, your name came to me quite clearly: 'Jessan.'

"And so Jessan you became. A few weeks later I hired a mule and a boy to walk beside it, and brought you to the village where Peta and her blacksmith lived, for I knew I couldn't raise you here. I would have loved to, but it would've been sheer folly. It would have been only a matter of time before the Summoner sensed your presence, and all would have been over before it had even begun."

"The Summoner!" I said. "He was already here when I was born?" I suppose I should've said "when I *arrived*," but I didn't even like the thought of that.

"Oh, yes," Grysta answered. "You see, the babies always appear at one or the other of their two temple palaces, and yours are Wethrelad in the east, and Sondaram here in the west. And, at least to my knowledge, no humans can now reach Wethrelad, so it was bound to be here. The Unnameable One installed the Summoner here some years ago, with nothing to do but wait and find you, when you came."

I shivered. When I saw Grysta had noticed this, I explained, "Despite that I'm now skillful at avoiding his touch, the thought of it still fills me with disgust. And I suspect I'm

not done with him yet, either—or, rather, he with me."

Grysta said nothing to this, which meant that she thought the same. We sat in a brooding silence for a bit, until I thought of something she had said earlier.

"When you said I knew nothing about how Alfrund practices his trade," I said, "that's but the half of it. I've never even seen him wear the herbalist's leaf-green robe. And since he has no home here, he can't come from Gedd. What's his story, and how does it intertwine with yours and mine?"

Grysta looked at me sternly. "That these questions only now occur to you despite all your time with Alfrund shows that you're at heart still too much a boy, taking what others give you without a thought."

My eyes filled with tears. "Don't scold me, Grysta," I said. "I got a good kick down that road when I learned of the existence of Fendal, and saw what he meant to Alfrund, and Alfrund to him. Take me this small distance further. It would shame me to ask Alfrund himself about what I should already know."

"Well," Grysta said gently, "I *am* your grandmother and I cannot bear to see you weep. So.... Alfrund is only five years older than you. At about your age he was just finishing his apprenticeship with a great master herbalist named Anisor, who, in turn, was well familiar with Orien.

"Now Orien and Anisor are part of what is called the Guardian Circle, a secret society of mages, healers, scholars, and alchemists, devoted to sustaining the memory of the *Nithaial* and to risk their lives to protect and nurture them when they next return.

"I'm a member of the Circle myself, although an outer ring of it. So when you appeared, I managed to get word of this to Anisor, whom I once knew well. He sent me a message saying that I should do nothing more for the time being, because there was no safer place for you to grow up than at the very end of the world.

"The danger would come, we both knew, when you reached the age of sixteen. That was when the Cronnex would reveal itself and, at the same time, your maturing process would greatly slow down."

She looked at me. "Has Orien told you that, should you survive your enemy, you will easily live as long as five hundred years? And that it will take you six or seven years to mature as much as a human does in one?"

I shook my head in astonishment. "No," I answered, "or if he did, I pushed it out of my mind immediately."

"This is so because you have an enormous amount to learn compared to any of us," she said, "and so your mind and body are kept in a growing state for an exceedingly long period of time. Get used to being sixteen, because you'll not appear as Alfrund does until he's an old man and I'm long gone to the Hallowed Halls."

She saw my eyes fill with tears again, and patted my hand. "That is your doom," she said. "Be careful of your heart, for to take a lover is to watch him grow old and die while you change little—a very painful thing for each of you. I'm glad that Alfrund is your *twerë*. You'll need many such to keep loneliness at bay. Take a lover, though, only after you spend a long time looking into your heart."

The flame that burned in the fat tallow candle in the center of the table began to gutter, and I feared that it would remind Grysta of the passing hours and send her off to bed. But, instead, she lit a wooden splinter with the candle's dying flame and sent me to the cupboard for another.

"I'm tired," she said, lighting it and tossing the splinter into the fireplace, "and I'm getting rather old for a two-candle night. But you deserve to have all this explained to you—both by Orien and by myself, since we have each seen and learned different things."

She took up my hand and continued. "So, after consultation with Orien, Anisor approached Alfrund and offered him membership in the Circle. In this, Anisor showed great insight, for Alfrund was, at seventeen, much too young to ordinarily be considered for initiation. Not to mention the fact that he's little given to gravity—and there could be no more serious business than what he was about to be asked to do. Still, that's what transpired, and well that it did so.

"Alfrund set aside his studies and left his home in the great city of Plæcenon to assume the trade of a wandering gatherer of herbs, collecting them in one part of the kingdom and selling them to healers and herbalists elsewhere. That allowed him to travel about without calling attention to himself, and make contact with those in the Circle without anyone being the wiser. For three years he did this, before being sent to Gedd to make contact with me."

"So he has known Fendal for all of... what? Several months?" I asked, suddenly confused.

"Five, in all, I think," answered Grysta, "and a very happy time it has been for him, too, after all those lonely years on the road. I grieve for him that it's now over. It's more than likely that he'll never be with Fendal again."

"Why does every twist of this tale turn to sadness," I cried. "Can't he come and be with Fendal after all this?"

"All this," Grysta echoed, "may take the rest of his life. Or simply take it, period. Haven't you yet guessed that? What's happening now is merely the quiet before the storm. And the clouds are gathering quickly. What you experienced on the road from your village to Gedd was but a gentle spring mist in comparison.

"Indeed, what is to come is beyond the capacity of anyone now living to imagine—even Orien, whose powers have greatly extended his years." She looked immeasurably sad. After a pause, she added in a quiet voice, "The greatest storm perhaps in the history of men."

"And I'm in the center of it," I said.

"And you're in the center of it," she repeated. She gave my hand a last squeeze, took a candle, and made her way to bed.

I was sleepy myself. But I drew the stool over to the

fire and sat there, prodding at the coals with the poker and thinking. As I had listened to Grysta speak, I had felt a longing creep over me, which at first I thought was for Alfrund to come and be with me in bed. But it shaped itself differently, and soon I realized it was a desire to go back to Sondaram and bathe in the rushing current of power.

Orien had bade me not to, but Orien was my advisor, not my master. He was to be trusted, surely, but, when all was said and done, he was but a mortal, with a mortal's sense of what was possible and what not. I sat listening until I was sure Grysta was asleep. Then I got to my feet and slipped out into the night.

## Chapter 14



HERE WAS NO MOON THIS NIGHT, and the way was pitch black. I wished, like Grysta when she came to fetch me as a baby, that I could have brought a lantern. But on such a trip even a small light would be too risky. I would have to stumble along as best I could, weakly cursing Onna for taking my vest, for the wind came off the sea, and was damp and cool.

Even so, I found my eyes adjusting to the dark in a way that seemed new to me. If I kept to a slow pace there was little risk, at least, of falling on my face. I easily found the track that led up the hill and soon, once again, I was above the trees, with Gedd spread below me, albeit as a great darkness. At this hour light showed from hardly any window. This was not a town where people were given to stay up late.

After a bit, I saw the flicker of a small watch fire ahead of me, and as I approached closer, saw five or six sleeping forms arranged around it. However, I didn't see the soldier detailed to serve watch until I was almost upon him, alerted by the glint

of the fire reflected from his helmet when he turned his head toward me. I turned and walked directly to him.

"What do you want, boy?" he asked, but in a soft voice. "You know this place is forbidden."

"Have you been over the crest to see it yourself?" I said, answering his question with another.

"No," he answered, "although in truth, I would greatly like to. But it's as much forbidden to us as anyone else."

"That's a shame," I said, "for it's truly a magnificent thing. Will you not accompany me there? For I can also take you inside, something you'll never regret."

The soldier shook his head. "Even if I could do so without being found out—for if I were it would cost me my life—I couldn't break my oath to the king, to fight and to obey."

I nodded. "If I might ask, what is your name? You're well spoken for a soldier."

He smiled. "My name is Caelas, and I'm no mere soldier, being high born and possessing hereditary rank."

I smiled back. "And I, as you already know, am the *Nithaial Galgaliel*, rightful inheritor of Sondaram. Yet you haven't seized hold of me nor roused your men."

"I was brought up well," Caelas answered proudly. "I know that the *Nithaial* are above the king and that their coming augurs great change, eventually for the better. I wouldn't lay a hand on you. Neither will I stop you from entering Sondaram. But I can't accompany you there, no matter how

much I might wish to."

"Fair enough," I said. "But what do your orders actually say?"

"That no soldier is permitted to gaze at Sondaram from the top of the hill," Caelas answered.

"Well then," I said, "the solution is simple enough. We'll bind your eyes with a cloth and I'll lead you there by hand. Once we're inside, you cannot see the palace any better than you can from here."

"But if my men were to awake...," he began to say.

"Caelas," I answered. "I am a *Nithaial*. They won't wake again until you shake them from their sleep."

I turned to where they lay and raised my hands, immersing the soldiers even deeper into the great inner sea where they now floated in their sleep. "There," I said. "If you don't rouse them, they'll sleep on for days."

I took his hand and said, "Just close your eyes. There's no purpose to binding them." I led him past his sleeping men and up over the crest. At that point the road was paved, and we could move without hesitation. Sondaram glowed with a soft blue light, very much like what Grysta had described when she recounted finding me here. Except now it embraced the entire palace, yet so gently that it did nothing to drown out the stars that glittered brightly above us.

I led Caelas into the entryway and let go of his hand. "You can open your eyes now," I said. "Remove your armor and set down your weapons, for Sondaram is a place of peace."

He nodded and began unfastening his sword belt. His fingers fumbled for he couldn't take his eyes away from the sight before him. At night Sondaram proved doubly magical, for the rooms were lit without any visible source of light. It was as if the very air glowed, energized by the pulsating mass of energy that swirled and flowed at the center of the great hall.

I removed my shirt and stood naked before him. "I'm going to bathe in the force," I said, "which you must not even touch. But wander everywhere else to your heart's content. In this place, time stands still, so don't worry about the hours passing. We can stay here as long as you wish."

I left him to his undressing with no more ado, since I was already preparing myself for the immersion. I stepped into the flow and let it lift me up, feeling my spirit hungrily absorb it, letting it pulse through every particle of my being. It tossed me about like a leaf in a stream as it ebbed and flowed and I let it do so without struggle, my head fallen back, my mouth agape, my eyes open but seeing nothing.

At last, though, I had my fill and brought myself down. Caelas was waiting for me in his military tunic with its regal embroidery, sitting cross-legged on the stone ledge that went around the room. When he saw me emerge he stood up.

I hadn't paid much attention to him before but now I saw that he was solidly built, with sturdy legs and muscular arms. His great mane of dark hair was tossed back behind

him, revealing his features, which, beneath a short and well-trimmed beard, were finely chiseled. His posture was easy. Our eyes met as I came to him.

The force still flowed about me and I felt no shame at my nakedness. I walked up to him and ran my hand on the front of his tunic. "So Caelas," I said, "shall I put on my shirt—or would you rather remove yours?"

Without a word, he pulled his tunic over his head and dropped it to one side. I stood on my tiptoes, threw my arms around his shoulders, and leaped up, wrapping my legs around his muscular frame. He then placed his hands under my buttocks and held me up, so that I was free to run my fingers through the great tangled mass of hair that covered his chest.

I had never felt anything like it before, and I found it hard to drag my fingers away. But eventually I wrapped my arms around his neck and we began to kiss. Unlike Alfrund, who was as gentle in kissing as in everything, Caelas was entirely the warrior. Our tongues dueled for but a moment until mine surrendered, and his took possession of my mouth.

When we finally broke away, I bent down slightly and began sucking on one of his nipples, which were as firm and erect as a child's fingertip. As I did so, I felt something large and hard rise and press itself into the cleft of my bottom. Caelas gently spread the cheeks apart, allowing his sex to press stiff against the most tender part of all. The sensation was so powerful that my body shuddered all over.

I sensed a hesitation in Caelas. I let his nipple slip through my lips and raised my head to look at him. His eyes had a quizzical expression, as if waiting for an answer that he had already silently asked. I felt a flash of understanding, looked him in the eye and, more shyly than I might have wished, said softly, "Use me as you wish."

He looked back at me for a moment, then said, "In that case," he answered, "you'll have to release me."

I did so. He set me down gently and went to the heap of weaponry and gear he had left in the entrance hall. Out of it he plucked a leather wallet that had hung from his belt, opened this, took something out, came back, and handed it to me.

It was a small container, carved of sandalwood. I twisted off the top and discovered it contained a smooth and aromatic salve, smelling gently of tamarith and oil of cerelet.

"The Warrior's Friend, we call it," said Caelas, without irony. "It eases chapped hands, soothes sores and scratches, and provides ease of movement in intimate moments."

I scooped out a little with two fingers and began to rub it onto his shaft. It was dark in color, so thick around I could barely enclose it in my fist, and hard enough to have been carved from wood.

Intoxicated as I was from my immersion in the force, I still began to feel qualms about inviting this monster inside me. But fear of humiliation is almost always stronger than fear of pain, or few wars would ever be fought. At least, I thought, the salve was extraordinarily slippery. I wiped the

residue in the crack between my buttocks and, nervously, reached up to wrap my arms around his neck.

This time Caelas bent down as I did so and swept me up, lifting me so that my legs clasped him even higher around his waist than I had been before. He looked directly into my eyes as his hands spread my buttocks apart. I felt the blunt end of his shaft in the crease, and moved my body slightly to guide it, my eyes telling him when it had reached its goal. Caelas then began gently but firmly working it in, pushing his groin upwards even as I wriggled down against it with my buttocks.

He entered me, opening me wide. Some pain attended this, to be sure, but it was nothing compared to the rush of sensation as he worked his way deeper and deeper inside me. I realized that Caelas could see in my widening eyes the effect this had caused and this excited me even further. I began moving myself to meet his strokes, pushing down when he shoved up; clenching the ring of muscle when he pulled back. My body was covered with sweat; my own sex, tumid and quivering, rode between our sweaty bodies.

His quickened his rhythm and the sensation became so strong that my eyes glazed over and my mouth moaned. I could feel the coarse hair of his groin between my legs when he came up, the knob at the end of his sex pushing against my clenched butt when he pulled back. The flesh there shivered in spasms of pleasure and I began to whimper.

Then, with a final thrust, he spent. I could feel the

heat of it as it spurted inside me. The feeling so overwhelmed me that I did not even notice that I had come, too, a long sticky trace that reached up to his chest.

Caelas reached up one hand and wrapped it around me to hold me and squatted down and spread out his tunic with the other. Than he kneeled and laid me on top of it and sprawled down on his back on the floor beside me.

I lay there for awhile, gathering my senses, and then I turned on my side to look at him. His eyes were closed, his body relaxed, his arms spread above his head. His sex, unlike any other I had seen, although it had freely spent, had not pulled back into itself as mine had, or as Alfrund's did after we made love.

I reached over and took it in my hand. It was limp but solid and heavy; closing my hand on it I could feel the steady beat of his pulse. I gently pulled back his foreskin, bent over, and licked the head clean. As I did so, he reached one hand, closed it on my shoulder, and pulled me back to him.

He kissed me and said, "It isn't manly to show such pleasure in being taken, little *Nithaial*. You'll be much teased if you ever take up the sword."

I smiled. "Do my wanton ways embarrass you, mighty warrior," I asked, "now that you've taken your pleasure?"

He laughed, the first time I had seen him do so. It warmed his face, right into his eyes, and filled me with love for him. "No, it quite excites me. I've had my fill of manly men."

I ran my fingers again through the hair on his chest. "Well, I'm just starting with them, myself," I said, "although it's true that you have filled my need for the moment, both with your great staff and what it left behind."

He smiled and wrapped his arm around me, pulling me against him. "Manly men don't chatter away after sex, either. I find I'm starved for such conversation."

"Unlike me, they're probably not bubbling over with questions, either," I said. "To start with, are you a great warrior, Caelas?"

He sighed, and I thought for a second that I might have offended him. "I think I'm brave and true enough," he answered finally. "But the fact that I've been sent to this lowly station tells you that I'm not highly regarded by my superiors. They think me troublesome and keep me safely at a distance.

"Even here.... Well, those who have been brought here to find you are kept quite apart from the rest of us. We have been told nothing and so have done nothing, while they hunt in vain."

He cast a glance at me through the corner of his eye. "For instance, the other day the Great Mage Orien, grimly self-important as always, passed me on the street, and I thought to myself, 'now why would such as he come to this place?" He smiled bleakly. "The answer is obvious, but those who hunt you are at once ignorant and uneducated and, worst of all, suffer from the illusion that they're all-pow-

erful. I'm happy to salute them as they push blindly by, hurrying to their doom."

He turned his head toward me. "Now it's my turn for a question," he said. "When you approached me in the dark, didn't you fear that I'd seize you and haul you kicking and screaming to the Lord of the Fort? That would have gotten me promotion fast enough, even an assignment back to civilization."

I considered my answer, since I would be explaining it to myself as well. "My powers have grown to the point where I need fear no man nor any small group of them, such as you and your squad. I can't yet handle a crowd or deal with distant attack, as from archers. But you would have found, if you had tried, that you couldn't draw your sword."

"Really!" he said, and sat up, crossing his legs and looking down at me. "You're not afraid of me at all?"

I reached out my arms and stretched my body. "Ah, I feel so good," I said, "however much I may regret all this in the morrow." I smiled up at him and then feigned a puzzled expression. "What did you ask?"

Caelas poked me with a finger between my ribs. "You're a fearless cub, aren't you? So, if I'd attempted to skewer you, would you have struck me dead?"

"Well asked," I answered, "since you *did* skewer me and I can't decide what punishment you should receive for doing so. Perhaps I'll just have to return tomorrow night and duel it out with you again."

"You'll find me well armed and ready," he said. "But

seriously—as one warrior to another."

"No, Caelas," I said, "don't even say that in jest. I've been brought here to be a shepherd. I'm not afraid of killing, I think, and I certainly had better not be. But kill you? How then could I learn who my enemies really are? Discover that you, despite your uniform, are not?"

"I swore allegiance to the king, not Him," Caelas said bitterly. "And the closer He bends the king to His will, the more my allegiance falters. Many—no, most—in the army know nothing about the tradition of the *Nithaial*. But they will turn against the king before they'll do His bidding, let alone follow the orders of His demon lords, who are now taking command of us everywhere. If this be treason, than the king will soon have nothing else."

I pondered on this, then asked, "Have you heard of Gostranar?"

"Of course," he answered, "or at least its ruins. It lies at the heart of the Wisferon, the Holy Wood."

"Caelas, when you hear that I've returned there, come and serve me. You'll have no divided allegiance then, I promise you."

He looked at me in surprise, then slowly nodded. "If things continue in the direction they're now going," he answered, "I'll come gladly, and bring with me all who will follow." He looked at me softly. "You'll be a very different boy when I come to kneel at your feet and offer you my sword."

## Chapter 15



AWOKE THE NEXT MORNING drenched in sweat from a dream in which I stood at the top of the tower that rose above the Gates of Karn. I was staring down at the road that twisted its way up to the pass, carved out of the side of the mountain. It was just wide enough so five men could stand on it abreast, and a great army of such men were marching up it, the lower levels half-hidden in the dust cast up by so many feet. Scattered among them were huge, misshapen figures that towered over the soldiers and drove them on with long, snaking whips, regularly laying a bloody welt across the back of any who might be lagging.

At the head of this army rode a similar thing, but larger still, astride a monstrous shambling beast walking erect on two massive hind legs. Its rider looked up at me; his eyes burnt in his head as red as coals. He lifted his arm and shook it, and as he did the beast he rode raised its massive head, opened a mouth full of teeth the size of swords, and uttered a scream of such pure and terrifying hatred that, even

though I struggled with all my strength to turn and flee, I was rooted to the spot, shaking all over as if seized by a great fever.

I stumbled out of bed, my head still ringing with that dreadful sound, pulled on my shirt and stumbled down the stairs. I mumbled something to Onna as I passed, went to the wash pail, and, holding my breath, plunged my head deep into it. I cooled it there until I could keep my breath in no longer, and emerged, gasping for breath and dripping water all over the floor.

"Oh, Jessan!" Onna's voice was a wail, conveying at once her shock at my appearance and her anger about the mess I'd made on her just-scrubbed tiles. Abjectly, I picked up a drying cloth and buried my face into it as I sank onto a stool.

"I'm sorry, Onna," I mumbled through the fabric. "I just awoke from a nightmare and I'm still full of the terror of it. Give me the mop and I will clean everything up."

"If I gave you the mop," Onna said, "you'd make only more of a mess. Go brew yourself some bracing tea. There's plenty of gruel left in the pot and it may yet be warm."

She swabbed the floor dry again and I, guiltily, concocted a tea for myself from Grysta's herbs and roots. While it steeped, I set the porridge pot onto the stool beside me where I could easily reach down into it. I was amazingly hungry and had devoured its contents before Onna could bring me the salt bowl. I brought the well-scoured porridge pot over to the

washing basin and returned to my stool to sip my tea.

Onna had gone into her room behind the kitchen. Now she emerged carrying my vest in one hand and my undergarment in the other. "I return the one with thanks and the other with...."

"With the satisfaction of having found me out again," I said, finishing her sentence for her.

Onna sighed. "Really, Jessan, you make it so easy that it almost isn't fair. Do you know at this very moment you have a dark round stain on the back of your shirt, right in the center of..., right where your..., right where you sit down." As she fought to find a phrase that she'd dare utter, her face turned a scarlet red.

"Oh!" she said. "You're *impossible*. You'd better take that shirt off and let me clean it before anyone else sees what you have been up to."

Sheepishly, I tucked the drying cloth into my lap and rose enough to pull up my shirt. I passed it over to her. She looked at it and tossed it onto the floor.

"But first," she said, "I'm going to have a look at you. There's blood there as well as..., as well as other stains."

"Onna!" I said, now completely alarmed.

"Jessan!" she answered, "don't argue. As an apprentice healer it's perfectly right that I do this and, if it's any comfort to you, I won't be seeing anything I haven't seen before. Which, if our positions were reversed, is not something you could say."

"But I'm fine!" I protested weakly. In truth, now that the power of the nightmare had waned, I realized that I was magnificently sore.

"I'll be the judge of that," Onna replied. "Up. Up."

I reluctantly stood up, holding the cloth to my sex. But I realized how foolish I looked bending over clutching myself, and so I tossed it on the table.

"Have it your own way, then," I said.

But Onna wasn't listening. She spread my buttocks, prodded the sore area gently, tsk-tsking as she did. She took the drying cloth I had just set down, placed it in a bowl, and covered it with steaming water from the kettle.

"Don't even think of touching me there with that," I said. Onna gave me a look and went into the workroom, coming back shortly with a fistful of herbs. She scattered them into the water and then came and sat on the stool across the table from me. She put her elbows on the table and cupped her hands to hold her head, regarding me with complete puzzlement.

"Didn't it hurt?" she asked. "I mean, truly hurt?"

"I don't know," I answered. "I liked what was happening so much I didn't really notice. Does it look bad?"

She considered. "Well, you *have* torn it a bit. But whatever that stuff is that your 'lover' smeared there, it seems to have a healing quality to it, for I see no sign of infection."

"It's called the 'Warrior's Friend," I told her.

"I'll bet it is," she said, and we both giggled.

I remembered now tasting it on Caelas when I'd licked him clean after our lovemaking. The thought caused a stirring in my loins. I quickly shifted my thoughts, took a finger, and rubbed some of the lingering salve on the tip of it. I then brought it up to my nose. "The vulnerary is fretvine, the lubricant is mostly jelly of minda tempered with a thickish oil, of lightwood, I think, with some extract of umbra to give it fragrance.

"That's impressive," Onna said, "and also disgusting. I'm glad at least you didn't taste it."

She saw a shifting of my eyes. "Oh, yuck!" she exclaimed, understanding the import of this, "I cannot *believe* you, disgusting boy." She reached over and tentatively touched the cloth. The fragrance from the herbs she had added floated about us. I refrained from naming them.

"It is still a little hot," she said, poking it back into the soaking liquid. "So," she said, settling back on her stool, "after your little escapade of yesterday afternoon, which left your undergarment forgotten in your pocket, you slipped out last night without wearing any, and found someone eager to take advantage of *that*. You know, you boys get away with a lot."

She reached over and touched the cloth again. "And you're such a skinny thing, too," she said. "I should think it would be like making love to a child."

"Onna, please," I protested. "I may be slight but I have hair in all the right places. And I'll be sixteen the day after tomorrow. No one would take me for a child."

"Not until they spend a few minutes with you, "Onna said, "and then they couldn't help but know it."

I sighed. "I suppose you're right to scold me," I said. "But, truly, I don't go looking for these things. They just seem to happen."

Onna looked at me and burst out laughing. She got up and wrung out the cloth, came around to me, and, still laughing, began to gently dab at my wound. I flinched but didn't complain; I knew the moist heat would draw out any lingering contagion. Indeed, after the initial shock, the warmth was comforting.

After she finished, Onna wrung out the cloth and dipped it again into the steeping liquid, removed it, and squeezed it out. "Here," she said, "passing it over to me. Your privates could no doubt use a little soothing themselves. While you attend to that, I'll clean your shirt."

After we both were finished, we realized that, my shirt hung up to dry, I had nothing to wear, since my new clothing wasn't yet finished at the tailor.

"Alfrund treats you poorly, beyond doubt, if you own but a single shirt," she said tartly. I was about to tell her that this was Alfrund's shirt, but caught my tongue in time. Taking pity on me, Onna went and got me a blouse of her own. It fit me nicely, although it barely covered me below. It was my turn to preen. The fabric was quite light and the embroidery done with skill and flair. I wished Grysta had a reflecting glass of a size big enough for me to see myself.

"Well," Onna said, "you're sweet looking enough to be a girl but far too thin to pass for one. Those scrawny shanks would give you away even if nothing hung between your legs."

I went over to Onna and gave her a hug and a kiss. "You're a true friend," I said, "and more than I deserve."

She flushed prettily and kissed me back. "Despite those winning words," she said, "I'm still going to lock you in your bedroom tonight and perhaps even chain you to your bed."

"Only if you chain someone there with me," I said, "because with dreams like mine I dare not sleep alone."

spent the rest of the day at Grysta's worktable, with a small pot of ink and several quills, scribbling away in my new book. It was my intention to start an *enkiridion* for Onna and I now feared I had little time to do so. Orien's promise of a week's respite seemed much frailer today.

My writing skills were long unpracticed and at first I despaired of even producing an unspotted page, let alone one written in the necessary small but readable hand. But after a few destroyed quills and an hour or so of effort, I retrieved the hang of it.

Grysta, as she did, came and went, sometimes with Onna in attendance, sometimes alone. When she was here, she was busy at her work, making poultices and refreshing her stock of physics, clysters, and antipyretics. When she did so, I would listen as she instructed Onna, for Grysta was a good teacher. And once, when she took down a delicately and elaborately hand-blown retort, I joined them and watched as she distilled some water of metaffra, watching as the concentrated essence dripped, tiny drop by tiny drop into a small vial.

By this time, my shirt had dried and I'd returned the blouse to Onna. If Grysta had noticed me the short time I'd been wearing it, she said nothing. She had one last errand to attend to at the end of the day, leaving Onna to prepare our simple supper of root and barley soup. She returned with a loaf of bread still warm from the baker under her arm and something else for me. Reaching into her robe, she retrieved a slip of paper from some inner pocket, and passed it over. "I was asked by Orien to give you this," she said, "and to warn you to burn it the moment you have committed its contents to memory."

On it was written "A as in Archfiend." I took the poker and pushed the scrap deep into the glowing coals. The rest of the evening passed as many did, with both Onna and Grysta going their separate ways to bed.

Although I indicated that I would soon do so myself, taking care to let Onna catch me yawning, I intended to return to Caelas that night, especially since there had been no sign of Alfrund all day. I suspected that this was at the order of Orien, as a precaution against drawing any attention to this place. Even so, I needed the smell, the warmth, the touch of a male body, and I desired Caelas's very much.

I was in no hurry to slip out, however, since I knew that he didn't take his watch until the owls were about. I pulled the candle over to where I sat, retrieved my book, the quills, and the ink, and returned to scribbling, despite the stiffness of my fingers. Several hours passed as I filled page after page, reworking what I'd read in Alfrund's *enkiridion* with what I'd learned both from watching Grysta and puzzling things out myself. When the candle had finally burnt low and the fire sunk into a mass of sullenly glowing coals, I put away these things, slipped into my vest, and hurried out into the dark.

nd dark it was. A mist had come up from the sea and the way was so shrouded that I despaired of finding my way up the track—or even find the track at all. I was about to turn back when a shape suddenly loomed out of the darkness and a hand closed on my shoulder.

"I came down the path to find you, fearing you'd lose your way and step over the cliff," Caelas said. He put his arm around me and led me forward, lifting me up when I stumbled. After a bit, he added, "I'd also begun to fear you might not come at all."

I clasped his hand. "If it hadn't been for the mist," I said, "I'd be in your arms already."

At last, the spectral glow of the watch fire appeared. It wasn't until we actually reached it that I could make out the sleeping forms of his men in the mist. I raised my hands to enhance their slumber, but Caelas seized my arm.

"A little less of that this time, *Nithaial*," he whispered. "It took me half the morning to rouse them. If it happens again, they'll think I've drugged them."

I lessened the force to a mere ripple, and we made our way, stepping over and around their sleeping bodies. "No need for you to close your eyes this time when we cross over the crest," I whispered back.

Caelas laughed. "In any case, it would be the blind leading the blind. But, listen Jessan," he said, returning his arm around my waist, "if we were walking now in bright sunlight, I would not avert my eyes. The time quickly approaches for me to make the choice I spoke of before."

"I know," I said, and told him of my dream.

"That wasn't fact but foresight," he said when I'd finished. "It takes many weeks for an army that size to cross the wide plains of the Lhennad. It will not reach the Gates of Karn for many days yet. But, yes, it comes, and in a great fury. But let us talk about that once we're safe within the walls of Sondaram."

## PART FOUR THE SUMMONER

## Chapter 16



HIS NIGHT, SONDARAM, wrapped in mist, seemed to float in the air like a dream. When we came to the arched entryway, I could see wisps floating through the rooms. But the moment I stepped inside it dissipated, as if chased away with an invisible broom. When I was away, would the icy winds of winter sweep through as well, leaving drifts of snow piled up in the corners? Well, I would find out about that when the time came.

As before, I disrobed as I crossed the floor and entered the force, letting it sweep me up. Each time I did so, the effect was different, my power over it more complete. Now I could set up currents within it and send them spiraling around me. I could braid them together, even spin out strands that reached into the room, soaring through the open space and then returning to me.

I spun out another strand and sent it beyond the arches and into the night, circling back to me out of the blackness. On a clear night, these displays would be visible

from afar, if any were out on the sea to watch. But on this one, the mist kept the secret, and I was free to play. Eventually, though, I tired of it, eased my body out of the force, stretched myself, and went to Caelas. This time he didn't rise when I approached, and I saw he held something in his lap.

"I've been exploring your palace," he said. "And, as I did so, a strangely familiar aroma drew me onto the terrace. There I found a grove of alestran trees, bent over from the weight of their fruit. I picked some and brought it in for us to share. You'll find it sweet, juicy, and marvelously refreshing. When I was a boy I would be punished for eating too much fresh, for most of it was meant to be carefully dried and set aside for the season of hunger.

I remembered the yellow blossoms that had filled the air with scent when I'd walked there with Orien. The fruit itself was a deeper color, a golden orange, in shape larger but not unlike a plum. Caelas offered me one and I bit into it. Its rich flavor filled my mouth and the juices ran down my chin.

Caelas smiled. "I'll clean that for you when you're done," he said. "Some say alestran is a gentle aphrodisiac, but I believe that the pleasure of eating it just calls to mind other, different forms of enjoyment."

I sat close beside him and we ate the fruit together. "With the fountain for drink and these for food, one could stay safe at Sondaram for some time," I said to him.

"True," he said, in a slightly distracted manner. Each

time I took a new fruit from his lap I'd gently stroked his member, and the bulge in his tunic had begun to push the few remaining alestran to either side.

The next time I reached over, I took them all up in my hands. "I think we'll save the rest for later," I said, and set them on the ledge beside me.

He took my face in both hands and licked away the juices staining my face. I then climbed into his lap and returned the favor, but with more concentration because it was tangled in his beard. It was only a matter of moments before I drew his tunic over his head and pulled him to his feet.

I then flung my arms around his neck and wrapped my legs around his waist. We kissed fiercely for a while and soon his sex was pressing firmly into my cleft. I clutched it by squeezing my buttocks together, and looked meaningfully into his eyes.

He nodded, let go of me, and he went to get his small container of salve, which tonight was near beside us. But instead of handing it to me, he opened it himself, and scooped out a small portion with one finger. He rubbed that finger and his thumb together to spread it out, then came over and gently took my own sex and rubbed it all over, from tip to base.

"But," I said, surprised, even a little unnerved, "I want *you* in me."

"No, little one," he said. "I saw the blood on the cloth when I cleaned myself this morning. You must fully heal before I do that to you again."

"But I *am* healed," I protested. "And, besides, I couldn't possibly hold you up around me."

He laughed. "Silly head," he said, "there are several other ways, and it's my hope to teach you every one." He reached out and took my shoulder, but when he saw I still hesitated, he put both hands around my waist and pulled me to him.

When we were pressing tightly together, he said into my ear, "It's a great blessing of man sex that each can enter the other as well as be entered. To wish it only one way is to mimic the ways of men with women—one the lad, one the lass, and always the question of who's to be which."

He reached up a hand and lifted my face to look into his. "Believe me, sweet Jessan, otherwise you cannot know the full pleasure of being entered."

"I'm sure I'm quite healed," I said, but with less force than before.

"Well, then," he answered, "bend over and let me look." He sat on the floor and had me face away, standing with one leg on each side of him. I bent over and he firmly spread my buttocks apart. I expected his look to be over in a moment, but instead he pulled me towards him and began to explore me with his tongue.

I gasped. My sex was instantly rigid. In all my lovemaking I'd never felt such a sweet sensation, wet and warm and flickering, first around the hole and then into it, a little way at first, and then more deeply. My body quivered all over like the string of a lute.

Suddenly, he withdrew, grasped my hips, and turned me around. "Ah," he said, "you now have something worthy enough to offer a soldier. Use it now so that I can feel it fully." He rolled onto his back and lifted his legs, spreading them to reveal himself. His hole, I saw with astonishment, had opened of itself, revealing a bright, wet pinkness within.

If I'd been erect before, I was now rampant. My rod quivered from the force of my anticipation. I dropped to my knees between his legs, and guided it to the opening and, closing my eyes, felt the rush of sensation as it burrowed its way inside.

Caelas groaned. "Deeper yet," he said. I thrust my thighs forward until his sack pressed hard against my stomach, his balls swollen and tight. This excited me almost beyond enduring, as did the tight grasp of his muscles around my cock, and, above all, the way he moved his hips, a rotating motion that drove me to the end of my endurance.

I thrust into him again and again, faster and faster, crying out. Then came an explosion that shook me to my bones. I spent inside him, in a frenzied spasm, which, when finished, wiped my strength away. I simply fell forward on top of him, feeling the cool outside air against my member as it slid out of that warm place altogether. I lay there, panting, whimpering a little, lights flashing in my eyes.

Caelas stroked my head. "There, lovely one," he

said, "you see there's *something* to be said for taking the other role."

I pulled myself up so that I could kiss him, and did so, for several minutes. Finally, I turned on my side, propped my head up on my elbow, and asked him, "Tell me truly, Caelas—do you like one as much as the other?"

He looked at me. "I've done it so often both ways that I couldn't count. In one mood I want the one, in another mood, the other. Tonight I was in the mood for two things. The first was to feel you inside me; the second," and he gestured toward his sex, which was still hard and throbbing, "to have you finish what last night you started with your mouth."

After I'd done that to both our satisfaction, we lay against each other for some time. I had closed my eyes, so I mistook the first spasm that shook Caelas's body for a smothered sneeze. But the second was stronger, and when I lifted my head to look at him, I saw that his eyes were glazing over and his mouth was slack.

"Caelas?" I said, on my knees now, full of alarm. "Caelas! Speak to me, *please*!"

He lifted his head, his eyes focused on me for a few seconds, his mouth half shaped a word, but even that effort proved too much for him. Before I could catch hold of it, his head fell back with a thud onto the floor.

Feeling wretched at not foreseeing that, I moved so that I could hold it in my lap, and caressed his hair as I looked down at his face, willing him to recover.

In my youth, I had witnessed an attack of the falling sickness, but this wasn't like that at all. His body wasn't locked in a rigid posture nor was he violently shaking. Instead, it was limp, cool, and gently tremorous, as if he were floating in a pool of water. Nothing in my own studies gave me the slightest hint of what I was seeing, and I dearly wished I had some way of summoning Grysta to my side.

Instead, I used my power to gently probe his mind, but all I could discern was a wash of feelings, impossible to differentiate or define—much like my own mind must be, I thought, when I am swimming in the force.

Even so, I was just gathering my courage to go wake a soldier and send for Grysta, despite the consequences, when Caelas began to stir. He groaned, slowly lifted his hands to his face and pressed his palms against his eyes. He groaned again, moved his head a little, realized it was in my lap, and looked up at me.

"What did you *do* to me?" he whispered.

"Caelas!" I said, shocked. "Nothing! I did nothing!"

He regarded me a few seconds more, then closed his eyes again and lay still, gathering his strength. After a bit, he sat up. He had meant to get to his feet, but instead collapsed into a sitting position, and even that required the support of both his arms. He was looking away from me.

I slid the short distance across the floor and put my hand on one of his knees. To my despair, he pushed it away. Groaning from the effort, he got onto his knees and crawled to the ledge that ran along the wall, dragged himself up so that he was sitting on it, then leaned forward, his face in his hands.

I went and sat beside him but dared not speak or try to touch him. After we had sat like that for some time, his body began to shake. I looked at him and saw to my relief that he was laughing. He leaned back until his head rested against the wall and reached out his hand to me. I seized it at once.

"Tell me, truly," he said, his voice still barely audible, "you've never entered a man before?"

"Not like that," I replied.

He turned his head slightly and regarded me from the corner of his eye. "Not like *what*?" he asked. And so I told him about Telo.

"And this boy, this Telo," he said, "how was *he* after you were through?"

"Very happy," I answered. "I remember thinking I had much to learn to get as much pleasure out of the act as he seemed to."

This time Caelas laughed out loud. "Oh, Gracious Mother," he said. He drew me to him and wrapped his arm around me. "Idiot boy," he said. "Didn't it occur to you that maybe, just maybe, something in your release might have been the cause of this...*intensity*?"

"Well," I admitted, "Alfrund did wonder about that,

but, well, I didn't have the nerve to ask Orien."

"Alfrund, Telo," Caelas said, shaking his head. "Exactly how much further does this list go on?"

"My list is *much* shorter than yours," I shot back, hotly, "and, as you well know, much less interesting."

He took my chin in his hand and turned my head so that he could look into my eyes. "Not so," he answered softly, and ran his fingers through my hair. "Everything about you interests me to distraction. Do you understand now what happened?"

I shook my head sullenly. But, of course I knew. I had added another reason to hate being a *Nithaial*.

"The wizard Occrast lived half his life as a man and half as a woman," Caelas said, "and when asked whether men or women got more from the act of love, he (or was it she!) replied—the woman, because for her pleasure knows no end, while a man's is over in the time it takes to sneeze.

"Well," Caelas smiled, "I now know sex as a woman..., or perhaps I should say, a very, very *lucky* woman. But I wasn't expecting it, and I thought you'd cast some spell on me, the power of which you didn't understand. So I fought it, with the result that I simply passed out. I suppose when it enters through the mouth, your spending has less power—or else young Telo is still lying, wreathed in smiles, on the floor of his shop."

I had to smile myself at that image. "Oh, Caelas," I said, "everything is so *complicated* about being a *Nithaial*.

Now I can't make love to someone without warning him that, that.... I don't even know what I would say."

"Just tell him to prepare himself for a penetration he'll never forget," Caelas said. "Many promise this, but you, sweet one, actually deliver."

Seeing that I was still unconvinced, he smiled again, and gave my shoulder a shake. "Jessan," he said, "the life of a *Nithaial* is beyond a mortal's imagining, I know, but this aspect, I can swear to you, will prove the least of your burdens.

"Now, rouse yourself," he added, standing up. "My strength is back, and I have something to show you." He took me by the hand and led me across the great hall.

As we went, he said, "While you were bathing in the force, I did a bit of exploring, as you invited me to do. Sondaram, as palaces go, is infinitely small, It's not a palace at all, really, but a jeweled miniature of one, and all the lovelier because of it.

"Even so, it seemed to me that it should have a lower level, just as it has an upper one. In that case, the staircase is in plain view, public, and open. If there's something below, it's meant to be private, perhaps even secret.

"Of course, if it were *truly* secret, I knew I wouldn't find it at all. But if it were just meant *not to be noticed*—well, I've a little experience with that sort of thing. Wizards often construct invisible doorways for those who can afford them. For the sake of convenience, however, they're rarely completely hidden—just made imperceptible to those who don't

know where to look. And, of course, even if you *do* know where, the real trick is getting them to open."

By now we had reached what to my eyes was a blank wall, distinguished only by the fact that the stone ledge that ran around the wall ended a short span before it reached the first outside arch. That, surely, was Caelas's first clue.

Then.... I stared and stared and still saw nothing. I went up closer to the wall and looked intently at each piece of tile that covered it. They were all the same, except for one, which, if you looked directly at it, seemed more translucent than the others. When I put my face directly in front of it, I could just make out—beneath the surface of the tile, where it couldn't be felt nor its ridges catch the light—the delicate outline of a hand.

I raised my own to see if it matched the one embedded in the tile. Before I'd even touched the surface, the hand began to glow.

"Tell it to open," Caelas said. "Just with your mind; you don't have to speak."

"Open," I thought. There was a click and a door swung inwards. As it did, it revealed a small antechamber. Large crystals set into its walls began to glow as soon as I stepped inside, with Caelas cautiously following me. There was nothing within but two doorways, one open, one shut. The shut one, I realized, would give access to the tower, if that weren't still in ruins. But the other opened onto a flight of stairs leading downwards. As before, as we approached,

crystals set into the stairwell began to glow, in anticipation of our descent.

I took Caelas's hand and asked, "Do we dare go down?"

He answered, "That's up to you. And maybe you should descend alone in case what lies below is for your eyes only. But as to 'dare'—remember, this is *your* house. All within it belongs to you and all of it obeys you. Whatever you find down there, it's not going to be dangerous."

"That's what Orien said, too," I answered. "But most of what I learn about myself ends up proving all too dangerous—to me and those who are close to me."

"Up until now," Caelas answered, "those around you were unused to danger. True, it's good to be wary of it, but that only enhances its many pleasures."

"Easy for you to say, great warrior," I retorted.

"Easy also to prove," he answered back, and scooped me up with one arm, as if I were a child. "Prepare yourself, *Nithaial*." And down the steps we went, the lights glowing on just ahead of us. At the bottom, Caelas let me go, and we looked at what lay before us.

To the extent that I had given it any thought at all, I expected to find a warren of passages, storage rooms, servant quarters, kitchens, and the like. But Sondaram itself had none of these. If there was a separate building that housed them, it had been totally destroyed when the palace was brought down.

What we came upon instead was a vast room the same shape and size as the great hall above, but divided by eight thick pillars, covered with elaborately carved friezes, supporting the room above. In the center was a massive throne. From it, like the spokes of a wheel, extended several rows of catafalques. On the top of each of these lay a life-size graven image of the one whose remains it entombed.

As soon as he saw this, Caelas seized my hand and quickly drew me back up the stairs.

"What is it?" I asked, startled, but he said nothing until we reached the anteroom.

"It's the resting place of the *Nithaial* who have come before you," he said, "and it would be a mark of great disrespect to enter it in our current state. Come with me to the fountain, where we'll wash ourselves, then dress properly and descend again."

## Chapter 17



o WE CLEANED OURSELVES and I called up a hot breath of air to dry us. Then, I in my borrowed shirt and Caelas, resplendent in his armor and helmet, went down the stairs again. When we reached the bottom, Caelas bowed deeply and stood silently for a moment, as did I, more in imitation than by instinct. When he lifted his head again, I took his hand and we walked together down one of the aisles toward the throne.

The raised tombs were made of black marble; the sculptures that lay upon them were carved from a pure white stone—marble, too, perhaps, but translucent. The mellow unflickering light of the magic lamps made them softly glow. The figures themselves were neither young nor old, but rather beautiful in a timeless way. The features of each were different from those of the next, and yet also very much the same. I was only barely familiar with my own reflection, but I knew that I in some way resembled every one of them.

I laid my hand on one and ran my fingers along its arm. A great sadness seized me and my eyes filled with tears. It was only self-pity—how much I would have liked to have known him, indeed, any that lay in this room. Caelas noted my state and put his arm around me.

I leaned against him and said, "It's like seeing all the members of your family, the resemblances, the differences, all of it simply moving and interesting—until you realize you'll never meet, let alone get to know, *any* of them."

"You forget your twin," Caelas answered, "at least if I remember the legends correctly."

"Yes," I whispered, "I do keep forgetting about him. If only I could have some sense of him...." I stopped in the middle of my thought. We had simply chosen the nearest aisle to reach the throne, but I'd already noticed that in the next one over there was something strange about the last three tombs. We had reached them as we were talking and I now saw why—each of the figures was broken into fragments, although these were fixed firmly in place.

"The last three of your line," Caelas sad sadly. "All killed by The Unnameable One, and their souls eaten."

I shuddered, and my whole body shook with sudden rage.

"What does that mean, Caelas," I asked, "that their souls were eaten?"

"Orien's the one to answer such a question," he replied hesitantly. "But if what I've heard is true, certain magi-

cal beings are able to devour the souls of those they kill. They do so to increase their own power and to prevent the soul from ever again returning to the Hallowed Halls, where it might bear witness against the perpetrator. In the eyes of men, therefore, it seems a doubly evil act."

"There's only one soul I would ever eat," I said hotly, still looking at the shattered remains of these beautiful figures.

"I hope when that time comes you'll find there's none to take," Caelas answered. "For if the word 'soulless' has any meaning, it refers to He Who Has No Name. But if He does still possess one..., well, it's not for me to advise." He took my hand and drew me away, saying, "Come, let's look at your throne—there seems to be something on it."

My attention had been so seized by the smashed figures that I had hardly noticed it. But now that I looked where Caelas pointed, I saw that something was lying on the seat, as if casually left behind by whoever was here.

The throne itself was made of several different costly woods, artfully joined and decorated with faint tracings of silver embedded in the wood, a filigree of interwoven arcane signs and ancient runes. Curved arms reached out from the back, carved to resemble spirits, their faces staring out at out at us from the ends.

The object resting on the seat was made of some mysterious metal with the glint of palest white gold. It was cylindrical, narrow, and longer than a dagger but not as much as a short sword. Since Caelas said nothing, I tentatively picked it up and, when nothing happened, turned it over in my hands. Two symbols had been deeply incised in it, one at the base of either end.



Naturally, from my studies in Alfrund's *enkiridion*, I recognized them both. The circle with a horizontal bar was the symbol of water; the other, the circle with a dot in its center, was that for air—the two of the four elements from which I drew my strength.

As soon as I had seen it, I thought it might be a wand of power, but now my initial excitement began to fade away. The thing was completely inert in my hands, nothing more than a mere rod of precious metal, meant to display, perhaps, my exalted status. Disappointed, I handed it to Caelas, who practically jumped aside.

"Jessan!" he said in a shocked voice. "You know what that is. I can't touch it, and wouldn't, out of respect for what it represents."

"I know what it *looks* like," I answered. "But it doesn't *feel* like one. And I hope it's not, if all it's going to do is provide Orien the opportunity for giving me more lessons."

Caelas shook his head. "It makes no sense that a wand of power wouldn't know you and respond accordingly. Hold it out again to me."

I did so, and Caelas first moved his fingers over it, braced to snatch them away, and then, when he felt nothing, took it in his hand. "I've never felt a metal at once so light and so solid," he said. "It has a pleasing weight. But you're right; it has no feel of magic about it at all."

He handed it back. "If it's not your touch that quickens it to life," he said, "it will be in connection with something that only you've the knowledge or power to do. Some spell perhaps...." He shook his head dubiously, even as he said it.

"So, we end up back with Orien," I said, and taking his arm, drew him toward the stairs. "Well, it will give him some pleasure, at least, revealing the mysteries. Meanwhile, though, it's time to head for home and my bed."

We exited the hidden anteroom and I closed the secret door behind me. Somewhat disconsolately, I followed Caelas across the great room, detouring as I did so to run my hand through the pulsating blue force at its center. The moment I touched it, the wand, held in my other hand, sounded a pure tone.

"Caelas, wait!" I cried. I stepped into the force, holding the wand tightly. To my astonishment, instead of wrapping itself around me as always, the force simply vanished, as if its flow had been suddenly cut off.

The wand, on the other hand, seemed energized beyond all imagining, vibrating so intensely that it was becoming too painful to hold. I hurriedly stepped out of the circle and, immediately, the force reappeared in a great swirl of pulsing blue light, as if nothing had happened.

I looked down at the wand, which felt as if it were about to explode in my hand. I pointed one end toward the sea and mentally commanded it to discharge. At once, a brilliant bolt of force shot out into the night, piercing and dispersing the mist. It traveled so quickly that almost before I grasped what had happened it was out of sight, leaving behind a luminous blue trail. A few seconds later a great burst of light appeared at the horizon, followed seconds later by an ear-deafening thunderclap.

"By the Mother Goddess!" Caelas swore. He had been pulling on his armor and buckling on his weapons while I was in the force field; the moment the burst of thunder sounded he rushed at top speed out of Sondaram and up the hill. A moment later I heard him commanding his men, who, despite my spell, had been startled out of their sleep.

I was about to decide what to do next myself, when I realized that the wand was once again inert in my hand. I'd utterly discharged it. Who knew when I would be able to return to Sondaram? I slipped into the force, but this time only long enough for the wand to feel alive in my hand.

By the time I'd done this I heard the sound of horses racing up the hill. Whoever was riding them had no qualms about approaching Sondaram, for I saw their torches appear as they reached the crest. Quickly I hurried to the secret door, commanded it to open, and slipped through. I knew that no one could harm me in the palace, but I had no wish

to betray Caelas by being seen here either.

Inside the anteroom, I listened as best I could, but heard nothing but my own beating heart. I was too restless to wait here by the door, so descended into the room below and went and sat on my throne, my legs tucked under me.

The lights in the room had once again begun to glow, dimly at first and then enough for everything there to be clearly seen. But this time, perhaps because I was alone, or because the wand of power was active, the carved figures on top of each catafalque not only appeared to glow, they actually did so. I found I could mentally dim the lights around the walls, so that these figures seemed to float in space, in their different attitudes of repose.

All, that is, except the three broken figures, who, because they were positioned behind me, I didn't immediately see. When I thought to turn and look at them, I saw that their broken fragments flickered but dimly like the flames of a dying fire, blue in the center but quickly fading into orange, yellow, and deepest red.

Again this stabbed at my heart. But now my eyes, instead of filling with tears, grew hard with hate. I swore that not only would I destroy The Unnameable One, but do all I could to make him suffer for this deed, and suffer long. I cast my eyes down and held this grim thought for some time.

When I lifted my eyes again, I found that they had adjusted to the darkness of the room. I could now see the catafalques on which the figures rested and, more interestingly, on a far wall, something glowing faintly. Curious, I left my seat and passed among the tombs until I came to it.

What I had seen was another translucent tile displaying the glowing emblem of a hand—a second secret doorway! I ordered it to open and it did so, as quickly and silently as the other. And again a flight of stairs descended before me. And again a string of soft lights illuminated the way. But this time, the way led away from Sondaram, not down further under it. This was a secret passage that would take me back to Gedd.

And, indeed, after a long descent, I found myself facing another door. I commanded the lights to extinguish themselves, and, giving my eyes a moment to get accustomed to the dark, ordered the door to open. It did so, and, stepping through, I found myself at the end of a dark lane. The door snicked shut behind me, and turning, I found nothing behind me but an ancient, half ruined stone wall. But when I lifted my wand to where the door had been, a hand glowed dimly, this time through solid rock. Sondaram was no longer barred to me, no matter how many soldiers guarded the road.

was unfamiliar with this part of Gedd and, in the pitch black, took some time to orient myself. But finally I made my way back to Grysta's door, lifted the latch, and let myself in. I began to ascend the stairs, already half asleep, when a hand reached out of the darkness, seized me by the back of the neck. It threw me into the kitchen, almost sending me tumbling onto the floor as well. I regained my balance and backed toward the fireplace, too shocked to remember I was still clutching the wand of power. The sleeping embers still cast off enough light to dimly see by, and almost immediately I was aware of Orien's face floating in the dark before me, a dangerously angry glint in his eyes.

"You reckless idiot!" he whispered. "You utterly empty-headed child! If I'd known you were slipping up to Sondaram on your own.... And that burst of light! Why not go into the center of town, jump up and down and shout your name until the soldiers come to drag you to the fort?"

I reached out a touch of the force to calm him, but he angrily brushed it away. "And don't even think to practice your little tricks on me," he hissed, "or I'll leave you at once and forever. There will be others born after you, and perhaps they'll be granted a fair share of brains."

I retreated to the table, pulled out a stool, and sat down on it, burying my head in my hands. As I did so, I laid the wand of power on the table. Before it had been invisible to Orien, but now it caught and refracted the faint light. The sight of it obviously caused him no joy.

"Well," he whispered, "that explains it. Couldn't wait to try it out, and in the most extravagant manner possible. And I suppose you've been putting the soldiers under a spell of sleep when you passed them to enter Sondaram?"

Since to lie would only turn his anger into frothing rage, I merely nodded my head.

"Well," he said, sighing, "if you'd the sense to wake them once you passed them on the way back, they'd have felt as though they merely dozed off for a second. You do know that if anyone found them asleep at their post, they'd all be immediately executed?"

I shook my head, speechless. I hadn't known that. Of course, Caelas had never slept, but if he'd been found to have entered Sondaram.... No wonder he had rushed off in such a hurry. And I'd been in no position to help him, even if I'd had the wits to try. My powers seemed so unformed. It was like growing into manhood all over again—one moment you spoke in a man's voice and in the next one you squeaked like a child.

All these thoughts, of course, I kept to myself. But my silence had more of a tempering effect on Orien than any speech would have done. Meeting no resistance, his anger faded into something akin to despair.

"We shall have to act at once," he said. "The Summoner will have already reported that bolt and The Unnameable One is now cognizant that you're quickly assuming your powers. If we don't leave soon and make plain we have done so, He will call a blight down upon this entire part of the kingdom, leaving it uninhabitable and all who live here seared and dead."

I lifted my head from my hands and stared at him in shock. "He can do that?" I whispered.

"It would take all His remaining power," Orien an-

swered, "and leave Him greatly weakened for a time afterwards, but, yes, He certainly could. However, I think that He'll wait for more information first. After all, what happened did so in the mist at a distance late at night, when everyone was asleep. No damage was done. It could have merely been you blowing yourself to pieces."

He stood up. "I'll have to advance our time of departure to the day after tomorrow. That will mean you'll celebrate your Coming of Age Day at sea, but I can't say that you deserve to have one at all.

"Tomorrow, remain in this house, all day and all night. I've the sense that the Lord of the Fort has some trick up his sleeve; things have been far too quiet. Alfrund's been busy quietly gathering supplies for our trip, but tomorrow I'll send him here to keep an eye on you. I told him more than once to slip out of Fendal's bed after their lovemaking and come here to keep an eye on you."

That would have pleased me greatly, I thought, to have Alfrund here straight from a bout in bed with Fendal. But, again, I held my tongue.

Orien turned to leave. But he thought of something, paused and turned to me. "Jessan," he whispered softly, "E' as in 'evilest." And then he was gone.

was now too shaken to go to bed. So, instead, I pulled my stool before the fire and poked the ash off the coals until flames began to lick at their edges. The house was so quiet that I could hear the regular drip of Grysta's water

clock in the work room, mindlessly marking off the minutes. Time was too complicated to be caught and tracked that way, I thought, however useful the device for timing alchemical processes. At this time of night, for example, it became merely a form of torture.

My thoughts were broken by a light tread. Onna pulled out another stool from under the table and sat down beside me. She reached out and took my arm.

"Jessan" she whispered, "who are you?"

I took her hand in mine and pulled back my sleeve, revealing the Cronnex. At this hour, in this darkness, it almost glistened.

She caught her breath.

"How much did you hear of Orien's whispering?" I asked.

"Everything, I think," she replied. "The sound of your stumbling woke me. Did Orien hit you?"

I shook my head. "But only by exercising great restraint," I said. "I'm sure he'd have dearly loved to, and would have, were I his apprentice. But he knew full well that one blow is all it would take for me to turn him into a toad."

She giggled. "Well, that thought didn't keep him from calling you some very choice names. So," she continued, "you've been stealing up to Sondaram these nights, not to some handsome lover."

I glanced at her. "As you know," I said, "I've been doing both. My lover commands the detail that guards Son-

daram all night."

Onna's eyes widened. "You aren't one to do things by half, are you?" she asked. "If Orien knew that, he probably would have beaten you with his staff, first as a wizard and then as a toad."

I smiled. "I told you before, Onna, that these things just happen."

"And because of that," she said, "will we all die and Gedd become a desert?"

Tears began to drip down her cheeks. I moved my stool next to hers, put my arm around her, and held her tightly.

"Not because of that, Onna," I answered sadly. "But because He Who Cannot Be Named wishes me destroyed. What Orien said is true, and I suppose I deserved some of his reproaches. But if I hadn't done what I did, I wouldn't have met Caelas, who may yet become an important ally in this struggle. Nor would I have learned to shape and master the force that I now command or have found the wand with which to do so."

I lifted my hand and made a summoning gesture. The wand rose from the table and floated into my fingers. I pointed it toward the fire and gave it a mental command. Immediately a bright blue circle formed, floated over the fire, and vanished with a puff.

"Even someone as wise as Orien can fool himself into thinking that if only everyone would do as he says, he could exercise some control over events. But he couldn't be more wrong. Great forces have long been set in motion; my enemy knows better than I what powers I've attained, for He has walked the same path himself.

"In all this, Orien is himself no more than a knight or bishop," I went on, "but I am a king or queen. The two who sit over the board are beyond our imagining and our fates mean nothing to them. All we can know is that each intends to win, and has already thought out the play several moves ahead. We can only await the touch that will push us toward our doom."

Where these somber thoughts sprang from, I hardly knew. But the moment I spoke them, I knew them to be true. I looked at Onna and smiled. "Now *that* surely cheered you up."

She put her arm around me and gave me a squeeze. "Believe it or not, it did," she answered. "Because you showed me a Jessan that before I'd never have believed existed. And that gives me hope."

She let go of my waist and gave me a gentle shove. "Let us get to our separate beds," she said. "Tomorrow sounds like a busy day."

## Chapter 18



URE ENOUGH, when I came down the stairs in the morning, Alfrund was sitting at the kitchen table, his face gloomy, drinking a steaming infusion of flastal leaf. However, when I entered, his face brightened. He stood up and we embraced and kissed. It felt good to have him in my arms, although I couldn't help but notice how slender he was compared to Caelas.

Onna was off somewhere with Grysta, but the porridge pot had been left in the fireplace, and I filled a bowl with it, and brought it to the table. Since it was too hot to eat with my fingers, and Onna wasn't there, I ate it with the serving spoon, while Alfrund sipped his tea.

Flastal leaf is an ataractic—and a tea promoting tranquil thoughts is not the usual choice for a morning beverage. Alfrund was greatly agitated and was no doubt drinking the brew to keep me from noticing this. He still had little idea how much of his *enkiridion* I'd studied, or how deeply I'd absorbed what I'd read. I decided to eat my porridge in companionable silence, and let him be the first to speak.

"There's to be a public execution today," he said at last. "Criers are walking about the town announcing it. They say it has to do with an enemy of the kingdom, which puzzles me greatly, since all of us—Orien, Grysta, Onna even, you, me—are accounted for, as is Fendal, too. Of course soldiers could appear at the door at any moment and bear us away, but it would be most unusual to announce an execution before the victim is even seized."

My mind immediately went to Caelas, but if they'd arrested him, he'd be tortured for information, and it would be some time before he was put out for public display.

"Worse yet," Alfrund went on, "despite Orien's strict orders to keep you in plain sight, I have to go into the town to get the clothing we purchased for you, all of which I've been promised many times would be finally ready today."

"The solution is simple," I answered. "Take me with you. Then I will be the one disobeying Orien, not you. He already considers me willful if not utterly intransigent. I'm willing to suffer the blows that would otherwise be aimed at you."

This brought a smile from Alfrund. "I would rather strike those blows myself," he said. "I've heard what you've been up to, and suspect that what I was told is far from the entire tale."

"I've simply been following my doom," I said primly, "in both my callings."

Alfrund groaned. "It's far too early in the morning, at least my morning, to hear more. Grysta has given me leave to concoct a few necessary ointments, potions, and the like for our travels. Finish your porridge and we'll do it together."

I only wished that Onna had been here to observe; Alfrund had none of Grysta's fussy deliberateness, but went about his work with what could only be called an air of insouciance. Some things he did carefully measure, especially those that were expensive or notably caustic, but others went in by the pinch or, in some instances, the handful.

At one point he was so casual at this that I glanced at him, and he caught my look. "The overcautious herbalist merely wastes his time," he explained. "Every leaf has a slightly different strength, elements decay over time, distillations evaporate even through closed stoppers. The herbalist practices an art wrapped in the language and the method of careful study; you must learn to play the one against the other, rather than falsely simplifying by clinging hold to one of them."

"And Grysta?" I asked.

"Ha," he replied. "Grysta is an old and crafty witch passing herself off as a mere healer. She slips spells into her potions and leaves us poor herbalists looking like itinerant pedlars of common simples."

"Truly?" I exclaimed.

"You haven't noticed this, little *Nithaial*?" Alfrund said teasingly. "She could give old Orien a run for his money, even though she's not been taken into the circle of mages.

This is partly because mages are uneasy about the separate way witches attain their arcane knowledge, but equally because she has no interest in such things—flowing robes embroidered with silver threads and faces filled with profundity. Magic would have a better flavor if women were the mages and men contented themselves with the alchemical."

He gestured over to a wall where a row of handblown glass crocks sat, holding various assortments of animal bones and teeth. "Those are not the medicinals of a healer's dispensatory; they are the elementals of witchcraft."

My opinion of Grysta, already high, rose higher still. For she'd hidden all signs of these powers from me. And I, as usual, had been too full of myself and my problems to even think of looking for them. That we'd been left undisturbed in this house for so long had surely to do with some carefully crafted spells.

An elbow nudged me in the ribs. "Pay attention," Alfrund said, "your crucible is about to overflow. Let's get this done and into town. The shops will all close when the hour of execution comes, for everyone will attend."

Indeed, we had just stepped out the tailor's shop, the last on our list of errands, when we heard the loud dull thump of the executioner's drum, a huge thing that could be heard for leagues. The beat began slowly but began to increase tempo every several minutes, as shops and inns and workplaces emptied, and people hurried, still in their working garb, to the central square.

Alfrund and I had intended to head back to Grysta's house, but the crowd caught us up and made it impossible to move in any other direction. Reluctantly we let it sweep us along. After all, we would be anonymous in the mob, while being the only ones fighting to go in the opposite direction could only call unwanted attention to ourselves.

Ominously, soon after the drum sounded, I began to sense the presence of the Summoner. This time, however, he wasn't searching into minds but pulling at them, each psychic thread catching hold and implanting a sense of urgency. I could easily brush these away, and did, but as we drew closer, I could sense that they were also saying a word, over and over again. Because I continued to keep the strands at a distance, it wasn't until we arrived at the town square, buried at the back of the mob, that I made it out. And when I did it was as if I'd been stabbed with a blade of ice.

"Faryn," the voice was saying, in a revoltingly gloating voice. "Faryn. Faryn. Faryn." I thrust the bundles I was carrying into Alfrund's arms and began shoving my way through the crowd, my brain reeling. "Faryn. Faryn. Faryn. Faryn."

Finally I burst through to the front the crowd, held back from a raised platform by a ring of soldiers with locked arms. Above me stood what must be the Lord of the Fort, a large man clad in full armor, helmet pulled shut, his arms resting on a huge sword. Beside him on one side stood a figure in a black robe, the hood tossed back to reveal a chalk

white, utterly hairless head. His eyes fell on me the moment mine did on him, but mine didn't pause. They had moved on at once to the other side of the Lord of the Fort. There, Faryn hung, chained to a rack, tilted up to be in full view of the crowd, each of his limbs stretched to the breaking point, the metal biting so deeply that blood oozed around them.

I sought to catch Faryn's glance, but he was already unconscious. And the moment the Summoner saw me, he pointed me out to the Lord of the Fort. He, in turn, gave a sharp command, and the soldier standing beside the rack pulled on a lever. Before my very eyes, the machine expanded with a violent lurch and Faryn was ripped apart, his legs and arms making a sickening popping noise as they did so, covering the platform with gouts of blood. In a mere second his head dangled down over his torso, which itself was held in place only by a thick leather strap that held it fast.

Instantly, a terrible screaming was heard, not from Faryn, who was already dead, but from the soldier who had pulled the lever, his arms first blackening as if thrust into a roaring fire and then withering into stumps. Blood gushed from Lord of the Fort's helmet. With a scream, he ripped it off his head. His face was a mask of red, gouts spurting from his ears, nostrils, eyes and mouth. He wavered, fell on his knees, then pitched forward with a crash. His helmet rolled off the platform and fell at my feet.

I had done all this. But in my blinding rage, it seemed to be happening at a great distance, not almost within arm's reach. All this time I'd been fending off the Summoner but now I turned to him. His eyes were stretched wide open, the pupils rolled up under his eyelids. He shook all over as if in the midst of a shaking fit.

As he did so, a vice as hard as steel closed around my head. The force was enormous; my very skull was wrenched with pain. I pulled up every bit of resistance I could muster to counter it and mananged to stay it for a moment. The Summoner's body thrashed about, as incoherent gibbering noises flooded out of his mouth.

The force began to intensify again and blood rushed into my eyes and blinded me. I struggled against it but my strength was quickly ebbing. I gave one last tremendous heave to shake it off and the Summoner's skull exploded.

I didn't see it; I was sightless from pain. But I heard the sound and felt the bits of his noisome brain splatter against me. The pressure was gone. The Unnameable One, in His eagerness to finish me, had pushed too much power far too quickly through his mortal medium and destroyed him instead of me.

Meanwhile the screaming of the soldier who had pulled the switch continued unabated. I turned my mind to him, felt in his body for his heart and ripped it from his chest. The screaming stopped.

My vision returned, first through a haze of blood, and then more clearly. The crowd was fleeing in a great panic, trampling many to death. Only a few soldiers remained, cowering before me, too terrified to run.

I spoke to one, or perhaps only thought I spoke, and instead sent my words directly into his mind. "Go and fetch me Caelas," I said.

"P-p-p-rince Caelas?" the soldier stuttered. "But he's in chains and under guard."

"Then I want him released, cleaned, and brought to me," I snapped. "If he's not here before me in minutes, I will rip the soul out of every soldier in the fort and eat it as I stand here."

The soldier turned and fled toward the fort. I saw as he ran that he had soiled himself from terror. I looked away and ascended the platform, and went to where the remains of Faryn dangled from that foul engine.

Great rage was transmuting itself into an equally terrible grief. I lifted his head between my two hands, kissed him, and said the prayer for the dead. It's not long but neither is it short, and as I keened it I heard the voice of Alfrund join with me. Tears flowed down my face and when the last words were uttered and I had kissed Faryn's lips one last time, I turned and fell into Alfrund's arms, sobbing uncontrollably.

And this is how it was that Caelas came upon us. I heard his footsteps approach, pulled myself together and led Alfrund across the platform, now covered with blood and human parts, to the ground before it.

I went to Caelas, took his hand, and looked into his face. "You're a prince, then?" I asked.

"Yes, *Nithaial*. I didn't mean to conceal it from you," he answered. "In the circumstances, it seemed an idle boast."

I nodded and said, "You did tell me that you were familiar with palaces. You're related to the king?"

"I'm his nephew," Caelas answered, "but that fact no longer avails me much." He lifted his arm to reveal the burn marks left by a cruelly tightened rope.

"Did they hurt you badly?" I asked. The sight of those marks made me think again of Faryn and it was all I could manage not to burst again into tears of grief and rage.

"Not badly, no," Caelas replied. "They were just warming to their work when a terrified group of soldiers arrived to tell me I'd been summoned. They had no idea by whom. By their description I knew it must be either a demon lord...or you."

I cast my glance down for a moment and then looked back into his eyes. "Are you willing now to offer me your allegiance, even against your kin?" I asked.

His eyes were gray, wide set, and steady. "Yes," he said. "Until my death."

"Then you may do so," I replied.

Caelas then knelt before me and offered me the hilt of his sword. I lifted it aloft and placed my hand on his head. Power moved through us both. The blade of his sword flashed with a brilliant life.

"Prince Caelas," I said, "I give you command of all

men who would fight for the return of the *Nithaial* and the overthrow of their enemy, whose name can not yet but soon will be spoken."

I took my hand from his head and bade him rise.

"I'm so weary I cannot say," I said, "but we must meet later in Sondaram and decide many things. Do you know the house of the healer Grysta?"

Caelas nodded."Then come to us there after you've explained the situation to your troops," I said. "Tell those who refuse to join us that they may leave here freely, but don't let them go just yet. Otherwise, order things as you wish, and deal with any problems as you see fit. I trust your judgment fully in all such things."

I turned toward Alfrund, thinking our conversation over, but Caelas reached out and touched my shoulder. "Jessan," he said, "I'm greatly, greatly sorry about Faryn. When they told me in the dungeon that he was your *twerë*, it all but broke my heart. It was the worst pain I suffered from them, that and the malevolent pleasure they took in what they thought would be their great triumph."

I took his hand again and kissed it, for it would be unseemly for the *Nithaial* to kiss his highest ranking officer on the lips... at least not in public. I then remembered to have him order that Faryn's body be wrapped in clean cloth and brought to Sondaram as well. And so we parted.

By this time, Orien, too, had arrived, and with him Fendal. Caelas strode away to gather together what army he could; the rest of us walked silently back to Grysta's house. She was waiting for me there, and held me, and again I cried for a long time.

## Chapter 19



HE FIRE HAD BEEN FED, a large tub placed on the floor. It was full of hot water, scented with a scattering of sweet herbs. I was soaking in it, attended by Alfrund and Onna, while Orien and Grysta talked in the other room. Alfrund was using a coarse scrubbing cloth to remove blood and clots of the Summoner's brain from my body while Onna burnt my shirt, too blood-stained to be cleaned and, in any case, too contaminated by the events of today for me to consider ever wearing again.

Despite myself, my mind kept returning to Faryn, each time filling my eyes with tears. I splashed water in my face and said to Alfrund, "my spirit needs a good scouring as much as my body. Perhaps I should summon Orien for a touch of his own expertise."

"Perhaps," Alfrund said, and laughed. "But then again, a little self-pity is a sweet balm." He squeezed out the cloth and told me to lift up my arms. It was actually good to hear him laugh and to have him close by. I realized how

much I missed him. What Caelas had offered me was most wonderful but with Alfrund I felt much more myself, or, more realistically, like the Jessan of old, who was fast being displaced by Jessan the *Nithaial*. And it was he whom I would have to call up again as soon as this bath was over.

"I hope you're not *thinking*, Jessan," Onna said, as she came over with more hot water for my tub. "Your poor little brain deserves a rest."

"Truly, Onna," I said. "It was like having my skull crushed beneath a screw press."

"There's no 'like' about it," Alfrund said, taking the kettle and, after testing the hotness, pouring some over my head. Onna, seeing what he was washing out of my hair, made a noise of disgust.

"More Summoner," Alfred agreed. "But it's all washing out. And that is evidence of what I meant: like all such forces, those of the mind have physical effects." He gently ran his fingers over the top of my head. "Grysta found no evidence of damage, happily, but much tenderness."

He returned the kettle to Onna, saying, "Heat yet more water, for he will need a good rinsing." To me he added, "You were a sight to behold, walking through the streets—an apparition from the Eve of Lost Souls."

"Grysta will be credited for a miracle, then," I said, "when I appear in public view again." I reached up and captured Alfrund's hand. "I shall be glad to finally be showing you Sondaram," I went on, "even on such a sad day. I wished

to take you there from the moment I had summoned it to return."

Alfrund bent over and kissed me and I kissed him back. "We'll all go," I continued, "Grysta and Onna, too. I don't want a council of men only."

"Or maybe not only the council of those you've slept with," Onna teased me.

"That, too," I agreed, "although as every hour passes it gets harder to find them."

aelas took longer to come than I'd expected, but it gave me time to rest, drink some broth, as little as I'd appetite for it, and to gather my things. Orien thought it best that I take up residence in Sondaram, if only for the night. He, too, saw it was time for me to assume my role as *Nithaial* and leave that as Alfrund's apprentice behind.

When Caelas did arrive, it was clear that he'd come to the same conclusion. He was followed by several soldiers, some carrying objects of furniture and others bedding and large soft carpets of lovely and complex weave.

"I've expropriated all this from the quarters of the late Lord of the Fort," he said, saluting me. "You will find it comfortable enough until better can be provided."

I'd meant to take them up the hidden stairway, but at the last moment I changed my mind. I wasn't being cautious, but I found I liked knowing something about Sondaram that the rest did not. So we climbed the track up the side of the hill, and found that a unit of soldiers still stood guard at the crest. They stood at attention as we approached.

"I've stationed them here, myself," Caelas said, "to remain until things at the fort are better ordered."

As we passed by, they stared at me with much curiosity, perhaps because I was the *Nithaial* or perhaps from a rumor that Caelas and I were lovers. I was glad I was wearing my new shirt, in which I felt quite handsome. I even flushed a little as we passed them, but not so much, I think, that it was noticed. In any case, I forgot them immediately, so great was my delight at being with Grysta, Onna, and Alfrund as they had their first sight of Sondaram.

First, however, I had a task to do. I beckoned the soldiers carrying Faryn's remain on a pallet, and took them with me to where the force played at the center of the room. I then removed my clothing, lifted the bundle into my arms, and stepped across into the flickering blue light. At once it lifted me and my burden up, and, as it did so, purified Faryn's body, transforming it out of death and into energy.

When my arms were finally empty, I lifted them and I let the force sweep my thoughts away, clear my mind, flush out the pain that had spread like little roots all over my skull, the sorrow in my heart.

I emerged feeling refreshed and further comforted, amused by the naked awe of the soldiers, who fell to their knees the moment I appeared. "Thank you," I said to them. "You may return to your fellows." Then I led my friends and lovers out onto the terrace where we settled ourselves in the

shade of the alestran trees.

And so our council began.

Orien opened his mouth but I gestured gently with my hand for him to close it again. What had happened in the town square had startled him into seeing me with new eyes if not new respect, and I had no wish for the moment to return to playing the pupil.

I turned to Caelas and asked, "What is the situation at the fort?"

"Heartening," Caelas replied. "There's a group that still believes that if the *Nithaial* could be captured or killed, The Unnameable One might yet relent, but they are a tiny minority. The others have taken heart from the reappearance of Sondaram and the death of the Lord of the Fort before the eyes of the whole town. And they also know that if the demon lord and the troops at his command are allowed to pass through the Gates of Karn, all the soldiers here will be tortured and then slaughtered, for not preventing what happened yesterday."

"The Lord of the Fort was protected by a ring of soldiers," I said, "and yet I don't remember harming any. What became of them?"

"They had never before witnessed a *Nithaial* in a state of great rage," Caelas answered, "nor at such close range. As I heard it, they were simply tossed aside as if by a great wind. Those who could pick themselves up, did so and fled to the fort. Those who couldn't witnessed what happened

after, a story they've now told a hundred times. There's no soldier this side of the mountains who'd dare lift a finger against you."

I now turned to Orien. "Once again, my actions have forced you to reconsider your plans. What do you advise that we do now?"

"Nithaial," Orien replied, but in his gravest voice, "if we stay we might help Caelas hold the Gates, but we would also face the undivided wrath of The Unnameable One. If we—meaning only you, Alfrund, and myself—flee, His rage will follow after us, and He'll leave Gedd to the mercies of the demon lord and the army he commands. Both choices, however, are but counsels of despair, for I can see no good end to either."

I turned to Alfrund and asked, "What say you, my twerë?"

"I think that we should go," he answered. "Your struggle with The Unnameable One through the Summoner has not hurt Him one whit, only enraged Him more. I fear He will now strike Gedd from afar unless we distract Him by going south. Fendal has offered us the loan of two of his apprentices, Wendma and Hestal, to sail the boat to Pharros for us and then bring it back."

"But why not sail north?" Grysta demanded. "Beyond the mountains are the great northern wilds—you could hide there for years and not be found."

Orien shook his head. "I've considered that," he an-

swered. "But we would be taking Jessan much further from any seat of power; the wilds have dangers none of us have ever confronted; and to merely survive there would take all our effort.

"And when we emerge from them a few years from now," he continued, "what then? Remember, Grysta, one of our purposes is to also draw the attention of The Unnameable One away from Jessan's twin. If we bury ourselves in the wilds, we'll free up the hunt for him."

Grysta sighed. "But the south!" she groaned. "First there's Cytheria to pass, the poisoned city of the dead, and beyond it Pharros,—a strange and dangerous place if half of what I've heard is true—and the port city of Heref, where agents of The Unnameable One will be waiting for your landing. Have you taken this into your calculations as well?"

Orien looked at her grimly. "I've already said there are no good choices," he answered shortly. "But yes, I've considered these things. Ships pass by Cytheria regularly and few are lost that keep well out to sea. And it's not my plan to sail as far as Heref. We'll slip ashore before then and head directly for the border city of Ciprias, which is neither dangerous nor strange and where we have friends. And then, with luck, we'll find our way to Wethrelad, the palace of the air, where Jessan will come into his full powers."

"And the true war will begin," said Caelas. Orien nodded. "And the true war will begin." he talk continued, but the decision had already been reached: we would sail south tomorrow. I left Caelas, Alfrund, and Orien to discuss the logistics of this, and took Grysta and Onna for a tour of Sondaram, upstairs first, where the soldiers, at Caelas's orders, had set up a room for me. It was a large one, with doors leading off from it on both sides, opening into what I assumed were vestiaries or the like.

Set out before us was a large bed, carved wooden chairs, and a military writing table with folding legs, which held pens, ink, paper, and a small oil lamp. The bed was heaped with pillows and soft sheeting; the floor was covered with many overlapping carpets. The Lord of the Fort, I thought, had pampered himself well.

Onna went across and lay, arms spread, on the bed. "I've never one seen so large and comfortable," she said. "I could roll up in it and fall asleep at once."

Grysta sniffed. "That is just why such things are best kept out of reach," she said crossly. "Sleep is a necessity, not a luxury. And you should know enough to realize that to throw yourself on someone else's bed is quite unseemly."

"Grysta!" Onna exclaimed. "You should not toy with Jessan's innocence by talking of such things!"

Something like a smile flickered across Grysta's face. "He puts aside his childhood and assumes the responsibilities of a man tomorrow, Onna," she answered. "I imagine he's been learning from Alfrund and others what those

entail."

This made me blush, to Onna's great pleasure. But she got up from the bed and after looking at the view of the sea from my windows, we went out, for I wished to show them the secret room beneath the main hall and what it contained. As we left, I dropped my bag beside the writing table and left my wand on top of it. It was tedious, I was finding, to have to carry it always.

As Caelas had done, Grysta and Onna, too, made the gesture of obeisance when we entered the lower room. "Such a place is very holy," Grysta said, "for it's dear to Gesryma, the Great Mother of Blessed Name. It's usual in such places to have a statue of Her at the center where your throne sits; you should always remember this when you sit there. It's an emblem of Her love for you that you've been given that privilege."

"In my village," I answered somewhat abashed, "we learned little of such things. Such worship we made was to the sea spirits, asking that our lives be watched over out on the water and our fishing be successful."

Grysta nodded. "You'd have found it little different if you'd been raised here in Gedd. The Unnameable One has done all in His power to obliterate even the memory of the Old Ways. But those of us who can, preserve them for the time when they can become open once again."

I remembered Alfrund telling me that Grysta was, in secret, a witch, and her words now expanded that word and gave it wider meaning. I looked at her but said nothing, since it wasn't for me to bring the subject up.

Instead I dimmed the lights and made the statues glow, for I now saw that this was part of the holiness of the place. Grysta saw the broken figures, and tears flowed down her face. "These are evil times, indeed," she sighed, and took my arm. "I pray that I live long enough to see that change."

e returned to quiet. Orien, Alfrund, and Caelas were contentedly eating their fill of alestran, which they had only to reach up their hands to pick from the branches.

When he saw us, Caelas stood up and said, "Nithaial, where is the servant with the damp cloth that we might wipe our faces and our hands?"

I sighed. "My lack of hospitality shames me," I replied, "but I thought in the army, soldiers have other ways of dealing with that problem... as with many others."

Caelas smiled. "Yes, we do," he said, "if it comes to that." He pulled a small cloth from his pouch and used it to wipe his hands and face. He then offered it to Alfrund and Orien, who did the same.

"Alfrund will return to stay tonight with you," Orien said. "But we must all leave now for there's much to be done before the morrow."

I thought about this for a moment, then went to Alfrund, took his hands, and said, "No. I wish you to spend the night with Fendal. I'll be safe here and will sleep soundly in my new bed, as Onna can attest. I look forward to much

time spent with you starting tomorrow, and Fendal can look forward to none."

Alfrund began to protest but I gently pushed him away. In truth, my noble little speech didn't come from the heart but from where I thought my heart ought to be. I wasn't in the least looking forward to a night alone after what happened today, even in Sondaram.

But Alfrund took me at my word and I bade them all goodbye. We would meet again at Grysta's house in the morning and proceed down to the dock together.

## Chapter 20



LONE IN SONDARAM. I willed the time to move here at the same rate as outside; if I could, I would have speeded up the time outside the palace to get the rest of the day over as soon as possible. I felt too restless to go down below and sit and so, instead, I climbed the stairs and went to my sleeping room.

I sat down at the writing desk, dug my *enkiridion* from my sack, sharpened a quill, and opened the bottle of ink. I then set myself to filling as many pages as I could before the sun went down, blotting each page carefully with one of the loose sheets of paper on the table. The lamp Caelas had left was very nice, but he had neglected to leave a tinderbox for me to use to light it, and lamp wicks are tricky things to get burning.

When the sun reached the horizon, I drew my chair to the window and watched it sink, a great glowing molten ball that changed from orange to red to scarlet as it sank out of sight behind the sea. It was a good omen for tomorrow, so far as sailing was concerned. Soon, only a few distant clouds on the horizon were still aglow and the sky passed through deeper and deeper shades of blue until its color couldn't be told from black.

As the sun set, the lights set into the walls had begun to glow, so I wasn't left in the dark. I went down and into the garden and ate my fill of fruit, while bats flittered among the trees. They didn't come into Sondaram and I wondered idly whether, if I gave them permission, they would want to. Much to learn; five hundred years in which to do so.

I sighed, stood, and went back inside. I drifted past the force and ran my fingers through it. Something else to miss when we set sail tomorrow. As I crossed the cool, shadowy hall, I felt a slight chill, and remembered I'd seen a robe in my room, cast over a chair.

I went up and slipped it on. To my surprise, it fit me perfectly. A gift! But from whom? It was beautifully made of an expensive fabric in which arcane symbols shimmered in gold on a field of what sometimes seemed a deep purple and sometimes a darkly glowing red.

"Very wizardly," I thought. I picked up my wand of power and went to the head of the stairs, to where a bearded graven head poked out from the wall. "Announce me!" I commanded it in jest. To my astonishment, the face came immediately to life, opened its mouth, and bellowed: "Attend, ye mortals, and behold! The *Nithaial Galgaliel* descends!" The words echoed around the great hall.

I was too shocked to proceed majestically down the stairs. Instead, I slunk down in a state of total embarrassment—which only increased when there was the sound of hurrying footsteps and a soldier appeared panting on the portico.

"Are you all right, *Nithaial*?" he asked. "We heard shouting."

I went over to him. He was, for all his weaponry, little older than I.

"It was a spell that went awry," I said, somewhat truthfully. I eyed him speculatively. He had sandy hair, a dusting of light freckles, and honest brown eyes. "What is your name?" I inquired in what I thought was my most seductive manner.

"Perrion, *Nithaial*," he replied, blushing furiously. I suddenly realized he was regarding me with something akin to terror. I sighed. Ironically, if I were Jessan, I'd have a much better chance of luring him into the bushes than, as the *Nithaial*, I had in inviting him up to my bedroom. In any case, it wasn't a good idea. He'd only make me think of Faryn and my sadness would be that much more bitter.

"Thank you, Perrion," I said. "I shall report your quickness to Caelas when I see him tomorrow."

I then dismissed him with a gesture and watched him flee back to the safety of his comrades, perhaps even faster than he had come. I imagined what help he'd have provided had he found me battling for my life with some Demon Lord, and smiled—the first time since the events at the town square. "For that, at least, Perrion," I thought, "I thank you."

I turned and descended the stairs to the sanctum below, wrapped myself in my robe, sat on the great stone chair, and tucked my legs under me. I commanded the lights to dim to almost nothing, and sat there a long time.

What Grysta had told me about the holiness of this place added little to the reverence I already felt, for I was ignorant of the import of what she said. I tried to imagine the presence she described, but to no avail.

You don't imagine such a thing, you invoke it with prayer; you make yourself available to it in a way that is humble and inviting and aware, and I knew nothing of such things. Instead, I let my mind drift off into a state of emptiness, as if the cup of thought had been drained, cleaned, and polished, then set back into its place upon the shelf.

t last I was sleepy enough to consider bed. I went back up to my room, set my wand of power back on the writing table and began to carefully fold up the robe. As I did so, something tumbled out of a hidden pocket. I bent over and picked it from the floor. It was a small container made of a fragrant wood, shaped as a hexagon, with JESSAN carved onto it, one initial to a side. I didn't open it, for I knew what it contained, and I also now knew who had given me the robe. I set the box containing the 'Warrior's Friend' next to the wand and brought the robe to bed. I covered myself with it, commanded the lights to fade away, and

went to sleep.

However, I didn't sleep long. I was awakened by someone sitting on the side of the bed, kicking off his boots and pulling his tunic over his head.

"Caelas?" I whispered.

"This bed is too large for one person," he answered, "especially someone as slight as you."

He lay beside me, extending an arm to allow me to snuggle up close against his body. I did so and he reached over to pull a blanket over us, his fingers encountering the robe instead.

"Ah," he said. "So you liked it."

I reached over and lay my arm across his chest. "I loved it," I said, "even before I knew it was from you."

"I ordered it made for you after the first time we met," he said. "A *Nithaial* without a robe is a sorry sight, especially if the alternative was that scruffy shirt you were wearing then."

"My mother made that for me," I said with mock reproach, and lying as well, since the shirt was Alfrund's.

"Yes, when you were but twelve," he replied.

I reached up and pulled his beard. "Ah, so you think modesty becomes a *Nithaial*," I said. "Orien explained to me that the word actually translates from the olden tongue as 'looks very attractive in shortish shirts."

The bed shook from Caelas's silent laughter. "You are a handful, without a doubt," he said. "But now it's time to

sleep—we must make an early start in the morning."

"Oh, no," I said, through a yawn.

"Oh, yes," Caelas said. "I can barely keep my eyes open, and neither can you."

"Very well," I said. "I suppose you're right. But just one question first: what did you say to the watch as you went by?"

"I said nothing, of course," Caelas said. "An officer owes no explanation to anyone except his superiors—certainly not to his men."

"And you're the superiors' superior," I whispered. I was very sleepy. I closed my eyes, clutched him tightly, and began to drift away.

"Exactly," Caelas said, as from a great distance. "I provide explanations only to you."

a soldier's bag into which I could pack my things. I put on my new shirt, which we had collected yesterday, but the rest of the clothing I packed away. If we were to be on a ship, I would wear what I wore on the fishing boat, with the addition of a breechclout, as seamen on such ships habitually wore.

It was all done in a moment. I hesitated over my new robe. I could see no point in bringing it on the trip; I would be happy knowing it was waiting for me here. However, Caelas saw my hesitation, and said, "I think you should wear that until you get aboard ship, so that you will appear as a proper

*Nithaial* before the public. There's no harm in a little awe." I gave him a glance but slipped it over my shirt.

Before we left, Caelas led us out onto the terrace, where he took my sack and set it on the ground. Then he splashed his face with cold water from the fountain, and gestured me to do the same.

"Thank you," I said, "but I'm already cold enough." There was a chill in the air which would vanish once the sun came over the mountains. But right now it made me shiver, and I wrapped my arms around myself.

Caelas suddenly seized me with both arms, lifted me up, and, as I shrieked, dunked my head into the water. He released me all spluttering and furious with him.

"That's no way to treat a *Nithaial*!" I shouted at him.

"Ah, unlike at night, in the morning we stand on our dignity," Caelas answered, unmoved. "But starting today, you're going to live like a soldier and so you'd better start acting like one."

"Well, I won't be presenting a clean face for any morning inspection," I retorted.

"No, you won't," Caelas agreed, "fortunately for you. But that isn't the point. From the moment you get up in the morning, you'll need *all* your senses as alert as you can make them. Drowsy awakenings will have to wait until you reach a safe place with a good bed. And you'll then enjoy them all the more."

I'd no retort to this, so I bent over and shook as much water from my hair as I could. It was true that I wasn't as cold as before, but that wasn't due to the cold dunk but my fury at having been given it. I left Sondaram in a sullen silence.

As we crested the hill, I looked among the soldiers, standing rigidly at attention, for Perrion. But, of course, his watch was long over. However, it did remind me that I'd promised to mention his name to Caelas and so, after a bit, I told him what had happened the night before. I wasn't happy being angry with him and I thought my tale would bring with it a fresh mood.

Instead, Caelas stopped dead in his tracks. "He addressed you how?"

"As 'Nithaial," I answered. "He could hardly be expected to know my name was Jessan."

"Don't be an idiot," Caelas answered. "He should have addressed you as '*Nithaial Galgaliel*, Highest of All High,' and not presented himself by his name like some *civilian*. I will have a word with this Perrion, and with his squad leader as well!"

"Oh Caelas," I said. "Why are you being like this? He's my age, if that, and for him, as for me, his life here must be new and strange. I've no idea how to address you or what your rank is or even how *I* should be addressed. Except that 'Highest of All High' would be my *last* choice."

"I made that up," Caelas admitted, "to make the

point. Quite honestly, the way to formally address a *Nithaial* wasn't part of my education either, there being none then to address.

"As to myself, if you wish to be polite, in public you should address me as 'Prince Caelas,' since my title has priority over my rank. That, though, for your information, is 'High Commander,' and as such my officers refer to me. Ordinary soldiers generally are identified by their weapon. So your friend should have introduced himself as 'Shortswordsman Perrion, Sondaram Watch Detail'—or whatever his current duty was." He snorted. "Perrion' indeed! You must have been flirting furiously with him."

I took Caelas's hand. "Of course I was," I said. "But I thought better of it when I saw how much I terrified him. I realized that if I wanted him in my bedroom I would have to carry him in a dead faint up the stairs myself."

Caelas laughed and squeezed my hand. "All right, Jessan," he said. "I won't be hard on this lad. But I will summon him anyway, to gaze upon those 'honest brown eyes' for myself."

I glanced at him to see if he were joking, but with Caelas you could never tell. In any case, we had arrived at Grysta's door. Caelas bent down and kissed me gently. "Happy Coming of Age Day," he said.

"No," I said. "That will happen tomorrow, for all it's worth."

"Ah, of course," Caelas said. Then he drew himself

up, saluted, and said formally, "High Commander Caelas, at your service. I shall return at mid-morning with an honor guard to escort you and your party to your ship, for the tide turns at noon."

"Thank you, Prince Caelas, O Superiors' Superior," I gravely replied, and slipped through the door.

nside I smelled not porridge cooking but the fragrant aroma of hot cakes. In the kitchen waiting for me were not only Grysta and Onna, but Alfrund, Orien, and even Fendal, all wearing their best dress. It reminded me immediately of when Alfrund and I'd declared ourselves *twerëi*, and tears came to my eyes. I went to him and embraced him, and then everyone else, including Orien, who, under his robe, was even thinner than I had imagined.

"We decided to surprise you with a celebration today," Alfrund said. "That way, all who love you may attend, at least the ones who haven't already been with you today."

"Caelas!" I exclaimed. "That explains his congratulations! So he was in on the secret, too."

Alfrund nodded. "I had a long chat with him yesterday, and told him of our adventures. He was very interested to hear about the war dogs and the sinking of the galley. I'll wager this morning he treated you with even greater respect."

Onna opened her mouth to say something, but thought better of it, and gave me a sly poke instead, as I passed her on my way to the place of honor.

Usually, the ceremony on this day is marked by many

speeches, each of the adults feeling called upon to wrap each present with a lavish amount of advice—some of it wise, some of it platitudinous, and some of it forthrightly bawdy. This morning, however, partly because time was pressing and partly (I suspected) because they felt uncomfortable speaking this way to a *Nithaial*, the giving of presents was accompanied only by warm embraces, along with wishes for the success of our expedition from those who were staying behind.

As I've mentioned, under my robe I was already wearing the longer shirt that men adopt when they come of age and that reaches almost down to the knees. Now Alfrund and Orien presented me with the belt I was to wear with it, Alfrund because the belt was his gift, and Orien because his present was a beautifully crafted clasp for it, worked from silver and inset with the sign of the Cronnex, fashioned of opal and onyx. Together, they fastened the belt around my waist to great applause.

Then Fendal set into my hands a sheath which, although made for a long dagger, held my wand perfectly, and could be fasted to my belt. This was both unexpected and perfectly chosen and I not only embraced him again but kissed him, which pleased him and Alfrund greatly.

Onna had asked her brother, who apprenticed to a leathersmith, to fashion me a purse that also hung from my belt in which I could carry coins (if I had any) and other necessary things, such as the small container of 'Warrior's Friend' that Caelas had given me.

Speaking of Caelas, he had left (yet another) gift for me, with instructions given to Alfrund so that he could explain it to me. Alfrund gave it to me first, and a very oddlooking thing it was, carved from an unfamiliar wood and resembling a small flute, with five holes for controlling the sounds. I put it to my lips and gave a tentative blow on it. The sound it made was extremely high-pitched and penetrating, and absolutely foreign.

"You won't hear anything," Alfrund said, "or at least you're not supposed to. It's used to train and control war dogs. When I told Caelas that those were probably the only things on earth you feared, he sent for the Dog Master and had got this whistle from him and then had him dictate to a scribe how to finger the various sounds and what response the dogs are supposed to make. That is all explained here," and he passed me a piece of parchment.

"That's a strange present," Onna remarked.

"More so than you'd imagine," Alfrund answered. "The method originates with the demon soldiers, who use it to control some other pack of beasts, far more fearsome than dogs. And this whistle, so Caelas assures me, is of genuine demon make."

A silence fell across the room. Then Orien asked to see it. When I passed it to him, he examined it carefully. "I would not expect such craftsmanship from them," he said at last. "This is very skillfully done. Still, I agree with Onna. It is a very odd present to give a *Nithaial*."

Perhaps it is, I thought to myself, but he didn't give it to a *Nithaial*. He gave it to Jessan, and *he* is fascinated by it.

Grysta was last, and her present was both the humblest of them all and the one that moved me most. For it was the cloth that she had wrapped me in when she had first found me as a babe in Sondaram.

"I've kept this all these years to remind myself of you," she said. "And now I give it you so that you will be reminded of me." Tears streaked down both our faces and I held her tightly for a long time.

Then we brought benches and chairs from all parts of the house and feasted on hot cakes and honey and drank the best ale of Gedd and laughed and joked as though we were a bunch of Fendal's apprentices on a lark. And this continued until a knock at the door announced the arrival of Caelas and soldiers who would accompany us down to the sea.

In the commotion that followed, I drew Onna aside and pressed the *enkiridion* I had composed for her into her hands. "You will understand what this is," I whispered to her.

Great joy appeared on Onna's face when she took the little book, bound in its golden-green fabric of twining leaves, and she opened it with trembling hands. But then a shadow crossed her face, which I understood at once.

"No," I said, "I copied none of this from Alfrund. Each entry has been transmuted through my own understanding and limited experience. You're to build on it and transmute it further—but now, at least, you've a good place to start. And when Grysta sees this, she'll understand how highly I regard you. Then, I think. she'll become more forthcoming with what she knows."

Onna threw her arms around me, kissed me, and whispered her thanks in my ear. I hugged her back, and thought how much Grysta and she had become family for me, so much more so than the grim life with Peta and Pelun. But already we were being urged to depart. I released Onna, we smiled at each other, and I quickly slid what gifts I wasn't already wearing into my pack. Then we were outside waving goodby, and the door to this life, too, closed behind me forever.

## PART FIVE HEZZAKAL

## Chapter 21



N THE STARBOARD SIDE, the sea stretched to the horizon, a shimmering field of blue, flecked with bits of white. To the port, at a distance, was the broken, barren coastline that stretched south of Gedd all the way to distant Pharros. It held no farms or fishing villages. The land was rock-strewn and deserted, the shore a jumbled mass of ledge and cliff, the sea below a treacherous labyrinth of shoals, cross currents, and riptides, erupting here and there with bursts of sea spume. The boom of the surf breaking hard on the rocks could be faintly heard even here where we sailed well out to sea.

Even so, to me, as I squinted in the sun to make out these details, our distance from it made the dangers, like the heady salt air, all part of the excitement of being on a true ocean voyage. I felt a pure happiness that was never mine on land. A fresh breeze was blowing, the sail was taut, the riggings groaned, and league followed league as we hurried our way south. The Tejj, the boat Orien had purchased, was barely large enough to make such a journey. It was a large fishing boat, upon which a fragile structure had been erected—little more than a flimsy roof supported by poles—to serve as shelter and to provide a storage place for our gear and supplies. However, the room meant for us was mostly crammed with bales of hay for Dwinsa, a mule Alfrund had bought and insisted on bringing with us.

It had been decided that we would be better not sailing all the way to Heref, but to disembark the Tejj at night somewhere along the shore before we reached that city. That being the case, Alfrund argued, we would need Dwinsa to carry our supplies—and make it less likely anyone we encountered would



suspect we were just off a boat—and more likely to accept that we were just a small party of traders who had lost their way. Certainly it provided us with a passenger who hated being at sea even more than Alfrund did.

Dwinsa was a sturdy animal, raised to carry sacks of salt up to the Gates of Karn and down again into the kingdom proper. When I could do so without being observed, I slipped her a piece of dried fruit or a carrot. Otherwise, I contented myself with scratching between her ears and stroking her nose.

Although I'd spent more time at sea than anyone else onboard, I'd never sailed in such a craft as the Tejj. Fishing boats were designed to go out to sea and back to shore, but trading ships sailed *along* the shore from port to port. And since the wind usually moves either onshore or offshore, it would be mostly blowing sideways at the ship, rather than from behind.

Because of this, the Tejj was constructed with a short mast, held up with much rigging, to which a very long yard was affixed with loops of rope, and from which hung a great triangular sail. It was shaped thus because to catch the wind the yard was tilted upwards. And so, if the sail were square, one end or the other would always be dipping into the sea.

A rope was attached to each end of the yard, long enough to reach the deck. Depending on which way the wind was blowing, one or the other of those ropes was pulled in to swing the yard around, allowing the sail to catch the wind. Then the rope was secured and that was that, until the wind shifted again.

I could go on and on about the Tejj, its planking and cordage and ballast and night sail and all the rest of its parts. From the moment we were out at sea I'd climbed over every inch of her, then pestered Wendma and Hestal—the two apprentices of Festal's who were sailing it—with endless questions until they threatened to throw me overboard.

Wendma tolerated my presence more than Hestal,

and I'd come and sit with her when she held the tiller. She'd been born in the Faïward Islands, about which I knew nothing at all.

"They're the main reason our kingdom has a navy," she said, "that and to keep down the pirates who prey on ships that ply this route. The Faïward Islands are seven towering mountains that rise out of the sea about a hundred leagues from Gedd. Great forests cover their lower reaches, after which they become sharp spires of naked rock, so high that snow clings to them well into the summer."

"I wish Sondaram had been built there," I said. "It sounds like a marvelous place."

She smiled. "I wish so, too," she answered. "For there could be no better site for the home of the Spirit of Water. But when the Four and the One appeared, the kingdom hadn't yet claimed the islands, which were only discovered four hundred years ago. And, even then, few chose to live there until gold was found, and the precious metal *mythrad*, every bit of which The Unnameable One claims for himself."

"Really!" I said. "Do you know anything about it? Have you ever seen it?"

"No and no," she replied, laughing. "Those were the easiest of all your many questions to answer. Your friend Orien may know something of it, but none of us islanders are permitted to set foot on Lydvel, the island where it is mined. The great war galleys were built to transport it from there to Gedd, where it's then transported over the mountain guarded well by a special armed force answerable to The Unnameable One alone."

An errant gust of wind shook the sail and the boat heeled strongly in response. "That's what comes when the ship master is distracted by talking, especially in a beam sea," Wendma said, ashamed at being caught off guard. "Leave me now, and go chat with Dwinsa, who's as idle as yourself."

"I'm sorry, Wendma," I said with downcast eyes, mostly to make her regret her sour words. I did give the mule a caress as I passed her, but my destination was Orien, who was standing at the prow, scanning the ocean ahead.

"Are you in the mood to answer some questions?" I asked.

He looked at me and nodded. "It's about time your curiosity started ranging beyond the adjustment of rigging on this boat and the sort of knot used to secure its stays," he replied. "Come and sit with me in the sun."

Once we had settled onto the deck, I said, "Most of all, I want to know about my twin. Can you tell me *anything* about him? His name? Where he was first found?"

Orien shook his head. "I'm sorry Jessan," he replied. "It's natural for you to wonder about these things, and it might even be helpful for you to know them. But I doubt that even Anisor knows those answers. The Circle is intentionally divided between those who seek you and those who seek your twin. Thus, if The Unnameable One seizes one of us, even if

we break under torture, there's only so much we can reveal."

When he saw how downcast this statement made me, he added, "Even though Anisor won't know the name, he'll at least know the person to ask. And *that* person will tell you all you want to know without hesitation."

"And do you at least know who that is?" I asked.

Orien glanced around to be sure no one was attending to our talk. "No," he said, "but I *suspect* that it's the high master alchemist, Porphoras. Since your twin takes his power from the spirits of fire and earth, he is, in a sense, the alchemists' patron demiurge—as you, who take your power from air and water, are the same to herbalists, healers, and other practitioners of the white magicks."

I thought about this. "There must be some way that I can contact him—my twin—directly," I said.

"There may well be," he answered, "but I don't know what it is. Once we know your twin's name, I *can* help you, for that's the only thing that makes my sort of magic possible. But without it...." He shrugged his shoulders. "We might walk right past him on a crowded street and never know it, unless you were both actively looking for each other."

I nodded. I *was* actively looking for him already, casting out my thoughts for some trace of his presence. But, so far, it had all been wasted effort.

"Well, then," I said "here's an easy question. I watched you while Alfrund shaved you this morning, not only your beard but your pate as well. I thought that it was a

mark of a Mage to have a great beard and a matching mane of hair."

Orien looked at me sternly. "If your other queries are of this caliber, I think I'll soon be taking my nap. Not that it's a foolish question, but that the answer is obvious. Given that what you say is mostly true, what conclusion do you draw about the absence of such on me?"

I thought a bit and blushed. "You're right," I answered, "it was a silly thing to ask. The Unnameable One has no love of mages; for your own safety as well as mine, you chose to cut it off."

"Good," Orien said. "That's exactly right. However, there are some things I can't pretend to hide. Caelas told me he had recognized me on the streets of Gedd in part because of my gravitas. If so, that simply can't be helped. I know no way of assuming the visage of a fool."

I recalled the words that Caelas had actually used and repressed a smile. "I've another question that will again reveal my ignorance but isn't so easy to answer. Are you familiar with a metal called *mythrad* that's mined on Lydvel, one of the Faïward Islands?"

Orien raised an eyebrow. "Yes, I am," he replied, "although I'm astonished that *you* do. Little, it seems, escapes your curious eyes... or, rather, your wagging ears."

This time I did smile. "Wendma comes from those islands and has heard rumors of it. Have you seen it? Why does The Unnameable One covet it so?"

"Ah, Him," Orien said. "That reminds me." He leaned over and whispered in my ear, "'R' as in 'ruthless.' Bury *that* letter carefully away and I'll give you some answers."

"Very well," I responded, after I had done so.

"A few days ago," Orien continued, "I'd have replied 'no' to your first question and offered only the vaguest sort of answer to your second. But I've recently come upon a piece. Go get my bag and I'll show it to you."

I made my way into the hutch and pulled Orien's bag from where it was stashed with all the others. It was quite heavy and, as I brought it back, I thought of someone his age carrying such a burden on his long journeys. He continued to amaze me.

Orien opened the pack, rummaged through its contents and brought out a package neatly wrapped in cloth and tied with twine. He undid all this and removed a circular disk, not much larger than a large coin, but shaped to be slightly concave.

"Can you guess how I obtained this?" he asked.

I shook my head. "How could I?" I replied.

"Because you continually reveal yourself to be smarter than I expect you to be," he said. "Think a bit. It came into my possession only yesterday, and then after a struggle—and, I should add, overcoming some squeamishness."

I sifted through the events of the last few days. When was Orien involved in a *struggle*? But even as I was shaking my head, the answer came to me and I stared at the thing

with horror. My glance passed from it to Orien, who saw from my expression that I knew the answer.

"Yes," he said. "I pried it from the head of the Summoner with the point of a dagger. As I had already suspected, he had been trepanned, and this was sutured over the hole that had been drilled into his skull."

"But why?" I stammered.

"Well," Orien answered, "that brings us to your second question. We of the Circle of Guardians had, of course, become aware of *mythrad* and the great care taken by The Unnameable One to secure every bit of it for Himself. And so we set our spies to discover what purpose it served Him."

He sighed. "Nothing about Him is easy to learn and for a long time we despaired that the purpose of *mythrad* would elude us entirely. But, eventually, fortune came our way. To turn it to His purpose, He requires the assistance of a master alchemist—and not one of those pathetic specimens he had corrupted and taken into his service."

"Porphoras?" I asked.

Orien smiled grimly. "Porphoras is far too wise to come into such close contact with the Enemy. No, it was someone who'd studied under Porphoras but hadn't the character to be initiated into the Circle. This was most fortunate, because he had nothing to reveal if, while under His employ, The Unnameable One decided to probe his mind.

"Or," he corrected himself, "when He did—since it beggars belief that He wouldn't have availed himself of the opportunity. Discreetly, perhaps, but thoroughly. In any case, after the task was done, The Unnameable One cast a spell and sealed away the memory."

Orien smiled slyly. "Well, He may have powers that we do not, but such spells can be made unbreakable only after careful study—something that those with the higher powers"—here he glanced primly at me— "sometimes think beneath them."

"So you broke the spell?" I said, in great excitement.

"I did," he said, "and I'll confess it wasn't the hardest bit of magic I've performed in my life. A very sloppy job."

"You're truly a wondrous mage," I said, at the same time meaning it and knowing it would please him.

Orien made a modest gesture, which fooled neither of us, and continued. "The full use of *mythrad* was, of course not revealed to our friend. But much could be learned with what he was called upon to do. The higher alchemists have created a device that they call the 'infinite edge of sharpness.' To use it, they produce a thin filament of force, in substance possessing less thickness than a single hair, but it burns so brightly spectacles of darkened glass must be worn to avoid being blinded when wielding it.

"They use this to cut through metal so cleanly that it doesn't know it's been cut. So, suppose you used it to divide a piece of gold. Then, years later, you fit the two halves back together. The moment you did so, they would meld into a single whole again as if they had never been severed apart."

I caught my breath. "That's a marvel, indeed."

Orien nodded in agreement. "This is what the alchemist was asked to do with *mythrad*, not once but several times. And, I suspect, other alchemists have been summoned to repeat this same process more times than we know."

He picked up the small disk and held it up. "I now understand," he said, "that the particular qualities of *mythrad* allows the passage of magic power unimpeded from one half of the cut metal to the other *as if they were still a single whole*. This has allowed the Unnamed One to create such creatures as the Summoner, and use them to extend his power."

"Can I examine it?" I asked.

Orien hesitated. "Well," he said, "it's true that I feel only the slightest pulse of power when I touch it. For a human to fall under his power, the disc must actually come in contact with the brain. Otherwise there would have been no need to perform something as dangerous as a trephination on the Summoner. But you're much more sensitive than we are, and I've no idea as to the effect it will have on you."

"With the Summoner," I said, "The Unnameable One was consciously focusing his power through the *mythrad*. It seems unlikely he is spending his days and nights holding the other half of this, on the chance I might pick it up."

Orien smiled. "True enough," he admitted. "Still it's very dangerous. Take it gingerly and be ready to cast it away if you even sense a presence on the other side." Hesitatingly,

he reached over and offered it to me.

The moment my fingers touched it, however, it adhered to them, as a limpet to a rock. A vortex opened within me, sucking all power, all life from my body. My eyes clouded over, all thought drained from my brain, all feeling from my body, all magic from my essential being. Even as I tried to free the disk from my fingers, I collapsed senseless, lifeless, onto the deck.

## Chapter 22



hen I came into half consciousness, I found myself lying in Alfrund's arms, as weak as a rag doll. Even my eyes had trouble opening, my eyelids shifting only enough to let in light and blurred images too indistinct to make out.

"He stirs!" Alfrund said, his voice so full of relief that it lit a tiny glow inside me. Then Orien said something, or at least it seemed to be Orien and he seemed to be speaking. I found it took all my effort to keep from sliding back into darkness—not the great ocean that was the force, but a cold black empty place that felt like death.

A vial was held beneath my nose. It released vapors that I might once have recognized but now could only feel wafting up my nostrils, riding on the faint movement of my breath.

"I don't want to die," I whispered, barely able to form the words, let alone push them out of my mouth.

"We won't let you do so, my love," Alfrund said. "Al-

low the distillation of temerith to do its work."

"Temerith, temerith," I thought. "Stimulates the spirit. Yes, that's good. And after, some tea made of..., of..., of...."

"Our old friends iacynder and dorras root, and some rare and wondrous ufforsta, little one," Alfrund whispered in my ear, "which neither of us have encountered before, and so isn't in my *enkiridion*."

I'd whispered my thoughts aloud, without knowing it. "Ufforsta?" I mumbled. "That must be from Orien. I'll know its powers when I taste it. Or not." Did I still have that power? This thought that I might have lost it didn't depress me. I hadn't even enough energy for sadness. My thoughts drifted away, conscious only of the penetrating scent of the temerith and the sharp edge of the alcohol that bound it. And then not even that.

Hours passed. Urine ran between my legs because I hadn't the strength to hold it in. It was cleaned away. Someone dripped a tiny amount of the tea into my open mouth, drop by drop. Some of it dribbled back out again, and it, too, was cleaned away. But some slipped down my throat. Slowly, slowly, it had its effect.

I became aware that I was now wrapped up in blankets. I could smell the night. I moved my hand a tiny distance and found Alfrund's beside it. I couldn't close my fingers on it but to touch it was something. Then he took my hand in his and held it, and tears slipped from my eyes.

"I'm afraid to sleep," I whispered. "And afraid to wake up."

"Try not to sleep, yet," he answered softly. "As to waking up," he leaned over and kissed me on the lips, "we'll make sure that it's nothing to regret."

"More, please," I said, and he took me in his arms and gently kissed me over and over, each one lifting me further from the darkness.

Finally, I said, "I think I could sip some tea, if you would hold the cup."

Alfrund propped me up and brought the cup to my lips. I expected the tea to be quite cold but it was nicely warm. I sipped it, little by little, until I drank my fill. As I did so, I filtered its components through my mind, winnowing out the presence of the ufforsta from the familiar ones of iacynder and dorras root. It was almost impossible to taste but its effect could be discerned, strengthening and encouraging the heart. Already I could feel a touch of color return to my face, my muscles quicken. At least I wouldn't wet myself again.

"How can the tea be so warm?" I whispered.

I could feel Alfrund smile. "Because Hestal sleeps with the flask held tightly between his thighs," he said, "for just that purpose. Did it add to the flavor?"

I smiled. "Oh, Alfrund," I whispered, "how I long to see your face. Is there light enough for me to do so?"

"Not yet, little one," he answered. "It's still night. But I think that now you can sleep a little, if you wish, after you sip a little more tea. Even by holding you, I can tell it's doing your body much good."

And so I did drink some, as much as I was able. Then I lay back in his arms and drifted away—but this time into sleep, not into the nothingness that opens onto death.

hen the morning came, I was able to open my eyes, move my limbs, and, eventually, sit propped up against the cabin without sagging over. Thoughts came and went like butterflies, so lightly I could hardly feel their touch. The sun rose higher, an awning was strung over me, and I was given more tea and a nourishing broth made with shreds of dried meat.

By the time the afternoon came, I took more interest in my surroundings. I turned my head to watch Dwinsa, who looked back at me for a moment, alert for a possible piece of fruit. When she lost hope and bent her head down for another mouthful of hay, I wanted to crawl over to her. But I still lacked the strength—of body or of will I wasn't sure. I went to sleep again and slept through the whole of the next night, waking the following morning to find myself lying on the deck again, well wrapped in blankets.

That day I was even more myself. My mind was clearer and my body felt stronger, although Alfrund advised me not to test that yet. After all, I was on the Tejj, not the land, and it was no easy trick to keep your footing on her deck. I agreed but asked him to bring Orien to sit and talk with me.

He did so, and after settling himself stiffly beside me, he took my hand and said, "I shall never forgive myself for doing so unconsidered a thing. I ask you with all my heart to forgive me."

"I do," I said, "although you shouldn't take the weight of this hurt upon yourself; I'm more to blame than you. We've learned something important that may yet prove worth the price. What happened to the piece of *mythrad*?"

"After I ripped it from your fingers?" Orien asked. "I threw it into the sea. If I hadn't, Alfrund and the others would have thrown it in instead, and me with it."

I sighed. "Remember when you told me that The Unnameable One had killed all the wizards he could find? At the time I wondered how he could have done so. I think we now know. He had only to trick them into taking a piece of this divided *mythrad* into their hand."

Orien nodded. "Yes, the same thought came to me. By the by, do you remember the four letters of His name that I've given you."

"Yes," I said. "That, my herbalist learning, everything like that has all come back." I was talking in a low voice that forced him to lean close to me. "But," I went on, lowering my voice still further, "I've lost *all* my power, Orien. There's nothing left in me. I feel, well, more than empty. *Barren*."

Orien took my hand again. "You're still in a state of shock," he said. "Don't judge this too soon."

I looked up at him. "I am in a state of shock," I re-

plied, "I can't even recall what it was like to have it. I feel emotions, I think thoughts, my body gathers its strength, but the power is gone. I'm nothing more than an ordinary sixteen-year-old."

Orien placed his hand on my forehead and closed his eyes. We sat like that in silence for several minutes, until he shook his head and took his hand away. "I feel nothing," he admitted, "not even as much as I'd expect to find in an apprentice mage.

"But you must not lose heart," he added, starting the slow process of getting himself up off the deck. "We know nothing about the effects of *mythrad* on someone as powerful as you. Remember, you didn't die. You didn't lose your mind. Each day you improve."

He rose to his feet and groaned loudly. I must have looked startled because he laid his hand on my head and said, "That moan was not because of what you just told me but because the sea air is a torment to my joints. I think I will pace a bit to stretch them and my mind as well." He hobbled away and, after a moment, I fell back asleep.

he following day I felt better still. Alfrund had dressed me in my smuggler's vest to protect me from the breeze. When I pushed my hands into its pockets, I encountered an oblong object that puzzled me, and so I pulled it out.

It was the demon whistle, wrapped in the parchment that explained its use. I looked at this for a moment, for it was simple and clearly set out. Each command was made with a specific series of notes, which were indicated by signs that indicated which of the five stops to close when the whistle was blown.

So, for instance, the command to have the dogs advance slowly, prepared to attack, was indicated as so:

00000 00000 00000

I studied this, learning the notes and memorizing some of the patterns. But the wind was brisk and I feared the sheet would be blown from my hands, so after a bit I stuffed it safely away. After all, it was the whistle itself that truly fascinated me, and now I had a chance to examine it without the distraction of all the giving of presents and hurrying to leave.

Words would be hard to find that captured its strangeness, for what made it so was all a matter of degree. It was shaped to be held by other than human fingers and to be blown by a differently shaped mouth.

The awning over me had been removed so that I could get some sun. Just at that moment, a shadow passed swiftly over my legs, and I looked up just in time to see a skalgür pass over, a black mote in the bright sunlight. I felt a flash of fear and almost gave out a cry. But it didn't pause, let alone start to circle, and in a moment it had passed on ahead of us, and vanished from sight.

I looked back down at the whistle in my hands, and the thought came to me that perhaps, in demon hands, the whistle controlled a *skeane* of skalgür. I lifted it to my lips and began to blow into it, not strongly, because I barely had any wind, but softly, just hard enough to get a sound.

I was surprised at how penetrating it was, even so. Dwinsa stood stock still and looked at me in alarm, her usual floppy ears standing rigidly erect. I looked around to see if I had roused the others similarly, but the silence that followed reminded me that human ears couldn't pick up its tones—all the more advantageous for the demon warriors or, for that matter, the human masters of the attack dogs.

I lifted it to my lips again and, fingering the holes, learned as best I could the different sounds that it produced. There were many, and by arranging them by pitch I found I could fit together the scale they must make up, if demons had such a thing. It was a strange one, if they did, melancholy and dissonant, at least as I heard it. I thought of a tune I knew, *The Fisherman's Bride*, and slowly worked the phrases out until I could play a simulacrum of the tune.

Down into the water she drew him, Her cold lips clasped to his own, Under the waves she now dragged him, Deep down in the ocean to drown....

It was haunting enough when played on human instruments; on the demon whistle, the music ate away at the flesh beneath your scalp.

A large dark shadow fell across me, and I dropped the whistle and gave out a strangled cry. Completely forgetting to keep alert, I had managed to draw back the skalgür, after all.

As I desperately tried to get to my feet, Alfrund dropped beside me and put his arms around me. "It's only me, little one," he said. "Whatever caused *that*?"

I stared at him and then slumped against his body. The shadow, of course, had been his. I told him what had happened, and how it had come about.

Alfrund put his hand on my head and held it close to his chest, caressing my hair as he did so. "Silly boy," he said, "after you told me about the attack of the skalgür back in Gedd, it's never left my mind. Hestal, Wendma, Orien, myself, even, probably, Dwinsa, are keeping a sharp lookout for them. And, indeed, no day has passed without our sighting one, but only at a great distance."

He reached his free hand over and picked up the demon whistle. "It put a chill in me," he said, "to come across you soundlessly piping a tune on this devilish thing. What were you playing?"

I told him, and he laughed. "Only you would think to play such a tune at sea and on an instrument like this. If you *must* practice on the thing, at least give us a silent rendition of *A Lad, His Lover, and a Moonlit Bed.* That should chase the demon right out of your whistle."

I looked up at him. "There is such a tune?" I asked, and, already knowing the answer, started to laugh.

"If not, there ought to be," he answered, laughing, too, and giving me a hug. "But," he continued, handing me the whistle, "put this well away. I thought you might like to come

stand at the rail with me."

I found, with his help, I could get up, and, with the rail to support me, stand and watch the distant shore slip by. It looked much the same as it had when I last cast eyes upon it, if only more so: a procession of cliffs, some high, some shattered. The sea smashed up against them all and roiled around ledges and huge fallen rocks.

"What a grim and lifeless land," I said after a time to Alfrund, who had his arm around me.

"Grim, yes," he answered, "but far from lifeless." He gently turned me, pointing to a cliff that butted out into the sea a slight distance ahead. "Watch," he said. "At the very top."

For a long time I saw nothing, and my attention would have wandered if Alfrund hadn't, every time it did, nudged me to keep alert. Then, suddenly, the flames of a fire burst up, feeding on something that gave off a thick smudge of smoke. The fire was there for barely a minute, and then disappeared. Whoever had lit it had just as quickly smothered it out.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Raiders," he said. "They hide in coves too small to be visible from this distance. They signal each other up and down the coast, when a ship such as ours approaches. We needn't fear them with a wind in our sails, because then they can't catch us. They wait for a lull to come and row out in a pack. They board the ship, kill all who are on it, and take what spoils and food they find."

"And are there enough ships to prey on?" I asked. "In all our sailing I've seen only one or two."

"Several others have passed us while you were sleeping," he answered, "and there are more further out at sea. Their masters know the coast like the back of their hand and can risk losing sight of the land for awhile. But even they can be driven in by storms or strong winds.

"So," he continued, "to answer your question, yes. They're sorry creatures, to be sure, so one prize can keep them going for some time. Small boats sail from Pharros with villainous merchants who buy the spoils from them, paying with cloth, dried meat, and barrels of strong wine."

I now understood Wendma's reaction when the wind gust caught her off guard. To have a sail blown out was bad enough at sea; on this coast it was a death warrant.

Alfrund gave me a squeeze. "We've no worry, happily, having both a mage and a *Nithaial* onboard. A bolt such as the one you shot out of Sondaram but a few nights ago will send them scurrying back like rats."

His words sent a feeling of dread coursing through me. Because of one stupid impulse, this very voyage, indeed the whole effort behind it may already have come to naught. So much depended on me and now.... The awareness of this made me dizzy; I had to close my eyes and grab hold of Alfrund's arm.

"Jessan!" he said, "I've let you stand here far too long!" He half carried me back to my pile of blankets and went to fetch me tea.

I'd recovered somewhat by the time Alfrund had returned. The wind was blowing briskly and the Tejj's joints creaked from the rate at which she plowed through the sea. I took the tea from him gratefully, for I'd gotten thirsty standing so long.

Even brewed with herbs, I could tell the water we had laid in was now thick and brackish. "How many more days do we sail?" I asked.

"With a wind like this?" Alfrund answered. "At Hestal's estimate, maybe five or six more. Two of those with shore like this and then we must head out to sea a bit to cross at the distant edge of the *Stavron Machaliad*, as the Pharroseans say it, or, in our language, the Bay of Fear. It serves as the harbor of the city that Grysta mentioned, Cytheria. All who sail this route take great care to steer well clear of that place."

"The poisoned city of the dead," I said, recalling her phrase. "Why is it called that?"

"You had best ask Orien that," Alfrund said, "when he is limber enough to sit again beside you." He bent over and gave me a kiss and took the cup. "But now, I think, it's time for you to sleep."

## Chapter 23



HEN I WOKE AGAIN, it was dark, with a field of stars glinting over my head. I lay half awake for a bit, looking up at them, until gradually I began to sense that something was amiss. It took me a moment to grasp what it was—more an absence of the familiar than the presence of a threat. The ship was motionless. There was not even a trace of a breeze. Even as I became aware of this, I heard whispering nearby.

"I can do nothing if I can *see* nothing," Orien was saying. "I can't cast spells at random into the dark."

"Orien," Alfrund said, "if they have to get close enough for you to see them, they will be over the side before you can raise your staff. Jessan can at least try."

"And that might be worst of all," Orien said. "Let him sleep. If we fail, he may at least die without ever knowing how or why."

But before Alfrund could reply, I said in the same low voice they were using, "Well, I'm awake and I do know. But surely they won't row out in the pitch black."

Alfrund made his way to where I was struggling into a sitting position and squatted down. "This side of the Tejj looks toward the shore," he said. "But on the ocean side, the moon has risen on the horizon, and it shows us plainly. The raiders have no fear of dark; it's their favorite element. If you listen you can hear the sound of their oars."

I did so, and it was as he said—a sound just slightly louder than the gentle slap of water against the hull. I could hear them approaching from several directions. "There are many of them," I said.

"Yes," Alfrund agreed grimly. "Too many for them to share the spoils. They'll kill us and then fall to killing each other."

I closed my eyes for a moment, then said, "Bring me my wand in its sheath."

"Jessan," Alfrund replied, "Orien told me what happened to you. It's too risky."

"Than being killed?" I said. "There are too many boats on the water for Orien to deal with at close range, and I know that as well as you. Now hurry and get it. There's no time left to argue."

Alfrund slipped among our baggage, feeling for my sack. Fortunately, it was made of stiff military canvas and easy to distinguish among the rest. He pulled it free and brought it to me unopened. Together we undid the straps and I felt among the clothing for the sheath, which I'd bur-

ied deep among them, then pulled it out of the bag. By now we could hear the grunts of the rowers as they threw themselves at the oars. I hesitated another second and then took the wand from the sheath.

The moment my fingers closed around it I felt as I'd just been given the kiss of life. Power flowed into my body as if poured from a large and bottomless vessel. It filled me up and yet seemed still untapped. I remembered now, when I'd brought it with me into the force, how it had absorbed the flow entirely, while I'd merely floated in it. If I'd been holding it when I touched the *mythrad*—well, I'd have been shredded flesh from bone by the discharge. But, instead, I'd met the worst attack He had made on me yet and still survived.

I felt such relief flow through me that I wanted to fling myself into Alfrund's arms and laugh for hours. As it was, I did nothing, leaving him waiting with baited breath for my response. Well, I'd give it to him.

I closed my eyes and entered the deep inner space, reaching through it to find the psychic ripple of each of the boats that approached us. Then I closed a fist tightly on each end of the wand and, calling on the powers of air and water together, brought a great burst of energy together.

The sky was rent with a flash of lightning that shredded the darkness of the night. It split apart into branches, each one striking one of the approaching boats. Following on its heels came a clap of thunder so great that it deafened us all and shook the very timbers of the boat. Then, as an afterthought, I did what, if I hadn't been so agitated by these events, I would have done instead. I summoned a wind. The night sail shuddered and swelled, the Tejj lurched, and we were underway, sailing on until the cries of the drowning could no longer be heard.

he following morning I woke up in Alfrund's arms, feeling refreshed and feeling completely myself. We had quietly made love to each other burrowed in my mound of blankets, after the others had retired—all that is but Hestal, who had the night watch. But he was out of sight at the tiller and, though he was not out of hearing range, well, he was welcome to what he heard.

One sure indication of my increasing health was that I once again overflowed with questions, some serious, some less so. After we had shared a breakfast of soldier bread and brackish tea, Orien ensconced himself on a bale of hay and warmed his old bones in the sun.

I came and sat cross-legged at his feet, silent for the moment.

Orien opened one eye and said, "Ask. I can feel the questions bubbling away inside you like the water in a boiling pot. Just try, for once, to ask something interesting."

"They're all interesting to *me*," I said. "Or at least the answers are." And, when he said nothing in reply, I continued, "I fear this isn't interesting, but I'd like at least a short answer. Are the *Nithaial* wealthy? Do I have some hidden store of gold or jewels?"

Orien looked down at me. "Nooo," he said, articulating the word slowly. "Is that short enough?"

"I suppose so," I answered. "There was certainly nothing like that tucked away at Sondaram."

"Nor will there be at Wethrelad or Gostranar. Your enemy took it all long ago. In days of old, tribute was given freely to the *Nithaial* and they possessed great wealth. Now, The Unnameable One simply demands it and uses it to foul purpose as fast as He can seize it. But why do you ask?"

"As I lay half asleep this morning, I was thinking again how empty Sondaram is. No servants, no musicians, no cooks. I realized this first when Caelas jokingly chided me for my lack of hospitality. Was this always the case? Or is it meant be so..., so...."

"Utterly austere?" asked Orien. He chuckled. "Remember, to you Sondaram is a home; to others, it's a temple, a place of worship. One reason you're allowed to make time stand still at Sondaram is to provide you as much privacy as you like, while giving free access to the pilgrims who come to witness and worship before the force made visible.

"Because of this, in former days, the site was served by several auxiliary buildings, which, unprotected by magic, were utterly destroyed when Sondaram's physical aspect was obliterated. Among these were a guest house, servant quarters, a commissary/kitchen, and a residence for the acolytes who are specially chosen by the *Nithaial* to perform the rites." "Chosen how?" I asked suspiciously. "For their religious fervor?"

"No," answered Orien, "for the beauty of their form and of their singing voice." He glanced down at me again, and added, "Or so I imagine *your* criteria to be, once all this is brought back into being."

I laughed. "Well, finally you've given me something to look forward to. But," I went on in a more serious tone, "what you tell me is that I've no way to provision and equip an army, even if I'm able to raise one?"

"You've already raised an army," Orien said, "provisioned *and* equipped. But this isn't a war that will be won by great battles or by how great a pile of gold you manage to amass."

He touched my shoulder. "D' as in 'damned," he said. "Tuck that letter away, too."

I nodded, and after a bit he went on. "When The Unnameable One found that by his vile act He had lost access to the powers of the *Nithaial*, He turned away from the elemental forces—which are, at their source, forever pure—and looked in places of corruption for His source of power. All He has now are the magics that degrade and pollute. They are to elemental magic, our magic, as cancer is to human flesh."

"Like what He did to the Summoner," I said, "or did to a man in order to create the Summoner."

Orien nodded somberly. "It's one and the same. Those He has corrupted for His evil ends are doomed by that very fact to a horrible end. They know it and serve Him, even as they hate Him, because He has the power to stave that end off for some time—if that pleases Him, even as He has managed this Himself.

"The point," he went on, "is that no external threat will affect Him any more than one of your scourges or curatives, no matter how powerfully concocted, will cure a tumor in the lungs or the brain. It must be destroyed from within.

"Now, leave me be," he said, 'these thoughts are too dark for such a sunny morning." As I rose to leave, he added, "Remember, Jessan, you were not brought here to wield a sword or to direct those who do. Such is the province of Caelas and his ilk. Your task lies elsewhere."

he days continued to pass, if slowly. Orien taught me what he knew about the forces of air and water and how they were manipulated; I'd go off by myself and see what sense I could make of these lessons and work to sharpen and extend what I managed to make work at all.

The breeze remained fair, occasionally by my own efforts, but not as much as the others supposed. The shore, if anything, grew more depressing, for the cliffs were now made a dark, crudely surfaced rock that might have been the left-over waste when the world was made.

I remarked on this to Alfrund as we stood at the rail, watching it creep past.

"You are more right than you know," he said. "This area was created by a great eruption that happened not all

that long ago. I've seen descriptions of it and the volcano created from it in manuscripts kept at the famous library at Tarrusor, the greatest city of our kingdom and the home of the king."

"A volcano?" I asked. "I'd love to see such a thing! Why isn't it visible now?"

Alfrund laughed. "Alas, it erupted a second time and blew itself to pieces. If you strain your eyes, you can see remnants of it—those dark spots in the water ahead. Those are called by the Pharroseans, *Hwrithnat Granwad*, the Fangs of Hell.

"In fact, they mark what remains of the edge of the volcano's crater, which, in fact, is the very place I told you about before. As you see, Wendma is already changing our course to bring us far enough out to sea to sail outside them. Did you ask Orien to tell you the story of Cytheria?"

"No," I said. "I missed my chance. Recently, it's all been lesson after lesson."

"I've noticed your studious demeanor," Alfrund said, "and I admire it, especially late at night, when you pass your lessons along to me."

I punched him. "If Orien taught me such as that I might have no time for you at night," I answered.

He feigned a return blow, and said, "That would be a pretty sight, the two of you wrapped in amorous study."

I refused to rise to such paltry bait. "You tell me about Cytheria," I said, "or we'll be long past it before I learn

anything about the place at all."

"Well," Alfrund said, "it's really not a complicated story. You noticed, I'm sure, how difficult it is to transport goods from Gedd up over the mountains and into the kingdom proper?"

I nodded. One couldn't live there even for a day and not be aware of this.

"Well," Alfrund continued, "that's why it took an accident of fate for Gedd to become a trading city at all. The self-destruction of that great volcano created a natural, steep-sided harbor and, equally as important, thrust a way almost entirely through the mountain range separating the Kingdom from the sea.

"All that was required to connect the two was a short tunnel—and one of the greatest of the wizards, Hezzakal, by name, went to the kobolds and persuaded them to do this for him, whether for gold or favor has never been discovered.

"Once they had done so, Hezzakal brought a great port city into being and ruled over it for many, many years, becoming immensely wealthy in the process.

"The kings of that time were always desirous of this enclave, but they were powerless to attack and seize it. Hezzakal was a very powerful wizard and Cytheria was, at least if attacked by land, obviously quite easy to defend. And, at the time, the Kingdom didn't have any navy or any understanding of making war by water."

As Wendma shifted our course to pass around the

outer rocks, the wind began to die. I paused for a moment to summon one to fill the sails for her. Then I asked Alfrund, "Was this a usual thing for a wizard to do—create a kingdom for himself? I thought they were solitary creatures."

"So they are—or were—so far as I understand," he replied. "But Hezzakal was not by any means the usual sort of wizard—as you shall see. Cytheria prospered just as I described for well over a hundred years. But then something terrible happened.

"The volcano erupted again, this time deep under water. A great cloud of boiling steam rose out of the sea, covering the surface of the bay with dead fish. At the same time, an earthquake shook Cytheria. But while that brought down some buildings, it didn't badly damage the city. And after it, the volcano settled down again, contenting itself with merely roiling the water at the center of the bay with great, fat bubbles of some gaseous substance released from the bowels of the earth.

"At first, the wind blew offshore, wafting this effluent harmlessly out to sea. But that night the wind switched direction, forcing it toward the land. And because the city was formed in the shape of a long funnel, the gas, odorless and deadly, penetrated everywhere and spared no one. When the sun rose the next morning, Cytheria was a city of the dead."

Wendma called to me and I realized that my breeze had shifted direction, and was now actually blowing the Tejj in the direction of the rocks. I spoke some sharp words of command, and it swung back from where it had been blowing before.

I turned again to Alfrund. "Hezzakal, too?" I asked.

"Hezzakal, too." he answered. "But the wizard had in his possession a magical artifact, a globe of power called the Ystherüd, which allowed him to place a spell over the entire city, and bring everyone back from the dead. No one knows how Hezzakal was able to manage this. It may be that before the effluent reached him, he sensed what was happening and had sufficient time to do what he could to combat it.

"In any case, the people picked themselves up from where they had fallen, and city was soon full of the hustle and bustle that had characterized it before. Nevertheless, these people soon discovered the nature of this bargain—they had *not* been given their lives back. Instead, Hezzakal gave them something different: life *in* death.

"Those who came to Cytheria to trade with them soon realized this, and some of them turned and fled. But the bolder and greedier among them continued to come to trade, and this let the city continue to prosper, at least, after a fashion. No children were born; those that had just been born grew no older; nothing changed. And, worse still, an eerie malignancy crept into everything.

"After a time, even travelers who disembarked there for the first time, not knowing anything of Cytheria's history, found themselves filled with dread the moment they left their ship. And this despite the fact that they could see nothing but normal city life passing about them. There was no liveliness, no joy, no anger in the air; eyes lacked curiosity, welcome, suspicion even...if you could bear to look into them. For they seemed less like organs of vision than a thin veil behind which lurked a dreadful secret.

"Mothers pressed impassive babies into the arms of sympathetic visitors, begging them to take their infant away with them. If they did, the moment the ship passed beyond the range of Hezzakal's powers, it withered before their horrified eyes into a tiny skeleton, which itself then crumbled into dust.

"It might have been that, as time passed, no one would have found any profit in going there. But, instead, something happened," Alfrund said, his voice now lowered, "only no one knows what. Those who traveled to Cytheria, whether by foot or by sea, no longer returned. So boats refused to sail there and Martinas, the king at that time, ordered that the far side of the kobold tunnel be sealed off with massive blocks of stone."

"Some speculated that the Ystherüd had failed," a voice said behind us, "and the inhabitants of the city became vampires in order to sustain their living death." This, of course, was Orien, who had heard what we were discussing and come over to us.

"But the Ystherüd didn't fail. Something still inhabits Cytheria. Every now and then, someone sails a ship, drawn perhaps by all the wealth waiting there for the taking, hoping to outfox what awaits him there—or, more likely, that the curse has lifted and the city is a threat no more."

Orien sighed and shook his head. "No ship has ever returned that dared enter Cytheria's harbor."

He stood between us at the railing and looked out at the bay. We had now come close enough to see that its color was different from the sea—a curiously brilliant blue. "Of course, only you two would decide to discuss this subject just as arrive we on the place's doorstep, so to speak. Why not climb up the mast and wave signal flags."

"I think no paltry effort of ours can compete with having a *Nithaial* aboard," Alfrund responded, adding "and, of course, a distinguished mage such as yourself."

Oriel snorted and turned away. The breeze had again turned capricious and again the boat was slipping a little toward shore. Wendma called us over.

When we arrived where she stood at the tiller, she said, "There seems no way that the wind will let us steer beyond that last rock, and it now seems more prudent to pass just inside of it. Do you think it matters if we fail to skirt it?"

Orien lifted his hand to shade his eyes. "We're still a great distance out to sea," he said. "If we had a choice I wouldn't risk it, but it seems we don't. My main concern is that we not run aground on a rock just beneath the surface of the water." He turned to Alfrund and said, "Go wake Hestal and have him ready to drop the sail at once. Then go to the prow and look for any sign of danger."

Orien then turned to me. "Jessan," he asked, "can't your powers control the wind?"

I shook my head. "Every time I freshen the breeze, it either swings around or fades away. And for some reason I can't keep it blowing."

He turned to Wendma. "And what if Hestal simply drops the sails now?"

Wendma shook her head. "I've been fighting a current that pulls us toward the shore," she answered. "Better to fight a fickle wind, even if it blows us a bit off course."

Dwinsa had eaten enough of her hay to free up a nice dark corner where Hestal could sleep after steering the boat all night. He had already crawled from it and stood by the mast, rubbing his eyes.

Orien said, "I do not like this one bit. If we must, we must, but keep as close as you can to that last rock and sail back out to sea the moment you can."

As soon as Wendma pushed the tiller to change our course, the wind picked up, and moved us onward at a good clip. I joined Alfrund at the prow and found that the water was unusually clear, which perhaps accounted for its luminous color. As we passed into the bay, the rim of the volcano was clearly visible beneath us, a great half circle of jagged rock, but far enough down—at this tide, at least—for us to pass over without scraping against it.

The outermost rock approached on our starboard side, a jagged, blackened tooth showing greenish decay around its

roots. A skalgür roosted at its very top, watching our approach with its piercing eyes. It spread out its wings and flapped them as we passed by, but did not launch itself into the air. Instead, it lifted its head and uttered a hoarse shriek.

The sun was already sinking into the west, and the rock cast a long black shadow over the water. As we sailed into it, Alfrund seized my shoulder. "There!" he cried. "You can already see the land of Pharros in the distance! We'll be there tomorrow."

Before my eyes could focus on the distant line of land, the wind completely died. As it did, the prow of the Tejj, as though by its own volition, turned slowly toward the land, and, sails flapping, we began to move toward Cytheria.

## Chapter 24



MMEDIATELY, I sat cross-legged on the deck, closed my eyes, and launched myself into the psychic depths, attempting to discern what power had seized control of the Tejj. Whatever I confronted, it was not the One Who Cannot Be Named. If this were His doing, He would be waiting for me to enter this space, like an assassin hiding behind the door.

The master of this force, however, made no effort to confront me and, indeed, proved skilled at moving his power away from my grasp. This made it impossible for me to counteract it. In the realm of the real, furthermore, I utterly failed to summon a counter current to stop the boat or at least slow its progress. It was as if an invisible hand had reached out, seized hold of the Tejj, and was now dragging it into the harbor.

I told as much to Orien, who nodded, sighed, and said, "Well then, we'll just have to wait and see."

Cytheria had been built into the side of the great curve of the standing half of the volcano. It rose in several tiers, or as rows of seats in an amphitheater. The setting sun had filled the city with golden light, and the sight of it, house rising above house, roof above roof, each perching on the slope directly behind the other, took the breath away. The walls of the buildings washed in different hues of sepia, ocher, and amber, roofed with curved terra-cotta tiles.

At a distance, it appeared as if the city had just been abandoned, but as we sailed closer we could see increasing signs of ruin—here, a caved-in roof; there, a swath of windows without frames; there, again, a façade toppled over onto the street, revealing a honeycomb of shadowy rooms with sagging floors.

As we grew closer to the long quay at the end of the harbor, we began to sail among other sailing boats, some with sails furled, other with their sails spread, idly flapping in the breeze. As our craft uncannily steered its way between them, our wake sent each gently bobbing up and down as we passed it. But, although no cables held them fast, none of them shifted even an arm's length from where they were before.

Then a harsh grating cry shattered the eerie silence. A skalgür rose up, spreading out its huge naked wings, from one of the roofs of the highest house. Then another appeared, and another, until we could see dozens of the creatures. Like a ragged chorus, they lifted their heads, opened their long, cruel beaks and shrieked, a great, discordant din that echoed back and forth from all sides of the harbor.

Then, one by one, they launched themselves into the

air. At first they soared and wheeled high above us. But with each pass, they dropped lower and lower, until they were swooping down right over our heads, their beady eyes alert for the chance to strike.

Alfrund had ripped away one of the posts that supported the hutch and clutched it between his hands. "Once they attack," he said to Orien, "there are too many for us to keep at bay. Do something *now*."

Orien nodded gloomily. "In for a pippin, in for a pie," he muttered, and lifted his staff. He spoke three words of command and a loud crack, like a stick being broken, sounded above us. One of the skalgür suddenly crumpled, its body as shattered as if it had flown straight into a wall. It plummeted into the bay, shrieking as it fell, and vanished in the water without a trace. Orien did this again, twice, until the skalgür, suddenly silent as ghosts, rose into the air and soared out to sea.

"That should wake the dead," Orien said, "if our immanent arrival hasn't already done so." He lowered his staff as the silence fell heavily around us again.

The Tejj was sailing directly to the great stone quay that formed a half circle at the end of the harbor. Beyond it was a great paved plaza, where once merchants had gathered from around the world. On the far side of it stood several imposing stone buildings that once formed the heart of the city.

Orien gestured with his staff at one of them that stood by itself to one side. "Hezzakal's tower," he said. It rose

high and narrow, with nothing but slits for windows until the very top, where a large one looked out over the bay.

"Quite a view from there," Alfrund said, looking up. Then he touched Orien's shoulder and pointed to another building that stood out from all the others. "What building is that, though?" he asked. "And why does it look so familiar?"

I looked at it myself with wonder. A flight of wide stone steps led up to a portico about three stories high, supported by several great pillars. The building itself was a massive edifice of stone upon which rested a high dome, into which, just below where it began to curve inwards, were set a series of large, round windows, paned with glass. The dome itself was covered with gold leaf that blazed brightly as beacon in the sun. Apart from Sondaram, I had never seen anything as magnificent—or, Sondaram included, anything so huge.

Orien nodded. "It should look familiar. It is sister to the great Scriptoria of Lorithar, and once held a collection of manuscripts even more extensive and precious." He shook his head and sighed. "Although, toward the end of the Cytherians' trading days, it is rumored, everything within it was sold. I wonder what, if anything, that great building holds now."

Despite the radiance of the dome, around us, far below it, the dark was spreading. Even as Wendma and Hestal together hurled themselves against the tiller to turn the Tejj and keep it from ramming the quay head on, shadow passed over us and swept on across the plaza. By the time we had secured the lines to heavy metal bollards sunk into the quay-

side, dark was creeping up the face of the building.

As it did so, a figure robed in black shuffled out its great doorway and down the stairs. It hobbled across the plaza toward us at such a slow pace that Alfrund said, impatiently, "Let us go meet the thing. Night will have arrived before it reaches us here."

When it saw we were coming to it, the figure stopped and waited, leaning on a long plain wooden staff. A hood covered its head completely, but as we approached, a withered hand, shrunken as a talon, reached from a sleeve of the robe and threw the fabric back.

The face that emerged was neither alive nor dead, but in some horrible place in between. It was the face of someone whose life had dripped out so slowly that all the living tissue, rather than decomposing, had dried and tightened and hardened, until it resembled a skeleton tightly bound in leather made of its own skin, beneath which its muscles moved like knotted strands of rope.

The eyes, however, were gone, replaced with two glass globes in which some milky liquid moved. And when the mouth opened, the teeth were black and the tongue a mere flapping piece of hide.

It slowly looked at each one of us, then pointed first at me and then at Orien. "You and you come with me," it hissed. "The others remain here."

"We'll stay together, if you please," answered Orien, evenly but without discourtesy.

However, the being—for I can't call it a man—had already turned and begun hobbling back. It merely waved an impatient arm, to urge us on. And so we followed in a tight cluster, across the plaza and then up the wide steps and through the portico into the great building itself.

Orien took my arm and pulled me with him to the front of the party and gestured to the others to stay a few steps behind. We passed across a grand foyer, the light dying around us with every step. When we entered the room beyond, at first it seemed as if we had stepped into the blackest night.

As my eyes adjusted to the dim light still filtering down from those high, round windows, I looked about me and gasped. The room in which we stood was itself circular, merging without a break with the interior of the dome. Up around it ran a single gallery like the thread of a screw, and as far as the eye could see, it was filled with hundreds of beings exactly like the one who had come and guided us in. Although I could barely perceive them in the dim light, I could sense them shifting uneasily, as if standing gave them pain. The sound they made as they did so was like the rustling of leaves, only harsher and more ominous.

Something closed on my arm. It was the hand of our guide. I immediately tried to shake it off, for its touch was cold and dry and painful. But the creature clutched me tenaciously and dragged me forward across the vast floor to a huge block of black marble that stood in the center of the room.

He then jerked me to a halt and croaked loudly,

"Bow down and make homage to the greatest of all wizards, creator king of Cytheria, and he who feeds us life though we are dead. Behold Hezzakal, paltry ones, and tremble before your doom."

The thing then threw me forward onto my knees. I prostrated myself and then began slowly lifting up my head, so that I could at least see this wizard before he took my life. I had to lift it higher and then higher still, before I saw his face peering down at me. He sat on a great throne cast of solid gold and thickly encrusted with precious stones.

Unlike his messenger (and my image of wizards), Hezzakal was massive in build, his muscles thick as cables. His skin, too, was black and leathery, but had a soft and supple look, glistening with what must have been the rarest and costlest of lotions.

His head was covered with a nimbus of white hair, each strand as thin as a thread in a spider's web, kept out of his face by a crown, a thin band of gold that widened over his forehead in order to clasp a huge gemstone of pale, brilliant blue. His eyes, as the messenger's, were globes of glass, but within his glowed an intense yellow light. His visage was as impassive as a lizard's and as hard and cruel. When his mouth opened, it revealed a full set of sharply pointed teeth.

"I've waited a long time to lay my hands on one of *your* kind," he hissed at me, the sibilance as sharp and threatening as the snap of a whip. His head turned from me to Orien and his face contorted into a sneer. "Ah, a worm who dabbles

with the Powers," he sneered. The yellow eyes flashed as he lifted a hand and pointed at Orien's staff. "You even dare to bring your beggarly stick into my chambers." He flicked a finger and Orien's staff vanished in a flash of light. The mage gave out a cry of pain, and the pungent stench of burnt flesh filled the air—the hand that held it was now a black and twisted claw.

"Forgive me, O Mighty Hezzakal," Orien said through teeth clenched in agony, "I meant no disrespect. Your might is legendary; only a fool would think to compare his meager mastery to that of yours. I beseech you to pardon me for even appearing to pretend to do so."

Hezzakal stared at him coldly for a moment without responding, and then turned his regard to me. "And you, maggot, do you ask my pardon for stealing the Ystherüd from my very palace?" As he spoke, the yellow flame that flickered in his glass eyes glowed with such intensity that their light illuminated the floor beneath my feet.

"O Illustrious Hezzakal," I cried, looking down as if in shame, my mind racing furiously. "I know of what you speak. Your anger is terrible in its righteousness. Yes, it was one of my kind who stole it from you, a curse be on Him."

I now raised my head and met his eyes. "However, hear me, Great One. I am here in Cytheria to give you the means to seize it back. He who stole it from you is our enemy as well, and we hate him as much as you."

Hezzakal stared at me in silence, his eyes pulsing

with light, his face clenched in a rictus of hate. "Tell me then, filth," he said at last. "But do not think it will ease your end."

I rose to my feet. "I do not seek mercy," I replied, "I seek revenge. I will do as I say and you will see its truth. But first answer me this. Did He who stole it from you tell you His true name?"

Hezzakal shifted uneasily in his throne. "No," he admitted. "He gave me a name, it is true, but I learned afterward that it was that of a soul he had eaten, which is why I could not detect his lie."

I nodded. "Yes," I said. "No one is allowed to know His name, for to have it is to possess great power over Him. He has created a great curse that will strike dead any living being that speaks it, or even thinks it." I looked directly into Hezzakal's eyes. "But you, O Mightiest of Wizards...." I let my voice fade away, letting him complete the thought himself.

It took him but a brief second to do so. "But I, Hezza-kal," he sibilated icily, "am already dead—is that your meaning, you stinking piece of excrement?" His body quivered with rage.

"Oh, no, Highest One!" I replied, my voice shaking. "I meant, as is well known, that you have succeeded where all others have failed. You alone are the master of death." Orien stirred beside me. He now grasped my intent.

Hezzakal lifted his head and gazed up past the galleries. As he did so, the jittering sound of his minions stopped

instantly, and utter silence fell upon the great room.

After a time, he lowered his head again, and said to me, "Yes, maggot, I am lord even of death. I have no fear of this thief. Tell me His name."

"Alas, I cannot, O Sublime and Puissant Hezzakal," I said. "For I only know half of it. But my companion, the mage Oriel, knows the rest. Let us each tell you one part of it and you will then alone know the whole."

The wizard made a gesture of assent and, giving Orien a moment to block his mind, I lifted my voice and said, "Maer." Then, not trusting my own ability to mentally stop my ears, did so with my fingers, instead, as Orien stepped beside me and said the rest of it.

Hezzakal looked at us both for a few seconds, then raised his head. I removed my fingers just in time to hear him furiously hiss, "MAERDAS." And again, "MAERDAS." The creatures that crowded the gallery began to chant the name as well, "Maerdas. Maerdas. Maerdas." It echoed around the dome, turning onto itself. "Maerdasmaerdasmaerdasmaerdas."

Hezzakal suddenly stiffened as if absorbing a great blow. His body then began to throw itself back and forth upon his throne. His mouth opened and he screamed, a sound so piercingly thin and chilling that it brought my heart to my mouth. But it didn't still the chanting. "Maerdas," the hundreds of leathery voices sibilated, "Maerdas. Maerdas."

The whole building shook and blocks of stone plum-

meted here and there from the great dome, hitting the floor around us with such force that they exploded into gravel. Then, all at once, the force that Hezzakal had summoned was broken. It snapped with a crack as loud as a thunderclap, and, suddenly, the whole great chamber was flooded with a light of many colors.

Shakily but triumphant, Hezzakal rose to his feet, holding aloft a great globe from which light radiated with an intensity that equalled that of the sun. It illuminated all the creatures in the gallery, and as it did so, their voices thickened, deepened, gained tone.

"Ystherüd," they now chanted loudly. "Ystherüd. Ystherüd." And, even as they did so, their flesh began to twist and swell, like dried beans soaked in water. To my eyes and those of my companions, the result was even more horrifying than their appearance before, but they themselves exulted. "Ystherüd. Ystherüd. Ystherüd"—the word was now chanted so loudly that the sound was deafening.

I noticed that in all this Hezzakal had entirely forgotten about us, and I turned to Orien, wondering if we should try to flee. When I did so, I saw that his ruined hand was gesturing at his side, tracing a series of magical signs. He finished these with a final flourish, and looked defiantly up at the wizard.

At that moment, Hezzakal's head was thrown back and his arms raised above his head, his hands clutching the Ystherüd between them, letting its light fill the dome above his head. When Orien's spell hit him, his back arched back and he staggered against the throne. The light in his eyes flickered violently, and as it did, he momentarily lost his grip on the Ystherüd.

He desperately flailed his arms about, trying to catch it, but he still was too unbalanced by the blow Orien had dealt him. The Ystherüd bounced off the marble pediment on which he stood, and continued its fall, smashing into the stone floor right before our feet, where it shattered into tiny shards.

Hezzakal turned to Orien, his face contorting in as many seconds from an expression of disbelief to one of rage to one of utter despair. Then the light went out in his eyes altogether and he collapsed onto the dais. I could feel his power rushing away from his motionless form like water in a mill-race. The bodies of his minions and then of Hezzakal himself withered away, then crumbled into dust. And the dust rose in a cloud that swirled up to the top of the dome and passed through the dome itself, leaving behind it a thin, breathless, echoing wail of despair.

Still the power ebbed away and a terrible truth dawned on me. Hezzakal's thaumaturgy had not only preserved the inhabitants of Cytheria but *the very city itself*. Even as we stood there, foolishly gawking, stone was loosening from stone and beam from beam above our heads.

I drew every ounce of force I could find within me to shore them back up, if only for a few seconds. "Flee, flee," I gasped, and closed my eyes. The effort had already weakened me so much that I could barely stand. Alfrund snatched me up, then he and the others ran, through the foyer, across the portico, down the flight of stone steps, out onto the relative safety of the plaza outside.

Even as they did so, my strength gave out and my power slipped away. At once the building imploded, falling into itself, the great columns cracking, the huge pediment above them splitting into pieces even as it fell. One of these fell onto the plaza and rolled over several times until it came to a stop just before our feet. As it did so, the rumbling about us ceased. The city lay in ruins, hidden in a vast cloud of dust that hovered over huge mounds of rubble.

We looked about in amazement. Everything we had seen when we had sailed into the harbor was gone, save for the ghost fleet in the harbor. And these ships, now untethered from Hezzakal's will, began to float out on the ebbing tide, moving slowly, clumsily out to sea. Only the Tejj, moored to the quay, remained.

Alfrund drew Orien's attention to the section of the pediment that had tumbled to our feet. Glyphs of some arcane language had been engraved upon it and limned with gilt.

"That's the manner in which a prophecy is written," Orien said, "especially if it has been uttered by one of the ten sibyls." He gazed at it for a moment, and continued, "and as given here it's incomplete. It reads 'eluding death is clever, mastering death, divine'—typically gnomic and astute. Hezzakal thought he had attained divinity; we see that he was

merely very, very clever. Only the Immortals have mastery over death, and he never had a hope of becoming one of them."

He turned away. "Let us return to our boat," he said, "before dusk turns to night and we find ourselves standing in total darkness."

## Chapter 25



NCE WE WERE ALL ABOARD, Wendma wrapped me up again in my bundle of blankets, while Alfrund lit a ship's lantern and, as Wendma held it up, began to examine Orien's devastated hand.

"There's only so much I can do," Alfrund said sadly, gently examining its withered, scorched remains. "Grysta, were she here, could do more—but not enough, I fear, to make much difference in the end. This hand is crippled for life."

"I care not," said Orien, "for I shall make it my emblem and display it as a great badge of honor. Today, Jessan, with some help from me, caused a most grievous blow to fall upon Maerdas—you see I say his name and am not struck down. And I myself have taught Hezzakal not to underestimate the power of mages. 'Worm,' indeed." He sniffed.

Alfrund laughed. "I saw his face when he realized what happened," he said. "The expression lasted but a moment but it spoke a book." As he spoke, he was opening his pack, and in the lantern light began to concoct an ointment

from various sachets and vials. This he rubbed with infinite gentleness onto the injured hand and wrapped it up with a length of linen bandage. Then he deftly wove together a net of twine to hold it snugly in place.

Orien closed his eyes and sighed. "The pain begins to lessen," he said. Then he opened them again and turned to me. "My dear maggot and piece of excrement," he said, smiling, "I continue, despite myself, to underestimate you. What you did today will become a legend, a song that none will tire of hearing. When I finally grasped your strategy I couldn't believe its audacious perfection."

I blushed. "It was no strategy, Orien," I answered from where I sat. "I said what I did because anything else that came to mind plainly led us straight to death. I was so afraid the spell wouldn't be activated at all since Hezzakal was, well, *un*dead. If nothing had happened when he spoke the name...." I left the sentence unfinished, adding instead, "What *is* amazing is that you had the presence of mind to cast your spell at exactly the right moment to save our lives."

Orien smiled. "Well, we could battle each other with praises all night," he said. "But your speaking of presence of mind reminds me of something. I believe that Hestal has something he wishes to show us."

All eyes turned to the boy, who looked stunned, then embarrassed. He reached into the deep pocket of his sailmaker's smock and removed something that glistened brightly, even in the dim light of the ship's lamp. Hestal offered it to Orien, and as he did I could see in the lantern light that it was Hezzakal's crown.

Hestal, now flushing himself, began to stammer some sort of explanation, but Orien immediately shushed him. "I'm not accusing you of anything, lad," he said. "On the contrary. I admire your quick-wittedness before a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity."

To the rest of us, he explained, "When Hezzakal turned to dust, the crown tumbled down just as the Ystherüd did, only, instead of shattering, it rolled across the floor to Hestal, who snatched it up as we fled.

"Ordinarily, this would be yours without question," he said, turning again to Hestal, "as the spoils of war—although courtesy might demand that you spread the bounty around a bit." Here he glanced at Wendma. "In any case, the crown itself remains yours to keep.

"But the jewel is quite another matter. I've never seen anything quite like it." He held the crown up into the lantern light. As dim as this was, the stone absorbed it into itself and radiated it back in a soft, lustrous glow.

"Yes," Orien said, his voice almost a whisper. "I think that this is a sigil of some very, very ancient magic." He then turned back to Hestal and said, "Please get out your knife."

Hestal reached down to his belt and withdrew it from its sheath. Orien handed him back the crown, saying, "Pry the gem free from its golden clasps."

Hestal hesitated, looking shocked at the request.

"I'm no jeweler, Mage Orien," he said. "To damage such a thing, especially if what you say about it...."

Orien stopped him the middle of his sentence. "You needn't handle it gently, lad," he said. "Your blade couldn't damage this stone if you struck at it with all your might."

So Hestal, squatting down close to the lamp, pressed the point of the knife between the stone and each of the points that held it, until the gem fell free into Wendma's waiting hand. Orien reached over and took it from her, ignoring the gold circlet, which, in a moment, vanished again into Hestal's pocket.

"You see," Orien said, turning the stone over in his hand. "It's a diamond, only one that's been shaped by magic rather than by the tools of a lapidarian. It has no facets at all, but is instead perfectly smooth to the touch."

Orien closed his hand over the gem, closed his eyes, and sat motionless for a moment. He then passed the stone to Alfrund, who had just finished placing the mage's damaged hand in a sling, fastening it so that it pressed against his chest and out of harm's way.

"Bring that to Jessan," Orien said. "I think he can handle it safely, and I want to see what he makes of it."

Alfrund came over and squatted down, offering the stone in the palm of his hand. This time I acted with caution and held my hand over it at a distance. I could feel its power, which was quite unlike my own, or, for that matter, Hezzakal's, which had existed in a realm outside of thought. But,

whatever it was, it was contained and extremely enticing.

So I took the stone into my own hand and, following Orien's example, wrapped my fingers tightly around it. Its reaction was neither welcoming nor hostile, but became passively attentive, as if it waited for me to ask a question or give it a command.

I said all this to Orien, who nodded. "That gem has been imbued with what in the language of The Elect is called *telesma*, powers of farseeing. Exactly what they are, however, you'll have to learn for yourself. I strongly suspect, however, that it can answer questions if they're carefully crafted enough. That's no doubt how Hezzakal learned we were sailing in range of his domain."

As I listened to Orien, I remembered noticing, once Hestal had pried the gem free, that the back of that part of the crown had a round opening, which allowed the gem to actually press against the wizard's forehead. Again, very cautiously, I reached up and touched it lightly against my own. The results were so astonishing that I passed it back to Alfrund and told him to do the same.

Even more hesitantly than I, he did so, then exclaimed in wonder, and passed the gem over to Hestal, urging him to follow our example. And so it made the rounds until it was back with Orien, who did so as well.

We all looked at each other and all around us with amazement. We could see as well in the dark as we could in daylight, except without color. Everything appeared in shades of gray.

"Night sight!" exclaimed Orien. "This in itself makes the gem beyond price. I have a spell for it myself, but what I can do is a paltry imitation of this. Look down at the water!"

We did so and found we could see right through it to the bottom of the harbor, a mangle of rotten timber, detritus, and broken stone. A few fish flickered by as we looked, and I thought how old Grannell's mouth would fall open with astonishment and greed, had he ever had the chance to use it.

Alfrund exclaimed and pointed up into the sky. Above us flitted a countless number of bats, wheeling and soaring with their usual erratic intensity, before now entirely invisible. "I could watch them all night," Wendma exclaimed, "if I weren't so desperately in need of sleep."

These words broke the spell. Orien gave the *telesma* stone to Alfrund and told him to return it to me. I started to protest, but the mage would have none of it. "No, Jessan, this must pass from Hezzakal to you. In anyone else's hands it's either useless or dangerous or something worse. Draw it out from time to time so that it can get to know your presence. Eventually, it will then reveal more of itself to you."

In the morning, when I was able, I planned to wrap the gem in a cloth and hide it away in my bag. But right now it felt good to hold it. And if it needed to become familiar with me, I might as well start the process right away.

"Now," Orien said, "until the spell wears off, let us all gather around Jessan. For before we sleep, we must, once again, make new plans."

This was then done, with Hestal and Wendma bringing with them a bale of hay for Orien to use as a seat, for he was clearly stiff and weary.

"What you may not realize," Orien continued, when he was seated again, "is that Hezzakal dealt our enemy far more damage than that done by their battle. By seizing back the Ystherüd, he took from Maerdas the one thing that gave him hope of achieving immortality."

"How could Hezzakal have defeated him?" I asked. "I was sure that if the spell had worked, the wizard would have been instantly destroyed."

"I've pondered on this myself," Orien replied. "If all things had been equal the battle would surely have gone to Maerdas, who is not only more powerful but didn't have to devote a large portion of his powers to sustain a city and its inhabitants even as he battled.

"All I can say is that Hezzakal was a very powerful wizard, he knew of such spells and their workings, and he had the advantage of complete surprise. Maerdas would never have imagined that *Hezzakal*, of all beings, would discover his name and challenge him completely out of the blue."

"Will Maerdas send a force here, thinking to seize the Ystherüd back?" I asked. "That would be a welcome waste of his effort."

"If Maerdas—what pleasure it gives me to speak that name!—doesn't realize it's been destroyed," Orien answered, "he may just do that. But I suspect he does know it was destroyed. The fact that you've taken physical possession of such a thing as the Ystherüd doesn't mean you control it entirely.

"Clearly, as its former possessor, Hezzakal was still managing to tap its powers to sustain himself and his minions, if only at the pathetic level at which we found them. Maerdas may never have even realized that."

Orien paused for a moment, reflecting, and then added, "No, what I fear is that he knows all too well how Hezzakal came into possession of his name. If so, Maerdas's despair and rage are now combined into one desire: to find Jessan and destroy him, and by the cruelest, longest method he can devise."

Silence fell among us at those words, everyone looking down at their laps, not wanting to look at me.

Finally, Alfrund asked, "Mightn't the destruction of the Ystherüd mean that he, too, has turned to dust?"

Orien shook his head. "You forget that Hezzakal was himself all but dead when he evoked its power. Maerdas has no doubt aged considerably in the past few hours, but it would be foolish to hope that this has...."

"Turned him into a leather mumia," Alfrund said.

Orien glanced at him with a grim smile. "Exactly," he said, "although Hezzakal wore that well enough, I thought."

"The very model of wizardly fashionableness," I murmured, and then said more loudly, "so, do we sail back

to Gedd? If Maerdas knows we're here, he will realize we're only a day's sail from Pharros and bend all his effort to intercept us there."

"Well," Orien answered, "I shall return to Gedd, and Wendma and Hestal as well. With Maerdas stricken, his army may well lose the force of his will behind it. If so, with my help, there's now a good chance that Caelas can repel it at the Gates of Karn. Also, now that I know its use, I want to make absolutely sure that no more *mythrad* falls into Maerdas's hands.

"But," he continued, "you and Alfrund—with Dwinsa, of course—will take the direction Maerdas is least likely to think of, heading directly for the tunnel of the kobolds, and through it directly into the kingdom."

"Orien!" Alfrund objected, "that's madness! The tunnel was forever sealed with a huge mound of stone on the far end. No one can pass through it."

"That's exactly why it's the best route, since Maerdas, even if he remembers it exists, will not take it into account," Orien replied. "As for the blockage, Jessan can deal with it easily enough."

Alfrund and I exchanged a glance that said, 'easy for him to say.'

"But isn't the way blocked at this end by the collapsed city?" I asked.

Orien sighed, "It's time to set a watch and go to bed. As to your question, it seems highly unlikely that Hezzakal would want trade caravans passing through any of his buildings. In the morning, we'll discover exactly where this end of the pass is to be found and then whether you can enter it. But, at least for me, the night vision spell is fading, and it's high time for us to get some sleep."

was exempt from watch duties because of my inner fatigue from the struggle to keep Hezzakal's palace from collapsing. And, since no sailing was involved, Alfrund volunteered for the first watch. He wasn't the most attentive watchman, since he and I lay together tenderly, but silently and—apart from some kisses—not making love. We were both too weary and, besides, Orien wanted both parties to start off at the crack of dawn. We would be alone together soon enough.

Still, it was nice having him beside me, and I snuggled against his body. I put one hand under my head and with the other I turned the gemstone over and over in my fingers. My thoughts touched on many things, but they came and stayed on the fate of my twin.

Orien wanted me to make my way to Wethrelad, the palace of the air in the distant west, so that I could come to my full powers. But I myself longed to find my brother in spirit, to get to know him, to be reassured that he was alive and safe. If only I could learn his name. That, at least, would be something to hold onto, a start. Even as I starting slipping into sleep, this question stayed floating in my mind.

Then a voice within me said clearly and simply, "Nic-

cas." And so I fell asleep with that word on my tongue, the gemstone still clutched in my fingers.

awn came soon after. There was a great bustle, exaggerate a bit, perhaps, to cover our grief at parting. Still, Dwinsa, who had hated every moment on the Tejj, now refused to be led off it. Once that was accomplished, luggage had to be sorted, provisions divided, and fresh water gathered to replenish the ship's barrels from one the springs that trickled down the sides of the surrounding cliffs. Finally, Orien had to lay on much advice with the usual heavy trowel.

The entrance to the pass through the mountains was, as the mage had correctly predicted, well away from the collapsed buildings. The passage so narrow that it was almost invisible until you knew where to look. Rubble had fallen across the opening but failed to block it. Alfrund and I could easily thread our way to it through the scattered stone blocks, even with Dwinsa in tow.

I was already digging into my supplies to don clothing suitable for land travel, all of it new to me. One item, a pair of braies, resembled the small pants, except for two things. It had grommets sewn into the hem of the short legs, to which the doeskin leggings were tied to keep these from slipping down my legs. The other difference was that, unlike the small pants, the braies were, for all intents and purposes, two articles of clothing, one for each leg, joined together at the very top by a stout layer of cloth, through which ran a

drawstring to hold them up. Below that they were completely open, although modesty was preserved by the full drape of the cloth (and, of course, the fact that shirt and belt completely covered them). Thus calls of nature—of whatever sort—could easily be attended to.

It was an odd experience, being clothed and open at the same time, and I said as much to Alfrund, mentioning at the same time the incident of the small pants.

"Superior folk have their own standards," he replied, "or at least feel the rules of propriety apply to them in a different way. After all," he said, reaching under my shirt and working his hand through the slit in the braies to caress my my left buttock, "who would presume to do this to a lord, let alone a *nithaial*?"

I laughed and slipped away, saying, "Don't get ideas above your station, herbalist."

"Exactly," he said, smiling back. "You see how exciting it is. The superior folk have all the fun."

I buckled on my belt, and fastened to it the sheath holding my wand, and, last of all slipped into my vest. I shoved my hands into its pockets, closed my eyes, and savored the feeling of how incredibly handsome I felt. As I did so, I realized that Orien was speaking to me.

I opened my eyes. "I'm sorry?" I said.

"Vanity, your name is a boy clad in doeskin leggings," Orien said, causing the others to smile. And, as I blushed furiously, he added, "What I said, Jessan, is that I want you to

exchange shirts with Hestal."

I looked down at my shirt, with its embroidered patterns in blue and red thread, and over at Hestal's grubby smock. "Orien!" I said, "you can't ask me to do that!"

"I think it's only fair," Alfrund said. "After all, Hestal's a rich man now, and you, *Nithaial*, as Orien has explained to you already, are only one step up from a pauper." The group laughed out loud at my look of dismay and indignation.

"Thank you, Alfrund," said Orien, dryly. "That was very helpful." Then, turning to me, he continued, "Maerdas has his spies everywhere, and it will confuse him further if he hears reports that you're on your way back to Gedd. He may even then convince himself that you *do* possess the Ystherüd, and, furthermore, are able to fully control it, as he was not. That would explain to him why his magic has been unable to find it and cause him great panic. After all, what the Ystherüd can give, perhaps it can also take away."

I found I couldn't argue with this, so, with a heavy heart, I gave my lovely shirt to Hestal. However, I had no intention of wearing his smock, which smelled to high heaven, and got a simple but clean shirt from my pack.

Even so, Hestal did have to take his smock off to put on my shirt. As he did so, I noticed that, while he may not have been given all that attractive a face, he had been fully repaid for that with a generous endowment below.

Hestal hardly failed to notice my glance and remarked, smiling, "Some of us are *not* so quick-witted, it

seems, when opportunity briefly knocks." He had a muscular body and my shirt didn't hang as loosely on him as it did on me. I had to admit he looked quite handsome in it.

"Perhaps I'll do better when we meet again," I said, already in better humor, and we embraced in farewell.

And so we all did, moving from one to another. Then they boarded and Alfrund and I cast off the mooring ropes and gave the Tejj a mighty shove. She floated slowly into the harbor. Hestal and Wendma raised the sail, and I sent a following breeze to help her along her way.

We then stood together at the edge of the quay and watched her and her crew slowly diminish in size until she tacked to the north and vanished out of sight past the headland. Alfrund and I turned and nervously looked at each other. Once again, we were facing this adventure alone.

## PART SIX THE STRYKUL

## Chapter 26



YTHERIA HAD BEEN BUILT up the side of the cliffs that contained the harbor, and faced west, out to the sea. These cliffs were so steep and high that the sun had to rise until it was almost directly overhead before it shone directly onto it. As Alfrund and I had stood on the quayside, watching the Tejj sail away, we saw it enter the light already shining on the bay, while we ourselves remained in deep shadow—which was a good thing for us.

"What now?" Alfrund was asking, as we strolled over to where Dwinsa was making short work of her last bale of hay. "I'm nervous about this plan of Orien's," he continued, before I thought of a reply. "Why couldn't he and the others have waited until it was clear that you can unblock the pass?"

I glanced at him. "You'll understand that when you see what the plan is," I replied. "But first...." What I'd meant to say was wiped from my mind by a hoarse, penetrating shriek. In all his planning, Orien had forgotten one thing, the skalgür, and he had left us at their mercy. For, although

their rooftop aeries had been destroyed along with the city, they had not flown away. Instead, they were massed along the edge of the cliff, fully lit by the sun, a line of ominous hulking figures, heads bent forward, their glittering eyes trying to discern our shapes in the gloom.

"But first," Alfrund said, completing my sentence, "let's run as if chased by the dogs of hell."

Alfrund flew to Dwinsa, grabbed her halter and, ignoring her protests, dragged her away from her hay. I led them across the plaza to the cliff wall directly under the skalgür. Already the shadow that hid us was lifting, for the sunlight had already reached the outer edge of the harbor.

"Jessan!" Alfrund said in a low voice. "Why are we going in *this* direction? The entrance to the pass is the other way!"

"I know," I muttered back. "But this is all part of Orien's grand plan. Wait and see."

As long as we were crossing the plaza, it was easy to avoid the fallen remnants of the city. But our way narrowed as we went, and grew increasingly treacherous. Finally, we passed the remains of the last buildings and reached a road that had been cut into the side of the cliff. It rose steeply, leading to the ruins of a tower that had once served as one of the two lighthouses built across from each other on both sides of the harbor.

We had only started up when the sunlight reached us, giving our location away to the skalgür, who spotted us immediately. Several of them launched into the air and soared over the water beside us. We kept them away by pressing as close as we could to the cliff.

"Let's hope they remember Orien and his staff," Alfrund said, as he came panting up behind me.

"I'll bet that skalgür have memories as short as their appetites are large," I said to him over my shoulder. "But we'll deal with that problem when we have to. Are you any good at throwing stones?"

"I was once," Alfrund responded. "I haven't much practiced the talent since I was ten."

"Well," I said, "let's hope it comes back quickly. Meanwhile, tether Dwinsa to that boulder and help me heap up a pile of stones. I've got to stand at the edge of the road directly over the water, and I won't survive a second without your protection."

We had to hunch down to gather those stones that lay in the middle of the road, because the skalgür were already testing the limits of our protection. By gaining altitude and then soaring down, turning sharply so that their wings almost touched the cliff walls on one side and the road itself on the other, they could come alarmingly close. I could see the iridescent sheen of the tender skin under their wings and, more to the point, the spreading reach and sharpness of their talons. Even Dwinsa was alarmed enough to have gotten down on her knees, every now and then punctuating the shrieks of the skalgür with a lament of her own.

When we had gathered a good pile of stones, I removed my wand from its sheath, which was now fastened again to my belt. "Orien told me to wait until the tide is full," I said. "But the skalgür will be digesting us by then."

Alfrund and I were squatting beside each other, and he reached his hand over, put it behind my neck. We bent close to each other and kissed.

"The Blessed Mother give you good aim," I said, and, after an approaching skalgür swooped just over our heads, we both stood up, Alfrund with a stone in each fist, me with the wand clutched in both hands, one at either end. I stepped over to the edge of the road, lifted it over my head, closed my eyes and slipped down into the inner world.

A small portion of my mind attempted to disorient the skalgür, but most of it reached as far out into the ocean as I could manage, then began pulling a mass of water back toward me. At first it barely shifted, even when I applied all the power I could summon. But gradually it responded and, as it built up momentum, moved faster and faster. At first it was only a great surge, but as it moved through the bay it began to rise up into a wave, swelling as it swept forward into a mighty wall.

As it grew nearer, its thunder began to drown out the cries of the skalgür, and I realized rather desperately, that if I didn't shape it, the water would sweep away the three of us and smash us against the further cliff. So, with all my might, I bent it, shaping it into the form of a great leviathan of the deep. It roared past us, and just as it was about to break against the wall of the quay, I sent it leaping up, so that it swept across the plaza and slammed into the opening of the passage through the cliffs.

Anyone unfortunate enough to be coming through that steep-sided passage would have suddenly confronted a surging wall of water that reached almost all the way up the cliffs on either side. Again I shaped it, forcing it as if through a funnel until it became an unimaginably mighty arm, which I directed, in all its force, into the mouth of the tunnel...and let it go.

When I opened my eyes, I found myself clutched tightly in Alfrund's arms, the two of us again pressing against the side of the cliff. Below me, to my astonishment, the harbor bottom was completely exposed to the air and on it lay several skalgür, some dead, some flopping about.

As I stared at all this, I said, "I don't remember..., what happened at the end?"

"You started to topple over," Alfrund murmured. "If I hadn't grabbed you and pulled you back, right now you'd be lying down there in the mud with the skalgür."

He nuzzled the back of my neck adding, "You finished your little trick just in time, wondrous one. My pile of stones had dwindled down to nothing. But I can now teach Orien a trick or two in dealing with those monsters."

I entwined my arms around his and held him fast. I was feeling weak and dizzy, but also excited, almost drunk,

from the passage of all that power through me. This sense of unreality was increased by the eerie silence. The skalgür had all fled. And while the great wall of sea water I had sent roaring up the passage should now be flooding back, nothing did. Water was already trickling in from the ocean and refilling the harbor. Apart from the drenched plaza, nothing even hinted at the magic feat I had just performed.

I said as much to Alfrund, who bent forward and whispered into my ear, "I myself was too distracted to fully witness all that happened. Do you think, little *Nithaial*, that you could do it all over again?"

I reached back my head and nipped his ear. "I wish I could," I said, "for you sorely need a bath. But the task is done. Either the tunnel is unblocked or else the whole mountain was tossed aside."

"Or the water just shot up and over it entirely and has now formed a little sea of its own on the other side," Alfrund replied. He stood up and let me go, adding, "Whatever happened, we shall soon witness it for ourselves."

hat, of course, was easier said than done. Already the skalgür were returning, and neither of us was eager to cross the open plaza where they could swoop down and pick us off at their leisure. And I had no tricks up my sleeve to match those of Orien for knocking them out of the sky.

Finally I thought to summon a strong wind in from the sea. I had meant only to make it difficult for the skalgür to attack us, but, howling through the rubble, it raised a huge cloud of dust. Through this we were forced to make our way, the ends of our shirts clasped over our mouths, and our eyes stinging and full of tears.

At last, tired of tripping over stones and hoping we were near our destination, I stilled it. As the dust settled again, we saw that the gap was close by, and we hurried into it pursued by the skalgür—the word "hopeless" being clearly not part of their vocabulary.

As they swooped and shrieked just outside the opening of the crevice, we halted a safe distance in to at least clean the dirt off our faces. Indeed, it took only one look at each other for us both to burst into laughter. A stranger coming down the passage would have taken us for two very shabby stone statues, albeit with bright red eyes.

Alfrund unstrapped our water skin from our baggage, splashed his face with it, poured some over Dwinsa, and passed it on to me, saying, "The next time you cast that spell, wait until I'm on the other side of the mountains."

My mouth was too full of grit to reply, and by the time I had washed it out and rinsed my eyes, his attention had turned to something else.

"Look up there," he said, pointing. I did and saw that above the water line where the flood had surged through, every bit of protruding rock was capped with a thick pile of dust. With no breeze able to blow through the passage for centuries, the dust had simply piled up higher and higher. If it hadn't been for the surge of water that swept it all away, we'd now have to wade through dust that easily reached as high as our waists.

"Or shovel our way through it," Alfrund remarked sourly, when I told him this. "Or, again, summon Orien back in a whirlwind and have *him* shovel it for us."

"All part of the mage's master plan," I said, and we both laughed, even while knowing that Orien would merely shrug. The mark of a good plan was whether anything remains, after all that can go wrong has gone wrong.

And so we set off. Dwinsa, for once, set the pace. As a salt mule, she was used to much harder work than this, and she was probably even more eager than we to get out of this dark and oppressively narrow passage and onto ground that at least offered an occasional tempting clump of grass.

The way rose gradually but unremittingly, and, as the hours passed, my leg muscles soon began to ache. Even Alfrund, who had stridden the length of the realm, eventually fell quiet, after muttering, only half-jokingly, "Too long a time in the flesh pits of Gedd!"

Finally, though, we reached the tunnel that the kobolds had hewn for Hezzakal. The sky above our heads was still a bright, clear blue, but down where we were, the way had grown increasingly dark. Even so, I gaped when I saw the tunnel entrance. As was their way, or so Alfrund told me, they wouldn't allow such an entry to be a mere hole, but had elaborately carved the rock to resemble the face of a great mythical beast. To enter the tunnel, you had to step directly into its jaws.

When Dwinsa saw where we were going, she resolutely balked. When we pulled on her halter, she stiffened her legs. Her refusal was so absolute that I went to the opening and sent my mind into the passage, to see if I could sense anything waiting for us.

I did sense something there, but it was so faint that it could barely be discerned. Even that was puzzling—if some fell creature had taken the place as a lair, it would have had no prey, since the passage had been blocked for centuries.

Still, I thought, even if there was such, the flood had surely swept it away. So, I put my palm on Dwinsa's broad forehead and calmed her mind. Then I tugged a handful of dried fruit from our supplies, held it before her nose, and led her into the tunnel. This time she came willingly, although at the price of a fist soon dripping with mule slobber.

The kobolds hadn't bothered to provide the tunnel with the sort of magic lamps that brightened when you approached them in the dark passages of Sondaram. Nor did the night-seeing powers bestowed by the *telesma* penetrate absolute darkness. So I took out my wand and caused one end to glow with a radiant blue light. It was nothing like a torch but it was enough to show us our way.

The kobolds, it turned out, had amused themselves by carving bas-reliefs of crouching dragons, goblins, giant spiders, and other pleasantries into the sides of the tunnel walls, cleverly crafted to seem real and menacing in the dim and flickering light.

For the travelers of yore, this might have been amusing, but for us, expecting attack at any moment, it brought our hearts up into our throats each time one loomed up before us. That and the airlessness of the place soon had us covered with sweat and filled with dread, especially because I had never imagined the tunnel could be so long.

"Does this thing never end?" I whispered.

"Ask your stone," he answered, with an edge to his voice. "The kobolds build their kingdoms deep inside the mountains; there, the tunnels go on forever."

"Alfrund!" I said. "Any more cheering up from you and I'll burst into tears."

He reached out a hand and grasped my shoulder. "Sorry," he said, in a slightly more familiar voice. "I just wasn't made for excursions deep underground. If it weren't for the slight tang of salt in the air from the sea water, I'd have already lost hope, and you'd be dragging me with one hand and Dwinsa with the other. But if the sea got through, so we shall, too, I suppose."

"Dwinsa isn't dragging her heels any longer," I answered. "A fistful of dried fruit is all she needed. If you want to take her from me and split your britches, I'll take hold of *your* halter. My hand is already soaking with Dwinsa's drooling, so...."

It was now Alfrund's turn to exclaim. "Jessan!" he

said, "that's disgusting!" And, after a pause, "though, I must confess, the very notion has made me rampant."

"Now I am, as well," I said, feeling a distinct stirring in my own britches. "And it's too bad, because I think we're at the tunnel's end."

Sure enough, a faint glow was perceptible ahead of us, which grew in size with every step. I dimmed the wand as we approached, so that by the time there was no doubt we had reached the far entrance, I had to lower it almost to the floor for us to find our way. No light shone in from the outside, for the sun was now set, and the light we had seen was the deep violet of the night-darkening sky.

I extinguished and sheathed my wand and halted Dwinsa, relinquishing the last piece of dried fruit as I did so. Now the trick would be to keep her from bolting for the exit. I whispered to Alfrund to take her halter and hold her fast, while I went ahead to check the life of the land.

I had crept about half of the remaining distance when there was a flash of sparks outside the tunnel, and a fire began to blaze, casting its light deep into the tunnel. I froze in my tracks, pressing my body against the tunnel wall, certain I'd been discovered. But when my nerves calmed down, I realized that no dark shapes had appeared in the entry, nor was there any cry of alarm.

So, after another moment, I slipped my hand into one of the pockets of my vest, closed my fingers around the *telesma*, and brought it out to press against my forehead,

again tapping its gift of nightseeing.

Directly ahead of me was the final—or, for travelers approaching from the opposite direction, the welcoming—kobold bas-relief, this one—or so I assumed from its short stature, long beard, and crown—a carving of their king. It protruded into the tunnel just enough to give me cover. I slipped along the wall until I was directly behind it and, peering over his majesty's shoulder, studied the scene without.

To my surprise, there was no jumble of water-tossed stones scattered about, just a long muddy swath leading downward and spreading out as it did. The fire had been built in the middle of this, on green logs that lifted it out of the mud. Beside it stood two soldiers on guard duty, their faces turned in my direction. Closing my eyes, I could sense the presence of several others, outside my range of vision.

Their spirits showed no sign of agitation, just boredom. They were talking in low voices among themselves, and while I couldn't read their minds, I found I could use my powers to make out their conversation, idle as most of it was. Even so, as I listened, I began to piece together what all this was about.

pparently, several months before, Maerdas had ordered the passage unblocked, planning a surprise attack on Hezzakal to clear Cytheria of his presence and gain a secret port for the transport of mythrad. Consequently, yesterday, after the struggle over the Ystherüd, he had hurriedly ordered his nearest forces to converge on the

tunnel. By marching all night, a large number of elite troops had arrived there this morning, and had been sent on to report what had happened at Cytheria, seize back the Ystherüd, and capture us.

Instead, of course, they were swept away by the flood I had sent to free the tunnel, and most of them had been killed. The rest had regrouped as best they could, set a guard on the tunnel mouth, and now awaited reinforcements, which were expected to arrive sometime later that night. Furthermore, the soldiers knew we hadn't already passed through when they were in complete disarray, or they would have seen our footprints in the mud.

Sorting all this out in my mind, I slipped back down the tunnel to where Alfrund was waiting and, in a low voice, explained our situation to him.

"This adventure only gets worse and worse," he whispered. "We're trapped like rats in a barrel. If only you had a spell of invisibility up your sleeve!"

"I do have such a spell, or at least the next best thing," I answered. I then took the telesma and pressed it against his forehead and then against Dwinsa's, although I had no idea if it would affect her. Little is taught on the effect of enchantments on mules.

"I'm going to creep forward again and put a sleeping spell on the guard," I said. "When I gesture, bring Dwinsa to the end of the tunnel, so you'll be ready to flee with me once I finish my work." "This time," he whispered back, "try to cast a spell that doesn't cause us more discomfort than our enemy."

I ignored this and made my way back to the kobold king. Caelas's soldiers had already been asleep when I put the spell on them, and this time I discovered that rendering insensate fully conscious, well-trained soldiers was beyond my powers. However, I was able to muddle their minds and make them drowsy—and that would have to do.

I had more success with the second part of my plan. After summoning Alfrund, I took the wand from its sheath and took it in both hands as before. This time there was no ocean to move, and the work was easy. I summoned up the sea water that lay soaking in the earth and caused most of it to form a thick mist. The rest I poured into the watch fire, which immediately hissed violently and went out.

Immediately, there was a distant shout of alarm. But no matter. It was now or never. I seized Alfrund's hand and we hurried out of the tunnel and down the muddy slope.

## Chapter 27



UR NIGHT SIGHT didn't completely penetrate the mist, but it gave us much better vision than the soldiers. Those I had muddled with enchantment were too confused to be of any threat, but the warning shout was bringing a host of others from where they had struck camp nearby.

As I groped in my mind for some way to confront them, Dwinsa unexpectedly lost her footing in the slippery mud. She shot helplessly down the slope straight toward the oncoming soldiers, crying out as she did. I say "crying out" because the sound of a mule in terror is a strange and uncanny sound—part donkey's bray and part horse's whinny.

The soldiers heard only the sound, coming directly at them at great speed, and, terrified, scattered in every direction, adding their shouts of terror to that of the mule's. Alfrund and I were forced to move slowly to keep from losing our footing ourselves, but our slowness only cleared the way for us more. We caught hold of Dwinsa's halter, helped her

back to her feet, and hurried down the road. As we passed the camp, we found it in a state of uproar and confusion. Torches were being set aflame, weapons passed out, and the soldiers formed a defensive line as best they could, preparing, I imagined, for the onslaught of the *Nithaial*'s terrible, bloodthirsty beast.

I told this to Alfrund once we were safely down the road. He stopped and seized my arm, saying, "No, no, Jessan, they thought that sound was coming from you! The battle cry of the *Nithaial* himself, in all its blood-curdling splendor." At this notion we both began to laugh so hard that we all but fell over, and so staggered on our way into the night.

Whatever the soldiers made of our distant roar of laughter, it brought no pursuit. Soon, we passed out of the mist and, indeed, the area drenched by the flooding. The way was rough for the road was seldom traveled, leading as it did, or so it was thought, to nowhere. Once our spell of night sight began to fade, I decided, we'd find a safe spot off the road to bed down for the rest of the night. It had been a very long day.

However, it was not fading yet. Moreover, the success of our recent adventure had refreshed us and we so we moved onward as fast as we could.

"Riddle me this," I said to Alfrund after a bit. "Why did Hezzakal use his magic to draw the other ships into the harbor? It was certainly not in hope that a *Nithaial* might happen to be upon one."

"I've wondered about that, too," he replied. "Orien might give a better answer, but here's mine. Cytheria was once a great trading city and it must have made the unhappy lot of its undead citizens even worse to look out upon an empty harbor day after day after day. It would be like a farmer condemned to forever till a field in which nothing ever grew."

"So Hezzakal cast his enchantment," I said, continuing his thought, "and, thereafter, whenever a captain thought to ignore the old superstitions and sailed within reach of the spell, another ship arrived in the harbor—until it was full of them, just as it was in the old days. So Hezzakal's minions weren't vampires at all."

"Well," Alfrund answered, "if you think about it, the new arrivals faced something even worse."

"The skalgür!" I exclaimed. "Of course. They didn't harass the populace, who'd have had all the savor of shoe leather, so Hezzakal let them be. They would pick off the ship's company one by one. Few probably even made it ashore."

"If they did, I imagine other unsavory ends awaited them," my companion said grimly. "Let us talk of something else."

"Even better," I answered, "let's begin looking for somewhere to bed down for the night. I'm getting very tired and the night sight is finally starting to fade."

This proved no easy task. The way was crowded on both sides with dense thickets of prickleberry and stands of poplar, and we would soon be totally lost if we simply pushed off into it. So we began to search for a side trail made by deer or some other of the wild animals that inhabited the region.

Discouragingly, nothing like this appeared, even after we had walked several leagues further. At last, I decided to risk another spell of night vision rather than leave us stranded in the dark, for we were half blind already. As we stood still while I retrieved the *telesma* from my vest, a sound became audible, distant but growing rapidly louder.

Alfrund and I looked at each other, first in puzzlement and then in fear. The reinforcements! This time the force was on horseback, and riding as fast as their mounts would take them.

"Look ahead," Alfrund said, "we are coming to a patch of real woodland."

Sure enough, now that our night vision was restored, I could see a mass of trees a short distance from us. Once we were among them, the undergrowth would be less dense and easier to pass through. Hurrying Dwinsa as fast as she could be made to trot, we entered the woods and soon found a place where we could make our way off the road and through the trees.

Very soon, we came to a small ridge running parallel to the road. We crossed over it into a little dell, and we settled there, out of sight of the road. Here we could hide and wait until the horsemen had passed us by, and decide then what to do next.

Leaving Alfrund holding Dwinsa and gesturing that he should remain where he was, I crept back up far enough so that I could lie just below the ridge and look over it, the sharpness of the night sight allowing me to make out the road through the trees. I wanted to see these riders, knowing they wouldn't be on the lookout for us, believing we were still boxed in by the soldiers waiting at the tunnel.

The thunder of the hooves eased when the horses reached the woods, for there branches hung low over the road, and the horsemen had to bend down as far as they could to avoid being struck. Their leader, however, could ignore these obstacles, for his mount brushed them aside as if they were mere willow fronds—and like those fronds, albeit with protesting groans, they bent and gave way, or snapped off entirely.

This rider was no man, and the beast he was mounted on was no horse. Immediately my dream in Grysta's house came back to me and a great chill filled my heart. I fought it off and calmed myself with a great force of will, grateful that Alfrund hadn't crept up beside me. Whether its rider could or not, I knew that his mount was a creature that could easily smell our fear.

Even with the spell of night sight I couldn't, in fact, clearly make out either, for both were black as night. The beast moved on two legs, with a fluid swaying motion, its head thrust forward, its breath so rank that I soon caught a whiff of it where I lay. That the horses could be made to follow

so close behind it spoke of skilled training. I also wondered what they fed the thing, and shuddered when I thought of the heap of dead soldiers who had been drowned in the tunnel. For that matter, I had no idea what the Demon Lords ate, and was happy in my ignorance.

When the Demon Lord came to the spot where we had left the road, he suddenly lifted his hand and spoke a word in his harsh language. His beast halted, as did the riders behind him. Both rider and the beast he rode lifted their heads and sniffed. The Demon Lord's eyes, burning like two hot coals jammed into the black mass of his head, began following the route we had taken up the hill, his head twisting in our direction as they did so.

As this was happening, I became aware that the Demon Lord was also probing with his mind, trying to find and identify us through inner sensing. Most likely Dwinsa's scent had confused him, for it was strong enough to cover Alfrund's and my own. He would be trying to discern if what had passed through here recently was merely a feral mule.

Cautiously I crept into the inner space myself, at first working to subtly deflect his own probing and then, taking courage from my success, to break his concentration by ever so slightly muddling his thoughts.

Suddenly, several of the horses began to whinny nervously and their riders had to struggle to control them. I used the distraction this made to push harder, crumbling his concentration into a confusion of impressions. For a moment he sat there, trying to pull them back again. But as the horses continued to shy, he uttered a frustrated snarl, spoke another word of command, and the beast again began to lope quickly down the road, the horsemen following after.

As they did so, I realized my body was now completely dripping with sweat. I was about to slide back down to where Alfrund waited, when I sensed, rather than heard, something following on the heels of the riders. It was a pack of beasts, eight or more of them, about the size of a man, but in shape more like the Demon Lord's mount. They also stood half upright on two powerful rear legs. But their movements were quick, darting, highly alert—unlike the Demon Lord and his mount, these creatures *knew* we were there.

Alarmed, I tried to deflect their awareness, but, like the skalgür, their minds were closed to me. Where all else was energy and flow, they were like hard black rocks. Their desire to destroy us, however, was palpable, even audible, for they crowded at the edge of the road, staring in our direction and uttering high-pitched whispering cries. But before they started to advance, they heard something distant that I failed to catch, their heads turning as one.

Reluctantly, they began to hurry up the road again, but not before one lifted itself to its full height and gave out a fierce hissing noise. In a moment, my nostrils told me that it had sprayed some sort of poisonous vapor in our direction, as vile as it was deadly. At once, I slid down the side of the ridge, seized Dwinsa's halter with one hand and Alfrund's

arm with the other and, without a word, dragged them away from the ridge, deeper into the woods.

Dwinsa had been standing rigidly, motionless, like a deer that has caught the scent of a pack of wolves and wills itself invisible to their awareness. But the moment I pulled at the leather strap, she started moving with such alacrity that she soon broke into a gallop, and I could neither slow her nor keep my hold. I lost my footing and went sprawling, the wind knocked out of me entirely. By the time I got painfully back to my feet, Dwinsa had disappeared.

So, I realized to even more alarm, had Alfrund. He certainly hadn't sprinted past me, and since both of us could still see well enough with the night sight, I couldn't believe he had gone off in another direction. I hurried back the distance that Dwinsa had dragged me, and found him exactly where I had been forced to let go of his hand in my futile efforts to halt her flight.

"Alfrund!" I whispered in horror, "what's wrong?" His body was shaking as if he had been stricken with palsy, his eyes were wide open, his pupils shrunk to the size of dots. He was making a pitiful whimpering sound, the stutering wail of someone whose mind was broken with terror. Worst of all, he had lost control of his bowels and had completely soiled himself down his legs.

I knew at once that it was the poison vapor emitted by the beast, but I had no idea how long its effect would last or how to treat it—not that I could, since Alfrund's pack was strapped to the vanished Dwinsa.

Even so, we couldn't stay here for another moment. I seized his arm and pressed my palm against his forehead, doing my best to calm his mind. When I felt his spirit, I almost burst into tears. It was like trying to hold steady a badly injured, wildly fluttering little bird.

But my efforts had some effect. The shaking subsided, to be replaced with uncontrollable sobbing. Tears poured down his cheeks and the terrified cries gradually changed into racking sobs. I wrapped my arm around him and led him away, following after—or so I sincerely hoped—the fleeing Dwinsa.

We traveled like this, both exhausted, Alfrund barely able to walk without stumbling, for about an hour, until we came to the bank of a stream. I brought him carefully down the bank into the rushing water and, kneeling down into it myself, began to wash away the mess between his legs.

The shock of the cold water must have cleared his mind, for in a moment, after grasping what I was doing, he squatted down beside me and began to splash water up into his crotch, to clean himself there.

When we had done a passable job, he stood up, his legs shaking, and seized my hand. I pulled him up after me onto the further bank, where he collapsed with a groan onto the turf. I got down beside him and lifted his head onto my lap.

Alfrund stared up at me dumbly, and the shock of what had happened at last lifted and all my feelings of guilt and pure terror came spilling out. Now it was my turn to cry, and tears spilled from my eyes and dripped down my cheeks onto his face. "Oh, Alfrund," I sobbed. "Oh, Alfrund. What have I done?"

He closed his eyes and then shook his head, as if simultaneously dismissing what I was saying and trying to clear his mind. "Strykul," he muttered. "Of course... foolish not to realize. Strykul."

He opened his eyes and looked up at me, this time with recognition. "Must sleep, Jessan," he whispered.

"No!" I whispered back, alarmed. "We can't stay here. We've got to get further away!"

But Alfrund's eyes were already closing. He half shook his head. "No use," he muttered faintly. "Can't escape." Then his head turned sideways, his body stopped quivering, and he lay as though dead. Even as I thought of how to rouse him, complete exhaustion flowed through me and, in a moment, swept me away. I slumped down beside him and fell instantly into a dreamless sleep.

## Chapter 28



T WAS ALFRUND who woke me, moving his head from my stomach, where it had lain all night, and shifting his body so that he was now stretched beside me. When I opened my eyes, he smiled wanly, but that was enough for me. I leaned over and stroked his hair and covered his face with kisses.

"It's you," I said at last.

"You sound surprised," he replied, gently mocking me. "You were expecting Dwinsa?"

I groaned and sat up. The woods were still in shadow but the sky was light grey, and pink had begun to suffuse it in the east. Already birds were singing in the trees around us, and the air was sweetly fresh. The very smell of it made my stomach rumble, crying out for breakfast.

I looked over at Alfrund. "No," I said, "but if it *had* been her, she would have gotten twice as many kisses."

He smiled. "Mine would be bestowed on the rations pack. You may be hungry, but I am *ravenous*."

I got groggily to my feet and began brushing away the leaves, twigs, and other detritus that had attached itself to me during my hours asleep. The back of my clothing was damp, each muscle in my body hurt, and yet I felt cheerful enough. Having Alfrund back made all the rest seem trivial.

"Come," I said, reaching my hand down to him, "let's go find her."

"Fat chance of that!" he replied, but he took my hand and let me help him up. As he brushed himself off, I closed my eyes and cast about in the inner space, seeking some sense of a wayward mule.

"She's happily browsing grass," I said, opening them again and, pointing in her general direction, added, "somewhere over there."

"And those who would be happily browsing on us?" Alfrund replied. "Any sign of them?"

I shook my head. "But they are very hard to skry," I said, and told him about my experience the night before.

I was immediately sorry I did. Fear came back into his eyes and he hesitated, as if fighting off the temptation to sink back onto the turf.

I put my arm around his waist. "Come," I said. "Let's go find our breakfast."

As we walked, I realized that Alfrund had most of his strength back. But I continued to hold him, as much for my comfort as his own. His body warmth soothed me and I didn't open myself to his thoughts. But after a while he said, "We should talk about it, for if we don't, there's no hope at all for you, as well as for me."

I said nothing for a little bit, but then, as Alfrund seemed unable to continue, I spoke the word that he had uttered just before he had fallen asleep. "*Strykul*. Is that what they're called?"

Alfrund nodded. "Either Maerdas has the king completely under his thumb or he has lost control of his demon allies entirely. Otherwise, their very presence in the kingdom would mean the immediate start of war."

He removed my arm from his waist so he could make his way ahead of me through a torturous cluster of poplar trunks. When we got to the other side of them, however, it was clear that woods and brush both were beginning to thin out. The meadow that Dwinsa had found must be getting close.

I stepped beside Alfrund, and this time he put his arm around me. "You see," he said, "the Demon Lords are fierce and skillful warriors, but the demons themselves are all but useless, for they would as soon attack each other as they would us. To an extent, the Demon Lords have found ways to discipline them into a fighting force, but never one that is any equal to a human army."

"Hence the *strykul*," I said softly.

He nodded again. "No such beast ever existed in the wild," he continued. "They are the creation of the demon necromancers, who, I should add, are a kind of Demon Lord, themselves. In any case, the *strykul* were devised for the sole purpose of killing humans in mass attacks. They are divided into packs, each of which is controlled by a specific Demon Lord, who controls them completely. *Strykul* move with incredible speed, their jaws can bite a torso in half with one snap, they're as intelligent in their way as we are, they have better vision and a far keener sense of smell, and, of course, when they attack they emit a spray of poisonous vapor that disperses instantly if there is even the slightest hint of a breeze."

I shuddered, despite myself. Alfrund, who still had his arm around me, felt it, and gave me a squeeze. "I know," he said. "You saw. It was the most shameful experience of my life."

"Alfrund!" I exclaimed, turning to him. "You can't blame yourself—not when it's so clear that vapor caused what happened."

"You don't understand," he answered, looking away.
"The whole purpose of those vapors to make you feel like that...afterward. Those who survive are forever broken, useless as soldiers or as anything except what the necromancers mean them to be: slaves."

fter that, we walked in silence. Occasionally, I closed my eyes, but still could find no hint of any pursuit. Even so, I knew, as Alfrund also did, that we were ahead of them only so far at it had taken the Demon Lord to reach the tunnel, learn what had happened, and hurry back the way he had come. Even at his fast pace, that gave us sev-

eral hours, but we had lost most of those while we slept.

Meanwhile, we had at last made our way out of the brush and onto a great plain.

"I know this place!" Alfrund exclaimed. "This is the very southern edge of the Plains of the Lhennad. That mound over there is an ancient barrow, the burial place of one of their warrior kings. They set them at the boundaries of their land, so that their spirits would guard the borders. All a very, very long time ago."

I seized Alfrund's arm. "Look!" I cried. "Dwinsa!" As he had been talking, I had been looking everywhere, for I could sense her presence quite nearby. The sun hadn't yet burnt off the mist that hugged close to the trees, and the mule suddenly stepped out of it, her head bent down to crop the grass.

Alfrund and I approached her cautiously, but while she didn't seem overjoyed to see us, neither did she make any effort to run away. I stroked her forehead, for *I* was glad to see her, while Alfrund tore open the food bag. He bit off a large piece of salt-cured beef and passed the rest to me, followed by a round of crisp bread and some dried fruit. If only we'd had a chance to refill our water skins at the stream, the meal would have been perfect, but even washed down with sour water, it was feast enough.

I was just brushing the crumbs from my vest, when Alfrund seized my arm. "Listen!" he whispered.

I strained my ears, but I picked up no sound at all.

The woods around us were completely still. "What?" I whispered back. "I don't hear anything."

"Exactly," Alfrund replied. "The birds have fallen silent."

It was true. Where a moment before the air was filled with birdsong, now you could hear nothing except for the drone of passing insects. Even as we stared at each other, Alfrund's face went vacant, as if his spirit had fled.

As I had the night before, I seized his hand with one of mine and Dwinsa's halter with the other. This time, however, I vowed things would end differently, although I hadn't a single thought as to how.

"Come," I said. "We're going to climb the barrow."

"But..., but...," Alfrund said, looking even more horrified. "It's forbidden! Even grave robbers...."

"It's not forbidden to *me*," I said shortly, and, dragging both my reluctant companions, hurried them to the mound. It was large, at least four times my height, with steeply rounded sides. It didn't in the least look like a hill, but more like the back of some earth-swimming leviathan, pushing up to the surface. If there was an entrance to the tomb it held, there wasn't any sign of it.

However, at the very top, once we reached it—with me pulling on Dwinsa's bridle and Alfrund pushing at her rear—we found a broad flat stone at its very center, lifted off the ground to the height of a table by three large rocks, crudely chiseled into columns. "A dolmen!" whispered Alfrund, and touched his forehead with the fingers of his right hand. "We really *should not* be up here."

I seized him by both shoulders. "We have no choice," I said calmly. "You know that." Then, leading him to the side of the dolmen and looking deep into his eyes, I spoke, sending my power into him as I did. "Sleep now. Sleep deeply. Hear nothing. See nothing. The air around you will stay pure."

Alfrund's eyes turned upwards into his head and he slumped into my arms. I laid him down so that his head fell under the cover of the dolmen. Then I turned the force onto Dwinsa. She fell to her knees, then over onto her side. I looked at both of them for the briefest of moments, then climbed up onto the top of the flat rock, shaded my eyes, and look back towards the edge of the plain.

The *strykul* had already emerged from the thickets. Blinded momentarily by the sunlight, they cast about, seeking some sign of us. Our scent was strong; they knew we were nearby. Almost as soon as I stood up on the dolmen, they saw me, all their heads turning at once. At first I thought they could communicate by mind alone, but then my ears picked up their eerie, high-pitched keening.

In the daylight, I could count them. There were ten in all, with compact bodies of rippling muscle beneath an earth-colored mottled hide, their thick tails rising straight up behind them. Simultaneously, they thrust their heads in my direction and opened their jaws, a flash of pinkish red, edged with long rows of pointed teeth. That gesture alone was terrifying. I could imagine the soldiers who had been sent to face them feeling their bowels turn to water, even as they shouted and beat their spears against their shields.

At the moment, the breeze blew down from the hills behind me, so we were safe from their poisonous vapor even it couldn't move against the wind. But they knew about breezes, too. Soon enough they would encircle us, and that advantage would be lost.

However, the first thing I had to do was to spot the Demon Lord. I had already started gathering the forces necessary to bring him down with a bolt of lightning. But when my eyes finally picked him out in the shadows, I saw at once that he had anticipated this, and had put himself beneath a grove of trees. It was hard enough to see him—I would find it very hard to strike him there. He knew much about me and I so little about him.

Out of the corner of my eye I could see the *strykul* advancing across the grass and turned to face them. They came not moving straight ahead, but in bursts of frightening quickness, jumping to the left, then to the right, even passing between each other. The purpose, no doubt, was to make them difficult targets for archers or spearmen. But for me, it was like a ghastly anticipatory dance, a ceremony in honor of the necromancer's dark god, Ra'asiel.

Panic, already haunting the edges of my mind, was

seeping into my thoughts. I could think of absolutely no way to fight them. It was war dogs once again, but this time I had no way to touch these minds.

Then my ears picked up a sharper keening. It was like that of the *strykul* themselves, but more insistent and piercing. The sound came from somewhere else, too, and following it to its source, I saw it was being produced by the Demon Lord. He was holding something to his mouth—and because my memory had touched on the war dogs, it took me but a second to realize what it was.

The demon whistle! This was its original purpose, to control and direct the *strykul*. It was also the only weapon I had left in my arsenal that might still rescue us, and with great trepidation—for I was hardly its master—I slipped my fingers into the vest pocket that held it and pulled it out.

By now it was clear that the Demon Lord was intent on taking me captive or I would already have been torn to bits. Also, he knew that I was immune to the *strykul's* poisonous vapor—or at least that I had enough control over the wind to keep it from reaching us.

So, instead, he was using simple fear to conquer me. *Nithaial* though I was, I shared the innate human terror of attacking carnivores, that mainstay of nightmares. He now also knew I lacked the discipline to keep that terror at bay; he could sense it, just as the *strykul* could. And against all that, I had nothing to protect me but this tiny wooden whistle.

I turned it over in my fingers, cursing myself for not

memorizing the note sequences when I had the chance, instead of idly fluting on it. Still, I remembered a few. I lifted the whistle to my lips and tentatively piped out the order to turn left.

There was a moment of confusion; the *strykul* hesitated, looked at each other, then continued to advance. I played the sequence again, this time more assertively. I was positive I had the notes right, but they had even less effect. The Demon Lord hadn't even bothered to countermand it.

A grim realization came over me. The dog master had not learned his commands from any Demon Lord. They were his own. He would no more be able to control a unit of *strykul* than the Demon Lord could direct a pack of war dogs. It was only the *instrument* that was the same.

At this point the *strykul* were only a stone's throw from the base of the barrow. Their eyes were fixed on me; when they opened their mouths, I looked right down into their gaping maws. The chilling truth was this: I had a bare moment left and then all was lost. Were they to devour Alfrund before my eyes, in my current state of helplessness....

I forced that thought away. As I did so, my mind turned from the *strykul* to the Demon Lord with such hatred that I wished I had the power to strike him blind. Then it came to me—*the morning mist*. It had retreated into the trees, it was almost gone, but I could easily summon it back, draw it out of the thickets, lift it up out of the moisture on the ground. Not enough, like the other night, to put out a fire

but plenty enough to cloak the Demon Lord, even the *strykul* themselves, in a dense bank of fog.

I commanded the mist to form and it came, sending long tentacles out of the trees, swirling up like sea smoke from the ground. It rolled across the plain until from my place on top of the dolmen I could see only the tops of the *strykul's* heads, and then not even those clearly—just dark shapes buried in the mist.

I put the flute to my mouth again and began playing random bursts of notes. Partly because fog makes it harder to determine the direction of a sound, partly because it muffles it, the beasts began to mill about, going first in one direction and then in another, no longer able to identify their master's whistle's unique tone.

I could also sense the rising fury of the Demon Lord. He attempted to seize control—but he couldn't see his beasts, and I could. I listened to what notes he played and saw what effect they had. In a matter of moments, if he turned the *stry-kul* to the left, I turned them to the right; if he turned them around to face in the opposite direction, I spun them around to face where they were before.

It was I who now controlled the *strykul*. I knew where he was, but he could no longer see me. I could direct the *strykul* and he could not. Slowly but surely I moved them in his direction, sure that his anger would overtake his caution and he would order them to blindly attack.

But he didn't. I underestimated him again. Instead,

he played a sequence I hadn't heard before and couldn't get my own whistle to play. He was telling them where he was, to help them orient themselves: for where he was, I was *not*.

This was a brilliant counterstroke. Now, when I blew on the whistle, I told the *strykul* exactly where to go. They were quite smart enough to figure out that if one whistle was played by the Demon Lord, their prey was blowing on the other one. And, even if I kept silent, they would gradually reorient themselves and begin to feel their way back to me. It would take them a little time, but they would do it. They were casting about for me already.

I *had* to figure out how the Demon Lord produced that note. Something scratched at my memory and I pulled the scrap of parchment from my vest pocket with the dog master's chart.

This time it wasn't the sequences I was looking at, but the notation itself. I had only to glance at the sheet to remind myself of what I had seen before, but not been able to puzzle out. And there they were, little half circles, indicating that that stop was at once open *and* closed.

Which meant...? I put my finger on one of the openings

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speculatively. Open, closed, and, well, maybe, *halfway*? Tentatively I put a finger over a stop but leaving half of it free. I blew. Yes! The note was the same, just slightly higher. I risked drawing the *strykul* to find the one the Demon Lord had used, then played the sequence. Loudly. The *strykul*, who had once

again almost reached the barrow, swung around. Quickly I sent them rushing toward the Demon Lord, then loudly blew a discordant slew of notes to drown out anything he played in return.

The *strykul* had become greatly agitated by the conflicting commands and the mist. When they burst upon the Demon Lord, he had no chance to capture control, turn them back. Instead, I heard the clamor of a raging battle, the earpiercing keening of the *strykul* and a duller, deeper roar.

Curiosity got the better of wisdom and I dispersed the mist. The Demon Lord's mount had one *strykul* between his jaws, two others lay dead at its feet. But there were many others. One had already cleanly bitten away one of the beast's dangling front legs, another had clamped its jaws to a fold in its neck.

The beast swung the *strykul* in its mouth back and forth to keep the others at bay, but as it weakened, the movement slowed. The *strykul* launched themselves at it as one, ripping open its flank, tearing the flesh from one leg. It staggered, toppled, fell, and disappeared beneath its attackers, who hadn't even bothered to kill it before they began to feed.

Just then, I felt an excruciating pain in my left leg. I looked down in astonishment and saw an arrow piercing it. I struggled with all my strength to keep myself from fainting, raising my head to see the Demon Lord emerge some distance from the gorging *strykul*, one hand holding a huge black bow, the other drawing another arrow from a quiver strapped to

his back. His red glittering eyes locked onto mine and his face contorted into a snarl of victory.

Then my leg gave way and I fell prostrate onto the dolmen, moaning from pain and trying to fight against what I now understood was poison from the arrowhead. But it was useless. I had neither the will nor the mental strength to summon magic to defend myself, or even to hold onto consciousness. The Demon Lord had won.

## Chapter 29



HE FIRST TIME I REGAINED CONSCIOUSNESS, my first thought was that I was back onboard the Tejj, sailing in a choppy sea, because my body was at once in motion and being subjected to endless punishing jolts. My whole left leg felt swollen and inflamed and the pain was beyond anything I had ever suffered before. I opened my eyes, and, to my amazement, saw the ground passing before them barely an armspan away. Then the pain overcame me and I fainted dead away.

When I came to the next time, I found myself lying in a bed in a small stone room. The pain had lessened but my body was wracked with fever. I was shivering violently, despite being wrapped in blankets. When I opened my eyes, I could see only dimly. Not because of my eyes, but because it was night. I smelt, heard, a fire burning and saw the flickering of its light. For a moment I watched it dance on the roughhewn beams above my head, then slid deep into sleep.

Now it was daylight. I was sweating profusely. My

body was burning. A cold damp cloth was laid across my chest and another pressed lightly against my face, gently mopping my forehead, my cheeks. I didn't open my eyes; I hadn't the strength.

And this pattern repeated itself, the raging fever, the violent shivering, the day, the night, until the fever broke. All this time I hadn't given a moment's thought to where I was or what had happened or in whose hands I now was. I was too sick, too frightened, and, worst of all, too ashamed.

Drops of water fell on my lips. I opened my mouth to catch them for I was desperately thirsty. But the drops only teased my thirst instead of satisfying it. I opened my eyes and saw a wet rag directly above me, hung from the roof beam with a long piece of thread. I reached up a shaky hand, slowly, and squeezed it. The drip turned into a trickle.

"I can do better than that," said a familiar voice. There was some movement, the sound of water pouring, and a hand gently lifted my head. A cup was pressed against my lips and slightly tilted, filling my mouth again and again, as I swallowed.

At last I said, "I can do it," and reached up one hand and took the cup. I raised it up to drink but my hand shook so violently that I spilled the water all over my face. The cup was taken away and a cloth mopped my face.

"You'd manage better if you opened your eyes," the voice said.

"I'm afraid to," I replied, amazed at how faint and quavery my voice was. I hesitated. "Are you Alfrund?" I asked.

"You were expecting Dwinsa?" Alfrund said, for it was he. "Don't you know any other questions, little *Nithaial*?"

Tears began streaming from my eyes, so when I did open them all I saw was a watery blur. "None that I so dearly want an answer to." I reached up, caught his shirt, and pulled him toward me.

"No!" he said, laughing. "This bed isn't nearly big enough for both of us."

"It will have to be," I replied, and, with a sudden tug, brought him down, half beside me, half on top of me. One of his legs hit my wounded one and I cried out with pain. The effect of it was so strong that I sat up in the bed and pulled myself backwards, as if to get away from the pain.

Now my eyes were wide open. I looked first at Alfrund, his face white from exhaustion and concern, and then down at my leg. It was the color of a ripe plum, purple and red, the flesh still so swollen that leg had lost its shape.

I closed my eyes again. The pain was starting to ebb and, as it did, I got back my voice. I realized that all this time I had been making a soft ululating wailing sound without even realizing it.

"Alfrund," I said. "This is so bad."

"I know, love," he said. "I'm so, so sorry."

"No, it was my fault," I answered. "I wasn't think-

ing...." My bed, I now had seen, was merely a pallet made by wrapping a blanket around soft boughs of cedar, and set on a dirt floor. There was so much I didn't understand, so much I was afraid to know.

"How bad is it?" I asked.

Alfrund had scrambled up from where he had fallen and now sat beside me on the floor, wrapped his arm around me. "I don't know," he answered. "Even in the best of circumstances, arrow wounds are dangerous things, and as you know, this arrow was tipped with poison—wherever it hit you, it was meant to bring you down.

"On the other hand, you have survived the fever, the wound seems to be healing, and, as bad as it looks, your leg is no longer black and shaped like a giant melon."

I smiled. "I'm glad I didn't see that," I murmured. "Or I would never have opened my eyes again." I laid my head on his shoulder, turning my face to rub my nose in his hair. "I'm so glad you're still alive."

Alfrund sighed. "I wish I could tell you how I felt, seeing you lying crumpled on the dolmen with an arrow through your leg and carrion spread below me as far as the eye could see."

I shook my head. "I'm hungry," I said. "I wish Grysta were here to make me some soup."

"I do, too," Alfrund answered, "because, instead, *I* had to make it. But I did, it's hot, and waiting for you. Should I get you some?"

"No," I said. "Not yet. Right now all I want to do is smell you. But soon."

Soon, however, became later, for I dropped off to sleep again in Alfrund's arms.

Now it was night again. And either because the closed door held in the odors of the place or my sense of smell was more alert, the aroma of Alfrund's soup made me dizzy with hunger. He was squatting, tending the fire, and when I called to him, he dipped some soup from the pot into a small bowl and brought it over, kneeling down to set it beside me.

"It's not too hot," he said. "I've been keeping the pot to the side of the fire—no sense in boiling all the goodness away. Let me finish tending the logs, and I'll start to feed you some."

But I was too hungry to wait. As soon as his back was turned, I picked up the bowl. Its thick clay sides protected my fingers from the heat, and while its contents were still a little too hot to drink, I could at least take a gingerly sip.

The soup was surprisingly good, the broth clear and savory, swimming with greens and bits of fresh—not dried—fish.

"Fish?" I asked, when I had sipped enough down to consider speaking. By now, Alfrund had returned, and, as before, was sitting next to me, his back against the wall, one hand gently touching my side.

"Trippa," he said, "caught by myself in a nearby

stream. There are clawcrawlers there, too. They couldn't resist the fish heads and guts I was throwing in the stream. So we certainly won't starve here."

I sipped some more, then asked, "And where is here, exactly?" A memory returned—"you must have brought me here on Grysta's back."

Alfrund laughed and ruffled my hair. "Dwinsa, I think you mean. Although Grysta would have bravely done it, had she been there."

I smiled. "And lecturing you all the way, too," I said, and then we both laughed. "Yes," I corrected myself, "Dwinsa. Poor Dwinsa."

"Don't waste any feeling for her!" Alfrund said. "Say 'Poor Alfrund'! I had to carry up half the baggage to make room for you."

He stopped speaking and glanced over at me. "But, here you are, weaseling the story out of me, and by fairness and right telling, *you* should first describe what happened after you put me to sleep."

I sighed and handed him the empty bowl. "Only if you first refill this, so I can have it as soon as I'm finished."

Alfrund groaned, but he got back to his feet, went to the fire, refilled the bowl, and came back and settled himself down again. When I reached for the bowl, he held it away from me, saying, "No, no. First, the story."

So I told him all I remembered, from the moment the *strykul* came into view until the Demon Lord shot me with an

arrow and I fell down onto the dolmen, thinking all was lost. Indeed, telling it all again, I felt I should pinch myself to see if I really lived—or, more truly, pinch Alfrund, and make sure he wasn't the Demon Lord, wrapped in a spell of shape changing. But, instead, I reached for the bowl. No Demon Lord existed who could summon up soup as good as this.

"What woke me up," Alfrund began, "was a sharp foot in the ribs, and I remember thinking how thoughtlessly mean of you it was, to arouse me like that. But when I turned my head and opened my eyes, what I saw was in fact a pointed boot, and all of chain mail.

"So I dragged myself up onto my hands and knees, for I was still too muddled to stand, and lifted my head. And there, standing before me and looking very stern indeed, was a warrior king of the Lhennad, in full armor, his hands resting on the hilt of a broadsword, the tip of which was thrust into the dirt.

"Herbalist,' he said, 'attend your master, for he is darkly wounded.'

"At this I did manage to get to my feet, and almost fell back on my knees again, when I saw you on that dolmen. I turned back to the phantom and said, 'My Lord King, by "darkly" you mean...?'

"The arrow was poisoned, herbalist. I am not conversant in these things, but,' and here he hesitated, searching his memory back hundreds of years, 'I believe our healers treated such wounds with *mesjastim*. Other things, too,

of course, but, that was the important thing. *Mesjastim*. Do you know it?'

"Yes, Your Majesty.' I answered. 'Thank you." And I bowed as low as I was able.

"He made no acknowledgement. The thanks of an herbalist were of no concern to him. Instead, he bent his head slightly, looking directly at me. I saw no flesh within the helmet, but I could see his eyes, as cold and colorless as ice.

"It was clever of the *Nithaial Galgaliel* to trick the Demon Lord into coming to my Death Home, for otherwise I could not have helped. Over the centuries, my powers wane. It was good to kill such as that again, and those vile beasts, although the word beast is too good for them.'

"The phantom king looked beyond me at the great plain that reached into the distance and sighed. Then he turned his head to me, took his sword in two hands, and swung it in a great arc, making a complete circle. It sang as it moved, and the sound thrilled me to my very core.

"Tell the *Nithaial Galgaliel* that Azraham, son of Mehadam, Ruler of all the Lhennad, said that *this* is how you fight battles—not with... *whistles*. Who is his teacher?'

"None has survived, Your Majesty,' I answered, thinking he meant the wizards and certainly not about to admit that *I* might be. 'They've all been destroyed.'

"If so, these are wicked times indeed,' he said. 'But the *Nithaial Galgaliel* must waste no more time.' The king gestured at the carnage around us. 'All this is folly.' He shook his head, then lifted his sword in salute—to you, of course, not me. 'Gesryma, Good Mother, watch over Your child,' he said, and slowly sank down into his barrow, holding his sword aloft. I watched this in awe until the tip of the blade vanished beneath the earth. I shook Dwinsa until she rose, tended to you as best I could, and brought as all here."

"I wish I could have seen Azraham, son of Mehadam, Ruler of all the Lhennad," I murmured. "When I'm able, I'll come and perform a ritual of thanking at his barrow."

"Do you know such a ritual?" Alfrund asked, surprised.

I looked at him. "I am the *Nithaial*," I replied. "The ritual is what I make it to be. Knowing is for others."

The following day it rained, but I was better, eating soup and being made to drink various disgusting brews. Alfrund made me a place by the fire, and I had him tell me how he had dealt with the arrow.

"The king telling me of *mesjastim* was what saved you," he began. "Fortunately for you, I attended my studies. That is the word of the Lhennad; we ourselves know it as arrowleaf—because, we had always thought, of the leaf's shape. I had some only because it is used in treating phthiriasis.

"Of course, I wished us to flee that place as soon as possible. Already a flock of ravens had appeared to feed on the carrion, and if others were searching for us, all the cawing and squabbling would bring them running.

"But I surmised that the *mesjastim* served as antidote to the poison, and that it would work best to get it into the wound as soon as possible. So I made a thick paste of the stuff, and while it thickened, I attended to the arrow.

"It was a great gift to me that you were unconscious, because to merely touch the shaft would have caused you excruciating pain, and I had to do much more with it than that. Even so, I worked as gently as I could. Using my sharpest snips, I clipped off the point, which I wrapped in cloth and saved for later examination.

"Now I had to decide whether to push the shaft through or pull it back the way it had come. There is argument about which is best, which I won't bore you with. I chose to push it through, for two reasons: there might be some poison left on the shaft itself close to the head and the demon fetcher might have added some hidden barbs that would expand and lock it in place if I pulled it back."

I shuddered. Alfrund saw me do so and put his hand on my shoulder. "War is a nasty business," he said, "and all the more so when fought with demons. In any case, I now clipped the other end of shaft about four fingers from where it entered your leg.

"By now I had noticed that the shaft was grooved, which meant more of the *mesjastim* might make it into the wound itself. I carefully coated it with the paste, feeling as I did so for any splinters. Then, last of all, I strapped your leg above the wound and knotted it, so that you wouldn't bleed

to death before I could apply the bandage."

Alfrund slipped his hand down around my waist and hugged me. "I said a prayer to Gesryma, the Great Mother, and pulled the shaft through. Even though you were unconscious, your leg quivered from the pain. Of course, I had an unguent prepared to serve as a coagulotic, which I applied at once.

"After that it was merely a matter of binding the wound and loosening the strap, little by little, while I prepared Dwinsa for the journey. By the time I lifted you up on her back, I was sure you would at least survive the journey."

I put my own arm around Alfrund and held him close. His story had shaken me, but it moved me even more. I opened my mouth to speak, but words failed me. He sensed this and turned to me, and we kissed, at first gently but then so passionately that we both became aroused.

"Not yet, little one," he whispered in my ear when I made to do more. "But soon. Now I must take you back to bed and change your dressing. And then you must rest."

I was still unable to watch as he did this, but, even so, I smelt something sharp but also pleasant. After the bandages were replaced and the pain had somewhat waned, I asked him about this.

"Some apprentice you are!" Alfrund exclaimed, jokingly. "Don't you know it?" And he scooped some on his finger and showed it to me. "Taste it," he said, and I did, if only for the pleasure of having some part of him in my mouth. The stuff was so tart it made my mouth pucker.

"Red rockberry!" I exclaimed. "Next time, mean one, sweeten it first!"

Alfrund laughed. "It is a wound dressing, not a finger sweet. But, yes, that's what it is, extract of fresh red rockberry. It grows in profusion here and nothing is better for extracting the corruption of such an injury.

"Now sleep, sweet *Nithaial*, while I brave the rain and see if I've caught any coneys in my snares."

continued to heal. In a week, with his help, I could come out and sit in the sun. We were staying in a small stone hut, set on a hillside in a clearing close by a stream. It seemed too perfect a place to have found by accident, and I said this to Alfrund, as I watched him mend a tear in his shirt. Much of our extra clothing had been sacrificed for bandaging, and now we had to get the most out of what was left.

"You remember," he said, "when we emerged from the endless brush onto the grasslands, that I told you I knew that place?"

I nodded. It was just before I had spotted Dwinsa.

"That's because I've crossed it many times, coming to this valley. We apprentices of Anisor came here every year at about this time, ostensibly to learn to identify, gather, and dry the many wild herbs that grow in these hills. It was we, or, rather those who came before us, who constructed this hut. But we maintained it, made our own meals, and took full advantage of being free of his supervision—as I'm sure he did of having us out of his hair.

"We were nominally under the supervision of the oldest of us, but any who exercised that authority too onerously quickly found themselves tossed into the stream. It was a time of laughter, games, songs...."

He looked over at me and smiled softly. "And, among the older of us, at least, some casual love making, and even the occasional broken heart. Still, we would get very competitive, ferreting out the rarer plants. I owe my keen eye for them, such as it is, to those times I spent up here."

Alfrund went on to explain about a secret cache, where the pots and bowls were hidden from year to year, the time it had taken to build the fireplace, stone by stone, each set with a crude mortar made of clay and sand, the onerous rethatching of the roof.

As he talked, I found myself only half listening, thinking instead how different it was to see him so animated, so purely happy. The arrow wound had summoned the old Alfrund to surface for as long as I was stricken, but, now, as I mended, he was slipping back into the listless apathy caused by the *strykul* vapor.

Now, apart from isolated moments like this, it was only when we were in bed together that he became the Alfrund I had known in Gedd. Even then, it was at my insistence that he had gathered more boughs and expanded the pallet so we could sleep together. And our lovemaking was, to put the best face on it, tentative, pleasurable for us both, perhaps, but lacking in its previous fire.

What was worst of all was that Alfrund acted as if nothing at all was wrong. My occasional bouts of sadness, when I was unable to hide them from him, he took as the result of my own suffering, the pain that still wracked my body if anything even brushed against my leg.

His attempts to comfort me at those times began to make me secretly angry. Why should my own pain reach him and not his own? If I brought the subject up, he neither denied nor defended his loss of spirit, but also refused to talk about it. He would listen to me and when I was through, he would just turn his head away.

I hated that he wouldn't fight against this dying of his soul, even while knowing there was nothing he could do and that I myself was wholly to blame for it. When the pain in my leg kept me from sleeping, these thoughts tortured me as well, all the more so because Alfrund slept, motionless, dreamless, right beside me but apart from me, like a stranger sharing a bed.

or once, my boast that I healed quickly proved true. Soon, with the help of a stick, I could accompany Alfrund on his shorter forays; in the evenings, we would string from the rafters the herbs we had gathered and take down others that had dried and, sitting by the fire, strip them, leaf by leaf, from their twigs and carefully bundle them up.

Our work together was another example of the change that had come over him. He worked industriously enough, but that was it. He made no entries into his *enkirid*-

*ion*—or, for that matter, even ever consulted it—nor did he teach me about them or, as he had in the past, reminisce about medicinals he had made with them and the results, which in Alfrund's telling, were sometimes, if not disastrous, at least very funny.

One evening, some days later, as I was lying beside the fire, Alfrund sitting next to me, silently weaving fronds of osier into a mesh that he planned to shape into a fish trap, a memory came back to me and an idea began to form.

I laid a hand on one of his crossed legs. "Alfrund, forgive this question, but I am still so ignorant of these things. When you and Fendal made love, did he ever enter you—from behind, I mean?"

Alfrund looked at me, a bit shocked. "Jessan!" he said, "that's between Fendal and me."

"I know, of course," I answered, "but I am your *twerë*, and I'm not asking out of idle curiosity. It's an idea that both attracts and repels me." A lie, of course, but no matter.

Alfrund sighed. "Very well. Yes, he did."

"And didn't it hurt?" I asked, still holding his leg. "I would think it very painful—unless Fendal's member is... somewhat *slight*."

"It's very *large*," Alfrund said without thinking. Then, realizing he now had to explain, continued, "He wasn't the first to enter me like that. Fréar, the one who did, was an herbalist apprentice like myself, and he used an unguent that eased the hurt, and the pleasure soon taught me to ac-

commodate myself to any size I needed to."

As Alfrund talked, I had eased the bottom of my shirt up over my waist. My own member had pushed its way through the slit in my braes and now quivered erect in the firelight. "Is Fendal's member even larger than *mine*?"

Alfrund glanced down and snorted. "Yours was bigger than I'd expected when I first slept with you—impressive, even, for someone your age. But Fendal's is as thick as a cudgel. I've heard his apprentices tease him about it when they're all drinking." Alfrund blushed slightly.

"Tell me," I said. And when he hesitated, I added in my most seductively pleading voice, "Alfrund...."

"Well," he said shyly, clearing his throat, "once three of them came upon us when he was doing it. He had told them to report to him as soon as possible, and had forgotten. He was lying across his eating table and I was astride him, squatting, to take it fully in, with Fendal's hands clamped onto my buttocks to spread them apart."

He looked over at me. "So they got quite a view. If they thought Fendal's member was large when it rested...."

The image of this had made my mouth turn dry. "And what happened then?" I asked in a hoarse whisper.

"Fendal continued without a pause," Alfrund said.
"My embarrassment excited him mightily and I never took a
plunging like I did that night, the apprentices standing right
behind me, rooted to the spot, eyes bulging in their sockets.
When he came, Fendal thrust so rapidly that the table col-

lapsed. We fell with it and away from each other, Fendal's member still gushing. He roared like a bear and the apprentices fled."

Spreading the news far and wide, I thought. And I'd also wager that it wasn't just Fendal who was teased after that! Alfrund's story excited me so much that it almost ended my plan there and then. But I fought the excitement back.

I could tell from the hand I placed on his leg, which had been slowly creeping under his shirt, that Alfrund was very aroused himself.

"Alfrund," I said, "get on me, just like that."

"I can't," he said. "Since Fendal...."

"I know," I said. "But this is different. We've always slept together. We just haven't done this. And it would make me feel so much better." And when he still hesitated, I added in a softer voice, "And you, as well, I think."

Alfrund stood up and pulled off his shirt. As I expected, he was rigidly erect. "I'll have to make some unguent," he said, looking around for his pack.

I smiled. "Just hand me my vest," I said, and when he did, I reached into yet another of its many pockets and retrieved the small wooden container of Warrior's Friend.

"Caelas told me this would come handy in an emergency," I said innocently, passing it to him.

Alfrund opened it, sniffed it, and gave me a suspicious look. But he said nothing, just scooped some out and, kneeling down, began to smooth it over my rod.

I watched him. When we had made love in Grysta's upstairs bedroom, I never had the chance to look at him like this. His long black hair hung down over his face. His body was thin but surprisingly rugged, his chest and legs had a light dusting of curly hair. I was surprised to see that his own cock was not as large as my own; in my hands and mouth it had seemed enormous. But it was stout and well formed and I realized it wouldn't be long until I invited it into myself. Alfrund, too, must learn that it's as pleasant to give as to receive.

He now reached between his legs and used the residue on his finger to wet his hole. Finally, he freed one of the blankets I was lying on, folded it, and rolled it up. "Lift up a little," he said, kneeling beside me, and slipped it under my lower back.

"There," he said, and raising one leg over me, squatted down until he was resting on his toes, his leg muscles taut. "Spread me," he said, "and I'll find my way by feel."

I did as he said, and he moved his hips, guiding my cock to the right place in his cleft. Then his face tightening in concentration, he opened himself to me. I could feel his hole quivering open, then gently nuzzling the tip of my cock. I was beside myself.

"Now you will feel what the other apprentices only saw," he said, and, accompanied by a soft sucking sound, he engulfed me.

It was so different from my time with Caelas and yet so good. Alfrund was as intent on pleasuring himself as he was me, something I could tell from the fact that his rod had never softened when he was teasing me nor when he brought me in. Now it was throbbing and he moved up and down on me and a droplet glistened at its mouth.

I fixed my eyes on it as though it were a beacon in a raging storm, as pleasure racked my body. I knew I couldn't last much longer, but I held out until Alfrund came, spurting onto my chest, and then I released inside him, as if I hadn't done so for months, spending and spending until I thought it might start dripping out his mouth.

I released Alfrund's buttocks and reached up and seized his shoulders, drawing his body down to me, holding him as he shifted from squatting to resting on his knees. Then I gently took him by the head and looked into his eyes, holding them with mine. It was time for me to take control.

I entered the inner space and eased myself into him, not into his mind but attuning myself to the feelings that pulsed through his body, the shivering of his nerves. I felt the presence of what I had just spurted inside him and took it in hand, guided it through him, slowing it, keeping from overpowering him, frightening him. I wanted Alfrund to experience this as I felt when I immersed myself into the force—cleansing, vivifying, exhilarating—and to ride it like a strong swimmer does the surf as it sweeps him to the shore.

All this time our eyes were locked. Unlike Caelas, whom I abandoned in my ignorance, Alfrund and I became one. As he became aware of what was happening to him, his

features softened and his eyes became so wholly trusting that it stirred my loins. I saw him as a child, a little boy, watched him come back to manhood, the residue of the *strykul's* poison dissipated, all shadows now dispersed.

The task completed, the force all spent, he sank down on top of me, and we held each other and sobbed in each other's arms. If I had nothing else besides this to show for being a *Nithaial*, I would be forever grateful—no matter what further suffering awaited me on the path ahead.

## Chapter 30



O BEGAN THE HAPPIEST DAYS OF MY LIFE, the joy pointed up by keen awareness of how short they were going to be. My leg continued to recover. I showed Alfrund how to properly clean fish; he taught me the art of skinning hare and squirrel. Our stews were rich with flavor and sustenance, even if our ale was water and our bread the crumbs of our vanishing sailor's ration. We made love often, in bed, in secluded hollows, on hilltops, once—with freezing legs, standing in the rushing stream.

We found signs of wolves and bear in the valley and possibly other predators as well. The apprentices had learned to concoct herbal repellents to keep them at bay, reminiscent of dogbane but of ever increasing ingenuity. Alfrund knew all these and employed them. But we still worried for Dwinsa, and our solution was to bring her into the hut with us each night, and argue heatedly each morning as to whose turn it was to gather up and dispose of her droppings.

Our plan was to remain only long enough for my

leg to fully heal. By then, our pursuers would have lost our track for good. Although they would guess we'd most likely be making our way east—they could not be sure to where. Wethrelad? Gostranar, the home I was to share with Niccas in the heart of the Wisferon, the Holy Wood? Or even some city where I might call up an army and challenge Maerdas's own? He would have no idea and not enough forces to fully guard all those places, even if things had gone badly for us at the Gates of Karn. The wider he spread his net, the easier it would be to slip through it.

Still, even when my leg had clearly healed, Alfrund remained reluctant to leave. Of course, I was, too, but the admonition of the Lhennad king—"the *Nithaial Galgaliel* must waste no more time"—had stayed with me. And this was just what we were doing, wasting time. Finally, Alfrund agreed, and we began preparing to set off the day after next.

he following morning, Alfrund left me for a cold bath in the stream. Dwinsa was already grazing, the bed had been straightened, the floor cleaned (my turn), and the dishes left for washing when they were needed for supper. The night before, we had taken down the last of the herbs from the rafters, and I was sorting and packing the bags, when I heard the sound of merry voices and snatches of song.

I got up and went to the doorway, just as a small band of youths appeared. They cheered when they saw the hut and a race broke out to be first at its door. However, when I stepped into the sunlight, the runners stopped dead in their tracks.

"Who are you!" the oldest of them exclaimed. "And by what right are you here!"

"I will give you answers to both your questions," I replied, "because I already know who *you* are and by what right *you* are here. You are apprentices of Master Anisor, and it's your tradition to come into this valley at the height of summer to gather herbs and otherwise engage in the studious ways of your art."

"Ah," the oldest one said, smiling, "if you know our habits so well, you must at least be a friend. My name is Theor, and this is Pandas, Matheas, Fyroll, and Unnar."

"Greetings to you all," I replied. "My name is Jessan and I am apprentice to a certain Alfrund, whose name you may already know."

"Indeed we do!" said the boy named Pandas. "For Master Anisor never tires of comparing us unfavorably to him. Is it true your master walks a hand's span above the ground and that rare plants call out to him by name when he passes by?"

"I can vouch for both those things," I answered, laughing, "and also that he makes entries into his *enkiridion* with both hands at once, as if playing a viol.

"But here he comes," I added, "so you can observe all these wonders for yourself, or at least the elegance of his robes."

Alfrund was, in fact, stark naked, since he had also

decided to wash his shirt, which now he held dripping wet in one hand. Never one to be embarrassed, however, he gave a shout, and came running up, waving his shirt as if a flag.

"At last!" he said. "Anisor has sent us a group of slaves to do the cooking and washing and the picking, drying, plucking, and sorting. You may begin by weaving a hammock for me and hanging it in the shade...," he paused and looked about, then pointed to a pleasant spot. "Over there, I think."

"You are sorely mistaken," Theor replied. "In truth, Master Anisor directed us to evict with all possible speed any good-for-nothings we might find here, gathering without a by-your-leave the finest specimens of pallberry, millengrass, wardwell, and fevernot."

"How well the old fox knows my ways," Alfrund said, sighing and shaking his head. "For I've done all that and more. Even picking—and for this, no doubt, he'll flog you severely when you return—all the piriflower to be found in the valley, which my apprentice and I have distilled into spirits and happily drunk."

And so it went for some time. However, even as the chaffing continued, the unpacking began. A glance passed between Alfrund and myself, and I went in and gathered up our belongings and began to carry them out. We'd sleep under the stars tonight, letting these apprentices set up their home for the month, and be on our way in the morning.

There was loud protest when they realized what I was doing, but Alfrund would have none of it—nor would I

have, either, had I been asked. Finally Theor said, "We must accept, since you'll not agree otherwise," graciously adding, "but, in return, we insist that you join us for our first meal here. We've spent more than a few coins in anticipation of it, and there's more than enough for us, you and your apprentice, and your friend over there as well," and here he indicated Dwinsa, "if she wishes to join us."

"Not only our friend, "Alfrund replied, "but our bed companion, as your noses will discover as soon as you enter the hut. But as for supper, we gladly accept your invitation, excluding Dwinsa, who is shy and prefers to graze on her own."

mong the provisions the youths had lugged the many leagues from the nearest town was a large sack of ale. Since we had no drinkware, this, once the feast began, was strapped to the back of poor Unnar, who at twelve years of age was considered too young to drink it. So, instead, he had to carry it about and bend over so that we could spill it into our mouths. Unnar took his revenge, however, by occasionally bending further, drenching the unwary drinker with brew. This simultaneously lightened his spirits and his burden, and caused general hilarity to all but his victim.

The result was that while none were sober (including, it must be added, Unnar himself, who quickly found a way to sample his wares), neither were any intoxicated to the point beyond conversation. So, at last, Alfrund and I were able to hear some news of the world, at least as it was variously interpreted by our new companions.

They had heard of a great battle at the Gates of Karn, which some said was fought by forces loyal to Prince Caelas who meant to overthrow the Unnameable One and end His corruption of the kingdom. Others, though, believed it was an attempt by Gedd to break the king's hold on the salt trade, which would be a good thing if the salt prices fell.

In any case, the great army sent to crush this revolt was broken after a single battle. Those who returned said that great bolts of force had come shooting down from the highest tower of Karn and killed the Demon Lords who had been put in command of the troops, whose fear of those who led them was their only reason to fight.

The king had insisted that they were liberating the people of Gedd from the rule of demons. But since it was none but Demon Lords who drove our own army into battle, while none were seen fighting for the other side, no one could make any sense of that, except as being an outright lie.

It had also been rumored that someone had dispelled the killing spell that kept the Unnameable One's name from being spoken, and that it was either Maerdas or Mordrad. But the fact that no one died from saying either name really proved nothing, since no one still lived who remembered what the real name truly was.

However, Theor, the oldest and by the far the most thoughtful, said that *something* must have happened, because there was obvious consternation among the minions of the Unnameable One and much guarded muttering among those at the court. Not much of this had yet become common knowledge, but it was in the air that great changes were in store for the kingdom, and that the throne might soon hold a new king.

Theor also noted that there was talk of the return of the *Nithaial*. But, again, after such a long time, little was remembered about them—save that He Who Could Not Be Named had once been one Himself. So, while some said that it would be good for the *Nithaial* to return, for the legends said that they were beneficent and were the reason the kingdom had endured longer than in history, others argued the kingdom would be well rid of them. Magic could be left to the mages, if there had to be magic at all.

Even so, the apprentices were of a single mind that the king had ill served the kingdom by his subservience to Maerdas, especially given the ruinous taxes that were constantly being raised to placate him. And the king's son, Prince Poestil, or Prince Pustule, as he was generally known—at least in places where no spies lurked—was, if anything even more craven and corrupt. They thought the populace would flock to the banner of Prince Caelas, when he come over the mountains from Gedd.

There was dispute, too, over why he hadn't come. Some said he intended to create his own kingdom on the other side of the mountain and let the rest of the land fend for itself; others said with equal assurance that he was waiting for a sign that hadn't yet appeared. This, they said, in-

volved the ruins of Gostranar.

These, it was well known, lay in the heart of the great forest Wisferon, and the reason for this belief was that the Unnameable One had cast a spell to prevent anyone from entering it, and kept a large force patrolling the few ways into it, to prevent anyone from even attempting to do so.

So much of this amounted to arguments that either couldn't be tested or could be twisted to support both sides that very quickly into the evening, talk wandered off on courses of more interest to Alfrund and the others—the subject of Anisor himself and the apprentice life, then and now,

Consequently, I drew back a bit and looked around at the group. As I did so, I noticed that one of the apprentices, Matheas, a comely youth about my own age, was watching me in a speculative way. He eventually got up to help Unnar free himself of the sack, for it had now become light enough for the drinkers themselves to pass around the fire. Unnar immediately joined the rest and began catching up with his eating. But Matheas stayed back, and when he saw I was watching him, gestured to me to come join him.

In all honesty, my lovemaking with Alfrund had quite satiated me, and the idea of a dalliance that might easily be noticed and made fun of had no real attraction at all. I was about to shake my head in refusal when it occurred to me that Matheas had not been nearly as merry and chatty as his companions, but had sat among them serious and quiet. He might not actually be flirting at all.

So I slipped quietly away. For a time Alfrund had made an effort to draw me in, but so much of the talk involved people I didn't know and events I hadn't heard about that he had eventually given this up. I knew that my absence, if it was noted at all, would be put down to a decision to get a good night's sleep.

When I reached Matheas, he took my hand and led me to a spot far enough away from the others where we could speak without being overheard but would know if we were suddenly missed. Then he perched himself on a large root, and I sat beside him.

"Forgive me," he said in a low voice, "if I speak where I should know to keep silent. But I think you're not, as you claim to be, Master Alfrund's apprentice. The others are too excited by meeting him to notice this, but he treats you with a deference that is not that of a lover, let alone a master—although I suspect the former to be more likely."

"Matheas!" I exclaimed, teasingly. "I thought you to be merely shy. But while the others chattered, you were busy delving into my secrets. What you say is true, and I'm now in your power, as well as being under your spell."

Matheas cast his eyes down. "You mistake me," he said. "I've yet to take a lover and I certainly wouldn't start by stealing one from Master Alfrund—especially knowing we'd have to part the following day."

Now it was I who blushed. "Matheas, I was merely jesting," I replied. But I couldn't keep myself from adding,

"although it's true that I find you attractive. And it's also the case that Alfrund and I are not lovers but *twerë*; he would have no quarrel with you if you wished to exchange a kiss."

Matheas shyly reached his hand and laid it on my knee. "Nor did I mean to say that I'm not drawn to you, Jessan, for it's obvious I am. But I brought you here to tell you a story, not to steal kisses, or at least not more than one."

I took his chin in my hand and gave him a lingering kiss. It was very sweet and I felt that it was hardly fair of him to offer me only one, and told him so.

Well," he answered, "by 'one' I meant merely...."

"Two or three," I agreed. And so we passed several very pleasant moments, quickly giving up counting, since it was hard to know exactly where one kiss left off and the other began.

Finally, I pulled away. "Well," I said, "if you don't tell me your story now, it may never get told, and you may have to leave the service of Anisor and come with us, for I won't be able to let go of you."

"Master Anisor," Matheas whispered indignantly.

I smiled in the dark. "I'm very forgetful of titles," I admitted. "*Master* Anisor, with apologies. Now, tell me your tale."

"Although I am now an apprentice to...," and here he giggled despite himself, "*Master* Anisor, I come from the great city of Lorithar, which, as you surely know, is famous for the alchemists who reside there. My father was eager for me to be apprenticed to one and since I showed some talent for the art, he was able to persuade the great Master Porphoras to take me on."

"Even I have heard of him," I said. The effects of the ale suddenly faded, and I found myself giving Matheas's words my complete attention.

"I'm now fifteen," Matheas continued, "and I became apprentice to Master Porphoras at the age of twelve, starting, as is the custom, by sweeping floors, running errands, and, whenever I could, watching the master work. I led, in short, the ordinary life of an alchemist's apprentice—except that I was still doing these tasks at the age of fifteen.

"As you noticed, I do possess some power of observation, and I knew that Master Porphoras was quite pleased with me. So I naturally assumed that when my master decided to take on another apprentice, it would be another twelve-year-old, who would take over the errands and cleaning tasks, so that I could be of more help to him with his investigations."

"Yes," I said. "Only the thickest-headed of apprentices are kept at menial tasks for very long. Your promotion was already overdue."

Matheas nodded. "So, I thought," he went on. "But that was not what happened. Instead, he took in a boy of my own age, who had been apprenticed to an alchemist in the city of Plaecenon who had fallen ill and died.

"Master Porphoras told me privately that Jaemas—

for that, as I forgot to mention, was his name—would be almost always by his side. By this he meant that *I* was expected to remain the one who swept the floors and ran the errands, thank you very much."

Matheas sighed at the remembrance of this blow to his self-esteem, then shook his head. "There's a reason I'm telling you all this," he said, glanced at me, then hesitated. "Well, he *does* have very pale skin and straight black hair, whereas your skin is nut brown and your hair is curly and gold. But otherwise, he is so much your twin that I couldn't believe my eyes.

"When I first saw you, for the span of a single breath, I believed, hoped...." His voice faded away.

"Hoped...?" I prompted.

"That you were he," Matheas replied faintly. I realized with horror that he was choking back tears.

A flood of thoughts were racing through my mind. "Jaemas?" It could only be an assumed name. There was something I could sense in Matheas that told me it wasn't just looks that had made him connect this boy and me. I squeezed his hand fiercely, and cried, "Matheas, is this... this Nicc... this Jaemas *dead*?"

He flinched from the pain but wouldn't look at me. "I don't know," he said in complete misery, eventually adding in a mere whisper, "Should I continue?"

I released my grip on his hand and wrapped my arm around his shoulders, pulling him close against me. "Yes, speak on," I answered. "Every word you say is piercing my heart, but I cannot bear to have you stop."

## PART SEVEN THE VALLEY OF DEATH

## Chapter 31



ASTER PORPHORAS asked me to teach Jaemas what was expected of him and help him settle in," Matheas continued, "which included sharing a bed with him, for although mine was a small one, there was no room at all in any of the others.

"At first I was furious at the injustice of this, and could barely bring myself to be civil to him. But it took only a short time for me to realize that in his company I was learning much, much more than I'd have otherwise. Even though Jaemas came to us knowing nothing of alchemy, he proved to be even more observant and quicker on the uptake than I, mastering skills with almost magical swiftness.

"Furthermore, while Master Porphoras was legendarily stingy in what he would reveal of the art, even to his oldest apprentices, Jaemas had only to ask and all was revealed. And he never let this swell his head—on the contrary, he was always friendly and sharing.

"So I went from resenting him to, despite myself, ad-

miring him, then to liking him, and finally...."

He sighed. "As I suppose you've already guessed," he said softly, "I fell under his spell. What was more surprising was that the other apprentices did so, too. They were older than either of us and mostly ignored our very existence, since Master Porphoras didn't allow them to order us around. But Jaemas gradually entranced them, even though they had even more reason than I to take offence at the favors that were shown him.

"Indeed, he made so little of that and his visibly growing powers that it was as if the rest of us were obliged to take up his cause ourselves. Nothing was said to him directly, of course, but it was not long before the others were bragging of his skills to the apprentices of other alchemists when they gathered at the customary inn on Freeday to drink ale and toss dice."

By now Matheas had forgotten both his sadness and his reticence and had nestled up against me, pretending not to notice that I was caressing his hair.

"This was the time," he went on, "when notice was sent around the kingdom, not only to the cities but every town and village, that all should be on the watch for a boy showing any sort of mark on his arm that was visible only in moonlight. A great reward would be given to anyone bringing such a boy to the attention of...."

"Maerdas," I said for him, for I could tell the name still inspired fear, "or, as we ought to say, out of politeness, Maerdas the Malefic." Matheas turned his head to look at me, shocked by my flippancy. "Agents of the Highest Lord Thaumaturge' is what the edict actually said," he observed, "for that's how he now wishes to be known. Anyway, it went on to say that failure to report this boy would lead to the direst of penalties."

I touched Matheas to silence him for a moment, then pulled up my sleeve and revealed the cronnex glowing in the dark. "Fortunately I never heard of this edict," I said, "nor did those who lived around me, for it never reached the distant fishing village where I grew up."

Matheas reached down and gently traced the cronnex with his fingers. "The sign as it appeared on Jaemas was just the opposite of this," he said, "and I saw it only by accident. By this time in our lives, an interest in intimacy with others was growing in both of us, and since we slept in the same bed...."

"Matheas!" I said. "There is no need to be shy. If I shared a bed with someone half as winsome as you, I'd find it hard to ever leave it."

Again I felt him blush. "Well," he continued, "I felt the same thing about Jaemas, and thought he did for me. But if I made any overtures he would only shake his head and withdraw to the far side of our bed. As you can tell, I'm not very practiced in these things, and I lacked the nerve to persist for long. During the day he was warm, even affectionate, throwing his arm over my shoulder and sometimes even around my waist. But at night, in bed, well, I finally decided

he was just tired and needed to be left alone.

"This had been the case for two or three weeks when, one night, I was awakened by some strange sounds. When I found my senses, I realized they were coming from Jaemas, who was in the midst of a nightmare. As I reached over to touch him, I saw that his thrashing had pushed back the sleeve of his nightshirt, and there was the mark—not as brightly glowing as yours, but clear enough. I hastily pulled the sleeve down to hide it again before I woke him up.

"Slowly he came out of the dream. When he did he moved close to me and asked me to hold him. His body was shivering as with fever. He whispered to me that he had been surrounded by war dogs intent on devouring him. They kept edging closer and closer until he could smell the slobber dripping from their jaws, and he was too riven with terror to either flee or fight."

Matheas shuddered at the memory of the dream, and I did, too, of the event. "It was foreseeing," I murmured, "for that was yet to happen, and not to Niccas—to Jaemas—but to me."

He turned to me with a look of astonishment.

"I'll explain later, if there's time," I answered, pushing his hair away from his brow. Every minute I was with him, I was more attracted to him, and it was a kind of torture, the fear the story had engendered with rubbing raw against my physical need for this boy.

Suddenly, I realized Niccas must have felt some-

thing very similar, those long nights they had shared the bed together. Poor Niccas! Poor Matheas! The shock of this realization made me groan aloud.

"Tell me," Matheas whispered.

Unable to stop myself, I took his head in both my hands and kissed him long and hard, our tongues meeting, his shyly, mine pressing into his mouth.

Finally, I wrenched myself away. "That was for Niccas," I panted. "What he wanted to do but wouldn't let himself. Now, please, continue your story."

"If his name is really Niccas," Matheas said, "I suppose I should start to call him that." He looked up at me, to see if I was now entirely sure.

I nodded my head. "He is Niccas without question," I replied. "But continue to call him Jaemas if you like. After all, that's how you knew him."

"No," Matheas answered. "To be given his real name, and by you, is too precious a gift. And it deepens my feelings for him. No wonder he was so reluctant to take me into his arms. Just let me set it in my mind for a moment."

He then fell silent for a bit, and we sat there in the dark with the merry chatter of the others floating to us through the dark and the trees.

"Niccas soon went back to sleep," Matheas said, starting again from where he had left off, "but I lay beside him in a state of terror and didn't close my eyes for the rest of the night. Of course, I wasn't in the least tempted by the

reward. But I knew my own silence wouldn't be enough. Even though the other apprentices slept on the further side of the attic, it would only take one of them rising in the night to use the pisspot and...." He shook his head.

"So I decided that very morning to tell Master Porphoras. I let Niccas start down to breakfast ahead of me and went to the workroom where I knew the master would be working alone, and revealed what I'd discovered. He listened to me gravely, but I quickly became aware that I wasn't telling him anything he didn't already know.

"He thought for a moment, then said, 'Matheas, I'm taking you into my confidence, for I've long known that you have a native caution and a good heart. Niccas is in great danger and it's time to send him away. He'll need company, and so I ask you to consider leaving with him. I'll arrange some explanation for your parents—it's not unusual for me to send apprentices off to secret mines in the mountains to quarry certain valuable ores.

"We are almost at the week of the Spring Blessing,' Master Porphoras continued, 'and you and Niccas will be leaving here to celebrate at home. When you both return, be ready to give me your decision. Think about it carefully—if you agree you may well put yourself in great danger, and possibly your family as well. So no one will blame you, least of all I, if you decide no."

Matheas bowed his head and said softly, "I did finally decide to say yes, although it was a very difficult decision, for

I love my family dearly and would never wish to hurt them. But it didn't matter, for when I returned to Master Porphoras after the holiday, I learned that Niccas had disappeared, and if was feared he had been seized and taken to Gorzungâd."

"Gorzungâd!" I exclaimed. "Where is that?"

Matheas looked at me in surprise. "How could you not know? Gorzungâd is the great fortress castle where Maerdas makes his home."

This news filled me with such despair that I was barely able to attend to the rest of Matheas's story—how Porphoras had sent him to the city of Plaecenon to tell this news to Anisor and, equally important, to get Matheas out of harm's way. Anisor, in turn, had had him join his other apprentices on their summer expedition, to get him still further out of the way, explaining enough to them so that they had accepted him as a companion.

After Matheas had finished, I put a light spell of sleep upon him unawares, for the ending of his story had extinguished all amorous thoughts. I felt guilty about this and chastised my unruly heart. It was one thing for me, who had Alfrund, but Matheas—well, I thought with a sad smile, he did now have the distinction of being rejected by both *Nithaial*. At some later date we would make it up to him..., perhaps both at once.

I went back to the others and found the party was breaking up. I told Theor that when I had stepped under the trees to take a piss, I'd come across Matheas, who had apparently passed out from too much ale. Theor looked at me curiously, but merely sent Pandas and Fyroll to go and carry him back and wrap him up in a blanket when they had.

Alfrund was already waiting for me at our sleeping place by the time I found him, and was clearly puzzled by my disappearance. He was going to make a joke about it when I sank down beside him, but one look at me was enough to change his mind. We kissed good night and he went to sleep at once. I finally managed to follow after him, although into a world of troubled dreams.

In the morning, I woke up to find myself cradled in Alfrund's arms, his face full of concern. After some gentle prodding, I gave him the gist of Matheas's tale. As I talked, I felt my despair of the night before fading away with the morning mist. Indeed, sunlight now was pouring through the trees and, at the hut, I could hear the sounds of the others stirring.

"The sooner we're on the road again," I said to Alfrund at the finish of my account, "the happier I'll be."

"We'll have some breakfast and say our farewells," Alfrund replied, adding, "including, I'm sorry to say, to Dwinsa. I've swapped her with Theor for two pack frames."

"Pack frames!" I exclaimed. "Not on your life!"

Alfrund laughed. "You'll find them easier to bear, little *Nithaial*, when their bundles are made up of dried herbs rather than salt fish and stones. And, really, we have to. Whatever else our pursuers know, it's that we're traveling

with a pack mule, and so it's time for Dwinsa and us to go our separate ways."

So it was that after a hasty breakfast and hastier packing, we said farewell to Theor and company. I took Matheas aside for an embrace, which turned into a kiss, which turned into several more. Finally, I stepped back and looked at him. He looked so serious, so lovely, so forlorn that I wished I could gently lift him up, fasten him to my pack frame, and take him with us. But of course I could not.

"Oh, Matheas," I said. "Part herbalist, part alchemist—where in all this do you actually fit in?"

He knew I was teasing him but could only shake his head.

"You saw the sign on my arm last night," I said. "Do you understand now what it means?"

He looked at me hesitatingly, then said, "I think it means that you and Niccas are the *Nithaial*, something marvelous, but what exactly I can't even pretend that I know."

"Well," I replied, reaching out and touching his cheek, "I look forward to showing you. When you hear that the palace of Gostranar has been restored, come to us there."

I reached into the deepest pocket of my vest, and withdrew the dolphin Faryn had carved for me. "This is the most precious thing I own," I said, handing it to him. "Keep it until you come, to remind you how truly I mean for you to do so, and return it to me then. That day I shall have two great

reasons to be happy."

And so, arm in arm, we went back to the others. From their glances, I could tell that Matheas would be mercilessly teased the moment we left, but he wouldn't mind it. The joy that radiated from him warmed my arm and my heart.

Now, Dwinsa. I spent several moments scratching between her ears and murmuring fond things into them. But I knew she would be well cared for and that, for the moment at least, she had found herself in a mule's idea of paradise—no work, lush grass, and warm sun. I put my arm around her neck and kissed her, and left her to enjoy it.

Alfrund and I didn't begin to talk until the track we were to follow passed back over the crest of the hill and widened enough so that we could walk side by side and speak in low tones. It was I who broke the silence, for something had occurred to me and I wished to know the answer.

"Alfrund," I said, "did you *mean* for us to come here all along, knowing that we'd meet these apprentices of Anisor?"

Alfrund shook his head. "No," he answered, "originally, I'd meant for us to go on until we came to the road to Brendrun, the only large town in this wilderness. There, I thought, we'd get a sense of how things lie and figure out what to do from there.

"What happened instead was mostly a matter of luck, followed by circumstance. I have been to this area before but, for obvious reasons, I've never set foot on the track we were following from Cytheria. If we hadn't stumbled onto the barrow, so that I recognized where I was; if you hadn't been wounded, which meant I needed to take you someplace safe to care for you....

"But once we *were* there, it's true that I did delay leaving, knowing from the unlived-in feeling of the hut that the apprentices hadn't already come and gone. And that meant they would probably be arriving any day."

I looked over at him. "But why didn't you tell me?"

"Because," he answered, "I wanted to keep our future at arm's length for as long as I could. Who knows how much more time like that we'll have together? I fear it may be none at all."

Since I had no answer to that, I reached over and clasped his hand instead. Alfrund held it, saying, "When they did arrive, though, I was glad to see them, for I knew they might bring me word from Anisor."

"And did they?" I asked.

Alfrund nodded. "More than I knew, especially since he sent us Matheas. But Theor was taken into Anisor's confidence and had some things to tell, which if true will give you a little... *hope*—although it makes things even more difficult for us."

"This is about Niccas, isn't it?" I asked. He was warning me by the way he said "hope" that he could have chosen a very different word instead.

Alfrund nodded again. "Anisor has reason to sus-

pect," he continued, "that Maerdas has suffered a blow very recently and was severely weakened. Of course, Anisor knows nothing of the destruction of the Ystherüd, but I'm sure that's the cause of this."

"But how does this affect Niccas?" I asked.

Alfrund let go of my hand to let us scramble over an outcropping of rock. "You'll remember," he said, "that you had enough power to deal with the war dogs and keep the Summoner at bay, even before you raised Sondaram and were able to bathe in the force?"

"Yes," I said, for we were now walking in single file and he couldn't see my face.

"Well," he said, "the same is true of Niccas. Once he reached the age of fifteen or so, his spirit was also able to draw in force, just like you, if very slowly and in modest amounts."

"But how does this concern Maerdas?" I asked. "I thought he was forever denied access to it."

Alfrund stopped and turned to face me. "No, Jessan, he is denied access to the Four Homes and to Gostranar. But he can still absorb the force if he can find a way to get hold of it."

My heart sank even lower. "Niccas," I said simply.

"Yes, Niccas," replied Alfrund sadly, touching my cheek. "Anisor believes that Niccas is being kept alive in Gorzungâd so that Maerdas can drink it from him as he produces it." "And the good news is...?" I asked.

"That it's in Maerdas's interest to keep Niccas alive. He can't eat the boy's soul and have access to the power, and he now needs the power to survive."

Alfrund turned and we started walking again, this time in silence. When I'd first heard Matheas's story, my first impulse was to go straight to Gorzungâd and call Maerdas out, regardless of Alfrund's desires or advice. But now I realized that I had to think things out much more carefully. I struggled at this for some time, and finally gave up, asking Alfrund, "What advice does Anisor offer us?"

"He and the other members of the Circle think that you should go to the mountains of the east and try to gain access to the ruins of Wethrelad. If you can bring it back into being, you'll not only complete your powers but, they also believe, resurrect Gostranar.

"If that happens," Alfrund continued, "you could transport yourself there instantly, and see what, if anything, might be found there to help you deal with Maerdas. And even if there is nothing, he built Gorzungâd close by to the borders of Wisferon.

"Of course, he can no more enter the Holy Wood than Gostranar itself, but at least from Gorzungâd, he can watch for anyone else who might attempt to, along with a force of mounted troops, who patrol just outside the borders of the forest night and day. He knows that Gostranar would be the best place for us to prepare an attack on him, and so he has made it nearly impossible to reach—except by magic."

"So," I said, reluctantly, but seeing no other course,
"I suppose we'd better start making our way east."

## Chapter 32



HE RUINS OF WETHRELAD, the Home of Air, rest on the top of a mountain at the far eastern edge of our kingdom, just as Sondaram lies by the sea to the west. This mountain lay at the edge of a mighty range that formed the kingdom's entire eastern border—peak beyond peak beyond peak, high, majestic, and cruel. Their name in the old language was the *Erakradash*, the Wall at the World's End.

No one had ever crossed this eastern range, either coming or going. No maps showed anything beyond them; our histories told nothing of people living on their other side. When Orien had told me all this, I'd imagined Wethrelad resting on the summit of a great peak, reachable only by eagle's back or kobold tunnel—or, more likely, by dragging myself up steep slopes covered with snow and ice.

I was right to anticipate difficulties in reaching Wethrelad, but my imaginings of what they would be would prove entirely wrong. It was Alfrund's argument that two strangers heading east on horseback would draw attention and immediate suspicion, whereas two footsore traders, who only happened to be tending in an easterly direction, would be all but invisible. And so it proved. By the time we were nearing the further edge of the kingdom, we were so dusty and dirty and obviously what we were, no one gave us any attention at all.

This meant a journey of several weeks, especially since we never hurried but rather wandered from place to place, stopping at village fairs and town markets to sell our potions, ointments, and other herbal concoctions, and sometimes stopping on the road to treat the complaints of peasants and other foot travelers like ourselves.

If I hadn't been so impatient to reach our destination, I'd have enjoyed watching Alfrund turn from being a higgler at one moment to a physician at another, and, when we met up with another herbalist, as affable a colleague as one could want, always willing to buy the round of ale and listen and learn.

From such, we amplified our stock, for what was easy to find in one place could be hard to come by in another. And, if Alfrund was struck by the other's manner and innate seriousness, he readily exchanged formulae for everything from vermifuges to eyesalves to *theriaca*, that being the proper name for antidotes for poison.

Such chance meetings also often gave us a chance to sleep in a clean bed and eat a decent, home-cooked meal, especially when it was revealed that Alfrund was a disciple of Anisor, who was greatly esteemed even by those who had only the faintest knowledge of his powers.

Such barter also meant that we traveled with little money. It was a desperate footpad who held up an itinerant herbalist, he said, and then usually for some treatment for a wound or disease. On the other hand, if a band of soldiers appeared, Alfrund went right over to them, guilelessly offering our wares and services. So, instead of hiding from our supposed pursuers, we regularly treated them for such minor soldiering complaints as lice, foot rot, and sour belly. We got little from their purses but much in the way of news, gossip, and, most importantly, hints as to the location of roadblocks and larger units of troops.

While a watch *was* out for suspicious persons, one of whom was most likely a wizard, no one knew more than that—and few wished to know more. As we lanced boils on their backsides or dosed them for worms, the solders muttered to each other that anyone so desired by The Nameless One would best be left for someone else to capture.

e had long since crossed the Great Road, which runs north to south and connects the great cities of the kingdom. It is what divides the country into east and west, and for a long time the one was indistinguishable from the other, at least on the back roads and byways we traveled. It was a world of farmland and orchard, and of towns that took what the land produced and made it into

product, in the homes of weavers and candle makers, and the workshops of tanners, fletchers, dyers, potters, brewers, and—well, the list goes on forever.

But as we continued on, the land grew less fertile, the farms were fewer and less prosperous, and the forests were no longer managed by foresters but grew wild and unkempt, with dead trees often left where they had fallen. We encountered fewer and fewer fellow travelers until there were none at all, nor anyone else except for the occasional charcoal burner or pig herder driving his charges into the forest to fatten themselves on nuts.

After several days of this wild country, I started to think that we had seen the last of any inhabited parts. The next time that Alfrund and I stopped for a rest and a bite to eat, I asked him if this were so.

"Not quite," he answered. "There is one last village to come, by the name of Nilfred, and we may make it by nightfall. It exists here, all by itself, because the dyeplant *indikos* grows in profusion in the foothills beyond it, and the inhabitants hold the secret of preparing the dye from its flowers. Their season must be long past, or otherwise we would have met traders returning with a supply of it."

"What's the color?" I asked. "I don't remember seeing anything about *indikos* in your *enkiridion*."

Alfrund smiled. "It's a deep and slightly purplish blue. And I make no mention of it, because—" and here he began to enumerate with his fingers, "first, I've never been

this far east before. Next, I've never heard that *indikos* has any medicinal use. And lastly, those traders keep a sharp lookout for any lowly herbalists like ourselves who might want a piece of their extremely profitable trade."

I swallowed the piece of dried and pounded meat I had been chewing on and said, "I've never known uselessness to deter you before. It must have been the traders...."

"Well, actually, it was the traders' mule whips," Alfrund assented, "that and their threats to dye me blue."

I was about to answer in kind when we both heard the snort of a horse, and realized that a party of mounted riders was moving toward us at a slow trot from the direction of the town. We looked at each other and by mutual assent quickly lifted up our packs and slipped into the shrubbery.

Almost immediately, they came into view, a dozen or so, led by a grizzled veteran with a scarred face and a stiff bearing. Those under his command were equally serious-looking, carrying large bows, with quivers full of arrows strapped to their backs and their stirrups pulled up high. That way, they could stand while they rode, guiding their horses with their knees, both hands free for shooting—if need be, right over their horses' heads.

We had learned early on that local conscripts pressed into guard and patrol duty were one thing, but hardened troops such as these were quite another, for they took their business much more seriously. These were alert but not searching for anything, and they quickly passed us by. "Lucky for us that they were leaving Nilfred, not heading there," muttered Alfrund, once they were well out of sight.

I nodded. "We must be close by to the town, for the horses were fresh and their riders rode easy," I observed, "as if in safe and familiar territory."

"Let's hurry then," Alfrund said. "There should be an herbalist in Nilfred, and I expect he can advise us on how to best make our way to Wethrelad."

e arrived in the outskirts of Nilfred in less than an hour, and found it surrounded with small plots where the inhabitants grew what food they ate. The day was already on the wane and these were empty, as were the streets of the town when we reached them.

Alfrund immediately began searching about for any sign of this herbalist—in particular, for a fragrant branch of spiritheart, which practitioners hung above their doorways, both to solicit business and inspirit cheer in passersby.

"This looks ill," Alfrund said softly, after we had briefly explored the town—a short enough task, to be sure, despite its tangle of crosspaths. "We'd best take a room at the inn, for we've done enough already to make ourselves conspicuous."

And it was true—more than one curtain had fluttered open and a suspicious face glared out at us as we had passed by, thinking we were being as silent as ghosts.

Alfrund's mention of a night in an inn filled me with

joy. I thought his efforts at finding this herbalist were a waste of time—what practitioner with any skills at all would wish to linger long in this dreary place? And whoever during our travels had told Alfrund about him, that news was probably already at least a year out of date.

An inn in hand, however, was worth much more than any herbalist in a bush—for it was unlikely that, even if fund, the latter could offer us a hot meal, a warm bath, and a soft bed. And an inn, after its fashion, could provide all three. The innkeeper put several kettles on, showed us our sleeping place, and invited us down to sup while the water heated.

As in most such outland inns, guests were given a space rather than a room, or, more precisely, a choice of several pallets laid out in the attic. But the place was whitewashed and neatly swept, the pallets smelled of fresh grass, and even the blankets seemed to have been laundered in recent memory.

"I'll sprinkle a fistful of fleachoke between our blankets," Alfrund said, "before we go down to supper. It's always a wise precaution, but tonight it might well prove to be no more than that. This seems an honest place."

Suspicious innkeepers, as they say, soon have no one but themselves to drink their beer. This one had an easy friendliness to him, and our supper of a whole roast fowl put us even more in his debt, as did the quality of his brew. Indeed, after our baths, we donned clean shirts, ordered a tankard of it each, and settled ourselves on a bench close by the

fire. When the landlord brought us our drink, he carried one for himself as well, and sat himself on a stool close by.

"Business is slow tonight," Alfrund said, greeting him. "My name is Alfrund. I'm a traveling herbalist and this is my servant, Osfalt." I was sipping some ale as he said this. I hadn't heard nor thought of this name for a long time, and Alfrund's sudden producing of it and applying it to me made me choke.

"Excuse him," Alfrund said, taking the tankard from me and giving me a wallop on the back. "He's still unused to anything stronger than weak beer."

The innkeeper gave me a beneficent look. "That will change soon enough, lad, as many've learned before you." Then, turning to Alfrund, he said, "I'm Feldor, innkeeper, as you see. It's quiet tonight as it is most nights, for the soldiers' presence here most nights drives my local custom away."

"Soldiers?" Alfrund said. "Is this something new?"

Feldor sighed and nodded. "They claim to have the authority of the king. But their emblem is that of a witch's eye, which is both unknown to us and offensive as well, since it puts a doom on anyone who looks upon it, or so they say. It certainly has on my business."

"Have they forced you to accommodate them here?" Alfrund asked.

This time Feldor shook his head. "No, they commandeered the largest dwelling in the village to house them and ousted the dyemaker and his family who lived there. They've

even built a small stockade behind it, where they hold our herbalist, Timon, accused of crossing over the foothills into the forbidden valley."

"Valley?" Alfrund said, surprised. "I thought the foothills led directly to the mountains, the great Wall at the World's End."

Feldor looked troubled, and glanced around furtively, even though there was no one here but us, and his wife busy cleaning in the kitchen. "No," he answered, "there is a valley between them, where the river Flëara flows down to the sea. As I was told it, many, many died there once in a great battle with demons. Too many, for none would live there after. And, more recently still, well, there are rumors of evil doings. And it was a lovely place before, or so it's said."

The innkeeper shuddered and made a warding gesture. "But enough of such dark talk. Let's have us a song." And then in a rich deep voice, he sang us *The Jolly Miller* and *No Empty Bed for Me*.

When he finished and received his just applause, he said, "Now, won't either of you give us one, too?"

Alfrund hesitated for half a second, then said, "But of course. Usually, young Osfalt would also accompany me on his whistle, but the last time he blew in it, he found it had lost its tone." As he spoke, he had leaped up, putting his back to the fire and clasping his hands behind him. He looked me straight in the eye and in a light but astonishingly melodious voice began to sing.

Some say the pure are cold; I know they're not: My love is pure as gold, But oh! so hot.

If but his hand I hold I straight grow warm: I burn if I enfold His glowing form.

All innocence his face But not his lips, their heat from sweet embrace All chasteness strips.

His breath, when we pull close, Ignites desire; His skin beneath his clothes Is all afire.

Chastity is pure and cold Untouched by sun, But purity is molten gold when two make one.

I had experienced nothing like this before, ever, and I was so embarrassed that I blushed despite myself, so much so that I could feel the redness spreading down from my face to my chest. If the room had been full, I might have fainted dead away. It was as if Alfrund had stood me up and began

removing my clothing in front of everyone, caressing me all the while. Even so, I knew my eyes were sparkling. I was thrilled through and through.

When he finished, he made a mock bow and sat down again on the bench beside me, and wrapped his arm around me.

"Ah," said the innkeeper, "bashful in public but hot under the covers, I'll warrant. Perhaps I should let you two slip off to bed."

Alfrund laughed. "Soon enough," he replied, squeezing me as he said so, which made me cast down my eyes and blush again. All I had to do was to giggle and kick his leg and I'd be the complete witless virgin. "But," he went on, oblivious to my discomfort, "before we do, let me ask you this."

Feldor immediately took on a cautious expression, but gestured that Alfrund should go ahead.

"Have you heard of a disease called paraphimosis?" he asked. "It is much prevalent in the west."

The innkeeper shook his head.

"No matter," Alfrund said. "The point is that it is treated with fivefinger, a rare herb that grows in the foothills beyond this town. I'd hoped to purchase a supply from your herbalist, Timon."

"No chance of that," Feldor said. "The soldiers confiscated all his goods—ransacked his house, they did."

Alfrund looked at Feldor for a long moment. "I see that I've made this trip in vain."

Feldor considered. "It's a pity you have been denied this," he said slowly. "And Timon is a good-hearted young man. I've never seen the least harm in him, and many swear by his curatives.

"When the horse squad is off on its patrol, which it is now," he continued, "they leave two men behind to hold the fort, so to speak, and feed and guard him, which is hardly onerous work. Perhaps they'd let you exchange a few words in the morning. The house is the last one in the village, taking the path to the north."

Feldor then yawned, stood up, and, giving me a wink, said. "Now, off to bed, you two. Never waste what's well started, I always say." He picked up the three empty tankards, shot the bolt to the front door, and headed into the kitchen, where we soon heard him talking to his wife.

He was barely out of sight when Alfrund took my hand and led me up to the attic.

fine one you are," I said, as I stripped off my clothes, "making me at once as randy as a street boy and as simpering as a girl who has never kissed a lover."

Alfrund, who was undressing as well, said unrepentantly, "Exactly my plan. Feldor now thinks we are as harmless as can be—and no one will ever be able to persuade him that you, my love, are the much-to-be-feared wizard that everyone is searching for."

I had to giggle at that. "Well," I said, "I guess I forgive

you then, if it's all part of the plan, and not just to make me so hot for you I might have leaked myself empty on inn floor."

Alfrund, I could see, was majestically erect and made no attempt to hide his pleasure in it. "I've never been more aroused—in public, at least—than when I watched you as you grasped the import of the song. It was all I could do to keep myself from entering you right there on the bench by the fire, innkeeper be damned."

"A good thing there's nothing to keep you from entering me now," I said, lying on the bed and spreading my legs. "Would you like to take me like this, or from behind?"

In fact, Alfrund had yet to take me at all. When we were still at the hut, after the night I had entered him, we had reverted back to our way of lovemaking in Gedd, which was mostly of stroking each other with our hands, or, with Alfrund using his hands while I used my mouth.

Then, on the road, we seldom made love at all, being too tired, too weary, and, truth to tell, too dirty and smelly to get much pleasure from it. So now, fresh from a bath and those lyrics, lying on a sweet-smelling bed, I was determined that this opportunity would not be wasted.

I could see that the idea was unnerving him, and I remembered myself with Caelas. "Remember your plan," I said to Alfrund coyly. "It will all come to nothing if the inn-keeper doesn't hear your grunts and my cries from where he lies directly beneath us. You can be sure *he* hasn't gone to sleep. In fact, if you don't do your duty, I expect he'll be up

here wanting to do it for you."

This observation lightened his mood, and he made no complaint when I knelt before him and gently smoothed a finger's worth of my shrinking supply of Warrior's Friend up and down his shaft. In my heart, I wanted to take him in as he had me, from above, to experience the freedom of motion that entailed. But I knew that Alfrund would feel too uncomfortably like Fendal, lying beneath me. So, since he expressed no preference, I raised my haunches up on a pile of blankets and guided him in. That way I could watch his face as he thrust inside me.

Alfrund—this hardly needs be said—was no match to either Caelas (or Fendal, come to think of it), but he was still large enough to bring on that exciting, heart-stopping moment when the shaft forces its way in and spreads you open wide. I gave a little cry as he did, and more as he began to work his cock in and out, partly for the benefit of the inn-keeper below and partly because it clearly excited Alfrund and, although I hardly expected it, me as well.

Although I was aroused, I wasn't quite swept away, and took my pleasure watching the movement of expression across Alfrund's features as he went from nervousness to half-astonished pleasure to, finally, erotic frenzy, as he brought himself to the end. At this point I was so much in tune with him that I got caught up in the moment and brought myself to spending shortly after he did, with a few strokes of my fingers.

We had quite flattened the pallet we had been lying on, so after we lay in each other arms for a bit and shared some gentle kisses, we got up and remade the bed on a fresh one. Then we bid each other sweet dreams in somewhat louder tones than we would have ordinarily used, and lay waiting until the sound of snoring rose up through the floor-boards. Then we quietly put our clothes back on and slipped down the attic stairs.

## Chapter 33



LFRUND QUIETLY DREW BACK the bolt to the door and we slipped out into the night. It took us a moment or two to orient ourselves in the dark, but once we did we found the place Feldor had described without any difficulty, for the smell of the horses was easy to pick out.

At this hour, as might be expected, the house was silent and dark. We crept beside it into the yard behind, where we first observed the stables and a large midden heap, smelling strongly of garbage, shit, and piss, for the soldiers simply emptied their pots out the upstairs windows.

A few dogs slunk away into the darkness when we appeared, but none barked. They were clearly used to being chased away, no doubt with a kick. They knew they were interlopers here as much as we. The stockade, when we finally picked it out, was little more than a wooden box made of heavy planking, with no window and a most casual attempt at a roof. Timon no doubt got soaked when it rained.

The door, on the other hand, was as stout as the walls, but it was fastened shut with no more than a stout wooden bar held in place by iron brackets. Silently, Alfrund slipped that back and quietly pulled the door open, releasing the stench of someone shut for a long time in a small space.

"Timon!" Alfrund whispered. There was no response, and he said it again, this time almost hissing it. Now we could hear someone stirring and after a moment, a figure came cautiously to the doorway and looked without.

"Alfrund!" Timon said in a soft voice. "I heard you call my name the first time, but I was sure I was dreaming." He came out and the two embraced with such warmth that I immediately knew something that I had already begun to suspect—that Alfrund had again kept back a good part of the story.

"Come," Timon said, after they released each other. "I'll take you to my home, where we can talk safely for a bit. Those two," and here he gestured toward the darkened house, "have been drinking and gambling all day and into the night, and will not rouse until well into the morning."

He led us back through the village and down a back lane to a small dwelling, with a tidy garden laid out before it. The door was ajar and we felt broken glass beneath our feet as soon as we stepped inside. Timon found a candle and Alfrund took out his tinder box and got it lit.

Once we could see, Timon and I righted a table to set it on and some stools so that we could sit ourselves.

Even in the flickering candlelight, we could see that the house had been thoroughly ransacked, shelves not only swept clean but actually broken from the walls. The floor was awash with dried herbs all muddled together and well mixed with broken glass.

I found a broom and swept as much as I could of this into a corner, while Alfrund took a water basin and went out to the well, where he filled it. Timon went into the back room and emerged with a clean shirt. He took off the filthy one he was wearing and threw it out the door. He then washed himself from the basin, after drinking from it greedily, and finally pulled the clean shirt over his still dripping body.

"I'll find myself some food presently," he said, "if any is left. At least they failed to find my hidden cache. In it is some money for you, if you need it, along with some other things Anisor thought might be of use. But let me embrace you again, this time without the shame of my filth."

"I'd happily press myself against worse," Alfrund answered, "to hold you in my arms again."

He reached out for my hand. I gave it to him, he drew me over and said. "Timon, this is Jessan. He is my *twerë*, as well as being the reason we're here tonight." Then, to me, he said, "And this is Timon, who is also my *twerë*, and also the reason we're here tonight."

Timon and I embraced, and I felt beneath his shirt a body as wiry and hard as could be imagined. Then we sat at the table and began our talk.

"As you know, Alfrund," Timon began, "I left for Nelfrid to spy out the way to Wethrelad the same day you left for Gedd with the hope of finding Jessan before the Unnameable One did. This town proved a quiet place, happy to have its own herbalist, and I settled in quickly. One of my patients was an old man, Tollar, who suffered badly from pain in his joints.

"He started coming to see me regularly to have me rub them with a heating salve. We talked, and it soon emerged that he once earned his living guiding pilgrims to the ruins of Wethrelad before the way became too difficult, too dangerous to travel. This, he told me, was because the Unnameable One...."

Alfrund interrupted him. "Timon, Jessan has destroyed the spell that keeps us from saying his name. It's Maerdas—may Gesryma of holy name shoot a shaft of molten iron up his ass."

Timon's eyes brightened and he smiled at me across the table. "Well, that's the best news, and a good omen, too, I think. So," he continued, "Maerdas has, unknown to the king, permitted the demon necromancer Jaçazal to build a tower there, and bring into the valley his underlings and followers. Any humans who still lived there were hunted down and killed, and Jaçazal has himself woven a set of spells around Wethrelad to prevent anyone, and especially anyone human, from approaching it."

To me directly, he said, "The ruins of Wethrelad are

sited on the top of a mountain, although a small enough one. A road winds up the side of it to the top, much as one does to the Gates of Karn. At the foot of the mountain, there is a small but fast-moving river, called the Flëara, which was crossed by means of a stone bridge with a single arch. Even though this wasn't protected by magic, it remained intact when Wethrelad was brought down. This is why pilgrims could still approach the ruins. However, the first thing Jaçazal did when he arrived in the valley was to destroy it, thus making it impossible to cross over the Flëara."

"If all this is the case," Alfrund said, "I don't see the point of Maerdas sending soldiers here to patrol the border. They seem a puny addition to what Jaçazal has wrought."

Timon snorted. "You mistake their purpose. They are here partly to track down the evil things that come across the hills from that valley and, above all, to keep word of all this from spreading into the kingdom. Even the *indikos* buyers are watched like hawks, lest they stray from the permitted path.

"All in this kingdom still remember the great war against the demons that finally drove them out back into lands of the distant south. Were it generally to be known that Maerdas has given them leave to occupy even a single valley—well, the resentment against the king would quickly grow to fury, no matter Maerdas's magic powers."

"Did you venture across the hills to the valley your-self?" I asked.

Timon shot me a look. "That part is easy enough," he replied, "as I shall show you tomorrow. It was crossing the valley that proved beyond my powers." He then fell silent and his eyes moved away.

After a few moments, Alfrund gestured to me. "Jessan, let's get back to the inn. There is no sense risking discovery of Timon's escape when we are separated from our things." Then, to him, he asked, "Is the best plan for us to go to the inn and retrieve them, and then leave Nelfrid this very hour?"

"No," Timon said. "Go and get some rest. Dawn will be here soon enough and I want to see what I can salvage from all this," and here he waved his hand at the debris around us.

"I shall be outside the inn, waiting for you at first light. My so-called guards will not roused themselves until much later, and once they find I'm missing, the last place they will look for me is near the inn."

We rose and Timon gave Alfrund a tender kiss and me one, as well. He then held my shoulders and looked at me. "We shall have some time to talk tomorrow," he said.

The inn was as we left it, deep in sleep. Alfrund plucked a straw from a bottle set by the fire for this purpose, and stirred up the coals enough to ignite it. This, in turn, lit our candle, and that, in turn, led us to bed. We kissed good night and, my body curled against his back, we both fell into a deep sleep.

y eyes grudgingly opened as the first light of dawn blazed through the tiny attic window. Alfrund was already up; as I lay on my pallet in a daze, he appeared in the doorway with a basin of heated water for my morning wash. Better than the cold splash prescribed by Caelas, I thought, as I staggered out of bed.

"I've arranged with Feldor to leave our packframes in his care," Alfrund said. "I told him we'll be gone for the day gathering fivefinger in the nearby hills, and will be back to claim them that evening. There's no point in our lugging them all the way to Wethrelad."

"If we get there at all," I replied. "Timon wasn't exactly encouraging." Alfrund's mentioning of fivefinger reminded me of something. "By the by," I said, "I have in common with Feldor at least this: *I've* never heard of fivefinger or...."

"Paraphimosis?" supplied Alfrund, grinning. "Well, as you guessed, fivefinger is an invention, but paraphimosis is a real condition, or so some think. You may have suffered it yourself. It happens when a young boy pulls his foreskin back from the head of his cock and can't get it back up."

"Mature for his age, I'd say," I said, laughing. "If so, the five finger treatment might be all that could be prescribed." I punched him in the shoulder, adding, "At least if I didn't have you around to treat me."

"At that age! Perish the thought!" Alfrund answered, in genuine horror. "I'm happy to leave that to their mothers.

But we stand here yapping and we have far to go. Come."

We brought our packs down the stairs, gave them to Feldor for guarding, and paid him for our night's stay and supper ("In case we should be delayed," as Alfrund explained), plus a little more for a wedge from a wheel of cheese we spotted in the kitchen.

As Feldor wrapped it in one of the inn's napkins, Alfrund said to me, "I stepped outside while the wash water was heating to eye the weather. Not only is it as fine a day as one could wish but I smelled fresh bread in the baker's oven. We'll stop by there and get a loaf for our breakfast."

Timon was waiting for us in the shadow of the eaves of the house across the way, and I went to join him while Alfrund got the bread, a very large loaf, and almost too hot for him to carry.

Timon led us down a narrow lane that quickly brought us to the edge of the village. A path started there that led us past more farmed land and some orchards, from which we also filled our pockets with ripe plums.

Alfrund held the loaf against his chest and cut it with his knife, giving us each a chunk, with the rest being saved for later. The piece of cheese was divided the same way, and we walked and ate and washed it all down with the tart plums and a pull at our water sack, and then set forth in earnest.

To cross the foothills was a whole day's journey, but not an arduous one. The weather held, the path was good, and Timon knew of a sheltered spot where we could spend the night in safety and a measure of comfort.

As he had promised, we talked. He had been alone for a long time, and now, with companions, he provided the conversation for all of us, or at least its staying power. He was full of curiosity, about me, about Alfrund and me, then (quite a bit) about Alfrund and Fendal, Sondaram, our adventures since Gedd, and on and on, league after league.

I was also curious, naturally, about him and his connection with Alfrund, and how they had become *twerë*. Both had been apprentices of Anisor, Timon being two years older than Alfrund. At fourteen, Alfrund had already begun to shine under the master herbalist's tutelage, and this hadn't escaped the other apprentices.

The story was much like the one that Matheas had told me, except that Alfrund hadn't Jaemas's ability to charm. So the other apprentices, two of them especially, set out to make his life miserable, and succeeded so successfully at it that Timon, who had somewhat shared their attitude, became less tolerant of their meannesses by the day, until at last he invited Alfrund to share his bed, not for any other purpose but to keep them at bay so that the boy could sleep.

Timon is not an imposing figure but, as I've already observed, he might as well be built of wood as flesh, so hard are his muscles. What he lacked in brawn and reach, he more than made up for in strength and speed, and it took only one fight, even though it was two against one, to free Alfrund of his tormentors.

At this point, Timon said, he had begged Alfrund to return to his own bed. Alfrund agreed that Timon had begged, pleaded even—but for Alfrund to remain with him. I myself doubt there was any begging on either side. As one of the older apprentices, Timon had a bed to himself, and into it Alfrund would steal every night, and they would make love, quietly, for if they woke their companions they risked being pelted with pillows and bawdy abuse.

What interested me most about this story, although, needless to say, I kept the thought to myself, was that Alfrund had grown so attached to Timon that they became *twerë*—and this after both Timon and Alfrund had left Anisor's house to find their own way in the world. After my time with Caelas, I understood the appeal of Fendal. But Timon, whether as a friend or a lover, would soon get on my nerves, although I could see he was pleasant company.

Perhaps the problem was that he was too pleasant for my current frame of mind—and perhaps, also, a welcome change for Alfrund from my quiet gloom. Jaemas was now constantly on my mind, and despite our efforts, I couldn't see what we were doing, or could do, to help him, let alone actually rescue him before it was too late. Things had gone as difficultly for him as they had gone easily for me, and this made me wretchedly guilty.

By late afternoon we were climbing the last of the foothills before the valley. The path we had been following had petered out long before this, but Timon knew his way, and confidently led us between some hills and over others, skirting any open slopes that might reveal us to any pursuers. Those horsemen could have tracked us through marshes and over open stone, but they weren't due to return to Nilfred for several more days. And any others after us would be far less skilled and easily avoided.

Timon had chosen well. The crest of the last foothill he brought us to was barren and stony at the top, with the ruins of some ancient building or watchtower still standing like a broken crown at its very center. We could creep over to it and then look into the valley while remaining invisible to any who might be watching for us.

t first, I had eyes only for the mountains, for I'd never seen anything like them, nor had my imagination been equal to their magnificence. On and on they went, like waves frozen into stone in the midst of a furious storm. The valley was, in fact, not all that narrow, maybe ten leagues across, but next to them it seemed a mere piece of ribbon. Their nearness took my breath away, and the thought that Wethrelad stood among them seemed both fitting and amazingly wonderful.

I asked Timon if he could point the ruins out, and he took my shoulder, turning me in their direction and pointing them out with an outstretched finger. At first they were hard to find, and trying to do so made me better understand the massiveness of what I was seeing. The river Flëara was but a bright thread; the mountain that held Wethrelad seemed a

mere dent in a wall of rock.

I'm not even sure I did see the place, but I did feel it call to me. As soon as my eyes had fallen on it, even from this distance, it wakened, and now awaited my coming. This tuning of my inner sensing made me also aware of something else, and I shifted my glance slightly to the south.

Set in the center of the valley and close by to the ruins of Wethrelad was a high dark tower, encircled by a high wall, clearly the abode of Jaçazal, the demon necromancer. As I watched, I saw that by some mechanical or magical device, the top part of the tower slowly turned.

Timon had seen what had drawn my attention. "Watch and wait," he said. I did so, and gradually a large disc appeared, set into the side like a giant eye.

"It's a lens of watching," Timon said, "which allows Jaçazal to see even the tiniest detail of anything that catches his eye. Of course, he's not always there looking out, but its purpose is also to remind you that he always could be."

Alfrund had crept up beside us. "Demons require such an ever-watchful, merciless master," Alfrund added, "for if they're not ruthlessly controlled they quickly fall into fighting among themselves."

Timon nodded. "Only the Demon Lords possess self-mastery. And that makes them all the more terrifying—because in their presence one feels a great inner longing to explode into violence."

Alfrund squeezed my hand. "That's something we've

discovered for ourselves," he said. And when Timon looked at him in surprise, Aldrund added, "you haven't heard all our stories, yet, by far. But let's get away from here, have some supper, and consult about what to do next."

However, before we did, Timon showed us a cleft at the far side of the hilltop, which, he said, gave access to the valley from here. I carefully fixed its location in my mind, as well as that of Jaçazal's tower and the ruins of Wethrelad. We made our way to a small cave on the western side of the hill that Timon had used as a camp on his previous visits. It was shallow but dry and a small fire could be made at its mouth without attracting attention.

As we settled in, Timon took my arm. "Tollar did pass on to me one bit of information that you may find useful," he told me. "A short distance south of where the stone bridge crossed the Flëara, a flight of stairs has been carved down the side of the stone cleft through which it rushes. It descends to a small platform that extends a short distance into the water.

"The old man thought that when the *Nithaial* had been in residence, he had slowed the flow of the river to allow foodstuffs and other supplies to be sent down it to be unloaded there and carried up to Wethrelad. In any case, Jaçazal didn't destroy it, either because he saw no threat in it or else hadn't even realized it existed."

I thought about this and then turned my mind to other questions. "You said before that the difficulty wasn't in reaching the valley but in crossing it. Did you try? How far across it did you manage to get?"

At this question, as he had the night before, Timon turned his face away and shook his head.

Alfrund, who had been gathering some twigs and breaking small branches into pieces, set them down and came and sat with us. "Timon," he said gently, "you're hiding something from us. All that chatter on the way here—that's not like you, and neither is this reticence about what we most now need to know."

Timon, still looking away, answered in a tight voice, "Alfrund, I don't think I've the courage to go down into the valley again with you. The first time I tried, I got about a third of the way across, keeping to the trees to avoid attracting the skalgür, and moving with great silence, as well, for I caught a glimpse of a great black slinking beast, like a giant cat, crossing the path ahead of me."

"Timon," Alfrund asked gently, "what happened then?"

Timon bowed his head. "It's a great shame," he said, his voice now shaking. "At first I thought it started when I saw that thing, but later I realized it had begun almost as soon as I had stepped down into the valley. A terrible dread had slowly overcome me. Now it increased with each step I took. At the very end, I could barely move forward at all, except on my hands and knees.

"Soon thereafter, my body began shaking all over. I

lost control of my bowels. I started making wailing sounds despite myself—I had been made so mad from fear that I could barely remember who I was, let alone what danger I was making for myself.

"Finally, I gathered up what self-control remained in me and turned to flee. But the terror let up just as slowly as it had gathered within me, and I was so wasted by it that when I reached the bottom of this hill I had to crawl up it on my belly, dragging myself forward with my hands."

Timon was sitting with his knees brought up and his arms locked around them, his head bent low. He held up a hand and we saw that the fingers and palm were scarred all over. He sat there in silence for a bit, reclasping his hand to the other arm. "That first attempt broke something in me that has yet to heal," he said in a bitter voice. "When the soldiers came to my house, I felt as if it were happening in a dream. In fact, I was *happy* to be locked in their stockade. I felt protected there. It wasn't until you two freed me that I understood completely what had happened."

He looked up at Alfrund with a desperate face, wet with tears. "I think they sent to Gorzungâd for an interrogator," he said, "If he'd gotten hold of me before you came I would have told him everything. I've fallen that far."

Alfrund sat beside him and wrapped his arm around his shoulder. "Why didn't you tell us sooner?" he asked. "This is no place for you now."

Timon turned his head and looked directly at Alf-

rund. "Because I still think of myself as your protector, *twerë*. I couldn't let you go down into that place alone. All I can do now is show you what has happened to me and beg you not to try." He looked at me and then back at Alfrund, saying, "Alfrund, if ever you loved me, please understand that *that valley is neither any place for you.*"

a state of great gloom. Timon would eat some supper with us, but not say another word. The small fire Alfrund built lasted but a short while, and he suggested that we get as much sleep as we could. We'd then consider our plans in the morning.

It was clear that we were in danger even here, and so we would have to keep watch. I was wide awake and so volunteered to be first, agreeing to wake Alfrund when the moon rose or when I grew sleepy, whichever came first.

I took my sack from where it lay with the others, saying I wanted to consult the answer stone, although the truth was that I'd have been hard pressed to think of a question to which I truly wanted an answer right then.

I moved to the mouth of the cave and sat in silence, dropping myself into the inner world to see if I could sense any threat that was near us. I intentionally contained this search within a certain distance, for I didn't wish to wake, so to speak, sleeping necromancers.

It took a while for Alfrund and Timon to fall into slumber, and when they did, I could tell that Timon was hav-

ing frightful dreams. I crept over to him and lightly put my palm on his head, partly to calm him and partly to gently probe his being. Although he hadn't said anything, Alfrund's beseeching glance at me at the end of Timon's story had spoken volumes, and I myself felt wretched at my response, which had been to imperceptibly shake my head.

He wanted me, I knew, to consent to have sex with Timon and to thus cure him as I had Alfrund. Jaçazal had been aware of Timon's presence and been toying with him, perhaps intending to use him to convey a taunt to me. In any case, the necromancer had used some form of the strykul's poison mist to destroy him.

Skrying Timon took only a moment and told me what I suspected—that he was beyond any similar resuscitation. The purpose of the *strykul* was to paralyze their victims and create slaves; Jaçazal had meant to torture and kill. That Timon was still alive at all was a testament to his love of Alfrund. But now that he had accomplished what he had set out to do, Timon's race was run.

Tears flooded into my eyes and, before I could stop them, fell on Timon's face. His eyes flew open. "You know," he whispered. "I can tell."

"Yes, Timon," I whispered back. "I'm so sorry."

"No, *Nithaial*, I'm the one to apologize. I've failed you, failed you all."

I leant down and kissed him. "No, Timon, you did exactly what was needed, and more—for you have also saved

the life of our beloved twerë."

He understood exactly what I meant, and his eyes widened. But before he could speak, I put my fingers to his lips. "Yes," I whispered, "I'm leaving you in his care for the time you have left. Find a safe quiet place and be happy together. I know Alfrund will find ways to ease your pain."

We smiled at each other through our mutual tears. "Tell him to wait for me in Lorithar," I said. "I'll find him there. Meanwhile, I discern no dangers here you need fear. So I'm going to cast a sweet spell of sleep on both of you."

Then Timon and I kissed deeply, and in my heart I begged his forgiveness of my misjudgment of him. I cast the spell and he was so weak that he fell away at once. I cast a fond glance at Alfrund's sleeping face, removed my wand of power from my bag and slid it into its sheath on my belt, and slipped away, vanishing into the night. And so I set off alone to claim Wethrelad.

## Chapter 34



OON I WAS CROUCHING where we had hid that afternoon, waiting until the watching eye at the top of Jaçazal's passed out of sight. It glowed a dark red and appeared to be floating in the air, since at night the tower itself was invisible. Slowly it turned, and when the last glint of red vanished, I made my way to the cleft and down the steep slope it gave access to, half scrambling, half sliding, sending cascades of rubble tumbling on ahead of me.

This, I knew, would be as dangerous a moment as I'd yet to face. Timon, I felt sure, had already betrayed us, unknowingly and unwillingly, by the simple fact that he was marked by Jaçazal's spell. However carefully we hid when we had come to the summit of the hill this afternoon, the necromancer would have immediately sensed his presence.

Whether this meant he also knew that Alfrund and I were with him—well, that would soon become apparent. He certainly had no need to come hunt for us, when we were so willingly coming to *him*. There was no way to reach Weth-

relad without passing close by his tower, no matter what approach I chose.

About halfway down the hill a wood began. Once I entered it I began to breathe more freely. Again I paused and let myself enter the inner place, and again I found nothing near me that was threatening. However, I could sense the strands of Jaçazal's spell of fear, the same one that had ensnared poor Timon. It was more loosely woven than that of the Summoner, for it was spread over a large area. Jaçazal knew that it would be only a matter of time before an unwary intruder touched against it, and that one touch would be all that was needed.

I didn't wish to keep dodging all night, so I commanded a gentle flow of force to lift it up until it floated just over my head. I shifted it so slightly I was certain the movement would be unnoticed; once such a spell was cast it took care of itself. In any case, he'd know that by now I possessed the power to avoid it. If he planned to find me it would be with his lens of watching—and with other forces at his command that I had yet to confront.

Well, I'd make it as difficult for him as I could. I summoned clouds up the valley from the south, and with them a gentle rain. I then slowly intensified it as I moved along, until it beat down hard and steadily. The rain would wash away any traces of my scent, keep birds of the night safe in their nests, and blur the view from the tower. If I were lucky, I thought with a grim smile, it might even lull Jaçazal to sleep.

My first goal, now that I was actually in the valley, was to find a path. Wethrelad called out to me, giving me a beacon to guide me. But the woods were dense, and the dark and the rain made for miserable passage. Fortunately, though, I had only traveled a league or so before I came across a track and cautiously started along it.

During my first short view of the valley and the mountains beyond, my attention was caught by other things, but I now recalled the landscape itself. During the war with the demons when so many died here, the entire countryside had been turned into a great military encampment, and its signs were everywhere—fallen barracks and command posts, broken watchtowers, remnants of fortified walls, and roads that curved back on themselves or came to sudden ends for no rhyme or reason except to frustrate enemy troops.

These were often nicely paved, but they were endlessly deceiving, always leading me off course, even those that seemed to run perfectly straight. No matter how carefully I kept adjusting my direction, in the end, my steps kept leading me closer and closer to the necromancer's tower.

Furthermore, this warren was haphazardly but persistently patrolled by demons and the occasional fell beast. I wasn't especially afraid of either, for I had the power to cloud their minds. But the constant demand of scouting the inner space for signs of them and diverting them away from me was as tiring as walking in the constant rain.

After several leagues had passed, some of them in

circles, my exhaustion caught up with me. My plan had been to soldier on until I reached the banks of the Flëara. But first I had to reach the road that led past Jaçazal's tower to the remains of the bridge. Once I was traveling on it, I'd have to move as fast as I could, for it was then that I'd be most visible and easiest to attack.

I was still confident that I could best Jaçazal, but I was beginning to see that my initial plan was failing. This was partly just bad luck—getting hardly any sleep the night before and none at all tonight. But the rain I had called was proving to hinder me as much help me and I needed to rest first and then, with a fresher mind, rethink my strategy.

I began examining the ruins that I passed, and eventually found a building that was still partially intact. Its upper floor had mostly fallen, filling the lower rooms with rubble, but there was one corner where it held, and so offered some shelter from the weather as its surrounding walls did from prying eyes.

I cast carefully about for any sign of danger, then pushed aside the vines that covered the hole where the window had been and climbed inside. The stone floor was covered with rubble, but there was no problem clearing a space for sleeping. I pressed myself into one of the room's corners, wrapped myself in my rain cloak, and, trusting my powers to alert me if danger approached, fell asleep.

awoke several hours later, in the gray light of a misty morning, feeling both refreshed and starving. I took a piece of my dwindling supply of traveler's bread and gnawed on it for a bit to ease the pangs. Then I reached into my vest and removed the questioning stone.

I held it tightly in my closed palms, cleared my mind, and asked, "How soon after he senses my presence will Jaçazal be able to array his forces against me?"

"He is gathering them now."

"Do you mean that Jaçazal *already* knows I'm here?" I asked in alarm.

"Yes."

"How long has he known?"

"Since you entered the valley."

So much for my clever subterfuges. "So, the eye of the tower can see through rain and dark?"

"Yes. Easily."

"Can it see through anything else?" I asked.

"Some things. Not others."

Stupid question. "Can it see through *walls*? Is Jaçazal looking at me right now?"

"It sees through walls as through a veil. He has not taken his eyes off you for a moment."

"Why haven't his forces seized me then?"

"He fears you are too powerful for his demon warriors. So he has summoned aid from elsewhere."

"From Maerdas? From the land of the demons?"

"Neither. That would take too long."

"What do you mean, then, by 'summoned'?"

"Jaçazal is a necromancer. He has the power to raise the dead. There are many such in this valley, most of them warriors."

I shuddered. "Can I defeat this force?"

"It is unlikely."

"Can I defeat this force from Wethrelad?"

"Yes. In Wethrelad you can defeat anything Jaçazal can summon. That is why he is doing everything in his power to prevent you from getting there."

This last answer seemed rather forthcoming. Perhaps I was getting better at using the stone, or perhaps its spirit was warming to me. Even so, its answers had chilled me to the bone. I wrapped it back in its cloth and stuffed it safely away. Then I lifted my hands and dispersed the clouds. With this enemy, sunshine seemed by far the better choice.

I was glad I had slept before using the stone, even knowing that Jaçazal had used the time to his advantage. The knowledge that he had been watching me since I entered his valley would have been devastating last night. But now, my spirits revived, I thought only of how I might deal with this new twist of events.

In the end, I decided to head straight for Jaçazal's tower, which was also the fastest way to Wethrelad. Perhaps Jaçazal would think I meant to attack him straight on, which might cause him to disrupt the disposition of his forces. In-

stead, I would veer east on the ring road that ran around the tower, intersecting the road from the south just before it turned toward the river Flëara.

I was also sure that once I turned toward the tower I'd suddenly find traveling much easier. And so it proved. I covered in an hour what it had taken me most of the night to travel before. The tower, which previously had been visible only through breaks in the trees, now began to loom over them. The round red eye at its top no longer revolved around it but held steady, following my progress. I had Jaçazal's full attention.

Even so, nothing happened. No skalgür circled overhead. Nothing stalked me or waited to ambush me ahead. Another league passed and I could see the grooves between the tower's massive blocks of black stone. Soon after the ring road came into sight.

Spotting it lifted my heart, but it also drew my attention away from the tower. When I glanced back, I saw what at first seemed to be a thick black cloud of smoke pouring out of crevices in the tower's side. With an eerie undulating motion, it began moving swiftly in my direction.

This cloud was almost upon me before I could make out that it was a mass of huge black hornets, the sort with stingers so large that they droop down behind their bodies. They surrounded me before I could summon a wind strong enough to blow them away, and I received two piercing stings, each of which immediately swelled into a hard red

lump the size of a pullet's egg that burnt like fire.

Furious, I yanked my wand from its sheath, pointed it at the tower, and sent a bolt of force directly at the great eye. Although not as powerful as the one I shot out over the sea that night in Sondaram, it was still a mighty thing, striking its target with an explosive blast of brilliant blue light. I expected the eye to shatter into a million pieces, and, when it didn't, for a moment I feared that the tower had simply absorbed the energy and that Jaçazal would now turn it against me.

But, no, the eye was *melting*. Slowly but inexorably it bulged, sagged, then oozed out of its orifice and began to slide down the side of the tower in red, viscous gouts. From within the gaping circular hole came a thin, piercing scream of rage.

Immediately after, I felt a great thrashing in the inner world as Jaçazal turned against me a torrent of spells—of damage, of mutation, of every form of pestilence, and some whose purpose I couldn't even ascertain. They were all easy to deflect for they hadn't been even properly cast, just a slop bucket of ensorcellments emptied in my direction.

At that moment I was greatly tempted to let loose a second bolt directly into the gaping hole at the top of the tower and finish off Jaçazal once and for all. With his destruction, his army of summoned dead would be vanquished as well. I had even raised my wand to do so when the image of the wizard Hezzakal's battle with Maerdas flashed into my mind, and I stopped myself in mid spell.

Up to now, Jaçazal had been one step ahead of me. He had corrupted Timon; he had watched me from the moment I had entered the valley; he had manipulated things so that I would approach his tower, where he was strongest. Even now, he was toying with me. After all, the attack of the hornets had already lured me into one wasteful display of power. And now, he tempted me with that muddle of spells to waste some more—while I was still leagues away from any hope of replenishing it. After all, destroying the tower's seeing eye wasn't at all the same thing as eliminating him.

Cursing myself for a fool, I summoned a thick mist out of the rain-soaked earth and wrapped the tower in it, then returned the wand to its sheath. The seeing eye might have been able to penetrate such stuff, but that didn't mean the necromancer could himself.

So, leaving Jaçazal blind for the moment—or so I hoped—I turned on the ring road and hurried east.

Like Jaçazal's tower, the road was made of blocks of black stone, and the verge on both sides had been cut close. Travel was easy but so was pursuit. I walked at a fast pace and kept alert to any shifts in the inner world that would indicate an enemy's approach.

However, it turned out that, like the *strykul*, Jaçazal's dead warriors were almost impossible to perceive. In this instance, I think it was because the power that animated them came from the tower rather than from within the things themselves. Because of this, I had no warning when I encoun-

tered the first of them, about six or seven, lumbering awkwardly toward me, their arms extended before them. I saw I could avoid them easily enough and did so, although escaping their foul stench was another matter. They had the high, fetid stink of putrid meat, and it made my stomach heave. It had also attracted a swarm of flies that all but covered the dead, feeding to their hearts' content.

The ring road was regularly bisected by other roads that led directly to the tower, and as I passed each I saw that there were walking corpses on these, too, all headed my way—even though they seemed to have no hope of catching up with me. When I glanced backwards, I saw the ring road itself was filling up with them, a mass of rotten flesh stumbling along behind me.

I wasn't frightened, not yet, but it did serve to make me very uneasy, like one of those dreams where dreadful things pursue you. At first you manage to stay well ahead of them, all the while knowing that it will be only a matter of time before they chase you down.

Because the ring road was, of course, circular, I'd been gradually turning from due east to southeast, and I began to worry that it would never intersect the road to Wethrelad. But the way continued to slowly turn, and finally I saw it ahead of me, striking the ring road at an angle.

Unfortunately, another mob of the shambling dead was heading my way from that direction as well. So, I hurriedly crossed the verge and plunged into the scrub, assum-

ing that they would have a much harder time getting through it than I. This proved to be so, but it gave me little advantage. When, after several minutes, I burst out of the bushes onto the road to Wethrelad, I discovered that hundreds, thousands of other corpses were waiting for me there.

Then the nightmare began. I'd noticed that none of them, warriors though they might once have been, carried weapons, and I discovered why when one of them seized hold of my arm. When I jerked away its hand came too, parting soundlessly from the rest of its body. The foul stench was so overpowering that this time I did retch, and retch again, even as I was shaking the ghastly thing off my arm. I began to run now, for the advantage it gave me in dodging them, slipping past or around the outstretched arms of one and then another and another.

This succeeded only for a time. There were more and more of them on the road as I grew closer to Wethrelad and the space between them was diminishing with every step I took. My first effort to deal with them was to summon a strong, no, *tempestial* wind that knocked them over like skip pins. But that merely meant that they began crawling toward me on their hands and knees.

Once Wethrelad bestowed on me full power over the air, I'd be able to summon a blast that would blow them all the way to Gorzungâd for the edification of Maerdas, but that was beyond me now. All I'd accomplished by my tempest was to make the road even more crowded by knocking them all over.

Soon I'd have to wade through all this rotten flesh if I wanted to proceed at all, and the very thought made me so nauseous that I could barely stand it.

So, instead, I took out my wand from its sheath, lifted it, and sent a circle of power radiating out from me. It scythed through the bodies, leaving behind it nothing but legs, arms, torsos, heads, scattered all about. These, too, attempted to move toward me, but were so barely successful at it that I was able to hop over the ones I couldn't pass around.

At the same time, the wind I'd summoned carried away the stench, or at least enough of it for me to keep my head. I dearly wished for a sachet that would at once overpower the putrid smell and clear my head of its poisonous fumes—something I could have easily concocted from the contents of Alfrund's sack.

Alfrund, Alfrund—the very thought of him all but made me weep. But I was so glad he—and especially he and that poor wretch Timon—were not with me now. I'd just have to get through this torment by myself.

By now an hour had passed since I'd left the ring road and headed back toward Wethrelad. For the last part of it I'd been climbing a slight hill, and when I got to the summit, I could see ahead to the river Flëara. At its banks the road turned due north and would soon reach the stone bridge—or rather, what remained of it, a mere two or three leagues away.

In short, it was so close that I could almost touch it... and so far away I would never get there. From the top of this

hill I saw that the road—no, *the entire land*—ahead of me was crowded with a huge army of the dead, too deep to pass through, too vast to destroy. I was so overcome with despair that I almost sank to my knees.

Jaçazal must have seen this. For, up until now, those dead beings made no sounds except for the soft, dragging sound of their footsteps—indeed, how could they, for their lungs were unable to draw in air. But now, for a moment, the necromancer gave them that, too. In unison, this legion of corpses opened their mouths and uttered a terrifying discordant howl, rejoicing in my defeat. And then, as one, they surged toward me, arms extended, hands grasping to seize hold of my flesh.

## Chapter 35



LL I COULD THINK TO DO was to raise my wand and cast a blocking spell around me. Immediately, a ring of blue fire surrounded me—close by, since I wanted none of the dead enclosed within it. This they were unable to penetrate, but, of course, that mattered nothing to them. They plunged right into it and were consumed, enveloping me in a dark cloud of stench, even as I felt my power draining, bit by bit.

This, at best, was only postponing the inevitable. Soon enough the fumes would overwhelm me and they would be on me, first driving me to madness as their putrid flesh embraced me, then smothered out my life.

In despair, I lifted my wand again, meaning to create one final blast to destroy as many of the creatures as possible before I was overcome, when some force of preservation within me deflected the charge just as the wand was about to release it. Instead of blasting the nearby dead to bits, it wrapped itself around me, and lifted me into the air.

I didn't rise far—no more than my height and half again—but it was just high enough to lift me out of reach of the sea of upraised arms and groping hands beneath my feet. I then remembered how, at Sondaram, I'd used the force as a couch on which to rest, sleeping for hours a few feet from the floor. This was just the same, except a few spans higher.

The wind I'd summoned earlier was still blowing, although not so fiercely. But it was strong enough to start me moving, floating in the direction of the Flëara... and Wethrelad! If I could keep myself in the air just long enough to cross the river's raging torrent, Jaçazal's destruction of the bridge would turn out to be my salvation.

From my current height, I could see the long flight of carved stone stairs that led up the side of the mountain to the palace, and at their end the ruins of Wethrelad itself. A small bit of the bridge's arch remained on the far side, reaching out of the water. I had only to reach that and I'd be safe and Jaçazal defeated.

However, this wasn't to be. The wand's remaining power was ebbing quickly and I dared not increase the force of the wind or I'd break my neck when I landed on the ground. True, the slippage was slight—I could float above the ground for some time. But what I couldn't do was keep myself out of reach of the outstretched hands beneath me.

At first, my feet began brushing against the corpses's fingers. They hadn't the strength to seize me, but the contact slowed me down. I dropped lower and lower still, and

now I was kicking away their arms, sometimes right from their bodies. I remembered the hand that held onto my arm even after it had parted from the body that wielded it and I shuddered with dread.

In all of this, there was only one good thing. The great mob of the dead had gone surging up the hill to destroy me, and now it was proving difficult to turn and go in the other way. The bodies at the rear of the mass were still pushing forward even as those at the front were turning around and trying to force their way back. Jaçazal's control over them was hardly such that he could effect a universal about face with a single command.

So, when my power was exhausted, I didn't sink into a mass of the dead but was able to set my feet on the ground just beyond them. I hadn't quite reached the Flëara—let alone crossed it!—but at least I would be able to make the river bank on foot, dodging among the warrior corpses that were lagging behind the others.

I had kept in mind the flight of steps this side the bridge that led down to the water, and silently thanked Timon for remembering to tell me about them, for I'd never have noticed them otherwise. By now the road ran right beside the river, with a stone wall rampart separating the two. Just before I reached the remains of the bridge I saw a narrow slit cut into the wall, just wide enough to pass through. Beyond it was a small ledge of stone, and it was from there that the stairs descended down to the river.

With the dead in shambling pursuit, I slipped through the break in the wall and hurried down to where the fastrushing water surged by just below my feet. Then I lifted my hand and stopped the Flëara in mid flow.

The two elemental forces from which I draw my power are air and water, and they obey me always, once I know how to command them. This is why I could summon winds even before I set foot in Wethrelad, and it is why, even with the wand of power exhausted, I could hold back the waters of the Flëara—at least for a time.

The river was fed by streams rushing down from the mountains. That and its narrow channel gave its water great force. Even in the few seconds that I had to wait while the water below my feet ebbed away to give me passage, the dam I'd created was breached as the Flëara flooded over its banks and began surging down the road that ran beside it, some of the water making its way back to the riverbed by flowing through the opening to the stairs and making a little waterfall as it came splashing down.

My attention, however, was directed to the other bank. On this side, the stone steps continued straight down to the bottom of the river. Large flat rocks offered passage across that to the other side, where more steps led up to the stone platform that Timon had also mentioned, which was presumably there for unloading provisions sent down river. The only flaw to this theory was that no flight of stairs led up from the platform to the far side of the bridge.

The other side of the river, of course, was part of the cliff face of the mountain on which Wethrelad rested. There, another flight of steps was carved in the stone, leading up from the river bottom to a small platform that matched the one I stood on now. And there it ended—which is to say, *it did not* continued up to the far side of the bridge.

If I hadn't been so shaken and tired I might have made more sense of what I was seeing, but I crossed the riverbed and climbed those stairs because I had no other alternative. If there was no going forward, there was no turning back, either.

When I reached the platform, I looked carefully to make sure that there weren't any handholds hollowed into the rock that would let me make my way up and across the cliff to the ruined bridge and the road up to Wethrelad. But the face of the cliff was sheer.

The sense of despair I felt at the top of the hill returned. I turned around and took in the scene across the river. Despite the fact that the Flëara had flooded the road, some of the walking dead had managed to wade through it, and others had been swept down the stairs by the water that was surging through the break in the wall. Some of these continued downriver, but others were staggering back to their feet and, after some aimless lurching about, became aware of me and started heading in my direction.

I could, of course, release the Flëara and sweep them all away, but the river was running so high that it would surge

over this platform and take me away with them. I didn't have enough control to cause the one to happen and not the other.

As the dead began to shuffle up the stone steps toward me, I turned back one last time to look despairingly at the bridge, and the broken arch that jutted out over the water—so tantalizingly near, so impossibly far. Once again today, I'd been given a glimpse of escape only to have it snatched out of my hands at the last possible moment.

While I had been struggling toward Wethrelad, the sun had been traversing the heavens. It was now well into the west and shone fully on the cliff face. As I stared up at the bridge, I noticed something out of the corner of my eye. It was oddly familiar—a squarish patch of translucent stone.

Even as I made out what it was, my memory had placed the time I'd seen such a thing before. Understanding flooded my mind and with it a feeling, simultaneously, of wanting to hug myself and beat my stupid head against the stone. Instead, I held up my hand and, in response, the pale image of one glowed within the rock. "Open!" I said.

There was a click and a rectangle of rock swung inwards, revealing a doorway and, beyond it, a flight of stairs leading upwards. Beside me, the first of the dead was reaching out his hands to seize hold of me. I ducked into the doorway, avoiding its touch, and turned to face its rotting visage.

"Soldier!" I said, in a voice that momentarily overrode Jaçazal's spell. It paused, turning its head in my direction in an awkward, blinded way, like a dazed fighter trying to fix its opponent. "Farewell and happy voyaging," I told it, and released the Flëara. As the wall of water roared past sweeping all before it, I leapt back and slammed shut the door.

The moment they sensed my presence, enchanted lights, just like the ones in Sondaram, began to glow in intervals along the wall. Unlike at Sondaram, though, the stairs also came to life when I stepped on them, suddenly, slowly, smoothly moving upwards, bearing me with them. Up and up we went, and once my balance was secure, faster and faster.

I closed my eyes, submerging myself in the inner space, and summoned the Home of the Air to rise again out of its ruins. The earth rumbled and the tumult of stone clashing against stone reached down even into this deep mountain cavern. But by the time I'd been carried to the head of the stairs, the tumult had subsided. In Wethrelad, there was no large chamber underneath—the small anteroom in which I'd been deposited led directly into the palace itself.

ethrelad! I wish now that I'd not been so exhausted and battered by my struggles when I first arrived there. I felt what I wanted most, the sweet taste of safety, of total, utter safety. But each of the great homes of the elements has its own special beauty, and much of Wethrelad's was lost on me that day. This place honored its element by hardly being there at all, a gossamer edifice of glass, held intact by a web of glittering metal, open to the view in all directions, but especially to the mountains, great

majestic tiers of them, their snowcapped tops glistening in the afternoon sun.

In the center of this light-filled hall, the force, as clear and fluid as molten crystal, spiraled up into the sky. I undid my belt and my sandals, and pulled off my shirt, left them where they lay, stepped into the flow. As it had in Sondaram, it lifted me up into it, surrounding me entirely, my body turning, moving one way and then another.

But here it lifted me up and up, through an opening in the palace's roof, and higher still, until I was but a speck in the blue sky, my arms outspread, turning slowly, my being feeding hungrily. The force here was the same as what had nourished me at Sondaram and also different—and it made *me* different. What had before lacked form, now took shape. It was like hearing a language I'd spoken in childhood but then forgotten: an understanding that before having existed only in hints and half-memories, now fell solidly into place. When I finally emerged, satiated, remade, I felt that I now could know who I really was.

I went over to where I'd left my things, and looked with distaste at my shirt, soiled by the touch of the dead. I withdrew my wand of power from its sheath, brought it to the force and let it have its turn to drink its fill. Then I slipped the far end under the shirt, tossed this into the air, and destroyed it with a burst of flame.

I turned around. As in Sondaram, there had been another door in the anteroom through which I'd originally

come. Now that Wethrelad was also restored—if the prophecy held—so now were the towers of both. I went to that door, opened it, and found the tower there. I climbed the stairs that led to its top.

I came out into sunlight. The sun was setting over the western hills, but its light still reached me here. Below me spread the valley, until this very moment the realm of Jaçazal. I could see the remnants of his great army of corpses, wandering aimlessly here and there, no longer directed by his will.

I didn't know or care whether he cowered in his tower or was fleeing to the south. It was true, Jaçazal had almost beaten me, but that was then. Now he was nothing. I lifted my wand and, feeling neither rage nor pity, directed a bolt of such force against his tower that it simply evaporated and, with it, all the spells he had cast upon this poor land.

At that instant, the dead collapsed where they stood and withered into dust. The demon soldiers, no longer under the necromancer's control, would fall one against the other; the fell beasts could be hunted down once men returned to this place. As they soon would, once it was known that Jaçazal was gone and Wethrelad stood on its mountain again.

Now I looked across the valley to the broken ring that crowned the last foothill. Again I lifted my wand and sent a bolt soaring into the sky high above it, where it exploded into a sparkling maze of brilliant light. It was a signal to Alfrund and Timon, of course, but also to Nilfred and especially to the soldiers stationed there that it was time for them to return to Gorzungâd.

I turned away from the view and looked around the place where I now stood, the very top of the tower. At its center was what looked like a round flat black stone as polished as glass, about a man's height in diameter. It was itself encircled by a rim of white stone into which four symbols had been set in gold:









The first of these was the sign for Sondaram and the next two for the Homes of Earth and Fire (the names of which I didn't know). The last of the four was the sign for Gostranar, the great palace where the four elements were conjoined into one.

As far as I knew, the Palaces of Earth and Fire remained rubble. There was some hope that the resurrection of Sondaram and Wethrelad would bring Gostranar into existence, and I planned to discover the truth of this soon. But now what I'd in mind was a hot bath. And for that...

I crossed over to the stone, the surface of which, as I approached it, softened and turned to liquid. I stood on the stone edging, fixed Sondaram in my mind, and stepped in.

end of book one