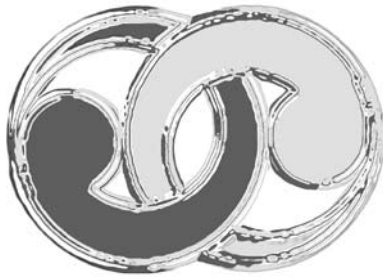


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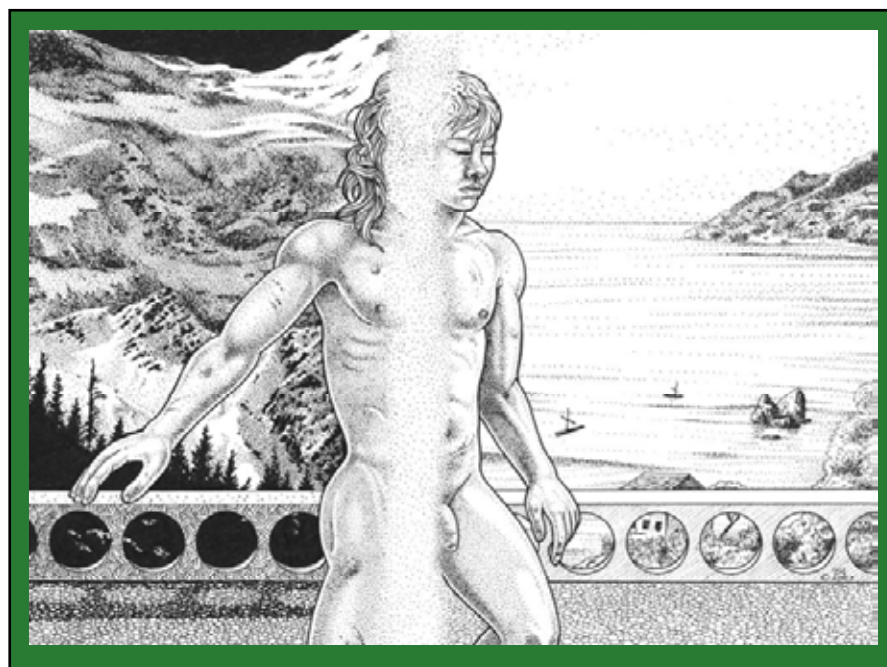
BEING VOLUME THREE OF
THE CRONNEX



BY TREWIN GREENAWAY

ART BY TRISTAN ALEXANDER

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TRISTAN ALEXANDER

PASSING THROUGH THE PORTAL



for Gaelan

our most secret thoughts mingle
as when two colors flow together
on the damp paper
of a schoolboy's painting
—Tomas Tranströmer

Neither the white horse nor the black reproaches his fellow for drawing their master out of the way. They are far, both of them, from home, and lonely, and lengthened by their strife the way has been hard. Now their heads droop side by side till their long manes mingle; and when the voice of the charioteer falls silent they are reconciled for a night in sleep.

~ Plato

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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 this volume.

Personæ

Gesryma, the 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.




Jessan the *Nithaial Galgaliel*.

Niccas the *Nithaial Elimiel*.



Maerdas THE UNNAMEABLE ONE, formerly the *Nithaial Elimiel*, now Lord of Gorzungâd.

The Guardian Circle, a secret society of mages, healers, scholars, and alchemists, devoted to sustaining the memory of the *Nithaial* and to to protect and nurture them when they next return.



Acwellen a Rider of the Llennad, a rowdy, and a table com-

panion of Jessan at a feast in his honor.

Adelantas a foreseer who resides in Shavagar-Yasí, where he assists Niccas in his search for Helias. His born name is Iannas.

Alcaron Head Steward of Gostranar and one of the Waldroner.

Anisor master herbalist, member of the Guardian Circle.

Ádísá wife of Bráíenn and head with him of their clan.

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

Bastnor head torturer at Gorzungâd.

Bráíenn son of Saergorn, father of Páli (and others), in partnership with his wife, Ádísá, chieftain of one of the clans of the Lhennad.

Breddan a spirit healer of great power who resides in a temple in the center of the Tarn of Subtle Waters.

Clænicas The stableboy who teaches Sepharan how to play pebbles and bowls, and perhaps other things.

Cœnred a youth who accompanies Jessan and Páli to the border of Wisferon, where he perishes.

Dectas servant boy in the “private house” operated by Laminas.

Do’arma’ak demon, personal attendant to Teshnar’ad.

Dracon Æledléoma the dragon who carries Jessan when the dragon swarm flies to destroy Gorzungâd.

Dracon Gléawmód (the) the oldest, wisest, and holiest of dragons, Jessan's interlocutor when he comes to ask for their assistance.

Dracon Wælfyra, (the) the dragon that carried Niccas to Faeÿstirran, and, later, beyond.

dre'aganzd the race of dragons, as they say it in their own tongue.

Dyrfinna a rider of the Lhennan, daughter of Bráien.

Eanflæd horse, bearer of Bráien.

The Eight. A circle of necromancers with enhanced powers who have made Maerdas into their puppet. They were originally The Nine, but Jessan killed Jaçazal before the circle learned to directly draw power from the the Land of the Dead.

Fransen a smuggler.

Fyrewourmhaem the word for "dragon nest" in the old tongue, and the name of the last dragon nest, in the spell-guarded place where the temple to the Avatar of Ra'asiel also sits.

Helias servant of Grendar and his murderer, member of the Guild of the Narrow Blade, lover of Niccas.

Hestal male apprentice of Fendal, possessor of a heroic or-

gan of reproduction.

Hostiatas head servant, house steward.

Jannis See Adelantas.

Jaemas Niccas's name during his stay in the house of Porphoras and Sophaera.

Justan an apprentice to Porphoras.

King Temblar Ruler of the kingdom and heir of the Amethyst Throne.

Lamminas innkeeper of a "private house" in Lorithar, open only to servants of Maerdas and those in allegiance to him. He is sent in pursuit of Niccas and Sepharan in the company of a wraith ghoul.

Leannian eldest son of Bráíenn.

Lord Lissator ruler of Lorithar.

Matheas apprentice of Porphoras, future apprentice of Anisor, and friend of both Jessan and Niccas.

Mazh'dagh the demon lord who heads the chase of Helias and Nassazia, and encounters Niccas at Faeÿstirran.

Melfyrus an apprentice to Porphoras

Miridal mother of Niccas, initiate of the Sisterhood of the Mystery.

Moçnaszh A necromancer, one of the Eight, and the murderer of Sepharan.

Naedas houseboy, later servant to Porphoras.

Nassazia daughter of Sophaera, a witch in her own right, who gains great power by tricking Niccas into having sex with her, his first heterosexual encounter.

Nastor a smuggler.

Naelas Sepharan's given name, used by ghoulish wraiths to torment him in the tunnels of the *viri*.

Niferas the young boy who replaces Sepharan as Maerdas's favorite.

Norsran the gelding that Jessan rides when he travels the smuggler route over the mountains from Gedd.

Orien mage, member of the Guardian Circle.

Ormaël Niccas's last lover, a warlock, an agent in the employ of Prince Nevoras, and the brother of Nassazia.

Our Neighbor the euphemism used in Lorithar for Maerdas Lord of Gorzungâd.

Ouras one of the guardian spirits of Wisferon, companion of Saiphar, both of whom take the shape of stags. The word "Ouras" means "East Wind," and it is by that name that Jessan calls it, its real name being secret.

Páli third son of Bráíenn, shapechanger, companion/lover of Jessan.

People of the Egg the race of demons, as they call themselves, in contrast to humans, who are called the Peo-

ple of the Womb.

Porphoras high master alchemist, member of the Guardian Circle, protector of Niccas.

Porros One of the two mules that Niccas and Sepharan ride on the start of their journey to Enfardast, the other being Smetna.

Prince Caelas military commander, lover of Jessan, a major leader in the revolt against King Temblar.

Prince Feldenas one of the younger princes, son of Prince Nevoras. Niccas pretends to be him when he is stopped by Prince Poëstil on the way to Ernfardest.

Prince Nevoras Blood relation to King Temblar (son of the king's sister), who plots to overthrow him.

Prince Poëstil Crown prince, heir to the Amethyst Throne, assigned by King Temblar to deal with the uprising led by Prince Caelas.

Prince Sadaras Second son of the King Temblar and a gifted military commander. Niccas meets him briefly in the Eye of Knoltan.

Rabih a street boy of Shavagar-Yasí who sometimes does errands for Adelantas.

Saiphar or “West Wind” — see “Ouras,” above.

Sepharan for a time, Maerdas's love boy, then Niccas's companion. Sihtric a horse, bearer of Leannian.

Šmetna See Porro.

Šophæra wife of Porphoras, Sister of the Daughters of the Moon or, in common parlance, a witch.

Švanr a silvery white horse, bearer of Páli.

Šelo shop boy, lover of Jessan, who becomes High Steward of Sondaram.

Šeshnar'ad Avatar of Ra'asiel, demon warrior, lover of Niccas.

Šezar The personal attendant of Crown Prince Poëstil. Niccas meets him in the Eye of Knoltan.

Šifridh horse, given to Jessan by Páli.

Šrdan apprentice torturer at Gorzungâd.

Šrvasor *koryphaios* of the House of the Narrow Blade in Shavagar-Yasí.

Šwaldrônur which, in the Old Tongue, means approximately "Those Who Speak To Trees." They are peaceful race of beings who are more like men in their appearance than not, but fairer in appearance and more ethereal of spirit.

Šwelrenc second son of Bráíenn.

Šwŷhnnŷa a mare belonging to Niccas.



Šisn'zahsk (Dune Rider) one of a breed of large, two-legged saurian mounts ridden by demons and used, unmuz-

zled, to vicious effect in battles. This one bears Niccas to Shavagar-Yasí.

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.

Viri an ancient near-immortal race that who lives in dark caverns they build themselves in the shape of a great beast's internal organs. They feed on blood, using a kind of mind touching to seduce their victims.

Wraith Ghouls horrific creatures summoned by Necromancers from Ais Dymassia, where they feed on the souls of the dead. Set loose in the land of the living, they happily gorge on human flesh as well, and since they are already dead, are impossible to kill. In order to remain in the world of the living, they obey the instructions of the Necromancers who summon them, but most of their victims are killed for their own pleasure.

Places

The 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 "This 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."



Gorzungâd fortress castle, 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.

Faeÿstirran 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.



Ais Dÿsmassia the Land of the Dead, bordered by the River Cyll. Accounts differ as to whether the Hallowed Halls are situated in this realm, or located somewhere else, perhaps in the heavens.

Alsorel a great river than runs through the kingdom from north to south and connects its three major cities.

Baskast Prül a great demon temple city, sister to the one where Teshnar'ad resides in *Fyrewourmhaem*

The Broken Teeth a spur of mountains that runs west from the Wall of the World and once served as the kingdom's southern border. After the Great Demon Wars, the kingdom extended its reach into the Great Barrens, building the Eye of Knoltan from which to watch the south.

Ciprias a city on the border with Pharros.

Cyll the river that borders Ais Dysmassia. The land on this side of it is said to exist half in the world of the living and half in the world of the dead. Those lacking the fare to cross the river are doomed to haunt the real one, tormented by the proximity of their former life.

Cytheria. Once a small free city surrounded by mountains that once served as a seaport for The Kingdom, it is now ruled by the sorcerer Hezzakal and has become a haunted and evil place.

Eye of Knoltan one of the Kingdom's Five Wonders, a watch tower shaped like an obelisk, from which an elite force watches for any sign of a demon invasion.

The Faiward Islands a small group of islands in the Western Sea claimed by the Kingdom.

Flëara the river that runs through the Valley of Many Deaths and limits access to Wethrelast.

Forest Grymaeld a great forest to the east of Lorithar, at

the heart of which is Wyldmast Druim.

Fyrewourmhaem “Dragon Lair” in the old tongue, the place where the remaining race of dragons are imprisoned by enchantment, along with the Avatar, Teshnar’ad

Gates of Karn a fort guarding the one pass through the mountains that separate the seacoast around Gedd from the rest of 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 Faiward Island on which *mythral* is mined.

Plains of the Lhennad the area just east of the mountains that divide the seacoast from the rest of the Kingdom.

Ngürknasg the land of the demons, far to the southeast of the Kingdom, a place of swamp and jungle.

Nilfred the last town before the hills leading to the Forbidden Valley and the Wall of the World.

Plaecenon one the Kingdom’s three great cities, home of Anisor.

Pharros the country to the southwest of the Kingdom.

Shavagar-Yasi the southernmost city of the Kingdom, and the only one of the far side of The Broken Teeth. It is a trading city, doing business with the lands of the south, and odd items and odder people can be found there.

Tarn of Subtle Waters a small lake said to possess curative powers that lies a stone's throw from Ernfardast.

Tarrusor 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.

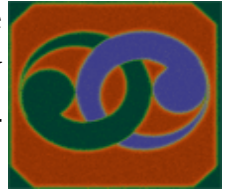
Wyldmast Druim a flat-topped mountain in the heart of the Forest Grymaeld. It is the locus of ancient magic of great power. It is here that Teshnar'ad, Avatar of Ra'asiel is imprisoned and where all known dragons are kept in perpetual sleep.

Terms

Amethyst Throne the line of kings who have ruled over the kingdom for many centuries. The jewel was chosen as their sigil because they came to power after a period of great strife, and the amethyst symbolizes sincerity, forgiveness, and stability.

cronnex the sigil of the *Nithaial* and a symbol for the essential harmony of both the elements of the natural world and between the spiritual and material world. It

is usually given the shape shown in the illustration to the right, which is a highly stylized rendering of two entwined dragons.



dre'aganzd'morsh Literally, “dragon ordure.” It is highly regarded by the People of the Egg for its magical and healing qualities, and the inhabitants of Heref for the pungent flavor a pinch of it can impart to a soup or stew.

enkiridion an autographic, or handwritten, book for the use of the owner only, as of alchemical substances and potions, secret spells, and the like.

glyptos a graven image, animated by magical powers, that usually keeps guard at a doorway, letting only those pass who are known to it or possess a talisman that gives them entry.

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.

The Nithaial half-mortal intermediaries between humans and Gesryma, the Great Mother of Bessed 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.

Order of the Narrow Blade a religious order of men and women who sought to return balance to the world by killing those whose evil deeds were conspicuous and who would otherwise most likely be left unpunished. Rank and wealth did not deter them; some said it encouraged them. But it was generally agreed that those who fell to the blade richly deserved their fate.

Summoner a human being corrupted by Maerdas to serve as a conduit of his powers, and so used for various tasks, most often for seeking out and destroying enemies.

telesma perfectly formed diamonds that necromancers and permeate with esoteric powers which can then be tapped for a specific purpose, such as various ways of farseeing or scrying. However, the results are often 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 is permits the public acknowledgment of profound emotional ties that

exist apart from kinship or matrimony. These may or 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*.

PART ONE



SMUGGLERS'
ROAD

Chapter 1



THE PASSAGE FROM Wethrelad to Sondaram happened in a blink of the eye. Indeed, the experience was like jumping into a pool of water only to have it immediately spit you out. Since the tops of both towers were virtually the same, the first realization that anything had changed came from the sun, which had shot back up into the western sky. Then I stepped to the ramparts to find the glistening sea dotted with fishing boats and the town of Gedd spread out before me, and my heart swelled.

I stared at this familiar view for several moments, breathing in the clean salt air, purging my lungs of the stench of the dead. Then I turned and went down the stairs. Leaving my bag in the anteroom, I continued down to the vault below and sat awhile among the tombs of the *Nithaial* who had come before me, further refreshing my spirits and calming my mind. Then I went back up the stairs, picked up my gear, and entered the great hall.

I had left an empty Wethrelad behind me and had

expected to step into an equally empty Sondaram. But it was clear that much had happened in the months I had been absent. Richly colored tapestries hung from the wall, cushions had been laid on top of the stone ledge that ran along the wall, and the air was faintly scented with incense. I looked about me in wonder as the door behind me swung shut.

The slight click this caused alerted someone, for there was a scurry of footsteps down the stairs and a comely youth clad in an embroidered shirt of soft blue fabric edged with gold and scarlet embroidery came hurrying across the great hall.

“Welcome home, *Nithaial Galgaliel*,” he said, grinning from ear to ear as he bowed low.

I looked at him closely. “Telo!?” I asked.

Telo smiled. “The very same, *Nithaial*. And *you*, I must say,” he continued, taking me in from head to toe, “look like something the cat coughed up.”

I followed his glance down. I had forgotten that I was wearing no clothing and, even more, that my body was covered with dirt, scratch marks, and large swollen lumps where the hornets had stung me.

“You know, I *have* had a rough day,” I replied. “I have just battled an army of the dead, beat back the spells of a great necromancer, then reduced his tower to ruins—after summoning the palace Wethrelad up from its ruins.”

“It sounds like what *you* need,” Telo replied, “is a nice hot bath—followed by something good to eat. Well, you’ve come to the right place.”

“You astonish me,” I said.

Telo laughed. “There you have the difference between us, *Nithaial*. You amaze *me* with tales of mighty battles and wizardry, and I amaze *you* with tales of hot baths and good food.” He took my sack, my sandals, and my belt from me, and saying, “Follow me,” led me up the stairs to my room.

It was much as I remembered it—the writing table, the chairs, the large bed, the soft carpets on the floor, the light flooding in from the high windows. However, Telo led me through it to a door that opened to a small inner room, brightly lit with glow stones, which to my astonishment—for I hadn’t entered it before—held a large sunken bath, quite full of water, which sent shimmering reflections skittering after each other across the white-tiled walls.

Telo knelt down and tested its temperature with his hand. He then picked up a small flask and poured in some of its contents, stirring the water vigorously as he did so. Immediately, the air was full of the fragrance of distilled herbs and aromatic barks.

“There!” he said. “Your bath awaits. Get in and I will start by washing your hair—mostly, washing things *out* of it. You have half a forest entangled there.”

I went to the end of the bath and looked down into the water. It was surprisingly deep—if I sat down on the bottom only my head and shoulders would be above the water. A short flight of tiled steps went down at one corner, but I

wanted to experience entering it all at once.

I spread out my arms and fell forward. There was a great splash, a distant cry, the voluptuous feeling of hot, silky, scented water enveloping me entirely. I let myself sink all the way to the bottom and then, very slowly, floated back up to the surface, turning over as I did so.

When my face emerged from the water I groaned with pleasure, then opened my eyes—and saw Telo, hands on hips, glaring at me. My plunge had soaked him from head to foot. His shirt clung wetly to his body and his carefully coiffed locks now hung down limply from his head.

“That wasn’t very thoughtful!” he said, plucking the wet fabric away from his skin. “I spent the whole of my first month’s wages on this shirt.”

“Oh, Telo, I’m sorry,” I said, trying valiantly not to laugh. “But that’s easily remedied. Lift up your arms.” When he did so, I cast a small spell and drew all the moisture from the cloth. The fabric was again dry, soft, and unwrinkled, although it remained faintly scented by the bath oils.

“Now,” I said, “go take that off and put it safely on the bed. Then come back and join me in the bath. There’s plenty of room for two.”

When he returned, I cast an appraising glance at his body, so white and slender compared to my own. I thought of the last time we met, the hurried and inexperienced lovemaking, kept silent for fear of alerting his father, who was busy in his workshop just over our heads.

Our eyes met and we both smiled. I had forgotten how lovely his were, large and liquid, beneath a fringe of long dark eyelashes, and I was happy at how bold they still were as he regarded me. There was no getting around treating a *Nithaial* respectfully, I had begun to understand, but that didn't mean it had to be done with abject servility.

"A broke-pence for your thoughts," I said.

He smiled, shook his head, and brought forth the hand that he had been keeping behind his back. It was holding a comb.

So it was that, a moment later, he was sitting half submerged on one of the steps, and I was floating on my back, with my head just a few inches above his lap, my hair floating like a nimbus around it.

Occasionally, Telo would utter a little gasp of disgust as he combed the detritus from my hair, but I decided it would be pointless to ask him what he had found. Instead, I inquired how he had come to be here, waiting for me.

"It was that Mage's doing," Telo replied, speaking in an abstracted way, since much of his attention was devoted to unknottling some ferocious tangles. "He passed me on the street, turned, seized me by the shoulder, looked rather fiercely at me, and muttered something I couldn't quite catch."

"Ouch!" I cried.

"Sorry!" he replied. "Some of your hair seems to be actually *glued* together. We'll just let it soak a bit." He gently

took hold of my shoulder and began slowly pushing me out, then pulling me back again.

“Anyway,” he went on, “I did make out enough to grasp that he was talking about you, and your...” he hesitated. “Well, there’s no way to put this tactfully....”

“My wanton ways,” I said resignedly.

“Mmm,” Telo agreed. “Your shameless cavortings. Lickerish lechery. That sort of thing.”

“Goddess bless!” I said suddenly. “Did Orien say... that I, uh....” I was suddenly hesitant to speak further.

“That our lovemaking had some unexpected consequences? For me, anyway?” Telo replied. “No. I had to figure that out for myself. The Mage’s attitude was essentially: the *Nithaial* made this mess, the *Nithaial* can clean it up.”

I opened my eyes and looked up at him. “And here you are cleaning *me* up,” I said.

“My new powers aren’t to be underestimated,” Telo agreed. “And we haven’t even gotten to the supper table.”

I sighed. “Seriously, Telo, what *has* happened to you?”

Telo shook his head, looking suddenly somber, at least for him. “I haven’t figured it out yet. I hear voices, but I can’t quite make them out. It was *very* unsettling until I realized that this was a gift of sorts from you. And I’m overjoyed to be here, even though it’s because the Mage wants me to keep an eye on you—and you, I guess, on me.”

“Are you angry with me?” I asked.

Telo cradled my head in his hands, then leant down

and kissed my lips. “What do you think?” he said.

Once he was finished (for the moment) with my hair, Telo produced a scour-cloth, which he passed to me, and set me to work cleaning my front parts, while he scrubbed my back with another.

Then we changed places—I sat on the stairs and Telo stood in the bath with his back to me. He pinioned one of my legs, then the other, under his arm, and made a valiant attempt to deal with my feet.

When all that was done, I slipped under the water again to rinse myself off. When my head resurfaced, I sighed contentedly and said, “I could stay here all evening.”

“The wrinkled skin from such a soaking would give you a needed touch of gravitas, *Nithaial*,” Telo agreed. “But, alas, your feet are crying out for attention—and I can’t rub them with salves when they’re submerged in water.” He sighed. “As to your toenails, we may have to borrow Prince Caelas’ sword.”

“Caelas!” I exclaimed, stepping out of the tub. “Is he coming here?”

“For supper,” Telo said, wrapping me in a luxurious length of toweling. “And, I imagine, for... after.”

This sounded so wonderful that a suspicion immediately crept into my mind. “And do you know whether the Mage Orien will be coming with him?” I asked.

“I *told* the prince that you’d be wanting to spend the night in serious discussion,” Telo said primly as he shaved

away my whispery beard, “but I’m afraid he just laughed and said he wanted you all to himself. Indeed, I suspect that if the illustrious mage insists on tagging along anyway, he may find himself spending the night in the dungeon.”

Finally, he worked a palmful of fragrant oil through my hair and brushed it until it glowed, then dressed me in the very robe that Caelas had given me before we left—a long and flowing affair cut from a lustrous fabric in which arcane symbols shimmered in gold on a field of what sometimes seemed a regal purple and othertimes a dark and luminous red.

Telo stepped back and regarded his handiwork. “A *dream*,” he sighed. “The Prince may decide to forgo supper.”

“Another remark like that, Telo,” I retorted, blushing, “and I’ll pick you up and throw you into the tub.”

“Would you *really*?” Telo asked, rather flirtatiously. “Well, I’d rather you tossed me onto the bed.”

I made a jump at him and he squealed and fled, almost colliding with servants bearing a table, two chairs, and a large tray heaped with food.

Telo immediately reverted to his role as High Steward (or whatever term he had chosen to designate himself), and directed the placement of these items.

To me, he said, “I thought it would make you happiest to have all this taken care of before Prince Caelas arrives, even if it isn’t strictly the way things should be done. I don’t

expect you'll want servers hovering at your elbow."

If I had been highborn, the presence of servants would no more intrude on my consciousness than the plates on the table. But I wasn't—in fact, I was even less used to the exhibition of gracious manners than he. So, happily, gratefully, I took him in my arms and kissed him, then let him slip away with the others while I settled into a chair to wait.

FOOLISHLY, I HAD IMAGINED CAELAS ARRIVING in full military gear, and me unbuckling his sword and removing the helmet from his head. Instead, of course, he came wearing a dress tunic, elaborately embroidered, with a belt of woven gold strands fastened around his waist.

I stood up the moment he appeared in the doorway, feeling suddenly shy—all the more so when he came to me, then knelt down and kissed my hand.

"Hail to thee, *Nithaial Galgaliel*, returned in all your glory," he said, raising his head as he did so, meeting my eyes. I was surprised at how full of depth they had become—and realized with a shock that this represented not only the events that had transpired since I had seen him, but the ripening of my seed. How strange that in this he and Telo were brothers.

"Rise Prince Caelas, O Superiors' Superior," I replied. "I thought I might have the pleasure of removing your armor, but I see, instead, that my task is to strip away all this princely protocol of yours."

As he rose to his feet, I dropped my arms and let my

robe slide from my body. I stepped over it, threw my arms around his neck, and kissed him long and deeply, inhaling his musky scent, his beard prickling my cheek.

When we stopped to take a breath of air, Caelas seized hold of my shoulders and pushed me back, not to distance himself from me but to look me over.

“By the Goddess, you look more like a soldier now than many of the striplings under my command. Although I suppose you still can’t handle a sword!”

I smiled. “The last army I faced I merely ripped their limbs from their bodies with my bare hands,” I said. “Like this....”

I struck him hard with both hands. Caught by surprise, he lost his balance and toppled onto the bed. In a flash I was astride him, pinning his arms.

“Goddess, you *have* gotten strong,” he muttered, struggling to free himself.

“Admit that you’re my captive,” I said.

“Never!” Caelas replied, and with a great heave not only threw me off him but reversed our positions entirely. Now he had me clenched firmly between his legs.

“Now, *you* admit to being captured,” he said, reaching down and tweaking my nipples.

“Hmm,” I replied, undoing his belt. I let it drop, then lifted his tunic, and began to unlace his smalls. “I might prefer to *not* surrender, but to struggle on regardless.”

“That is the nobler option,” Caelas agreed. “And a

worthy opponent will soon put you out of your misery.”

“Well, not *too* soon, I hope,” taking hold of his cock. It was already rampant. I had forgotten how *big* it was.

Caelas removed his tunic and, ever the soldier, laid it neatly to one side, placing the belt beside it. I remembered the hair on his chest, but not that it also ran down his stomach, an isthmus of it melding into the luxuriant mass that surrounded his privates. I buried my fingers in it, the hair so wiry and dense, the muscles just below the skin so solid and hard. My need to have him inside me almost made me pant.

“Now!” I said. “Now, now, now, now.”

Caelas released my legs and as I spread them apart, kneeled in-between them, slid his hands beneath my buttocks and lifted them up.

He gasped with surprise as he did so, because my whole body rose up from the bed as well.

“There are *some* benefits in having a *Nithaial* for a lover,” I said. I wrapped one hand behind his neck and reached down with the other to guide the head of his cock to where my hole was impatiently waiting for it.

“You’re about to encounter the last of the Warrior’s Friend you gave me,” I told him, not adding that Telo had insisted on applying it inside me himself, so as not to soil my robe. His fingers inside me had almost put an end to my carefully laid plans.

“The *last* of it!” Caelas exclaimed. “I’m honored. You

have been a busy lad.” Both his hands were clasped to my hips. He gasped and I cried out as his knob forced open the clutching ring of muscle wider, then wider still, before suddenly slipping inside. I could feel my eyes opening just as wide—not from the pain but from the sheer sensation of taking such a huge thing inside me.

Caelas clenched his own ass as he drove his cock slowly into me, bit by bit, until I could feel the heat of his body as the tender inner skin of my spread buttocks pressed against it. Then, just as slowly, he withdrew his cock until the knob was caught against the inside of the muscle ring. He pushed back inside me.


I reached up and grasping his nipples with my fingers, held onto them as he fucked me, faster now.

Weightless, floating in the air—this allowed every nerve in my body, every muscle that lay along its route, to focus on this thing rooting in my ass. Its size, the force of its motion, the quivering sensation when its head rubbed hard against what Alfrund called the spend button, because simply fingering it could make any man shoot his cream.

Both our bodies glistened with sweat. Caelas’ eyes had locked with mine, his saying, “you feel that, don’t you?” and mine replying, “yes, yes, yes.” His rhythm quickened, and suddenly I realized that, aloft in the air as I was, I could reach down and hold his purse as he shot.

And I could. I let go of his nipples, reached underneath me, and took hold of him, one of his orbs in each hand.

Each was swollen and hard, like an unripe plum. As I began to pull on them, Caelas' eyes glazed over, and his throat made a sound, half moan, half growl. His thrusts turned into convulsions, and as they did, his balls went into spasms, convulsing in my hands, as his spend flooded hot inside me. Our bodies shuddered together, he fell down onto the bed on top of me, and we lay there, half conscious, panting, for a long while.

Finally, Caelas rolled off me, muttering, "Let me suck you." He lifted his head, looked down, and laughed. My own spend coated both our stomachs. I had come without even knowing it, the intensity of his release triggering my own. It had all been one, a great wave that picked us both up and tossed us, battered, delirious, onto the shore. 

Chapter 2



ALAS, I ATE THE MEAL Telo had orchestrated for us in such a stupor of exhaustion that I hardly appreciated how good it was—the whole fish stuffed with a mincemeat of prawns and baked wrapped in leaves; the spiced pottage of dried peas, the fluffed barley full of bits of wild mushroom, the pile of sweetmeats and honey cakes. Eat it though I did, holding my own against Caelas even, for I was famished, and my appetite at least understood good this dinner was, even as I remained oblivious to it.

There was, of course, a pitcher of the finest ale to help us wash it all down, and when we had finished it, I had merely to speak Telo's name to have still more. He came with a servant who cleared away all but the sweet things and our drinking bowls.

Once the edge of his own hunger had dulled, Caelas began plying me with questions, and by now he knew all I cared to tell him of my adventures since I had set sail on the

Tejj. He, in turn, told me of the doings here, principally, of the battle at the Gates of Karn, where he and his forces, with the aid of the Mage Orien, had defeated the army that the king had sent to crush the rebellion and regain control of the profitable salt trade which was one of the financial underpinnings of the Amethyst Throne.

However, defending a mountain pass against an army was one thing and going down from the mountains to fight against the king's forces and Maerdas was quite another. And the king was determined that if he wasn't to profit from the salt, no one else would, so he forbade any trade at all between Gedd and the rest of the kingdom. This, especially, hit the city hard.

The initial popularity of the rebellion—and especially the joy at the ending of the hard rule imposed by the Lord of the Fort—was now quickly waning. True, trade continued by sea, but the lands to the south had no need of salt (indeed, they were now selling it most profitably to the rest of the kingdom themselves) and few for the salt fish, timber, and furs that were all Gedd was capable of offering for trade. There had been no open unrest, but Caelas was well aware of the mutterings in private and the waning enthusiasm of the soldiers under his command.

Caelas had spent most of his time plotting to bring other parts of the king's army over to his side, for without such an alliance, he had no hope of spreading the rebellion further. Everything depended on that, and, even more so, on

the return of the *Nithaial* and the resurrection of Gostranar in Wisferon, the Holy Wood.

“And as to that, I finally have some good news,” Caelas said, “which reached me by messenger only yesterday. It is, in truth, *very* good news.”

He took a drink of ale, knowing he now had my full attention, which had, in my sleepiness, begun to drift. “I received a secret dispatch from my cousin Tristfanas, who commands the Eye of Knoltan and the pass there to the southern lands. He reports that your twin, the *Nithaial Elimiel*, has resurrected Fæyðstirran, and, furthermore, was seen traveling there on the back of a dragon.”

“A dragon!” I exclaimed. “How could that be?”

Caelas laughed. “A very good question! And, even better, one to which we may soon know the answer. Tristfanas writes that he has word that your twin may even now be within the city of Shavagar-Yasí. If this turns out to be so, my cousin plans to join the rebellion and shut off the passage there through the mountains, thus denying the king another important source of revenue.”

My heart lifted up at the thought that Niccas had accomplished so much. From my time hiding in Gedd I had realized that Maerdas’ first priority was to capture him, not me. “Perhaps the dragon could then carry the *Nithaial Elimiel* to Ernfordast,” I said, “thus evading Maerdas entirely.” I didn’t add that this would mean that the towers would rise at both Fæyðstirran *and* Ernfordast, and that we could be together in

little more than a heartbeat. That thought would surely have Maerdas pulling out his hair.

Caelas misread my silence, or rather put his own thoughts into it. “I know that Shavagar-Yasí, like Gedd, is isolated from the kingdom by a mountain range,” he said. “So you are probably thinking that we haven’t accomplished all that much.”

I shook my head. “No,” I said. “It’s true that I’ve never before heard of Shavagar-Yasí, just as very few in the kingdom have heard of Gedd—or would care anything if they did hear of it. But even I know about the Eye of Knoltan, the great symbol of our victory against the demons. To have it on our side would be a great blow to the king.”

Caelas’ eyes met mine and we both smiled. I lifted my drinking bowl, and he, his. “To victory,” he said.

“And to the Warrior’s Friend!” I replied.

Caelas almost choked on his ale. When he recovered, he said, “That reminds me. You have yet to tell me what happened to the rest of it.”

I HAD ASSUMED THAT CAELAS would be spending the night with me, but that was not to be. Telo appeared and, as before, seemingly oblivious to the prince’s nakedness, bowed and said that a soldier had arrived to summon him back to the fort.

Caelas immediately stood up and, taking a steaming towel from a covered basin that Telo had thoughtfully left when the table was cleared, began to clean away the remains

of our meal and, more importantly, the dried bodily fluids and such that remained splattered on his chest, stomach, and nether regions. Telo stared at Caelas' cock, limp but still impressive, without a hint of good manners, then turned to me and let his jaw drop, mouthing astonishment (or perhaps his willingness to give the Prince a good sucking).

"Slut," I mouthed back, and he had the grace to blush, which he hid from Caelas by going to the bed and retrieving his smalls, tunic, and belt.

"Let me, your highness," he said, and before Caelas could reply, he knelt down, deftly fastened the smalls, then laced up the tunic in the back while the prince fastened his belt himself.

Then Caelas came to me and took hold of my chin, drawing me in for a kiss while keeping my sticky body a good distance from his clothing. The kiss, however, was far from perfunctory.

"Oh sweet boy," he said. "If you could treat all my soldiers so, we would have a force to conquer the world."

"Please, not *tonight*," I said. "Telo already has enough to clean up."

Caelas pulled my nose. "Yes, and you do need your sleep. I'm going to tell you about the Battle of Karn all over again when you are awake enough to listen.

"Get up early, though," he added. "The Mage Orien and I will be here first thing in the morning to make plans for what we should do next." And to Telo, "If you can provide us

a breakfast half as good as this dinner, I may well make you a prince, myself.” Then he turned, and in a moment we could hear him hurrying down the stairs.

“I see you’re struck speechless for once,” I said to Telo, once we were alone.

“What that man doesn’t have, no one would want,” he answered dreamily. “Jessan, you are so fucking *lucky*. I hope you are at least good and sore—perhaps even damaged a little?”

“That is so *mean*,” I said. “But take a look. I fear I may well be.”

I bent over, and almost immediately Telo gave out a sharp cry of despair.

“What!?” I said. “I can’t feel anything that bad!”

“Oh, it’s not *you*,” Telo replied. “It’s the terrible *blotch* you left on your seat cushion. Or does your magic extend to stain removal?”

“Minion, remember that you’re talking to the *Nith-aial Galgaliel*,” I said haughtily.

“Sorry, your Holiness,” Telo replied, and we both collapsed on the bed laughing.

“All right, let me look at your holy hole,” he said at last, and I rolled over and spread my legs.

“Hmm,” he said. “I see the prince is someone you have to work your way up to. Some small tears, but, even so, I’m really amazed. You’ve been practicing.”

I began to realize how sore I was. “Do you have any

more of those warm towels?" I asked, with a groan.

"Everything we need, I have," he replied, and began the long process of cleaning me up, gently rubbing some soothing unguent to sooth my hurt, and finally remaking the bed. When he was finished, he brought over my pack and set it on the bed beside me.

"Shall we unpack this now?" he asked. "It sounds as though you'll be very busy in the morning."

"Doesn't it," I said with a sigh, adding about the pack, "I don't think there's anything in there besides dirty laundry."

"I've already dealt with *that*," Telo said, emptying the pack carefully onto the bed. "Well, here's your wand of power, your secret diary (referring to my carefully bound-up *enkiridion*), your herbalist tackle, and...these."

He took out a small parcel wrapped in cloth, and when I made no move to stop him, started to unwrap it. I thought it was the little dolphin Faryn had carved for me, and I felt a twinge of sadness, for it was my one link to my boyhood, my first love, my lost life.

Telo, meanwhile, opened the cloth, and gasped. It wasn't the dolphin after all, but a large diamond shaped by magic into a perfect sphere. Then I remembered pressing the dolphin into Matheas's hand when we parted, and my sadness turned to something more bittersweet.

Telo, the gem cupped in his palm, looked up at me wonderingly.

“It’s called a *telesma*,” I said. “It’s used for farseeing and for answering questions—if you can make it speak.”

Telo’s eyes glittered. “Can I try?” he asked.

I thought of Orien struggling in vain to get any response from it at all. “Of course,” I answered, “but don’t be disappointed if nothing happens. You press it against your forehead, then try to link it with your mind.”

Telo sat cross-legged on the bed, shook himself like a dog, then took the glittering gem and held it firmly in place, just over the bridge of his eyebrows.

At first nothing happened, and my mind wandered back to my conversation with Caelas. But then I felt him go rigid beside me, and even as I turned my head to look at him, he began to speak in a high-pitched stranger’s voice.

“Niccass! Is that you? Please Niccass, tell me what happened to Iannas. He hasn’t come back. And I can’t mind-touch him, even with this stone.”

I seized hold of Telo’s hand. “Who are you?” I asked.

“It’s *Rabih*, Niccass. Iannas managed to hide this stone before the soldiers seized him. Things are very bad here.”

I glanced at Telo. His eyes were clouded, and I had no idea what this was costing him. I had better be quick.

“Rabih, my name is Jessan,” I said. “I’m Niccass’s twin, the *Nithaial Galgaliel*. Where are you?”

There was a moment’s silence, then Rabih said cau-

tiously, “Well, you *sound* like Niccas.” I could sense tears. “I’m in Shavagar-Yasí. Niccas and the wizard Helias were here, too. But soldiers took them all to the Eye of Knoltan.”

I sighed in relief. “They were taken to Tristfanas. He’ll protect them, Rabih. He’s going to join us in the rebellion.”

This time there was a longer silence, and when Rabih spoke, the voice was softer, almost indistinct. “Prince Tristfanas has been killed, Jessan. All his soldiers, too. Prince Poëstil commands the Eye of Knoltan now.” The words were coming more slowly, hesitantly, each one spaced apart. “Helias... Niccas... Iannas... must all... all be *dead*.”

The stone fell from Telo’s hand and bounced off the bed with a thud. Telo had passed out.

In a panic, I chafed his wrists. When this accomplished nothing, I reached over, took up from its basin the soaking cloth that Telo had been using to clean me, and began to mop his forehead.

In a moment, Telo groaned and opened his eyes. They were clear, now, but unfocused. With a visible effort, he fixed them on me, then on what I held in my hand.

“Put that *back*,” he gasped. “I’m *not* going to make this bed again!”

Oh, Telo,” I said, embracing him. “I’m so sorry.”

He lifted his head and tried to see where I had tossed the wet cloth. “You’re *impossible*,” he said. “I’m sure it landed on one of the more valuable rugs.”

“Stop it,” I said. “You’re more important than the fucking upholstery.”

Telo smiled. “Now *that* is about the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me,” he said. Then he caressed my cheek. “I’m fine,” he said. “Never better. I can’t believe that happened. Who were you talking to?”

“Someone named Rabih,” I replied. “He didn’t tell me who he was.”

Telo tried to sit up, and failed. “I am weak,” he conceded. “That takes a lot out of you.” He caught my eye. “I can tell you that Rabih is a boy—a very frightened and unhappy boy. And I’m afraid you left him even *more* frightened and unhappy. Could you figure out what he was talking about?”

I thought about it. “Yes and no,” I answered. “But mostly no. I think I now know why Caelas was summoned away so quickly. He must have received some very bad news. I’ve heard Prince Poëstil’s name before, but I can’t remember exactly where.”

“Maybe the word ‘pustule’ will prompt your memory,” Telo said dryly.

I looked at him in astonishment. “Yes!” I said. It had been Theor, one of the apprentice herbalists, at that feast at the hut, who had said it. “King Temblar’s eldest son, Prince Poestil, or Prince Pustule, as he was generally known,” I murmured, remembering. “If anything, even more craven and corrupt than the king himself.”

“You *do* consort with dangerous company,” Telo

said. “But that’s the man, down to a very fine stitch.”

I started to get up. “I should go find Caelas and tell him at once,” I said.

“No!” Telo exclaimed. “You’re going to stay right here and tend to *me*. You just said that Caelas has probably just received this news himself. And if he hasn’t, why spoil his sleep? Bad news is always easier to digest in the morning, as my granny used to say.”

I fell back down on the bed beside him. Telo was right. If I went to find Caelas, I would end up having no sleep and for no purpose. I snuggled up next to Telo.

“I see that your talents for farseeing don’t always require a *telesma*,” I said. “Did you have something particularly in mind when you spoke of this ‘tending’ of you?”

Telo kissed me, then kissed me again. “Now you’re the one who’s reading minds,” he said. “I *was* wondering if you had gotten any practice at giving suck since last we met. For a beginner, you showed such natural talent.”

I smiled and kissed him back. “Well, let’s find out,” I answered.

And so we did.

TELO, WHO SLIPPED OUT OF MY BED long before I woke up myself, did present us with a princely breakfast when Orien, Caelas, and I settled down to talk on the terrace under the ever-blossoming, ever-fruited alestran trees. There was a platter of hot oatmeal cakes drizzled with honey, thin slices of salt mutton, deeply perfumed wedges of

melon, and a jug of bubbling golden perry.

Furthermore, the day was radiant. Sunlight poured through the branches of the trees and made the ocean sparkle; birds sang above our heads; a cool breeze came off the water, bearing with it the delicious tang of salt. But none of this helped make our meeting anything but gloomy. For once, even Orien was almost without words.

In truth, I surprised myself with the warmth of my greeting. He might be abrasive, always, and pedantic, often, but he was also wise and true, and his burnt hand, now a twisted claw, was but the most conspicuous sign of what he had suffered on my behalf. We embraced, and I saluted him as the hero of the great battle at the Gates of Karn.

He laughed. “I certainly made the most noise,” he said. “Mages have always especially delighted in magic that goes bang, especially if it also casts out shards of brilliant light. I think King Temblar thought the rustic soldiers who manned the walls would shake in terror at the sight of a real army, especially one led by Demon Lords.”

The mage smiled beatifically. “But once I turned a few of *those* into scorched gobbets, the lads had no trouble rallying, shoving over the siege ladders the moment they rested against the walls, all the while sending down on the heads below a steady stream of rocks, boiling pitch, and arrows. They lost hundreds before they fled; we lost fewer than twenty.”

Caelas stood by silently during this speech, with the

expression of one who had heard it once or twice before. He caught hold of my hand, squeezed it, and said, "From the fact that I failed to return, you may have guessed that I was sent ill tidings—but perhaps not how ill they are."

"I know that your cousin Tristfanas was killed," I said soberly, "along with many of his men, and that Prince Poëstil now commands the Eye of Knoltan, and perhaps even holds Niccas in captivity."

Caelas and Orien looked at me with such astonishment that I felt obliged to relate Telo's farseeing adventure of the night before.

Orien looked a bit miffed but said nothing. Caelas, on the other hand, gave Telo a look that must have been equal to any he would have received for the deliciousness of the mostly untouched breakfast.

"Sit with us, Telo," he said, "for you have earned a place at the table. I think I know whence come your powers, but how is it that I wasn't as lucky as you?"

Telo blushed. "I cannot answer that, your highness, except to say that 'luck' might not be exactly the right word. It is an exhausting and, I think, dangerous business."

"*Very* dangerous," grunted Orien. "There are many ears in the world of the spirits."

Telo glanced at him. "It is Rabih that worries me, Honorable Mage," he said. "He is but a boy and desperation drives him."

"That may be," Orien replied, "which is all the more

reason to make no effort to contact him again. He could well drag us all down with him.”

“Mage Orien,” I spoke up, intentionally changing the subject. “Rabih mentioned that a wizard was in the company of my twin. Didn’t Maerdas destroy all the wizards hundreds of years ago?”

Orien looked pained. “Where do you think wizards come from?” he asked.

“I thought they were a species of supernatural beings,” I replied, surprised by his question, “like dragons or kobolds—or demons, even.”

“There is nothing supernatural about demons,” Orien said. “They are as mortal as you or I. It is an act of hatred that we call them that, although they deserve the epithet well enough. In the old tongue, they were named *grazzenfowk*, or ‘the lizard people,’ which is much closer to the truth.

“However, wizards,” and here he paused to take a mouthful of perry, “are something different, and you are plenty bright enough to have figured out their origins for yourself.” He looked pointedly at Caelas, then at Telo.

“No!” I said.


“Yes,” Orien countered. “Of course, not everyone you tumble into bed will become an actual wizard, but all will become *wizardly*. For that matter, to attain full potency, this Helias would have to—ahem—be ‘blessed’ by you as well as your twin.”

He fixed me with his deep blue eyes. “And if you are thinking what I suspect you are thinking—I can only say, *no thank you.*”

It was my turn to blush. I was thinking no such thing, but I saw now that I ought to have been. Shades of Timon: being a *Nithaial* brought with it some truly knotty problems.

“Are you sure...?” I asked, trying—and failing—not to sound relieved.

Orien smiled thinly. “Those who are called have no choice in the matter. But since I don’t seem to be one of *those*, I’ll admit to feeling only relief. I’m an old man and I have spent my many, many years mastering a very difficult art. To become a wizard now would turn to ash all that matters to me, whatever else it might do. So, again, there is no need to make the offer, *Nithaial Galgaliel.*”

He sighed. “Anyway, enough of this chatter,” he said. “We have some serious and painful decisions to make. The sooner we have a workable plan, the better.” 

Chapter 3



GEDD HAD CHANGED, but as far as I could tell, entirely for the better. It wasn't as though everyone was walking around with a smile on their face. It was more as though, before, everyone had tried to compress themselves into the smallest possible space, but now allowed themselves to open up, like plants hungry for sun and rain. Although no one seemed to recognize me as the *Nithaial Galiel*, not a few locked eyes with me in a way that suggested hope of a quick coupling in a back alley.

However, even if the feeling was returned, I was far from being in any mood for that. The meeting with Orien and Caelas had ended on the same feeling of sour helplessness with which it had begun. Caelas' plan had two parts: getting other nobles to join him and having the *Nithaial* make public their return by bringing Gostranar back into existence.

Now that Prince Poëstil himself was brutally crushing out any hint of rebellion among the nobility and quite possibly had captured Niccas as well, it was clear that some

new approach must be devised. And since there seemed to be none, it began to seem the better part of wisdom to admit that we had—at least for the moment—failed. By the end of the meeting Orien and Caelas were even debating whether to use the war galleys to carry what troops were willing to go with us into exile on the Faiward Islands. Then Gedd could make its peace with the king.

On that somber note, Orien and Caelas departed, after warning me to keep myself safe in Sondaram. Instead, once they were safely on their way, I put on as ordinary a shirt as I could find in my wardrobe, and slipped down the secret stairs.

At first, my intention had been to go to Grysta and give her (and Onna) a long hug. But once I was out into the town, I realized that it would never again be possible for me to give Grysta a simple embrace. Quite rightly, she would want to hear of my adventures, keep me with her as long as she could so as to reassure herself that I was alive and well and standing there before her. Then she would want to feed me and compete with Onna in fussing over me....

With each of these thoughts, my steps slowed, until I was standing indecisively in the middle of the street, reluctance wrestling with guilt. I was so caught up in these thoughts that I failed to recognize the person who suddenly stopped, gasped, and threw his arms around me.

“Jessan!” he cried.

“Hestal!” I replied, returning his embrace. “Why aren’t you slaving away at the sail yard?”

He laughed. “You forget, thanks to the crown of Hez-zakal, I came back to Gedd a very wealthy man. I hope you got equal value from that magic jewel.”

“More than you could imagine,” I replied.

He looked at me curiously. “Well, you have been adventuring, I see, while I have been getting wealthier. But I have had some adventures, myself. Let me buy you an ale and let us talk a bit.”

I hesitated. I had endured so much talk already this morning. But what Hestál said piqued my curiosity—and a chat with him would hardly weigh me down as much as had the one with Orien and Caelas, where every option had been turned down almost as soon as it was broached.

I took Hestál’s arm. “Since you are the wealthy one, I’ll let you do just that,” I said, and off we went.

I had expected him to take me to an alehouse that he particularly favored, but, once we entered, I realized he had picked one where he was completely unknown. Still, our host knew money when he saw it, and we were soon settled in a corner, with a flagon of ale before us and a bowl of salt-cured cabbage between us to whet our thirst.

Once we were alone and our thirst quenched, I said to Hestál, “I’m surprised that you talk about making money, now that trade between Gedd and the kingdom has been banned by the king.”

Hestál smiled as he deftly took a good pinch of the salt cabbage, squeezed the brine back into the bowl, and

popped it into his mouth. Once he had done so, he laid his forefinger against the side of his nose.

Once he had swallowed his mouthful, he asked, “You remember that we switched shirts before the Tejj sailed away from Cytheria?”

“Shirts!” I exclaimed. “Yours was a smelly old sail-maker’s smock and mine was a fine thing, embroidered and as nicely stitched as any lord’s!”

He laughed. “Yes, I did well enough in that exchange. But what you didn’t know was that what I really coveted was that elegant leather vest of yours. So when I returned here, I sought out a leathersmith and described it to him. By the best of luck, he recognized it right away, for he had made it himself. He took me aside and told me what it really was. Did you know that yourself?”

I thought back. “Yes,” I said. “It was really a... .”

Hestall lifted a hand to silence me. “Very fine piece of work,” he said, finishing my sentence for me.

“Very, very fine,” he repeated. “And it gave me the idea for the trade that I have been following ever since.”

Hestall looked at me intently as if to guide my thinking, but I already understood. That vest had been made for a smuggler, and smuggling was now Hestall’s trade. And even as this thought formed itself, I saw the answer to my own immediate problem. My heart lifted.

“Hestall,” I said, smiling, “you won’t believe how happy I am that fate has thrown us together again.”

THIS FEELING OF RELIEF also freed my mind enough to remind me that Hestál himself had had in his possession something that *I* had coveted.

“Isn’t there some place more private where we could go?” I asked.

“Indeed, there is,” Hestál replied. “And I mean to take you there, once some ale and a little conversation had whetted your appetite—as I do believe it has.”

I blushed. “I meant to talk as well,” I said. Hestál was well-knit, as he had to have been as a sailmaker’s apprentice. Even so, I had paid little notice of him, partly because he seemed the sort who was only interested in girls, and partly because his features were more cheerful than comely.

It was only when we exchanged shirts at parting that I noticed he either kept a coil of ship’s rope in his smalls or else was *amazingly* endowed. I had failed to hide how stunned I was at what I saw, and Hestál made it clear that I could make up for my previous indifference the next time we met.

After we had drunk up and paid our due, Hestál took me to an inn of assignation, something I had heard about but never visited. These existed solely for those wishing to make love in a place cleaner and more hospitable than a back alley.

Many an apprentice, male or female, had experienced their first time in such an inn, and often left with a nice bit of coin jingling in their pockets, as well. (A clear difference

was seen between offering yourself for sale and accepting a gift token from a grateful lover who was in a position to give one.)

Hestál's choice now was a small house, from which hung the banner of its trade, a small square of neatly hemmed sheeting. Inside, we were met by an old woman who took Hestál's coin, went back to her kitchen for a pitcher of steaming water, and then brought us up the stairs to a small room all but filled by its bed.

The one other distinguishing feature was a strong rope, tied to a ceiling beam, that hung down about halfway over the center of the bed, a knot tied to its end. There were no other furnishings save a barred rack to hold one's clothing and a small table with a basin, into which our hostess set the pitcher. Beside this were some folded cloths and a cheap clay crock holding ointment.

Hestál flung open the small window to let in some fresh air and began to pull off his shirt. The room seemed clean enough, the bed linen was coarse but well washed, and I was pleased to catch the scent of fleabane.

"Do you come here often?" I asked, as I disrobed.

"Yes," he replied. "So often, in fact, that I keep this as my own private room." Unlike me, he ignored the racks and just let his clothing fall carelessly onto the floor.

Then he asked a question in return. "When we first met," he said, "you took me for one who preferred women, did you not?"

After I nodded, he continued. “So I am, too,” he said. “And happily married, with one child born and another on the way. However, in making love to a woman, I discovered a sad fact.”

Hestal was now lying on his back, and I discovered it *had* been a length of ship’s rope hidden in his smalls, only one that he came by naturally.

I sat down beside him, took it in my hand, and a thrill shot through me. It was not as thick as Caelas’ organ but thick enough, and, set loose from his smalls, it unfurled half-way down to his kneecap.

“We should send out for an apprentice,” I said. “If you fuck me with that, you’ll need someone to suck the knob when it pokes out of my mouth.”

Hestal smiled. He was lying back with his hands tucked under his head—clearly, I was expected to do all the work. So far, I had felt no need to complain.

“That, you see, is where the sad fact comes in,” he said. “It turns out that no woman’s quim is deep enough to take all that in. And while some are willing to take it in the rear, my wife is not. Indeed, the very idea frightens her.”

His eyes met mine. “Men, I’ve learned, are bolder. As an apprentice, I was constantly importuned, begged even, but I had no idea then that... I would enjoy it *so much*.” He shook his head. “If only I had known, I could have fucked from morning to night, and had more coin than I could have found a way to spend.”

I smiled. Hestal was barely into his twenties. I said nothing, however, because, in truth, I was only half listening—so absorbed was I in fondling his cock. I stroked it easily with both hands at once, something I had never done before. Before it began to stiffen, it was as supple as a snake, but warmer and softer. I thought that once Hestal had his release, I could sit here for hours, just playing with him.

Before this, I had never thought it possible that a cock, all by itself, could have such power over me. And, yet, there it was—Hestal was someone who himself would never have drawn a glance from any passerby. It just happened that he owned a dog that everyone had to stop and pet.

All *my* petting was making it stiff, and while it grew no longer that I could see, it was quite a formidable staff. I would be lying if I said my heart didn't quail a bit as I took some of the ointment from the crock on the table by the bed and spread a slick coating up and down its length.

"Your lovers usually survive their impaling?" I asked, only half in jest.

Hestal opened one eye. "Surely some do, since I've plugged them more than once. A few, *many* more times." As I got up onto the bed and stood astride him, he added, "Turn your back to me. I like to watch it going in and out."

I hardly exaggerate when I say that I hardly had to bend my legs before I felt it brushing against my ass. Hestal reached up and seized each of my buttocks, spreading them apart as he guided his post directly to my opening.

His knob was not large; taking him in was nothing like it was when Caelas entered me, which must be akin to a woman giving birth. A firm push and I could feel Hestal inside me, and I began to lower myself down onto him.

“Use the rope,” Hestal told me. *That* was its purpose! By grabbing hold of it just above the knot, I could raise and lower myself easily and quickly without putting so much strain on my legs.

I grabbed hold of the rope and let myself sink down, feeling his cock find its way deeper and deeper inside me. The sensation of having a cock burrowing that far inside me gave the urgency of my lust a riveting edge of terror, and it made me shiver.

“Further,” Hestal grunted, “you aren’t there yet.”

Goddess! My legs were only half bent! Gasping, I slipped down some more. Now my arms were holding onto the rope well over my head.

“Almost,” Hestal said, forcibly spreading my buttocks even wider, “almost there.”

My legs tightened as I let myself drop, feeling my spread ass hit his groin. Immediately, I hoisted myself up until I felt his knob pressing against my rim, then let myself slide down again, faster this time.

As I did, I became fixed on the idea of Hestal watching all that cock, his cock, going in and out of my ass. My desire to see it was so strong that, without even willing it, I mind touched him, and suddenly began seeing everything

through his own eyes.

The sight of him thrusting up into me melded with the awareness of being rooted, and, amazingly, the quiveringly intense sensations that radiated from the whole length of his cock. Despite the fact that I was only half erect myself, I knew that at any moment I would be uncontrollably spending.

He was moaning now almost without cease. I could feel the shudder of excitement when I cried out, which I did now each time he pushed back into me. My body shivered; I felt on the verge of fainting. I realized, almost abstractedly, that I was shooting all over Hestál's legs.

It was as much as I could take. I mind touched him just enough to push him over the edge, and he spent, too, and I felt the heat of his spending spread out deep inside me. And this time when I hoisted myself up, his cock slid out and fell with a slapping noise against the inner side of his leg. I dropped down beside him and passed out.

“**A**RE YOU ALL RIGHT?” Hestál's voice. I dragged myself out of my swoon. I felt dizzy and slightly sick, and more than slightly disgusted with myself. I opened my eyes and pulled myself up on one elbow.

Hestál was standing by the bed, cleaning himself with one of the cloths left on the table.

“Pass me one of those,” I said. Hestál set his own aside, took up another, dipped it into the basin, wrung it out, and passed it over to me.

“It was good that you shot on your own,” he said as he did. “I take little pleasure in making men spend.”

I buried my face into the damp warmth. Then I lay back again and, lifting my legs, began to mop up the mess behind.

“So you’ve never taken a cock inside you?” I asked.

Hestal looked shocked. “No! Why would I?”

“Curiosity, I suppose,” I replied. He snorted, and I saw no point in saying more. I had begun to understand why I was feeling disgusted with myself. What had excited Hestal had little to do with me—it was watching, feeling, his own cock go up my ass. Up any willing ass, really, and he had worked it all out, the rope, the facing away from him, to get as much as he could from it without giving much at all, at least from a man, not even a kiss or a hug.

I sighed. “It’s just as well that I did spend like that. My creaming has had some strange effects on others.”

Hestal looked at me with interest. “Dangerous, is it?”

“It could be,” I assented. “But it certainly has some very strong and unexpected effects.”

“Well then,” he said, thinking about it, “perhaps you should carry a spendsafe in your pocket.”

He laughed at my look of befuddlement. “It’s easy to tell that *you* have never split a quim. A spendsafe is a length of sheep’s gut, neatly sewn up at one end. You slip it over your cock and, when you spend, it catches it all. You lose a little sensation but you don’t become a father. A fair trade-off,

some think.”

This was an interesting bit of information, and I tucked it away in my memory. But I had something else more urgent on my mind. “Hestal, sit down on the bed. I want to talk some business with you.”

He was putting his clothes back on. As he did so, I watched as he coiled his member then tucked it into a wide pouch sewn into his smalls. Once his shirt was buttoned and his belt fastened, he sat down beside me.

“I want you to smuggle me out of Gedd,” I said.

Hestal lifted his eyebrows. “Going to fly the coop, are you?”

I knew him well enough to know this was said in jest, and nodded. “Prince Caelas wants to keep me safe at hand,” I said, “but I can’t bear the idea of spending—who knows how long—twiddling my thumbs in Sondaram.”


“Well, it can be done,” Hestal said. “But it will cost you some.” Then, when I looked at him in surprise, he hastily added, “The money’s not for me, you understand. But the lads take an extra risk bringing along a stranger, and want to be paid for it.”

I nodded. “What else?”

“When do you want to go?” he asked.

“When does the next party set out?” I said.

“Tomorrow night,” he replied hesitantly. “But....”

I jumped out of bed, stopping him before he could say another word. “Tomorrow night it will have to be.” 

Chapter 4



THE MOUNTAINS THAT DIVIDE GEDD from the rest of the kingdom are as nothing compared to the Wall of the World, but mountains nonetheless they are. Our party had slipped out of Gedd in the deadest part of night, the smugglers taking us along trails that they alone could see—or knew so well that instinct was all they needed.

We moved at a stiff pace, since we had to be hidden in the mountain range by daybreak. It hadn't occurred to me to wonder if these mountains had a name, any more than I wondered if the ocean did. The ocean's name was "ocean," the mountains, too, were just that. But now that I had been out in the world, I knew things were not so simple. But by the time I thought to ask, we had already been commanded to keep our silence. Even the sound of the horses was muffled by hoof-boots of thick leather.

Yes, horses. I had expected that the smugglers would have a team of mules, just as the traders did who once came

and went over the mountains. But mules could not hope to outrun patrols, whereas horses could—at least the ones on which the smugglers rode, which were as sleek and spirited as the packhorses were large and docile.

So, fate at last had got me mounted on a horse. He was a gelding named Norsran, and, so far as he was concerned, I was just another sack of salt. His reins were tied to the horse ahead; all I had to do was keep my balance, and for that I had the pommel to cling to. It was as easy an introduction to riding a horse as anyone could hope for—needless to say, after a half hour or so, excitement had given way to boredom and the danger that I might actually fall asleep.

We were a party of four. Besides myself, there were the two smugglers, Nastor and Fransen, whom I immediately thought of as a pair of squirrels—both being short, wiry, and exquisitely nervous—and a third person whose name I was not given. He had wrapped himself in a dark cloak and rode his own horse, and sat in its saddle with the ease of someone who spent his lifetime there.

Nastor and Fransen each led a string of packhorses, one behind the other, with the stranger bringing up the rear. From what little I could see, all but two of these animals were laden with sacks of salt. Norsran carried me, and—shades of my not-so-distant past—two big sacks of salt fish slung over him just behind me. Another horse bore a bundle of wolf pelts, and I wondered that it consented to do so without struggle and complaint. But it probably felt that any linger-

ing scent of that predator was a small price to pay for such an easy load.

Hestal had told me to prepare for a four- to five-day trip, two days to pass over the mountains and three more to cross the Plains of the Lhennad to one of the small towns at its edge. There were several such, and only the smugglers themselves knew which one would be this trip's destination. The army patrols likewise visited them at random, and somehow the two very rarely met. Usually, there is not much money to be made soldiering, so they often welcomed a nice little bit for turning a blind eye.

The first light of dawn found us at the outskirts of the forest that covered the mountains' western flanks. We halted at the edge of it, and Nastor and Fransen quickly removed the leather hoof-boots. The trail would now be leaf-covered, and the sounds we made would be barely audible even to ourselves. No such forest was to be found on the eastern slopes, and, consequently, that was where we were most likely to be spotted and chased down.

I had insisted on leaving the following night because after our bout of sex, I realized I didn't really trust Hestal all that much. He thought well of himself, which was something, and I knew he would protest that he turned to smuggling for the sake of the rebellion to keep money flowing in and out of Gedda. But the temptation of sending word out to Maerdas that I was about to be smuggled over the mountains—why put Hestal to that sort of test?

What I hadn't considered was that Maerdas and the king both would have their spies in Gedd, that they and/or their messages would have to get in and out, and that smugglers were the obvious, even only way to do that. And Hestall hadn't said a word about someone else coming along on the trip. He hadn't even appeared at the rendezvous. It had been Nastor who had met me, taken the bag of coin, and—after he had carefully hefted it—led me to a derelict stable where the others were waiting, the horses packed and ready.

Even so, I was mostly concerned about Maerdas tracking my movements. I could deal with any spy, or, for that matter any patrol of soldiers. I was in full power, master of Sondaram and Wethrelad, *Nithaial Galgaliel*. I feared only the wrath of Telo.

“**J**ESSAN! YOU ARE OUT OF YOUR FUCKING MIND! I'm going to summon Caelas and have him lock you up in the same cell as Orien until you come to your senses.” Telo looked so adorable in a huff that he was halfway down the stairs before it dawned on me that he was dead serious.

I leaned over the balcony railing and called after him. “Telo, in the name of the Goddess, get back up here. Or your farseeing skills are going to end right where they are now; half-formed, next to useless.”

Telo stopped going down the stairs, but refused to look around. I noticed, to my embarrassment, that the main chamber contained several pilgrims who were kneeling down before the pillar of force.

I sighed. “Telo,” I called softly in my most seductive voice. “Come back to me, most enchanting of love boys.”

Now the pilgrims *did* lift their heads, and Telo, totally mortified, hurried back up the stairs and chased me into the bedroom.

“Just listen to me,” I pleaded, keeping the table between us. This wasn’t easy, because Telo was sneaky and quick on his feet.

“I’m going to *kill* you,” he said. “Love boy!”

I couldn’t tell if he was really hurt or just mortified to be so addressed before the worshippers.

“Telo, please,” I said, barely eluding a quick lunge and snatch. “I’ll go and announce from the balcony that I mistook you for someone else. I’ll take you down the stairs and introduce you to everyone as my....”

I paused. “What exactly are you, anyway? Steward of Sondaram? Personal attendant to the *Nithaial Galgaliet*?”

“I should be your fucking *keeper*,” Telo replied, panting. “I let you slip away for a few hours, and what happens? You get reamed with a beanpole and decide to join a band of smugglers. Even love boys have *some* common sense.”

“I’m sorry I said that,” I said, eyeing him warily, standing poised for flight on the balls of my feet. “I just wanted to get your attention.”

“Well, you succeeded at getting it,” Telo said. “Now what, O Mighty One?”

“I’m going to surrender,” I answered. “You can come

around the table and take me prisoner.”

“Very wise of you,” he said. “You would never have escaped me.”

“I know,” I said, letting my head hang down. However, when he came around the table to seize me, I dropped down on all fours, scrambled under the table, and, with a shout of victory, leaped onto the bed.

“I claim sanctuary, by virtue of the Holy Pillows,” I cried.

“It’s Holy *Pillars*, you idiot,” Telo said, as he dropped down beside me. “And you have to be standing among them, not lying down on top of them.”

I reached up and stroked his cheek. “I *am* sorry I called you a love boy, Telo,” I said. “I just didn’t want Caelas coming down hard on my ass.”

Telo looked at me in total astonishment, then burst into laughter. “It will take *all* my willpower,” he said, when we had both subsided into intermittent bursts of giggling, “to not tell him what you just said.

“But, seriously,” he went on after a bit, “can’t you imagine what he would do to me if I let you slip out of Gedd? With a bunch of smugglers?”

“Skin you alive and fly your pelt from the gate of the fort?” I asked.

“At least,” Telo answered grimly. He sighed and lay his head back on the pillows. “All right. Tell me why you must do this. If you succeed, I’ll allow you to cast a spell of

sleep over me. Even Caelas will have to allow *that* excuse.”

I thought back on my first encounter with Caelas and smiled. “Yes,” I answered. “I think he would.”

Then I reached down and took Telo’s hand. “Caelas wishes to bring down both Maerdas and the Amethyst Throne,” I said. “That is the task he has set himself. But mine is different. I have no choice but to find my twin and join my fate with his. When that is done, the two goals become one. But not before.”

I squeezed his hand. “But not before,” I repeated. “Already I’m afraid he—his name is Niccas, Telo—has been captured by Maerdas. I met someone who knew him, who told me he feared that. When Caelas said he was free, that he had brought back Fæyſtirran and was flying around on a dragon....”

I paused, because tears flooded into my eyes. “I was so happy, Telo, so happy. And then, when you reached that boy...”

“Rabih,” Telo said.

“Rabih, and learned what had happened since, I was totally *crushed*. What do my accomplishments amount to now? *Nothing*, if I allow him to be held captive by Prince Poëstil and do nothing.”

We lay silent for some time, lost in our own thoughts. Then Telo sat up. “All right,” he said, “I will help you, although I still think you are a total idiot to do this and risk so much with the odds so much against you.”

“Thank you, Telo,” I said. “I’m....”

He interrupted me. “I’m not through yet, Jessan. You have to agree to one thing, first.”

“No!” I said at once. “I’m *not* taking you with me.”

Telo looked shocked. “Don’t worry about *that*,” he said. “You’d have to drag me kicking and screaming behind you. No, what I want is for you to do what you said on the balcony. You’re going to prime my farseeing powers. Then, we’re going to try to contact Rabih one more time.”

BY FIRST BIRDSONG, we had passed through the forest, climbing all the while. So when we came out of the trees, we found ourselves already far above Gedd, traveling through a barren of scrubby grass forcing its way through the scree and among pieces of broken rock. The sun, of course, was still on the other side of the mountains, so we moved in shadow. Below us, I saw something I had never seen from above—Gedd entirely covered by a sea of fog.

“It will burn off quickly,” a stranger’s voice said to me. “The sun will shine brightly today.”

I turned my head. The cloaked stranger had ridden up beside me. He pulled back his hood, revealing a weatherworn handsome face, a shock of golden blond hair, and piercing gray eyes. What really caught my attention, however, was the fact that around his neck hung a necklace of spun gold, and a jewel sparked in the lobe of each of his ears.

“Bráíenn, son of Saergorn,” he said, extending his hand. When I extended my own to take it, he reached past it

and grasped my forearm, and so I did the same.

“Jessan,” I said, so confused about whether I should add “spoken son of Pelun” that it didn’t occur to me to give him a false name instead.

“Well met,” he said, adding in a lower voice, “I had hoped to meet with you during my parlay with Prince Caelas, but he said you were not to be found.”

He smiled. “I admit I hardly believed him,” he went on, “but now I can see I was wrong. You clearly make your own trail, *Nithaial Galgaliel*. Certainly Prince Caelas would never countenance this.”

I flushed. “Caelas is not my master.” I said hotly, adding, “anyway, who are *you*, and how do you come to know so much of my business?”

Bráíenn tilted his head. “Cannot you tell from the way I speak your tongue?”

I thought for a moment. “It is true that your speech seems edged with the Old Tongue,” I finally said, “but I am not well taught enough to know what that might mean.”

“Ah,” he said. “Well, let me prod your memory. Not so long ago, you lay prostrate at the feet of our king.”

“Bráíenn!” I replied. “You only confuse me further. I have met no king in all my life.”

“I did not say you *met* him, *Nithaial*,” he said. “Cast back your mind—it is obvious enough.”

My mouth dropped open. “Azraham, son of Mehad-am, Ruler of all the Lhennad,” I gasped. “But he’s been dead

for centuries!”

“Six hundred and forty-seven years, by the common accounting,” agreed Bráíenn. “But that makes him no less our king. And if *he* fought for you, I must consider doing the same.”

“The Lhennad,” I said, marveling. “I thought your people had vanished from the kingdom long ago.”

“So it would have been if the kings of the Amethyst Throne had had their way,” Bráíenn replied somberly. “They stopped hunting us down and killing us only when He Who Cannot Be Named sapped their will to fight.”

“Maerdas,” I said.

“I have heard that name,” Bráíenn answered. “But I think it wise not to use it—even to forget it, if possible—until he lies shattered in the ruins of Gorzungâd.”

“But you came to parlay with Caelas,” I said.

“We love He Who Cannot Be Named no more than the puppets he has set on the Amethyst Throne,” Bráíenn replied. “Caelas wishes to make peace with us for what help we can give him in bringing down the king. I now carry the terms of his offer to all the clans.”

He looked at me. “We no longer have a king,” he said. “They are too costly for a people who live in perpetual war.”

As we rode and talked in low voices, the sun had begun edging over the mountain tops. We had ridden into a defile that was created, it seemed, when one mountain was

wrenched brutally apart from another, and emerged from it on a narrow plateau.

There, to my surprise, we came upon a small squadron of soldiers, headquartered in a roughly built stone house. What surprised me, of course, was not that they were there but that we rode directly up to them, and that they came and greeted Nastor and Fransen as long lost friends.

Seeing my puzzlement, Bráíenn explained, “Prince Caelas would hardly make war on smugglers, since they aid his cause. No, he uses them to his own advantage—which is why I am here, riding with you.

“Still,” he added, as Nastor passed a small pouch to their leader, “butter always helps the bread get swallowed, no matter how soft the crumb.”

He was dismounting as he spoke, and came to help me do likewise, adding as he did “Here we will rest the horses and, if we can, sleep a little ourselves.”

LOVEMAKING WITH TELO was a world apart from my encounters with Caelas and, Goddess forgive me, Hesttal—sweet, slow kisses, lengthy caresses that savored the soft, smooth texture of his skin. Eventually, we turned onto our sides and began to explore at length what, the first time we had sex, was done with haste and astonishment. That was the first time I had taken a cock in my mouth, and the whole thing was so exciting that I couldn’t even imagine that there might be reward in lingering awhile.

Now, I knew there was. Telo’s foreskin was remark-

able in its length. I could gently blow into it to open it and then stick in my tongue, as if into a deliciously flavored sleeve. Not much time to savor that, though! Telo shivered, his cock stiffened, and its head began to force back its covering, although not before I slid it back and pulled it back up again, licking the exposed length of tender flesh it covered.

Telo, meanwhile, after nuzzling his way into my bush, was exploring my sack, sliding his tongue under it and lifting it up, taking each of its contents into his mouth, wetting them, sucking on them, letting them slip free.

It took very little of that to make me rampant, and I all but gasped with relief when he turned his attention upward. My own foreskin was such that, even limp, the hole of my cock poked out of it; now all Telo could do was to nibble at it on his way to take my knob into his mouth. The tip of his tongue worried at its opening, and I dizzily thought that if he kept up at this rate, in a few moments he would become not only a wizard, but the *king* of wizards.

Telo's own cock was oozing tasty droplets that I sipped away the moment they appeared, stroking his cock with one hand to bring out still more. However, when his hips began to make little thrusts, I gave the knob a good suckle and allowed him to begin pushing it down my throat.

It went down easily; my mouth had been made wet by the taste of his fluid. He was taking me in as well, and I hoped he had sopped it well himself, because, compared to his, mine was quite a mouthful.

Not that he had anything to be ashamed of; like the rest of him, his cock was smooth and shapely and soon proved to have more to it than one might have thought. I took him in, deeper and deeper, until my nose was buried in his delicate thatch, which was lightly perfumed and already damp with sweat.

I reached a hand around him, spread his cheeks with my thumb and my last two fingers, while the first two began fondling his bud. When my middle finger began prodding at its opening, I discovered—Telo!—that it was already prepared for entry.

It hadn't occurred to me that he might prefer to get a good fucking, but what was happening already was too delicious to stop. However, I could make it up to him. My index finger slipped in with the other. Then, as I pulled them in and out, I began spreading them apart, opening him up.

Goddess, Telo liked that. Even with my cock down his throat I could hear his groans, and I could certainly feel the change in his thrusts. Where before they had been considerate—Telo's way of conveying awareness that he was fucking the mouth of the *Nithaial Galgaliel*—now they were fast, furious, and totally lacking politesse.

At the same time, he had seized hold of my own buttocks in order to force my cock deeper down his throat. Part of me felt a flutter of concern, but the sensation was so overpowering that I was soon following his guidance, and could feel my purse slapping against his face.

In fact, I shot first, deep down his throat, and even as I convulsed, Telo surrendered, too. I could feel his butt hole quivering in sympathy, even as the salty heat of his spend filled my throat, forcing me to swallow and swallow again. I carefully sucked him clean as his member shrank and finally slipped out between my lips. When he finally surrendered mine, I turned and took him in my arms. Then we tongue-kissed each other, looking deep into each others' eyes, and tasted our own spend in each others' mouths.

As we did, I mind-touched Telo, guiding, tempering the force that entered him, helping him—without his being conscious of my presence—gain control. This, it proved, was easy enough—if anything, something inside him welcomed it, took hold of it, melded it into himself.

This showed even in Telo's eyes, which slipped out of focus for a moment. He closed them for a moment, and when he opened them again they had a depth that hadn't been there before.

He saw me seeing this, and smiled. "We should do this more often, *Nithaial*," he whispered. "It seems to suit me very well."

I smiled back. "If we do it too often, sweet one, you will become more powerful than I."

Telo poked me. "A good thing for you, if so," he said. "Then I *could* exercise some control over your wild ways." As he spoke, he was sitting up. "Where's the *telesma*?" he asked. "This time there will be no fainting away."

He was right, but not in the way he meant. He found nothing—or at least he didn't find Rabih. This, of course, made complete sense. The boy would hardly spend night and day with his own stone pressed against his forehead, hoping to be disillusioned even more. Still, it was a severe disappointment.

Nor was Telo any more successful in finding Niccas or his companion wizard, Helias.

After an hour of this, I asked him, "Do you remember the name of the person Rabih was actually looking for?"

Telo shook his head, not in answer, but to jostle his thoughts. "Iannas," he said slowly, tugging the name from his memory.

"Iannas. Yes." I agreed. "See if you can reach him."

Telo concentrated, then stiffened. His eyes went blank. "Who calls me?" he said in another's voice.

I seized hold of Telo's hand. "I am the *Nithaial Galgaliel*," I answered. "I seek news of my twin."

There was a silence, then an answer. "Yes, I can tell now who you are. But you speak through an intermediary. Do you not know you can do this yourself?"

"When I used the *telesma*, I spoke only to the answering spirit."

"That's because the only reason a *Nithaial* would use a *telesma* would be for such a purpose," Iannas replied. He then sighed, adding, "Well, if you are so untrained as to not know this, perhaps it is best that you keep your distance

from the spirit world.

“In any case,” he went on before I could reply, “the only thing I can tell you about Niccas is that he is not here with me.”

“In the dungeons of the Eye of Knoltan?” I asked.

Iannas was silent for a moment. “No,” he answered, “by the shore of the River Cyll.”

I looked at Telo. “Where is that?” I whispered to him. But Telo was in a trance and unable to hear me, let alone reply.


“I am dead,” Iannas said, finally. “You *are* remarkably ignorant for a *Nithaial*.”

I was not exactly warming to Iannas, even though what he said was true. But then the import of his statement struck me, and I gasped.

“Rabih has been searching for you,” I said at last.

“I know,” Iannas said softly, “but I haven’t the heart to answer him. It isn’t good for the living to allow them contact with the dead, certainly not with those they love. However, that being so, I ask you to grant me this one boon.”

“You have but to name it,” I replied.

“Tell Rabih you have learned that my corpse is at the foot of the Eye of Knoltan. Have him send someone—*he must not go himself*—to put a splitpence in my mouth. Thanks to Niccas, Prince Poëstil wasn’t able to burn my body, thus denying me an afterlife. But without the fare to cross the River Cyll, I must remain here among the abandoned souls, too close to life to become wholly free of its memory.” 

Chapter 5



BY THE TIME I had finished mulling over the events of the past day, I had no time to catch any sleep. Nastor and Fransen were already heaving up the sacks of salt onto the horses' packframes. The rest time was over. In fact, at that very moment, Bráíenn approached where I still lay, and said, "It's time to mount up."

I groaned and painfully got to my feet. "The horse may do all the work," I muttered, "but its revenge is to make its rider do all the suffering."

Bráíenn laughed. "It is your tender butt that causes that, not the poor horse. We riders of the Lhennad are all over leather." He looked at me. "Even so, you are knowledgeable in herbalism, are you not? Surely you know of some soothing liniment to give you relief?"

I had no desire to explain to Bráíenn the complications of my nether soreness. Even so, he had a point. Caelas had sent me a fresh supply of Warrior's Friend, and I knew it had healing properties as well lubricating ones. While my

companion saddled his horse, I discreetly applied some to where it hurt. What it lacked was any numbing quality, which was—of course—what I wanted most.

“This part of the trip is timed so that we will rest the horses next just before the long descent to the plains,” Bráíenn told me, as we headed into the mountains. “That must be done in the dark, for there is no cover there, and otherwise we would be visible from leagues away.”

I only half attended to what he said, since my attention was wholly focused on levitating myself a scant fingertip above my saddle. The relief was immediate, and I kept myself on the horse by clutching it with my legs and resting my back against the sack of dried fish strapped on behind me.

Bráíenn mistook my silence for a disinclination to talk, and let his horse fall back to leave me alone. In truth, I had little to think about. My thoughts briefly returned to my last words with Telo—he had promised to keep trying to make contact with Rabih and pass him Iannas’s message.

I had only the impression of Iannas caught by Telo, but I was already imagining him to be much like Orien, except, perhaps, with a long beard. I speak of personality, naturally, but clearly Iannas, when alive, possessed powers of magic himself.

Our conversation through Telo was short, but I did think to ask him about Niccas. My heart sank when he told me about the malignantly enchanted band that had been fastened around my twin’s neck, crafted to suck away Niccas’s powers—

and, through the *mythral*, feed it directly to Maerdas himself. A bitterly clever replacement for the Ystherüd, I thought, shuddering at what Niccas must be feeling, not only powerless but subject to a constant and terrible shame.

We were riding in the sun now, edging along a narrow ledge, one side of which was a towering cliff of stone, the other side a fathomless drop into a cloud of mist that the sunlight had yet to burn away. A pair of eagles circled about, only a bit above us and barely moving at all, their dark feathers glinting in the sun.

“Take off your shirt,” Bráíenn called to me, “and wrap it around your forearm and wrist.”

Puzzled but compliant, I did as he said.

“Now mind-call the eagle closest to you,” he said. “Say, ‘Come visit with me, Skybrother,’ and, as you do, fix in your mind the image of your wrist.”

Disbelieving, but again compliant, I cast my eyes on the closer of the pair, and did as Bráíenn ordered. Slowly, majestically, wings spread, the eagle banked, sliding out of its course to turn in my direction. When it was nearly overhead, it suddenly stretched its wings behind it, almost touching its tail, and dropped out of the sky like a stone.

Then, so fast as to blur the eye, it shot its wings out, jerked to a complete halt just a finger’s length from my arm, and, talons extended, clutched hold of my arm. Despite the many windings of cloth, the claws plunged right through them, each one digging painfully into my arm.

I ignored the pain. The bird was large but not heavy, and, this close to me, its majestic ferocity took my breath away. Close up, its feathers had a sheen that sometimes seemed black, and other times a range of browns, with a scattering of white bars across its chest. A ridge of them swept up from its beak to the top of its head; the beak itself was colored a hard metallic blue, with a sharp predatory hook at its end. In the manner of birds, it turned its head away so as better to regard me. Its eye glittered with fierce intelligence, a black stone set in a band as deeply yellow as the yolk of an egg.

I gently mind-touched it, saying, "Greetings, Sky-brother. I am the *Nithaial Galgaliel*, guardian of the air and all that flies in it. Take my blessing with you."

The eagle had no thoughts comprehensible to me, but I could feel the focused intensity of its awareness. It suddenly leaned its head back, opened its beak, and uttered a shriek that reverberated back to us from the mountain across the void. Then it bent toward me, bowed its head, and, for a second, placed its beak against my cheek.

When the eagle raised its head again, I could sense that it wished me to raise my arm. I did so, it spread its wings, and with a single strong thrust, went soaring away. I watched it go, my heart still its captive, until it was nothing but a bright gleam in the sky.

It was only then that I unwound my shirt and found it had been shredded into tatters, and blotched all over with

my blood. I raised it up like a flag.

Bráíenn laughed. “When the path is wide enough,” he called, “I shall give you mine. But keep that shirt safe and fly it as a banner from the walls of Gostranar.”

BRÁIENN PROVED AS GOOD AS HIS WORD. When the trail left the edge of the cliff, he rode up beside me, removed his leather vest, then pulled off his shirt and handed it to me, ignoring my protests. His chest, beneath a golden haze of hair, was as nut brown as his arms and face.

“Put it on,” he said. “The sun is pitiless to skin as pale as yours, especially at this height, and there’s no point in adding pain above to match that you are suffering below.”

“I’m recovering a bit from that,” I said, “now that I’ve worked out the right way to ride.”

Bráíenn snorted. “The right way to *sit*, you mean. You must learn to ride a horse, and properly. Floating above the saddle is a good trick, but your mount would think it had no rider at all. You would have to spend half your time convincing it otherwise.”

“You grew up riding horses,” I replied, “while I grew up sailing boats. And I’m as happy riding as you would be far out at sea, tossing about in a near copy of a washtub.”

Bráíenn smiled. “I’ll teach you to ride, then, and you can teach me to sail—a fair exchange, I think. When I waited for Caelas at the fort, I had eyes only for the sea. To sail on it must be as close as a man can come to flying.”

As he spoke, I was applying ointment to my arm. I

glanced up at him. “I shall be talon-marked for life,” I said. “Do you often summon eagles to your side?”

“Oh, how I wish I could, *Nithaial*,” he replied. “We riders of the Lhennad hunt with hawks, but eagles are not so easily tamed. I am sorry for your wounds, but I glory in the sight of it resting on your arm. Nothing could better persuade me that you are who they say,” he paused and met my eye. “Not that you are not who you claim to be, of course, but what that truly *means*.”

I thought about this for a moment, then smiled. “Fair enough,” I said. “And when I teach you to sail, we shall go swimming together among the sharks.”

The path that edged along the cliff now turned into a narrow pass, and, as Bráíenn had said we would, we stopped for our second rest among a jumble of boulders at its far end. These were the result of massive rocks tumbling down from the heights above us and smashing into smithereens where we now stood.

Bráíenn, who had kindly spelled this out for me, added, “Luckily for us, most of them fall in the dead of winter, and those that don’t usually drop in the morning, when the sun first hits the night-chilled rock face. We shall be long gone before then.”

Conveyance by the smugglers did not, apparently, include provisions, since Nastor and Fransen made no effort to share their paltry meal with either of us. However, Telo had packed a stack of the uneaten oatmeal cakes, which he

had drizzled with honey and then wrapped each by itself in a wide, fragrant leaf of clutchvine, then bound these together with a length of twine. I shared some with Bráíenn, who in turn passed me some dried strips of meat, into which dried berries had been pounded. It proved deliciously tender, the fruit having softened the sinewy meat. That, itself, I could not place.

“Horse,” Bráíenn explained. “We people of the Lhen-nad have long stopped raising crops, as we became tired of watching them burn. But the plains have food enough for those who know where to look for it.”

“Do you think your people will rally to Caelas’ banner?” I asked.

Bráíenn glanced at me, then shrugged. “I think, before we met, Prince Caelas imagined hordes of blond-haired, spear-wielding horsemen galloping out of the plains and wreaking havoc before all that stood in their path. Such, still, is the image the kingdom peoples have of us.”

He paused and smiled. “I had to explain to him that it has been centuries since we could muster such a force, and, nowadays, we had no practice in such fighting. Instead, a small group of us slip up to our enemies on our hands and knees, and skewer them—if we’re lucky—while they sleep.”

Bráíenn ripped off a mouthful of meat with his teeth and chewed on it meditatively. “If we decide to become involved, we can offer him our service as spies,” he said even-

tually, “and as breeders of superior steeds. These days the horses of the Lhennad vastly outnumber the riders.”

After that, our conversation fell away. We were both tired, and the sun had passed over the mountain, leaving us in a cool deep shade. Even my nervousness about falling rocks was not strong enough to keep me awake once I had wrapped the pungent horse blanket snugly around me.

When Bráíenn shook me out of my sleep, night had come, and when my eyes opened they saw little more than they had when they were closed.

“Can you see any better than I?” I asked.

“No,” he said. “But I may have a surer sense of the lay of the land. Take my hand and I’ll take you to your horse—and don’t forget your pack and the horse blanket, or you’ll never see them again.”

“How can we ever make our way in total blackness?” I asked, to disguise the pleasure I got from the firm warmth of his grip. I had yet to get any indication at all where his taste in lovers lay, and I would be no more wiser when I climbed onto the packhorse.

“There’s a moon,” he replied. “We’ll have its light once we get out of this coomb.”

So there was. It was first visible as a faint silver wash, which, as we approached, began to take on depth. We had just begun to pass into it when I heard Nastor—who rode in front—exclaim in astonishment.

Immediately, we saw why. A great distance away, a

ball of fire rose into the air, until it was almost as high as we were. Moments later, there were equally bright but much smaller flashes of light.

“A busy night, it seems, at Gorzungâd,” Bráíenn remarked dryly.

As he did so, I began to feel a pain just like the wounds the eagle had made, but these cut into my side from my chest down to my stomach. My eyes began to water, my head spun, and with a cry, I fell from the back of Norsran, and lost all consciousness.

ICAME TO, I THOUGHT, almost instantly, my head full of violent pain. I gasped—whimpered is more like it—in agony, and struggled to get up.

At once, an arm wrapped itself around me, holding me tight.

“Easy, easy,” a now familiar voice cautioned. I fell back against his shoulder. “Bráíenn,” I whispered, tears pooling in my eyes, “My twin, Niccas, the *Nithaial Elimiel*—Maerdas *has* him.”

“Has he killed him?” Bráíenn asked. “Can you tell?”

I was afraid to reach out into the spirit world to find out, realizing as I shrunk from the thought, that I didn’t have to. I remembered the band that Iannas said was clasped around his neck. “No, no, not yet, anyway,” I answered. “Maerdas needs him too much.”

I had now come around enough to notice that we were alone. “Where are the packhorses, and Nastor and

Fransen?" I asked.

"Gone," Bráíenn replied shortly. "The moment you cried out we became trouble, and trouble on the trail is best left to fend for itself."

"It could be worse than that," I said.

He smiled mirthlessly. "Maerdas getting two for the price of one, hey?" he replied. "Maybe, but I don't think so. Our guides would have insisted on bringing you down to the plains, instead, all the more so if you were unconscious."

"They'd have had to deal with you, though," I said, holding onto his arm.

"Now *that* would have been a pleasure," he agreed. "But, really, they were just grateful that I offered to stay with you. Not that they offered a partial refund."

I had to smile at that. "What now?" I asked.

Bráíenn sighed. "Are you aware of the wounds that appeared on your body?" he asked.

"Yes," I answered. "I felt them open up just before I fell off Norsran." I shifted a little and gave a little cry. "And they are still incredibly painful. Why are they there?"

"If I knew that, *I* would be the *Nithaial* here," he said. "It is magic, or something like it. Have you felt anything when your twin has suffered before?"

I shook my head. "Not like this," I replied. "Is that what it is?"

"I think so," Bráíenn said. "This happened to you just after we saw the lights over Gorzungâd; your first words just

now were to tell me that Maerdas had seized your twin—how did you know that? Was it the wounds that told you?”


“I don’t know,” I admitted. “The words came out before I was able to think. I just *knew*.”

As we talked, I sensed a hesitancy in Bráíenn that I suddenly was able to put words to. I looked up at him. “You want to take me away from here,” I said, “but you’re afraid I won’t be able to stand the pain.”

“Something like that,” he admitted. “Like my son Páli, you are rather ‘delicate.’”

Well, *that* made things clear. “Bráíenn,” I said as firmly as I could, “singlehandedly, I defeated an entire army of the dead commanded by the Necromancer Jaçazal, and, with the help of Orien, cast down the wizard ruler of Cytheria. I can handle a little pain.”

“I meant no offence, *Nithaial Galgaliel*,” Bráíenn said, mildly enough.

“And none taken,” I replied. “But what you *did* mean was that you and I aren’t going to be making love before we set off down the mountainside.” 

PART TWO



GORZUNGÂD

Chapter 6



THE SKALGÜR SWOOPED DOWN to the highest tower atop Gorzungâd and dropped me on its roof, then flew off again—presumably to fight over the remains of Dracon Wælfyra. As a group of guards yanked me to my feet, a revolting stench made me retch onto their feet. The tower served as the skalgür’s eyrie, and the filth of their droppings was everywhere.

One of the guards gave me a cuff to the head, but their leader restrained him, saying only, “Enough of that. *He* wants this piece of shit brought down immediately. Noxas, your feet are still clean—you can help me get him down the stairs.”

The two of them half carried, half dragged me down what seemed an endless flight of them, pressed against the curving wall. Somehow, I had imagined Gorzungâd built, like the tower of Jaçazal, of smooth black stone. But no. What I saw was wrought of great slabs of polished granite, cunningly curved by stonemasons to the shape of the tower.

Then we reached an elaborately carved oaken door,

flanked by guards on both its sides. These two dragged it open, and we stepped out onto a stone ledge which served as the border to a great abyss. How far down it went I couldn't see and didn't want to find out, since the ledge had no railings.

If you could ignore the chasm, the ledge became nothing more than an elegant corridor, paved with marble that was itself covered with priceless carpets. Glowstones devised to resemble precious jewels were set into the curving wall, and illuminated the way with softly colored light. But the pit tugged ceaselessly at the consciousness of those who passed by here, reminding them—as I imagined it was supposed to do—of how closely here life was edged by death.

Almost the moment we exited from the tower, we were met by a man dressed in a livery of deep purple edged with scarlet, and bound with a belt of silver mesh. Around his neck was a silver torc, studded at each end with a large rare red sapphire.

“I am Sirdias,” he said, “Steward of Gorzungâd and, in a moment, I am to bring you to The Highest One of All.” He was young and comely, and yet, at the same time, strangely old, with eyes that were ciphers. Seeing that my eyes were drawn, despite themselves, to the gulf of air just beyond us, he remarked, “It drops down almost to the very bottom of this, the mightiest of palaces, and it is from there that he orchestrates his most powerful spells.” Sirdias pointed to what appeared to be a statue of a leaping beast, set into the ledge so that it protruded out a good distance into the abyss.

As I imagined Maerdas stepping out onto it until he reached the thing's head, a sudden realization struck me. Standing there, surrounded by the implacable pull of the abyss, wrapped in the forces of his magic, he had replicated as best he could ever do the experience of immersing himself in the force at Fæyſtirran or—I supposed—at the Deep Dwelling, Ernſardast.

As I stood there wondering if he understood this himself, I saw someone approaching us from that direction. As he came closer, I saw it was a very beautiful boy of about nine or ten years, with ice-blue eyes and a flowing mane of golden hair. He nodded meaningfully to Sirdias, then he glanced at me without apparent curiosity, and passed us by.

That, apparently, was the cue Sirdias had been waiting for. He set off in the direction from which the boy had come, gesturing that we—the soldiers and myself—should hurry after him. When we reached the base of the statue, I saw that the ledge actually curved out to it, while the wall curved inwardly to a pair of great doors, made of hammered gold.

This was obviously the entryway to Maerdas's private chambers. Any lingering doubt about this was immediately dissipated by the enormous sigil, crafted wholly in red and yellow sapphires, set into the floor, which Maerdas had adopted as his sign.

It was a corruption of the Cronnex, the usual sigil of which shows the two *Nithaial*, in the form of dragons, each one taking the other's tail in its mouth. Maerdas replaced it

with a single serpent devouring its own tail, thus claiming to have completed the circle of power entirely within himself.



The jewels flashed brightly as Sirdias, being infinitely careful not to step on it, went up to the closed doors and lifted his left hand. A distant gong sounded, and the doors began silently to swing open. As they did so, he made an impatient gesture that I should come stand beside him.

I did so slowly, for my mind had pulled up something from my readings in alchemy that, had he known it, should have given Maerdas pause. There, the very same symbol is used to encapsulate a statement set forth in the venerable text known as *THE GARDEN OF CYRUS*, which goes thusly:

All things begun in order so shall they end, so shall they begin again according to the Ordainer of Order and the mystical mathematicks of that is the very breath of the blessed Gesryma.

In the end is the beginning; and in the beginning, the end. Or, in other words, destiny is inescapable, because it forms a circle that cannot be broken.

Such were my thoughts as I went with Sirdias into a large room—far larger than the eye could make out, for it was both dimly lit and aswirl with shadow. This was mind-clouding magic, and were I not robbed of my powers it would have affected me not at all. But now I saw what the guards saw, at least before they threw themselves down on all fours and pressed their foreheads against the floor.

They also shook with fear. For while we could see nothing, we could *sense* something so large and dangerous and immeasurably evil that it made one's blood turn to ice.

I had been dragged down with them, although my forehead was not likewise shoved against the floor. So I could see that Sirdias did not prostrate himself, but rather dropped down on one knee and bent his head.

"Can our guest stand unaided, Sirdias?" asked a soft voice from somewhere in the shadows.

"Yes, Highest One," the servant replied.

"Then let him do so and leave us—and take those guards with you. Meanwhile, send word that Bastnor is to be brought up to await my summons."

Sirdias bowed his head low, then stood up, gesturing that I should do so, as well. He went out the door, followed by the guards, who crawled after him, too weak with fear to get back onto their feet.

"At least they didn't shit themselves, which does sometimes happen," the same voice said. "Why Sirdias thought they were needed is beyond me."

A figure emerged from the shadows and flicked his wrist. Immediately, the murk disappeared, and I saw him plainly. I gasped. What monstrous thing I expected to see, I do not know, but I was not prepared for this.

“Why, Niccas,” Maerdas said, amusement of a sort in his voice, “you recognize me. So flattering.”

A youth stood before me with pale skin, a slender body, topaz-colored eyes, and long raven-black hair. I might as well have been looking in a mirror, except these days I was not nearly so well dressed nor fair of skin. I nodded, not trusting myself to speak.

“Well,” he went on, “why not? After all, in a manner of speaking, I *am* you—so, in that regard, at least, we are even closer than twins.”

Maerdas came over to me and touched my cheek with his hand. I shivered. It was freezing cold.

He let the hand drop. “Yes,” he said, “I no longer possess any living warmth. Even magic can’t give *that* back once it’s gone. But I can’t say I miss it much... until I touch it.”

As Maerdas was speaking, I saw a kind of film ripple over him, like the reflection in a pool after a pebble has been tossed in. His smooth skin became suddenly a mass of wrinkles and as taut and yellow as parchment, his eyes sank back into hollows in his skull, his hair turned white, then thin and wispy.

Maerdas could tell what was happening from the look on my face, and, closing his eyes and gathering his pow-

ers, called back upon himself the appearance of youth.

He sighed. “When the dragon was killed and you fell into the void, your terror and grief fed me so much power, Niccas. But, alas, vanity makes me use it up just as quickly. I don’t get to meet one of my kind but twice a millennium; I wanted to look my best.”

Finally, I found words. “You are not my kind.”

He laughed. “Perhaps not the best *example*, certainly. If such things were taught in schools, I would be pointed out as proof that when things go wrong, they can go *really* wrong.” His eyes hardened. “But I am *Nithaial Elimiel*, exactly like you. And one of us in this poor world is plenty enough.”

He looked away “Niccass, Niccas,” he said softly, “once that ingenious band was locked around your neck, I found myself entertaining fantasies of us becoming friends, lovers, even. That tenderness you feel toward your wizard—how long it’s been since I’ve savored anything like that.

“But now that we meet...” He paused, shook his head, then continued, “I am forced to confront the fact that you haven’t the courage to find me desirable. And so I find that I loathe you as much as I did your predecessor.”

Our eyes met. “But this time I can’t afford the pleasure of eating your soul.” He sighed. “Not immediately, anyway.” He lifted his head and, in a penetrating voice, called out, “Bastnor!” Then, to me, he said, in that manner with which one ends a conversation, “I shall take my pleasure in

other ways.”

Maerdas brought back the shadows and stepped into them, even as the doors swung open, and an unhealthily pale and flabby man came into the room, and dropped down onto his hands and knees.

“Yes, Greatest One?” he said, his voice quaking.

“This is Niccas,” Maerdas said. “He is to be our guest for a while and I am putting him under your care. You will find that he has some nasty wounds from a skalgür’s claws. Make sure they’re not allowed to fester.”

“As you command, Lord of All,” Bastnor said, and began scrambling to his feet.

“Wait!” Maerdas commanded, and, as the poor man dropped back to the floor, turned to me.

“Your eyes,” he said to me, “you’ve been in the company of demons.” He stepped toward me and looked closer. “Yes, yes, I thought I sensed something different. Niccas, you anger me. You haven’t been feeding me any of *that*.”

“Whatever *that* is,” I said, “I know no way to touch it—for my own use, or yours. Even the eyes—they may look different, but they work much as they always did.”

A look, close to astonishment, passed over Maerdas’s face. “Have you encountered Ra’asiel, then?” he asked.

This question I refused to answer.

Maerdas stared at me intently, and when he spoke again, his voice almost hissed. “*He* showed himself to you. I *know* it. How did you ever manage that? In all my thousand

years, I've never...," he began, then checked himself. He looked at me thoughtfully for a good moment, then finally muttered, "Well, well, well."

His eyes turned look at Bastnor, groveling on the floor. "Get him out of my sight," he ordered sharply, and Bastnor again got to his feet, bowed deeply, seized hold of my hand, and led me out of Maerdas's presence.

Almost immediately, he turned into a corridor that led to another vertiginous stairwell, this one descending as far as the eye could see. Those that had brought me down from the roost of the skalgürs was as nothing compared to these. We went down and down and down until I thought my legs would fail.

When we finally reached the end of them, Bastnor paused to let me catch my breath. "You have now gone from the very top of Gorzungåd to the very bottom in less than an hour," he said. "Usually it takes a bit longer for *that* to happen."

When I didn't respond to what must have been a little joke, he went on. "In any case, it's a great privilege to have you put in my hands, Niccas, and I mean to do my best with you. Have you ever met anyone of my calling?"

I was barely listening to this man, my mind wholly preoccupied by sorting out my encounter with Maerdas. But my mannerly upbringing made me reply. "A healer?" I asked, politely, in a voice almost too weak to be heard.

Bastnor looked at me in surprise, then laughed. "Ha,

Niccas, that's a good one! No, no—I am the Highest One's head torturer.”

He threw open a door and led me into what proved to be a cell, illuminated by two torches, stuck into sconces on opposite walls. As we came in, a slight, wary man got to his feet. He, like Bastnor, was strikingly pallid.

“This is my assistant, Urdan,” Bastnor said. “He is going to shackle your legs while I fasten up your arms. Thank you for not putting up a fight. It does make things simpler.”

I screamed, then screamed again. The stink of burnt flesh filled the cell. Urdan shoved the angled poker back into the brazier of glowing coals and pulled out another. It glowed a dark red.

“That was well done,” Bastnor said to him. “Align it if possible to cover the whole wound. Otherwise you have to apply it twice.”

To me, he said, “Scream away, Niccas. It doesn't bother us a bit. We're used to a lot worse than that, as I expect you'll discover. Indeed, this isn't really torture, as such. Any physician would do it to you, cauterizing those wounds. His Highestness will have our heads if we let them turn bad.”

He seized hold of my shoulder and turned me to expose my back. Again, the searing, impossible pain, the same acrid stench. And, again, my scream.

“Roll it a little, side to side,” Bastnor instructed Urdan, “to cover more surface. That's it. Now thrust it back into the coals.”

“That must really hurt,” Urdan said, as he did so.

“I expect it does,” Bastnor agreed. “Niccas could tell us.” He put his hand under my chin and lifted up my head. “What do you say, lad?” he asked.

I was beyond being able to speak. I could hardly focus my eyes on his pasty genial face.

He let my head drop with a shrug. “There’s your answer,” he said to Urdan.

Later, they unchained me, removed the torches, and left me in the total darkness of my cell. There was a straw pallet for me to lie on, but there was no way I could position myself without pressing against one of the wounds. Nor did it escape me that I had never in my life before felt the particular, nerve-wrenching pain of a burn. I knew now what it cost an apprentice of alchemy to actually acquire them.

I forced myself not to dwell on these things—or anything else for that matter—not knowing if Maerdas was reading my thoughts even as he was sucking away the force that the trauma had brought into being. My powers still fought to protect me and in so doing helped to defeat me. It was too bitter a pill to swallow, so I sat involuntarily sucking on it, tears running down my face.

Some time later—I had no idea how much—Urdan came in, bearing a torch and a bowl of broth. I thought I had no appetite, but the smell was appetizing, and the broth itself rich and flavorful as well as nourishing. They feed me well so as to hurt me more, I thought. But I ate.

As I did so, Urdan squatted by my side, regarding me with curiosity. I looked back at him, once my eyes adjusted to the torchlight, and I saw nothing noticeably malevolent about him.

“How can you do this?” I asked him, after a bit, pausing in my eating. “Hurt people who have done nothing to you?”

Urdan shook his head. “You are not ‘people.’ I would never do what I did to you to just anyone on the street.”

I lifted the bowl to drain out the last of the broth. “But you would if they were brought down here,” I replied, handing it, now empty, back to him.

“I am only Bastnor’s assistant,” Urdan said, “and not yet much skilled in my craft. How can I pretend to speak for it? But this is the first thing I was taught when I was accepted as an apprentice by the Guild of Torturers: ‘We honor those we break by taking no pleasure in the pain we inflict; we honor our duty by feeling no remorse for inflicting it. Our doom is to hurt as it is for others to heal.’”

I opened my mouth, but then shut it again before speaking—there was simply no point to it. If he found himself enjoying hurting me, he would blame me for it; if he found himself feeling sorry for me, he would blame me for it even more. Malevolence wasn’t a necessary component of a torturer’s aura—to be one, you merely needed a talent for assigning to others the consequences of your own deeds.

Meanwhile Urdan went over to the sconce and removed the torch. “Sleep well,” he said as he left, closing the

door behind him. After he shot the bolt, there was nothing in my world but silence, darkness, and pain.

A hand touched my shoulder, and, when I failed to respond, grasped it more firmly and shook me gently. I opened my eyes to the faint glow of a candle—too faint for me to make out who was trying to rouse me.

“Is it day already?” I asked, foolishly. In this place there was no day or night, just darkness, sometimes partially illuminated, mostly not.

“You’ve slept through a whole day,” a voice answered. “*He* ordered that you be left alone and given time to rest and heal. So, it is night again. I have brought you some bread and cheese.”

I struggled to a sitting position, ignoring the stabs of pain as best I could. “Who are you?” I asked.

“Don’t you know me?” the voice replied. “I passed you in the great hall.”

The speaker lifted the candle to show his face, but from his voice I had already guessed who he might be. It was the beautiful blond boy with the ice-blue eyes.

He regarded me coolly with these now, displaying an eerie confidence that belied his age. “I am named Sepharan,” he said, “and you have the bad luck to be Niccas, the new *Nithaial Elimiel*.” He lifted a golden plate on which rested a thick slice of bread and a wedge of cheese.

“No wine?” I asked.

He smiled. “Thoughtless of me, I agree. If you wish,

I can bring you some the next time I come. But here is some clean water.”

“Why are you here?” I asked, looking at him warily.

“Seriously, you must eat,” he said, setting the plate into my lap. “Do that and I will answer your questions.”

I bit off some the bread. It was tender, with a delicate flavor, the cheese was so soft that it could barely hold its shape. There was no knife, so I spread it with my thumb.

I chewed slowly, to make it last, pausing after a bit to glance up at Sepharan.

“Curiosity. Boredom,” he replied in response to my look. “I can do what I wish here, go anywhere I want to go. Anything I request is granted. But there are few places worth visiting, little that is worth doing, and since I have everything, there is nothing for me to request—that is, until you arrived.”

“You are his... favorite,” I said.

He shrugged indifferently, then tossed back his long blond hair. “Call it what you like,” he answered. “We do not make love, if that’s what you mean. He no longer can, really. Instead, he enters me by magic to savor my—what can I call it?—my *maturing*.”

The boy glanced aside for a moment, then looked back at me. “He treats me as a bud about to blossom into a flower. When that happens, he will savor the result until he is satiated, then he will begin to search for another.”


We looked at each in silence for a long while. Then I

said, “It must be very difficult.”

He shook his head—not denying what I said, but rather pushing it away. “I’ve taught myself to not even think about that. I must be always available to him, and be always pliant, even during the occasional pruning.”

Sepharan flashed me that amazingly charming smile. “I have taught myself to bear what he wants of me, you see. I might even last and become like Sirdias.” He lowered his voice, “Or, perhaps, replace him.”

He shot a quick glance at me to see if I caught his meaning. When he saw that I had, he added, “You look at me and see a beautiful boy. But look inside me, if you like, and you will find something a bit more complex.”

He leaned toward me and kissed me, then took up the empty plate, placed the water jug in my lap, and got up. “I’ll leave you the candle,” he said, and was gone. 

Chapter 7



“You offer a torturer a very unusual opportunity to expand his craft,” Bastnor was saying as he led me out of my cell and down the shadowy corridor just outside it. There were no glowstones or torches set in the walls to provide light, which was why Bastnor held aloft a small lantern to show our way.

It cast just enough illumination to show how little there was to see. As had been my cell, the low ceiling was coated with soot; the walls were damp and thick with mold, broken here and there with crusted patches of lime. You could also catch the foul reek of the cells—of piss, shit, vomit, blood, and sweat—but there was so much less of it here that the air almost seemed fresh.

Because the cell walls were so thick, their doors were set back, and remained in the shadows until we were right beside them. I heard no sound—no screams or wailing or ravings of men driven out of their minds—only a faint, brittle, rustling sound, like insects rubbing their wings to-

gether, made, I thought, by the lost souls of the dead that crowded around us, and that we pushed out of our way without even realizing it.

“Almost always,” Bastnor was continuing, glancing at each door as we passed it, “we have a simple assignment—provide the sufferer with a slow and exceedingly painful death. Sometimes there’s the additional fillip of extracting a demeaning and totally untrue confession from them, which, I grant you, does take practice and skill.

“You might interrupt me here and say, ‘But Highest Torturer, what about the extracting of information?’” Bastnor shook his head at the naivete of the question. “The Highest One has no need of *my* services in cases like that. His methods are—and I’d be the first to admit it—by far the superior.”

He glanced at me. “Necromancy offers many ways for magic to enhance the methods of our profession.”

Bastnor lifted a lantern and examined what to me was a completely featureless door, and shook his head. “No, not that one,” he muttered to himself, “but we’re almost there.

“Anyway, what I was saying was that my assignment—*our* assignment, if I may say so—is to inflict the maximum amount of pain on you while keeping you alive enough so that we can keep at it for the foreseeable future. *Not* an easy assignment, especially because *he*,” and here Bastnor lifted his eyes, “is very..., very...,” he paused, examined a door, took hold of its handle.

“Hmm, I’m not sure *what* to say.” As he pulled the door open, he glanced at me again, this time regarding my gold collar with genuine curiosity. “Maybe—*hungry*?”

The room into which we entered was about twice the size of a cell, and, for once, was lit not with torches but with two glowstones set at eye height in the masonry. Even so, the ceiling was black with soot, and the stench was, if anything, even greater. The walls, I thought, must be permeated with the reek of fear and pain. There were, no doubt, many such rooms down here, each with its own specialized device for breaking bodies and minds.

Again, as before, Urdan awaited us, but this time was busy adjusting a large wooden structure, not unlike a table, with two cranks at one end and three at the other.

“You have only to remove your shirt and lie on the table, Niccas, lad, and we’ll take care of the rest.”

“What if I should refuse?” I asked. “I haven’t seen a guard since I’ve come down here.” I knew what I was looking at, although I had never seen a rack before.

“Good question,” Bastnor exclaimed. “And easily answered.”

I felt, simultaneously, a blow and a bolt of such excruciating pain that I fell to the ground. Urdan had given me a vicious kidney punch. Unceremoniously, Bastnor bent down, grabbed me, and heaved me up onto the table, while Urdan swung my legs around. He began to fasten each to a leather cuff, attached to a rope, that fit tightly around my

ankle, while Bastnor fastened similar cuffs to my wrists.

As he was fastening still another—this time in the form of a sling, that fitted under my neck and around my head—he spoke. “It was observant of you to notice the lack of any guards in the dungeons, not at all the standard practice in chambers such as these. But that’s because *he*”—again the glance upwards—“has cast spells that cause all who enter Gorzungâd to unknowingly submit to his will.

“Outsiders imagine this place as being full of gloom and fear, but it’s quite the opposite!” He smiled, if mostly to himself. “We have no choice but to be happy here—and so happy we are.”

Bastnor stood back, and began to slowly turn two of the three cranks at his end, while, at his signal, Urdan turned those at the foot of the table. Both of them stopped as soon as my limbs were firmly spread-eagled across it.

Then Bastnor walked around the entire table, carefully checking over the device. As he did so, he continued talking. “Even you—until just now, when you summoned the will to do otherwise—have exhibited the usual involuntary compliance. And really, lad, it’s for your own good. Guards are the least of it, when you enter Gorzungâd!”

As he talked, I felt fingers touch me, and looked down to find Urdan undoing my smalls. Our eyes met as he pulled them away and dropped them onto the floor. He might take no pleasure from giving me pain, but he was clearly excited by my helplessness. I could only hope that I wouldn’t be left

alone with him.

“Take your station, Urdan,” Bastnor said, and from the subtle tug of the ropes fastened to my arms, I realized he had seized hold of the handles that turned the cranks.

“Half a turn, half a turn,” he ordered. There was a clicking noise from the ratchet and the ropes were stretched taut. By stretching myself, I was just barely able to meet the strain.

“Quarter turn,” Bastnor ordered. The ratchet clicked, the ropes went rigid, the leather cuffs bit into my skin. A terrible, tearing pain convulsed my arms and legs as the joints were loosened from their sockets.

“Three clicks, slowly.” Each of them brought an excruciating increase in my agony. Every muscle in my body fed its own pain into the maelstrom. My body burst out in sweat. Unable to stop, I wet myself, then shit myself. I screamed without shame, without cease.

Time passed in such a thick haze of pain that minutes became hours. I will never know how long I had been kept like this when Bastnor ordered, “Release two clicks,” then added, “Douse him.”

Urdan tossed a bucket of water over me. Its coldness made my body instinctively contract, further intensifying the agony. Now I was panting and screaming, panting and screaming.

After a few minutes of this, Bastnor said. “Free the cogs.” There was a burr as the freed ratchet spun backwards, loosening the ropes. Then he bent over me and slapped my

face sharply so that I stopped screaming. My eyes focused and I looked up at him.

“This was just day one, lad,” he whispered, seizing hold of my hair and bring my face close. “No neck crank. Just a short spell at strong pull. Three clicks more and you’d hear popping noises as your ligaments start to snap and your cartilage rips apart. Another click and bones begin to snap. A few more clicks and we reach maximum pull. That’s where your legs and arms are ripped right from your body. So why not shut up for a bit?”

He let my head fall back against the table with a thud. “Urdan, wait here in case the Lord of Lords sends word He wants more. I’m going to get some guards to help us get him back to his cell, otherwise.”

As soon as Bastnor left, Urdan pulled up his shirt and freed his erection. At this point if he had fucked me I wouldn’t have even noticed. But he didn’t touch me at all, just pulled himself fiercely until he released his seed. He looked dazed, shaken, frightened. Avoiding my eyes, he dropped his shirt to cover himself again and went around the table, freeing my restraints. I could feel the cruel bruises they left on my arms and legs, but hadn’t the will to lift my head and look at them.

In a while, Bastnor returned with two guards. He gestured at me, and as they hauled me up to a sitting position, I saw him glance at the gobs of Urdan’s spend on the end of the table and look away, shaking his head.

“Clean things up a bit,” he said to Urdan, and to the

soldiers, “I’ll lead the way back to the cell.”

The guards moved to each side of me. When they tried to hoist me up by throwing my arms over their shoulders, I cried out so loudly that they dropped me back on the table. They regarded me for a moment, then the bigger one heaved me up and carried me out like a sack of turnips.

As we went down the corridor, Bastnor handed the lantern to the other guard and came to walk beside me. “Urdan is my wife’s brother’s son,” he muttered into my ear. “I have to make allowances. But it shames me, it truly does.” Those words were still with me when the darkness fell upon me and began feeding on my pain.

The streets of Shavagar-Yasí were filled with people hurrying about, always impatient to find themselves behind me and my crutches. They pushed their way past me, and each time they did I quivered with pain. Dark alleyways beckoned on either side, promising quiet, but I was too afraid to turn into any of them. However, a strangely familiar figure robed in shadow beckoned to me from the next that I came to, and I paused to think of who it could be.

That was a mistake. Someone immediately ran straight into me, causing me to convulse in agony. I would have fallen onto the pavement if the figure hadn’t stepped for a bare second out of the alley, seized hold of me and dragged me to safety.

“You are such an *idiot*,” he said, and I realized at once who it was.

“Iannas!” I cried. Despite my pain I was suffused with joy. I made to embrace him, but he stepped back further into the darkness. He wore a robe of such a dark gray that he seemed to have vanished, but my eyes adjusted to the light, and I saw him waiting for me a little way down the alley.

“Let us go quickly to my rooms,” he said, and, as before, I followed after him through the warren of narrow alleys and a spider’s web of corridors and stairs—although this time, because of my crutches, I was barely able to keep up.

“Not so fast!” I pleaded. “I’m in terrible pain.”

“I know, beloved,” he answered, looking back, “but we don’t have much time.” He pulled back the hood of his robe as he spoke, showing his face. There were no jewels in his eye sockets. Instead, he had real eyes, and he could see with them.

It was then I remembered that he was dead. A great relief swept through me—for I thought this meant that I had died as well, and Iannas had come to escort me to Ais Dysmassia.

But no, he brought me to his rooms, just as he had said. We entered them together, and this time I found them dimly lit. I looked around and saw Rabih asleep on the bed.

“Is Rabih dead, too?” I asked.

“Speak softly,” Iannas said. “I don’t want to wake him. And no, he isn’t dead. What makes you think that?”

“Because I must be, if I am in your company,” I replied, adding, “for surely *you* are dead.”

“Yes, sweet one, I am truly dead. But you are not, at least not yet. There is the pain to remind you of that.”

“You have eyes now,” I said, stupidly. Now I could see that they were a dusty rose.

He smiled. “Yes. Now, at last, I can see you. Which is good, because I can’t take you in my arms and hold you, which I so much long to do.”

“Do you visit Rabiḥ often?” I asked.

“Never until now,” Iannas replied, looking down at where he slept. “And never again. Do me the favor of pulling back the blanket. I would like to see him plain, this one last time.”

Gently I pulled away the covering, revealing his wiry, naked body, his arms wrapped tightly around a pillow. Iannas looked down at him, until tears pooled in his eyes. Then he turned away, and I drew up the covers again.

“Come,” Iannas said, and led me into the side room, where he gestured for me to sit.

“I spoke with your twin, beloved, and asked him—or, rather, his medium—to speak to Rabiḥ...”

“How could he do *that*?” I asked.

“You mustn’t interrupt me,” Iannas chided me, “we have so little time. But since you have—Rabiḥ managed to rescue some of my seeing stones, and among them was your *telesma*. He knew what it was and used it, trying to find and speak to me. Instead, he found Jessan, who was trying to find and speak to *you*.”

He sighed. “Instead, I implored him to tell Rabih to have someone find my corpse and put a coin in its mouth, so that I could have the fare to cross over the Cyll.”

“You don’t know what awaits you on the other side,” I cried out. “Bless Gesryma that you didn’t cross.”

Iannas shook his head. “Same Niccas,” he said. “You do listen, but what you hear seems never to be what was actually said.”

“I’m sorry to interrupt again,” I answered, chastened, “but....”

“But,” Iannas broke in, lifting a hand to silence me, “you should bear in mind that a farseer, if anyone, knows what awaits him in the land of the dead. So the question for you to ponder—some other time!—is why we still cross over.

“However, yes, it was a blessing from Gesryma that I was kept on this side of the Cyll. In fact, I think it was more than a blessing. It was a doom.

“You see, beloved, when we were all sitting on that bed together, I saw all that would come to pass. But I hadn’t the courage to face it. Instead, I glanced aside, persuading myself that what I was shown was merely one future out of many—and that you and I would be clever enough to change our fate. As, indeed, some have.”

He shook his head sadly. “I, if anyone, should have known that too many threads were being woven together to make our future for me to hold them all. And so I missed that of Prince Poëstil—a disastrous failure.”

He looked down, grief filling his face. “My beloved, you blame yourself for what happened, but in truth the responsibility remains with me. It was so much easier to convince myself that you would be safe in the hands of Urvasor in the House of the Narrow Blade than to work a better plan out of the scraps at our disposal.”

He raised his head again, and our eyes met. “You would have been better off in Rabih’s hands.”

I had to smile at the thought of all of us scurrying over the tops of walls and through the city sewers with the soldiers of Prince Poëstil in hot pursuit.

Iannas met my smile with a small one of his own. I wanted to embrace him so badly, to cover him with kisses, feel his body pressing against mine again, that I cried out in pain. But Iannas mistook it for the hurt my body was suffering, and I said nothing to dissuade him. What I wanted—what we both wanted—was simply not to be, at least until we met again on the other side of the Cyll.

“Even so,” I replied, “you should hate me simply for dragging you into my troubles.”

“You forget it was *I* who stopped you on the street,” he said simply. “Now *you* are suffering the same torments that Prince Poëstil inflicted on me—and I have come to keep you from following me to the same fate.”

He leaned toward me. “Niccas, you can take at most one more day of the rack. They mean to keep you alive, yes, but if your joints are weakened any further, even should you

survive, you will stumble through life in agonizing pain. We have to stop them, at least for the moment. Jessan already knows where you are. Indeed, he was standing in a pass in the western mountains when you were seized, and fully felt your capture.”

“Even if that’s true,” I said, dispiritedly, “he won’t find it so easy to rescue me. I imagine by this time He”—and I glanced quickly upwards—“knows his every step.”

Iannas shrugged. “That may be. The Unnameable One can easily cloud any mind that attempts to learn such things. All that matters to me is that if Jessan *does* manage to get to you, he finds something worth rescuing.”

Our eyes met. Really, I just wanted to be put out of my misery, but how could I say that to Iannas?

“And thus fate takes us by the hand and leads us back to Prince Poëstil,” he said. “He has the pendant given to you by Ra’asiel, Lord of Chaos, and it contains within it more than enough power to satisfy the needs of The Unnameable One. You need only tell him about it.”

“And he will then kiss my brow and set me free?” I asked, with unmasked bitterness. “I think not.”

“Niccass, Niccass,” Iannas replied, “think before you speak. First, Prince Poëstil will absorb all his wrath and greed, then he will have the pendant to master. It will not be a week or a month before he is able to use it effectively. And he’ll soon realize that the power he draws from you will work against his commanding the other. Did you ever gain


mastery of it?”

I shook my head vehemently, not only to answer his question, but to express my absolute refusal to consider his proposal. “Beloved, you ask something of me that I *cannot* do. I would rather be dead and with you than to give something that powerful to Maerdas—especially when Ra’asiel gave it to me to aid in my battle against him.”

“Did the God tell you that?” Iannas asked skeptically. “I’ll wager he didn’t. He merely used you to put it into play, for what reasons we may never know. And how long do you think it will remain in Prince Poëstil’s possession before Maerdas learns of it?”

“Not long,” I muttered in unwilling agreement, “given what a braggart he is.”

“Even so,” I said imploringly, “please don’t ask this of me, Iannas. I will rue the day that through my carelessness I allowed something so powerful to fall, first into Prince Poëstil’s hands, and from those into *his*—but tell Maerdas about it myself? That is something I could never forgive myself.”

“Then you will simply have to add it to the long list of such things,” Iannas said, almost lightly, pulling his hood over his face. “I have just removed myself from it, so perhaps I can be allowed to choose what will take my place.” 

Chapter 8



IANNAS REACHED out and touched my cheek. Immediately, I seized hold of it, and found that his fingers were warm. Shaken, crushed with emotion, I made to embrace him, even as the memory of his broken body, revealed to me by the gloating Prince Poëstil, broke the spell of my sleep. I woke to find myself, in the soft glow of candlelight, clutching the hand of Sepharan.

“You were dreaming, *Nithaial*,” he said softly, as I released it. “I’m sorry to wake you, but I’ve brought you food and...” he held up a small crock, “as I promised, some wine.”

I lifted my hand to take it, but the pain was still such that it shook uncontrollably.

“Ah,” Sepharan said, “I understand. Let me.” He reached over with one hand and gently lifted my head, and, with the other, brought the mouth of the crock to my lips.

I drank greedily, and, as I did, thought of what Iannas had asked me to do. Sepharan would be the ideal mes-

senger. But even as this thought crossed my mind, I knew I would say nothing. Maerdas might get hold of the pendant, but with any luck it would be after my death.

In truth—even though I hadn’t dared admit this to him—I *longed* to join Iannas on the shores of the Cyll. Every decision I had made as *Nithaial* had narrowed my choices, and now there was only one left, and it would release me from this horrible pain. I had no doubt I would find myself like any ordinary mortal, waiting my turn to cross over the black river. What other fate could there be for a *Nithaial* who had failed all that was asked of him? I would find my beloved, and he and I would face the terrors of Ais Dysmassia together.

By now, I had drunk most of the wine, and Sepharan was giving me bites of bread and cheese. “You have fed *him* well today,” the boy said. “And, as usual, he fails to husband the force, but expends it as soon as he gets it. He acts as though you will last forever, but to spend one moment with you is to realize otherwise.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I replied, my voice surprisingly calm. “If it is to be sooner or later, I’d prefer it to be sooner. I take no pleasure in feeding him.”

“Well, I’d like your company a little longer,” the boy said. “For the first time in years, I’m not bored out of my mind.”

Sepharan lifted up the candle to examine my face. “You do look like brothers,” he said, “when *he* is at his best.” He giggled. “When he’s at his worst, he looks like your great-

great-grandfather, just dragged from his tomb.”

“I saw him in both states,” I said, “and they both gave me the shivers.”

Sepharan nodded. “It is an acquired taste,” he said, setting the candle down again. “But you’re quite attractive, you know, despite all your bruises and bitterness.”

His ice-blue eyes held mine coolly, until I looked away. “You’re too young for thoughts like that,” I said, shocked.

He laughed with genuine amusement. “Why *Nithaial*, who is this Rabih, then, if boys are beneath your notice?”

“How have you learned that name?” I said, fear closing around my heart.

“Because you talk in your sleep,” he said, reaching over to touch my hand. “Don’t worry, suspicious one, his name is safe with me.”

“Perhaps,” I thought. When he had bent toward me, I saw that around his neck hung a thin gold chain, from which dangled a small pendant bearing Maedas’s emblem.

The boy, however, was gazing at my eyes, not following them. “Tell me, *Nithaial*, how you came to have these demon eyes. I’ve never seen such a thing, even on the twisted souls who serve *his* pleasure.”

“I don’t know,” I replied. “He seems to think that I was given them by *Ra’asiel*. But I think it more likely that it came from powers I absorbed from the demon avatar, Teshnar’ad.”

“Absorbed!” Sepharan exclaimed. “How did you do that?”

“Let’s change the subject,” I replied. I had merely been expressing some of my own broodings, but suddenly the realization came as to where these thoughts were leading us.

“In a moment,” Sepharan replied. “This visit has its purpose. But please answer my question. From your reluctance, my guess is that you allowed the demon to... what’s a polite way to put this? Have its way with you?”

“Sepharan!” I said, realizing as I did so that his innocence was long gone. Indeed, his eyes danced with excitement. *Nithaial*, you *are* an adventurous one! And can you pass on your own powers in the same way? Does your demon lover’s eyes now resemble yours?” The boy giggled. “If so, this Teshnar’ad must have a lot of explaining to do.”

I couldn’t help smiling, albeit thinly, at the thought of Teshnar’ad and Do’arma’ak regarding each other in astonishment as mutual realization slowly dawned.”

“Perhaps it was Ra’asiel, after all,” I said. “I can pass my powers on to humans, yes,” adding, thinking of Helias, “although to what good purpose I have yet to learn. But as I told *him*,” and my eyes quickly glanced upwards, “I sense no demon powers in me, and certainly have shown none.”

Sepharan regarded me thoughtfully, then visibly shook whatever he was thinking aside and reached into a pocket in his shirt. He took out a small folded piece of paper. He opened it, revealing a small amount of powder the col-

or of madder. He carefully spilled this into the wine crock, swirling about the remaining wine as he did so to dissolve it completely.

“Either this will kill you instantly,” he said with disarming nonchalance, “or it will free you from the rack for a bit.”

I looked at the crock covetously. It offered me everything I wanted most at this moment—to die, or, failing that, to not have to endure the rack again, not tomorrow. Even so....

“Why would you, of all people, do this for me,” I asked, “risking the wrath of Maer....”

Sepharan leaned over with astonishing quickness and clamped his hand over my mouth. “*Never* say that name in Gorzungâd, and it is better not to even think it,” he said. “As to your question, I hope you aren’t so naive as to think I *love* the Lord of Gorzungâd. My upbringing has made love, from what little I understand of it, something I have never felt and never will. You have something I want, and to get it I have to give you something *you* want.”

“Unless you desire my corpse,” I said bitterly, “I have nothing left in the world to give anyone.”

Sepharan flashed his disconcertingly seductive smile. “Well, that remains to be seen. But if you do want to be free of that enchanted band around your neck, you have no choice but to drink this down.”

I swallowed the dregs of the wine and didn’t die, although they had an eerie narcotic effect on me, leaving me so that I hardly knew whether I was awake or asleep. Ei-

ther way, it seemed as though I was having terrible nightmares. Without ever being quite aware of what they were, these left me covered with night sweat, and that and the pain in my joints made the next several hours miserable beyond description.

Eventually, Urdan appeared, stuck the torch he was carrying into the sconce on the wall, and came over to me.

“Bastnor told me to make you ready,” he said, lifting his shirt, and revealing himself. “But first you’re going to give me a good suck.”

I looked up at him. “I’d be delighted to,” I said.

Urdan smirked. “I thought you would,” he said, giving his cock a few strokes to stiffen it. Then he poked it into my face. It smelled of piss and badly soured milk.

I took it in my hand, then said, “Although I’m surprised you trust me not to bite it off.”

“You wouldn’t dare!” Urdan exclaimed.

I gave his cock a hard squeeze. “Oh?” I said. “What, exactly, do I have to lose?”

I looked up at him, opened my mouth to show him all my teeth, and made as if to take his cock into my mouth.

Urdan jumped backwards, yanking it out of my hand, even as the door to my cell swung open and Bastnor stepped inside, carrying a pair of crutches.

He took in the scene—me smirking and Urdan looking furtive and scared—and opened his mouth to speak, but stopped when he noticed the sheen of sweat that covered my

body. He took up the torch and examined me closely.

“Not unusual after your first day on the rack,” he grunted, “or your second day either. It’s nothing to keep us from our appointment.”

My heart sank. Obviously, sick as Sepharan’s powder had made me, I wasn’t nearly ill enough to stay another day on the rack.

“Here’s some crutches,” Bastnor added, tossing them on the pallet beside me. “Should’ve had them on hand yesterday. Can’t be carrying you about all the time.”

I just stared at them. Despite what he had just said, I couldn’t summon the energy to struggle to my feet.

“All right,” Bastnor said. “I’ll give you a hand this once.” He seized hold of my shoulders in a vice-like clamp lifted me to my feet, and pushed me against the wall. Then, Urdan shoved the crutches into my armpits. The pain of it made me cry out.

“None of that,” Bastnor said, cuffing my head. “We got an earful of your whimpering yesterday, and that’s our limit.” He struck me again. “Now, *get moving*.”

As I tried to walk, I immediately realized how injured I was. My joints felt loose and wobbly, as though I were a puppet. Even so, it was possible to move, thanks to the crutches, even though I couldn’t quite straighten my legs.

As I moved slowly and painfully down the corridor, I noticed something strange. The nightmare feelings caused by the drug were fading away. No, they weren’t *fading*. Once

I was in enough pain to summon fresh power to my aid, the venomous haze mingled with it and went *pouring out of me* through the enchanted neckband.

The moment I realized what was happening I smiled bitterly. Sepharan's plan hadn't been to make me too ill to be tortured, but something far more ingenious—if amazingly risky to him.

Sure enough, a moment later, all of Bastnor's blood seem to drain from his body, leaving behind a waxy pallor. Maerdas was mind-touching him.

He fell to his knees. "No, Highest One," he gabbled, "I gave him nothing. *Nothing!*"

There was a pause, then Bastnor spoke again, in the same terrified voice. "You mean Urdan?" Bastnor gave his assistant a look of suspicion that turned instantly to pure hatred. He was remembering what he had just seen as he entered my cell. "Maybe so. Yes, I'll find out, I promise. Give him a taste of his own medicine. No, Highest One, it couldn't have been anyone else."

Again a pause. "Guards at the door? Why would I have done that? You didn't order..." Bastnor screamed, and pitched forward unconscious onto the stone floor.

Urdan and I stood there looking at him, then looked at each other. Urdan was ashen. He turned to me. "I didn't give you *nothing*," he said. "You've got to tell him, I didn't give you *nothing*."

"Why would Bastnor believe me?" I asked. "You're

smart enough to know that if I volunteered such a statement would *immediately* be taken as confirmation of your guilt.”

Urdan stared at me, then glanced down the corridor, the wheels clicking over in his mind: nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. As he stood there, paralyzed, Bastnor groaned, then began trying to get himself up onto his hands and knees.

“Help me up, you worthless piece of shit,” he muttered, without looking around.

Urdan turned to me uncertainly.

“I think that in this instance he means you,” I said.

He went over and nervously took hold of Bastnor’s shoulder, helping him get to his feet. As he did so, he said once again, “I didn’t give him *nothing*.”

Bastnor, now standing, if precariously, gave Urdan a long, hard look. “Well, it wasn’t me,” he said at last, “and so it *had* to be you. And, believe me, you’ll be begging to admit it to *him* soon enough.”

I was hurried back into my cell, the door locked, and the two of them hurried away, Urdan bleating all the while.

It was Sepharan who came to remove the neckband. “We can’t get it off your neck too quickly,” the boy said. “The enchanted poison you swallowed has plunged *him* into a state of delirium and rage. Happily, he realized that if he came himself, he might not be able to keep himself from throttling you and devouring your soul. And he needs you still.”

Sepharan settled down on the floor in front of me, instantly soiling his costly shirt. “So he sent me, instead.” He giggled. “There isn’t anyone else he could trust to perform so delicate task. He’s known me since I was a little child; there’s no way *I* could be an agent of the *Nithaial*.”

“They’ve already caught the culprit,” I said.

“So I heard, and from his own mouth!” he replied with a wry grin. “I was there when the guards brought him up.” His eyes were glinting with amusement. “How clever of your conspirators to choose someone as hapless as the torturer’s assistant. If a person is dim enough, you insult yourself by suspecting him.”

He shook his head. “Even so, the fact that an agent of the *Nithaial* was actually insinuated into Gorzungâd—each time that realization comes to *him*, it maddens him all over again.” As he spoke, Sepharan was unfastening a small pouch from his belt. No need to use a hidden pocket when it was Maerdas who had sent him here. “In nearly a thousand years, no one has managed *that*.”

Sepharan removed three items, which he laid out on the flagstones before him. He picked up the first, a small vial, and removed its stopper.

“To start, you’ll have to drink this down,” he said. “*He* insisted on it, and I know he’ll check.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“A narcotic of some sort,” the boy replied, “to keep you too mazy to cast any spells. No one is allowed to wield

power in Gorzungâd but its master.” He then added with a knowing look, “Such as calling up a horde of fire imps.”

“If you’ve learned that much about me, you should also know that such spells require my wand of power,” I said, “which he has safely locked away.”

My eyes moved from the vial to meet his own. “And what happens to me,” I asked, “when the potion wears off, and I emerge from oblivion?”

Sepharan shook his head. “No, not oblivion. It will be more like being seriously drunk—but without any hang-over. Here, drink it and see.”

He held the vial to my lips, but not before delicately sniffing at the open top. “Ooh,” he said, and inhaled some more. “That *is* something.”

I drank it down. If this was what I had to do to get the neckband removed, even for a brief respite, I would do it.

The effect was immediate, but, as Sepharan had promised, pleasing in a syrupy sort of way. It was like floating in a warm bath after making love.

“Now we have to stop up your ears,” the boy said, picking up the two other objects of the floor, “while I recite the unlocking spell. They’re enchanted, so you can put them in yourself if you wish.”

“You’ll have to do it,” I said. “My hands are still shaking too much.”

“Shame on me for forgetting,” Sepharan said. He reached over to one ear and then the other, gently inserting

the plugs. As soon as he had, I understood what he meant. It wasn't just that they blocked any sound from the outside—they had one of their own. It was of something terrifying creeping up on you, and the sound (if it *was* a sound and not just a magical emanation) drew all your attention to it.

Not only did I not hear him speak the spell—I had to struggle to just see him mouthing the words. But the result was clear enough—the neckband snapped open, and would have fallen to the floor if Sepharan hadn't caught it.

He set it carefully between his legs, then reached up and unplugged my ears.

"Perfect," he said. "Saying a spell and actually having it work is wonderfully delicious, isn't it?" He gave me another of his radiant smiles.

"As to your question," he went on, "of course, he wants the neckband put back on as soon as the effect of the powder wears off, in one or two days. But by then, two things will be different. I will know the spell of release, so I can come and give you relief as often as possible. And *he* will have sent a skalgür to claim a few items from your old friend, his excellency, Prince Pustule."

Even in my stupor, I could feel my heart stop beating. "What are you talking about?" I asked, my speech slurred and hesitant. "How could Maer...—*he*—know anything about, about..."


"The pendant of Ra'asiel?" Sepharan said, completing my sentence for me. His eyes flickered with suppressed ex-

citement. “In truth, he has yet to find out about it. I needed to wait for the right moment to tell him, since he doesn’t know of my secret visits to you—and I mean to keep it that way. One look at that wreck Bastnor brought up....” The boy shuddered, then determinedly shook the image out of his head.

“However, now that you and I have officially met,” he went on, “I can present him with a gift beyond price—and one that will ensure my favor for all time.” His expression hardened as he added, “And, if my plan works, it *shall* be for all time.”

“But how... how....” I desperately wanted to get the sentence out, but it kept wriggling away like an eel.

Sepharan reached over and caressed the side of my face with the tips of his fingers, making hushing noises as he did so.

“I already told you,” he said. “You talk in your sleep.” 

Chapter 9



DESPITE WHAT SEPHARAN HAD TOLD ME, I was so exhausted that oblivion did claim me for many hours. When I finally woke, I found myself alone in the dark and with my mind deeply drugged. My limbs only vaguely responded to my directions and my mind struggled to work out a thought with words that refused to link together.

When Sepharan finally appeared, I found it took all my concentration to swallow the thin gruel he spooned into my mouth, and more than a little dribbled down my chin. But the boy would catch it each time with a finger, and poke it back into my mouth, teasing me while he did.

Finally the bowl was scraped clean. Sepharan set it aside, and moved so that he sat against the wall beside me.

“We have to get you out of this cell,” he said, “if for no other reason that if I keep visiting you here, I’ll ruin all my shirts. This one, I can already tell, will have mold stains all over its back.”

He turned his head to look at me. I was apprehending his words, but as if from a great distance. I realized with equally distant embarrassment, that my mouth was gaping open. It took all the will I possessed to manage to close it.

Sepharan giggled. “Yes,” he said, “that does make you look less like a drooling idiot. Can you understand anything I say? Or is your mind off playing with the sprites?”

I managed to put two words together and make my mouth spit them out. “I... can,” I said, and to prove the point, vaguely nodded.

“Excellent,” the boy replied, “because it’s time to effect the next part of my plan—it’s your turn to give me what *I* want. Have you worked out what it is?”

I shook my head. In fact, I had thought about it when my mind was clear, but came up with no other answer than that he wanted a pet, and I was elected to be it.

“I’ve never actually seen a man spend,” Sepharan said. “No one in Gorzungâd would dare be so familiar with me except for one, and *he* can’t manage it any more.”

The boy’s hand was pulling up my shirt. To my mortification, I found myself responding to his touch, especially when his fingers found my member.

“So, Niccas, sweet *Nithaial*, you are about to fulfill two of my deepest wishes, to learn about that and to get some power of my own—*lots* of power.”

He began to stroke me. “Is this right?” he asked. “My own is still too small to give me any useful clues.”

Then he giggled again. “Well, I must be doing *something* right. How big it has grown! Amazing. And so smooth and hot. Did your little Rabih let you stick it up his butt? If so, he was admirably brave.”

I was desperately trying to quell my response and to struggle away. But all I managed to do was to flop my limbs about. “No..., no..., I didn’t,” I stammered.

“Here’s where it gets really tricky,” Sepharan said. “I know I have to swallow the spend to absorb your power, and I don’t even know how to get it out of you.”

With his free hand, he reached over to where the candle burned, and lifted it up in its holder.

“Well,” he said, “something is oozing out of your piss hole. Is that it? I thought there would be much more.”

He tossed his hair back, leaned down, and licked me with his tongue, then paused to consider. “No,” he said. “I don’t feel anything different. Perhaps I should just try harder.” He returned the candle to its holder, then took my knob in his mouth and began to suck on it mercilessly. I shuddered and groaned aloud.

Meanwhile his other hand began exploring my crotch. He took hold of one of my balls. “I know this is where you keep it, Niccas,” he said, removing my cock from his mouth. “Should I give them a little squeeze?”

He did so, and when my cock quivered, took it back in his mouth. There was nothing I could do. In a mere matter of moments he brought me to release. It happened so

quickly and I shot so much that he gagged, but still forced it all down his throat before pulling me out of his mouth, coughing and gasping for air. When that spasm passed, he bent down, sucked me clean, then climbed up onto my lap, facing me, and lifted up my head.

“I feel it, Niccas!” he cried out. “It’s like having a wild animal inside me, frightened, angry, fighting to keep from being tamed.”

He kissed me, then pressed his body against mine. “Help me catch it,” he whispered in my ear. He wrapped his arms around me and buried his face against my neck. He made soft, whimpering sounds as the force fought back, bending his will as though it were a finger, and doing its best to snap it.

None of this weakened Sepharan’s resolve; I felt his body twist and his muscles tighten, making a physical buttress to support his mental grapplings. Such single-minded intensity in a boy his age awed me, and melted my anger into something more complex—a wary, hurting sense of connection. I closed my eyes and tried as best I could to calm the force, shape it to him, show him how to take control.

I succeeded, or, rather he did. The frantic beating of his heart began to return to its normal pace; his arms, which had before clutched me with all their strength, now held me in a comfort-seeking hug. I could just barely sense his mind, a labyrinth of calculation walling in a core of baffled innocence. Unbidden, tears came to my eyes—not of pity, but of grief, and I felt it for both of us.

Soon after Sepharan's departure sleep claimed me again, and I was most grateful. But my dreams were terrifying—as I should have expected them to be, for the effects of the poison were no longer being swept out of me through the neckband.

As the power accumulated in me, the effect of the poison intensified, bringing on a state of delirium, in which I suffered the most terrible of torments. I was forced to watch as Iannas was broken on the rack, then crushed beneath a fiendish press. Helias copulated with Nassazia to produce a divine child who was to rule in place of the *Nithaial*. Maerdas dangled the pendant of Ra'asiel in my face, then let it fall into my hands, laughing mockingly when my fingers proved too weak to grasp hold of it.

So, it was with gratitude that I found myself being shaken awake, with a hand that, while not as brutal as Bastnor's, was hardly as gentle as Sepharan's. When my eyes opened, they met the painful glare of a flaming torch, and so I closed them again.

A foot immediately dug sharply into my side, and a voice said, "*Nithaial*, where is the neckband?"

I recognized the voice; I also realized that the fever had lifted. Both potions had worn off. My shirt was soaked with sweat, but my mind was clear.

I opened my eyes again, prepared this time for the brightness, and looked up at Sirdias. "Why do you ask me?" I said, reaching up and touching my neck, savoring its na-

kedness.

“Because you know who removed it from you, and I don’t,” he said impatiently. “The Highest of High told me to be prepared to put it back on you at any moment, and I hadn’t a clue as to what he was talking about.”

Sirdias looked distinctly worried. “*He* actually visited you in your cell while you raved, and observed the waning of the poison. He passed me in the great hall and stopped me to tell me I had done well.”

He looked over at the guard who accompanied him and who had been poking about in the corners of the cell, then said in a low voice, “There is nothing more dangerous to a servant than praise he doesn’t even understand, let alone deserve. Fortunately, I’m not an idiot, and was able to piece together roughly what I had supposedly done.”

He looked at me coldly. “And what obviously *was* done,” he added, “by someone who felt free to usurp me.”

“You must have your suspicions,” I said. I was surprisingly reluctant to name Sepharan, even though everything he had done for me had ultimately proven to be self-serving.

Sirdias snorted, an agreement of sorts. “You’re filthy,” he said, and nodded to a basin of water set on the floor, with a drying cloth and a clean shirt laid out beside it. “Wash yourself as best you can and as fast as you can. I’m bringing you back up with me.”

I looked at him in astonishment.

“Get to it!” he said testily. “Once I find the thing, I’m not about to go running back down all those flights of stairs in order to attach it to you. And I have a feeling that I’m not going to find the accursed thing down here in the dungeon.”

The turmoil within my mind may have passed, but the pain in my joints seemed no better, even after my long rest. I was in such agony that the guard had to hold me while I performed my ablutions, then help me into the clean shirt.

However, when I asked for my crutches, Sirdias, who had been pacing up and down during all this, waved the request away. Instead, he handed the guard a large piece of thickly woven, maroon-colored cloth worked with a host of arcane symbols in a luminescent sea green.

“Wrap him up in this,” Sirdias said. “The cloth is magic, and will bind him tightly by itself, without need of rope or straps.”

This was true. And I could tell from the strength of the spell that this was the least of what it was meant to do.

“Now, hoist him up,” Sirdias ordered, and when the guard attempted to do so, he almost drove my head through the stone ceiling, and would have, had I not had the wit to command the thing to stop before we hit.

“Easy! Easy!” Sirdias barked at the guard. “*It* does the lifting. Your task is simply to guide it.” To me, he said, “Don’t even think of trying to soar off into the sky. For one thing, there are no open windows in Gorzungâd, and for another, all it would take is a snap of my fingers for the spell to

break and you to go tumbling back to earth.”

I doubted that he had such powers—I certainly didn’t sense any. Sepharan was going to have to be a clever lad, indeed, to hide his from Maerdas, who obsessively hoarded all available power in his own person. However, I kept all these thoughts to myself.

Sirdias walked ahead of us briskly—did he ever move any other way?—while we brought up the rear, the guard not only guiding me along but holding up the torch with his other hand. We went up the same stairway that, a few days earlier, Bastnor and I had climbed down.

I noticed that, paradoxically, the ascent seemed much easier than the descent had been, and I commented on this to Sirdias.

“By necessity, the long stairs here are enchanted,” he explained begrudgingly. “But all spells wear out in time, and because of certain events,” and here his voice dropped, “only enough magic could be spared to renew the one that helped with the ascent.”

In return, I told him about the ascender that had taken me to the top of the Eye of Knoltan, which interested him, and began a series of questions—not about my experience there, but the place itself. Even the Steward of Gorzungâd, it seemed, wasn’t immune to the allure of the Eye of Knoltan.

The purpose of the conversation was to distract him, or at least put him more at ease. I didn’t need an *open* window, just one large enough for me to break through. Those

in the stairwell were far too small, but they did indicate that Gorzungâd did at least *have* windows.

The thought of actually escaping Maerdas—and, of course, the fact that I was currently free of the neckband and so absorbing into myself the trickle of power that my spirit generated—made me feel something like myself again. The shroud of grayness that had cast a shadow on all my thoughts began—if not to lift, at least—to lighten.

We left the stairs before we reached the top. Sirdias led us quickly down a corridor, stopped before a door, peremptorily rapped on it, and opened it before giving anyone inside a chance to answer.

The room belonged to Sepharan, who was there, sprawled across his bed. He was propped up on his elbows, leafing through a large, leather-bound tome.

He looked over, saw me, and his eyes brightened. “Hello, *Nithaial*!” he said. “You look like a great big baby wrapped up in swaddling clothes.”

Then he turned to Sirdias. “Thank you, High Steward, for bringing him up to visit me—and in what looks like a clean shirt, no less.” The shirt Sepharan had been wearing when he had last visited me was lying where he had tossed it, half on a chair and half on the floor. He had been right—there were mold stains all over its back.

Sepharan’s nonchalant reaction to our arrival had—as I’m sure he had meant it to—only served to infuriate Sirdias all the more. “Where *is* it, you wicked boy?” he hissed.

“The moment you fall out of favor I’m going to have you flayed alive.”

“Oh Sirdias, you are such a *steward*,” Sepharan replied. “Why don’t you say something original for once—threaten to turn me into a toad, and feed me to your pet snake? Or...” he glanced down at the book, “this sounds perfect—give me a case of the strangles.”

He pointed a finger at Sirdias and, reading from one of the pages, chanted, “*Prescast wearun difernost.*”

He looked over to see if the spell had any effect. “Do you feel a creeping clamminess?” he asked Sirdias. “You don’t *look* any different.” He glanced back at the book. “Oh,” he said, disappointed. “This one only works on horses.”

“Shut that book, *at once*,” Sirdias said, now in a complete state of rage. “I know *he* would *never* have given you permission to take a book like that from his library, let alone lie here and pretend to use it. Now I ask you one last time, *where is the neckband?*”

Sepharan frowned and put a finger on the page to mark his place. “Oh *that*,” he said, as if now things were finally clear. “Well, you’re a little too late. I finally remembered to bring it to *him* just a few minutes ago.”

He looked over at me. “I suppose that means you’re all better, Niccas.” He sighed, then asked Sirdias, “Did *he* tell you to put it back on?”


Sirdias had gotten a grip on himself. “No, not yet,” he replied. “But *he* did tell you that *I* was the one he wanted

to go remove it.”

Sepharan nodded. “That’s true, steward. But *he* didn’t seem particularly upset once he discovered I’d taken the task on myself.” The boy gave Sirdias the lazy, satisfied smile of the cat who had got at the cream, “You see, right now he is very, *very* pleased with me.”

He turned back to his book. “But if you wish the honor of putting the neckband back on, you are certainly welcome to do so. I left it on one of the shelves in the sanctorium. But leave Niccas here with me while you go get it.”

Sirdias gestured to the guard to set me down. Unfortunately, he also had me unwrapped, and the guard took possession of the cloth.

The steward sneered at Sepharan. “That’s what you wanted to get your hands on,” he said. “Well, I’m taking the wrapping—you can do what you want with its contents.” And he stalked out of the room, followed by the guard. 

Chapter 10



THE MOMENT THE STEWARD HAD GONE, Sepharan carefully folded a piece of worn ribbon across the page to mark where he had stopped reading, and closed the book.

“He’s right, of course,” the boy said. “I’d give anything to get hold of that piece of cloth, especially now that I have the power to control it.”

He shrugged, pushed the book to one side, and made a beckoning gesture. “Come and join me on the bed.”

“Not on your life,” I replied.

“This is all so *unfair*,” Sepharan moaned. “I’m the favorite, and *no one* seems to remember it. But at least come sit on the *edge* of the bed, before you tumble onto the floor.”

He had a point. My legs were already shaking from their burden. Without the carrying rug, I wasn’t going to go anywhere. I limped over to the bed, and sat down.

Sepharan immediately rolled over, and pressed his body against mine. “You’re so warm,” he said. He shivered.

“*He’s* so cold. When you defeat him, will you take me as your personal servant? I’d be at least as good as Sirdias.”

I thought of Sepharan’s reaction were he ever to come to Faeÿstirran, and couldn’t help but smile. “That’s an easy promise,” I said, “given how things stand.”

“You say that because he managed to capture you,” Sepharan said. “But, having met you, I’m sure that you will defeat him. Don’t you feel how *hollow* Gorzungâd is? Once, it was bustling with intrigues; inquisitors, stalkers, delators, summoners, and such always coming and going; the torture chambers busy day and night; and, most of all, the feeling of magic everywhere. Now there’s none of that, and the Highest One spends more and more time sequestered in his chambers.”

“I pity you, missing out on all that,” I said, sarcastically. “You’d have been so much in your element.”

“Maybe I would have,” the boy said, with hurt in his voice. “But that isn’t my point. Why are you so mean to me, *Nithaial*?”

“You know why,” I replied.

“And did I have a choice?” he asked in return. “If I had freely asked, would you have freely given? Even knowing that in doing so, you would be striking a blow against *him*?”

I looked down at him. “No,” I said. “You are simply too young to be given it. There’s a reason why my power is passed on the way it is, even if you don’t understand it.”

“I hope the power lets me stay a boy always,” Seph-

aran said bitterly, “because every adult I meet is as thick as the next. If I know what I want, and if I’m clever and determined enough to get it, then what does age matter? Or, if it does, why can’t I find that out for myself?”

I opened my mouth, but before the words could leave it, the boy spoke them himself, in a pretend adult voice. “Because you’re too young.” Then in his own voice he added, “That’s such *shit*. Responsibility comes from *necessity*.”

Suddenly, Sepharan reached up, took hold of my shoulders, and pulled me onto my back. I was too affected by the tone of despair and anger in his voice to protest, even when he then nestled up beside me. Besides, I was now in full command of myself—there would be no repeat of what had happened when we were last together.

As if reading my mind, the boy said, “I’ll keep my hands to myself, I promise”—even though he was already breaking his word by taking hold of my arm. He did it to put his mouth close to my ear, and whispered into it, “*Perfos malas, Maerdas mistor.*”

I turned my head so our eyes met. “That is an unbelievably generous gift, Sepharan,” I said. It was the spell that released the neckband.

He gave me his radiant, come-hither smile. “When I’m old enough to overcome your moral qualms,” he said, “I’ll come claim my reward.”

“If he masters the pendant of Ra’asiel,” I said, sighing, “that time will never come. And, if by chance it should,

if you keep behaving the way you did with Sirdias, you won't be around to take advantage of it."

He shook his head. "Sirdias is my mortal enemy no matter how I treat him," he said. "I knew that from the moment I was first brought here, at the age of six. He is the only one of us who has survived, and he will do anything he can to make certain he remains so."

Sepharan looked away from me, adding, "He won't do anything yet. He'll start his poisoning talk a few years from now, when I start to reach the age when *he* begins losing interest. But I'm already making my plans. When the time comes, we'll see who has the greater will to survive."

He sat up. "Let me show you my room," he said. "Really, it is my whole world."

"There's no need to get up," the boy added, when I struggled to do so. "You can do the whole tour right from there."

The room was brightly lit with glowstones, set in a chandelier that hung over his bed. He lifted his hand to dim them, and I saw that other, softer ones had been set just a short distance up the wall. These illuminated the carpet-strewn floor just enough to comfort anyone who woke in the night without in any way interfering with their sleep.

Sepharan lifted his hand again to bring back the brighter lights, then went about, opening closets to show me his lavish collection of clothing, shelves that held ingenious toys of every sort, and a cabinet that clearly was his cur-

rent pride, holding an assortment of alchemical equipment and a host of vials and canisters holding powdered minerals, extracts of metal, and other requirements for performing investigations.

This interested me too much to remain confined in the bed, and, gingerly, moving from chair back to chair back, I made my way to it.

The boy smiled. "I thought you would be interested in this," he said. "I'm glad you're the *Nithaial* I got to meet. Your twin is said to have become an *herbalist*."

Sepharan said the word with such scorn that I looked at him in surprise. "Really? How did you learn that? And why do you mock it? Herbalists have done much more for mankind than alchemists ever have."

The boy shrugged. "If that's what you want. Herbalism is all about finding cures and killing bedbugs, while alchemy is all about....," he paused to think. "Well, not being *bad*, exactly. It's more like that being *beyond* good and bad. Other people don't matter so much. It's just you, fiddling with the secrets of the universe."

Sepharan glanced up at me. "Even the best poisons are alchemical," he said, as if that clinched the argument.

I said nothing, and my continued silence gave him pause, perhaps even unsettled him. He shook his head dejectedly. "Besides, *Nithaial*, what point is there learning to be an herbalist if you're condemned to spend your life *here*?"

"You can call me Niccas, Sepharan," I said. "And,

there, you have a point. At heart, alchemy *is* a solitary passion.”

I uncorked a vial of minium, sniffed it, then recorked it and set it back. “I’d like to hear about your investigations sometime,” I said, “but I have a feeling we won’t be alone much longer. If only I had my wand of power, I could at least put up some kind of fight.”

Sepharan’s face was suddenly filled with dismay. “Didn’t you know?” he asked.

I looked at him, shaking my head.

“You do know, don’t you, that his own wand shattered into tiny pieces when he ate the soul of his twin?”

Again I shook my head, but now I had a dreadful premonition of where the boy’s words were taking me.

“The same thing happened when he ate the souls of the twins who appeared five hundred years later. So, it occurred to him that perhaps if he didn’t eat your soul, *your* wand wouldn’t shatter when he touched it.” The boy looked at me sadly.

“But it did, anyway.” I said.

Sepharan nodded. “I’m so sorry, Niccas. I should have told you.”

I stood there dumbly for a moment, then shrugged. It was probably the best thing that could have happened, considering. I pointed to a window, filled with small panes of stained glass, and asked, “Does that open?”

I had no plan of climbing out, as Helias had done at

the hunting lodge, but I did desire to breathe air not thick with the claustal reek of Gorzungâd, and so refresh my mind.

Sepharan looked hesitant. “Yes,” he said, “although *he* doesn’t like me to do it, except sometimes at night.”

“There are scrolls that say the mountain was the haunt of vampires before I built Gorzungâd on top of it. I doubt if any still survive, but I worry that one might attack Sepharan as he sleeps. Stranger things have happened.”

The voice was that of Maerdas, who had entered behind us silently. “Well, dearest one,” he said, turning to Sepharan, “has the *Nithaial Elimiel* had a chance to admire your alchemy equipment?”

The boy nodded. “Yes, beloved master,” he said in a sweet, soft voice. “He told me he had studied the art himself.”

Maerdas nodded with a thin smile, glancing at me as he did. “So I understand. Although you have probably spent more time learning it than he ever did.

“In any case, I want both of you to come with me. And, sweet boy, would you please bring that book?” He gestured to the volume where it lay forgotten on the bed. Sepharan retrieved it, then Maerdas took us, not to the door that led to the corridor, but another, hidden one, that opened onto a flight of stairs that went straight up to his private quarters. Sepharan had somehow failed to include it in his guided tour, which was why we had had no hint of his approach.

We stepped out of the stairway into what must have been Maerdas's sanctorium. The pain in my joints from climbing the stairs had been excruciating, and I had to stop and hold onto the door frame for a moment. As I did, I looked around. The room was, in nature, much like Porphoras's, but much larger and conspicuously more elegantly appointed. Also, unlike the alchemist's private study, this one had a dead body lying in the middle of the floor.

"Sirdias," Maerdas said, as if the corpse needed an introduction. "I found myself displeased with him. Tragic, really, since he will be *quite* hard to replace."

He lifted a finger and pointed to a shelf heaped with ancient tomes. "As I remember, that book goes there," he said to Sepharan. "Perhaps you wouldn't mind replacing it."

"Such a sweet lad," Maerdas said, as we watched him carefully returning the book to its place. "He keeps me young."

The Lord of Gorzungâd looked at me. "You probably disapprove," he remarked. "But you would feel very differently if fate had granted you the chance to live for as long as I. By then, the human lifespan seems so short, so different from one's own. Then, if you bother noticing them at all, you realize that most are pure dross. But some are fruit and a few others, flowers, to be cultivated and, at the right moment," he made a snapping gesture, "to be *picked*."

"So sad you won't find this out for yourself. But I

want to talk with you about other matters.” Maerdas opened his robe to display the pendant of Ra’asiel hanging around his neck, and clasped the jewel in his hand.

“I have waited over eight hundred years for this,” he said softly, “without even knowing it existed.”

He shook his head. “Well, of course, it *didn’t* exist, until Ra’asiel made it and gave it to you.”

He saw my look of surprise, and smiled. “Ah, well. This comes from Prince Poëstil who... *extracted* it from the seer Adelantas. But what interests me right now,” and he stepped closer to me, “is that I understand that to summon the god, one makes a blood sacrifice first.”

I looked back at him. “The god especially savors the blood of the summoner,” I replied, “which, in this case, would be *your* blood.”

Maerdas smiled again, but this time with genuine amusement. “What you say is undoubtably true, *Nithaial Elimiel*, and I would have no qualms about doing that, if I happened to have any. What courses through my veins is something *different*.”

I hadn’t thought about that. Maerdas’s appearance had, in fact, shifted again. The pendant was already feeding him somehow, but, as it did, it was also darkening his veins, mimicking the purple ichor that is said to flow through the veins of the gods.

Meanwhile, Maerdas had continued speaking. “Moreover, you forget one thing, *Nithaial Elimiel*. The god gave the

pendant to *you*, not me. So I think it only fair that, the first time he is summoned, the blood he ‘savors’ should be *yours*.”

Moving with unexpected swiftness, he snapped the band back around my neck. I moved to block him, but my joints were still too shaky for such an immediate and precisely coordinated effort. I grabbed hold of him, but too awkwardly and too late. And with the band in place, he easily shook himself free from my frantic grip.

Maerdas then turned to the door that opened onto his bedroom, and called out, “Niferas!” There was a scurrying sound, and a boy of about six years appeared in the doorway. Like Sepharan, he was blond, with an appealingly childish face, but with none of the other boy’s intelligence in his eyes. In fact, he seemed slightly drugged.

Sepharan, who was still standing near to the bookshelves, went rigid with shock. He continued to stare at the younger boy even when Maerdas addressed him.

“Sepharan, Sepharan,” Maerdas sighed, “I am so fond of you that this will be like pulling out my own heart. And mostly, I blame Sirdias, who failed completely to supervise you. He, if anyone, should have been alert to your little games. I have generously overlooked your scheming to usurp him—if for no other reason than you most likely would have done so, and in a very few years.”

Then Maerdas’s face hardened, and his voice turned as cold as ice. “But to seek to attain magic powers of your own, to make common cause with my most dangerous en-

emy in my own house—did you imagine for a single second that I could forgive you for *that*?”

He went over to where Sepharan stood, seized him by the shoulders and shook him until his teeth rattled. Then he set him down again, and hissed, “What do you have to say for yourself?”

Sepharan opened his mouth and tried to speak, but nothing came out. He closed both his mouth and his eyes, took a deep breath. Then he opened his eyes, looked straight at Maerdas, and chanted, “*Prescast wearun difernost.*”

Maerdas’s face turned livid. He struck Sepharan such a blow that the boy flew across the room, and when he got back to his feet, blood was streaming from a cut on his cheek.

The master of Gorzungâd turned to me. “You have one last pleasure to offer me, and I’ve thought of a way of enhancing it even further.

“Come here, lovely boy,” he said, looking at Niferas, who seemed oblivious to what had just transpired, “and hold out your hands.” When he approached, Maerdas removed the pendant of Ra’asiel from around his neck and draped the chain around the boy’s outstretched hands.

“Good lad,” he said. “Hold it just like that. If you touch the jewel, you’ll be badly burned.” He lightly touched the boy under the chin and lifted up his head. “Do you understand?”

Niferas replied in a clear, thin voice. “Yes, dear master, I am to hold it only by the chain.”

Maerdas ruffled his hair affectionately, as he turned back to me. “Here is my plan,” he said. “You will take Sepharan into your arms and carry him with you, as you leap from the catamount into the abyss. Your grief at carrying him to his death, and your own spirit’s reflexive attempt to save you, will squeeze out of you one last delicious surge of power. I shall be filled with it when I immediately summon Ra’asiel, and He will know me for who I am.”

My voice shaking, I answered, “I shall do no such thing. Nor can you hope to make me, for I will pull you down with me if you do.”

Maerdas shrugged. “No need to threaten me. I won’t force you. But if you do refuse, I’ll eat the boy’s soul right in front of you, then eat yours. Afterwards, I’ll have the two of you tossed off the catamount, and summon Ra’asiel at my leisure.”

We looked at each other for a long moment, then I looked away. “Very well,” I said, “I’ll jump. But spare the boy. He had no idea what he was doing.”

Maerdas laughed mirthlessly. “I admire you for saying that with a straight face. Of course, he knew. But in fairness, I should make him the same offer.”

He turned to Sepharan. “Make your choice,” he said, “fall into the abyss or mingle your soul with mine forever.”

“I go with Niccas,” the boy answered. Then to Niferas he said, “I wish you the joy of my room.”


And so we walked out of Maerdas’s chambers and crossed to the foot of the catamount. It arched up gracefully

from the floor, as if turned into stone as it sprang.

I bent down and let Sepharan wrap his arms around my neck, and then stood back up, lifting him as I did. He wrapped his legs around me and pressed his face into my neck.

The pain in my legs was made all the worse by the boy's weight, but it only made me the more eager to get the business over with. I carefully found my balance on the catamount's narrow back and began edging out, looking straight ahead. I didn't dare look down, for fear of all my nerve deserting me. Already the abyss was clawing at my feet, and the rush of hot air up from its depths tossed the boy's hair into my face.

When I gauged I had reached the middle of the stone beast's back, I spoke softly but as clearly as I could into Sepharan's ear. "The moment we start to fall, say the release spell. We can at least deny him the chance to gorge himself on the terror of our last moments."

I felt his head shift, and hoped he was nodding. Because, at that very moment, my left foot found nothing under it but space. Sepharan and I toppled over, at first with eerie slowness, then as if flung down by the Dark God Himself. The last thing I heard was a boy's voice chanting, "*Perfos malas, Maerdas mistor*"; the last thing I felt was the band snap open and fall away. Then we struck bottom, and all became black, blacker, and blacker still. 

PART THREE



RIDERS OF THE
LHENNAD

Chapter 11



AS BRÁIENN HAD SAID, the eastern slopes of the mountains were clear of forest, and as soon as we rode out of the coomb, a sweeping vista met our eyes—the Plains of the Lhennad, spreading out before us as far as the eye could see. This naturally meant that we were equally visible to anyone watching out for us, but when I mentioned this to Bráíenn, he just snorted.

“We’re obviously not smugglers,” he replied, “and so of no interest to anyone—except for riders of my clan, who will be meeting us once we reach the plains.”

We were both on his horse Eanflæd, me sitting behind him and holding tightly to his belt. The air was brisk and fresh, and it was a novel thing to see the sun rising so far in the east. All my life I had lived with mountains to the east of me, so morning was always cloaked in shadow. Of course, on my way to Wethrelad I had seen the morning sun often enough, but never so dramatically as this.

The way down was twisting and treacherous, the

path covered with scree, a great jumble of loose stones and broken rock. We rode slowly, almost as slowly as we had climbing up the other side, and to distract my mind from the jostling, I asked Bráíenn whether his people looked down on those who found love with those of their own sex.

He was scanning the horizon, his hand shading his eyes. He said nothing until he had finished, not even giving any indication that he had heard me. But when he had finished, he reached behind and patted me on the leg.

“I was not offended by your offer, disguised as it was as a lament,” he said, adding, “if that’s what you mean.”

“Well, partially,” I replied. “But I also notice you avoid giving me a direct answer to my question. Is it out of fear of offending *me*? I haven’t forgotten your calling me ‘delicate.’ That seems very... indirect.”

Bráíenn laughed. “No, no,” he said, “you misunderstood me. Perhaps I should start, then, by explaining the ways of man love among us of the Lhennad.”

He again paused to scan the plains, and I wondered if his reassurances had been meant more to keep me from worrying than as a statement of fact.

“First let me tell you that love play among the youth of the Lhennad is both accepted and usual,” he began. “It makes bonds that last a lifetime and it helps keep girls from having more babies than the clan can support. But when at sixteen years they are initiated into manhood, we think it time for a man to find a wife, and make a bond with her.

“Even so, what is once tasted and enjoyed is never quite forgotten, and so we of the Lhennad have a ritual called the fight dance. If a man fancies another—and that interest is returned—the two engage in public combat. They fight until one pins the other’s shoulders to the ground. Then the winner picks up the loser and carries him to his tent, where they take their pleasure.”

“With the winner being the rider,” I said, pleased with the aptness of my analogy.

Again Bráíenn laughed. “*Nithaial*, you understand us too quickly. They fight to see who will choose. We men of the Lhennad take pride in our ability to endure hard treatment, a fact that can give a powerful edge to such... encounters.”

For a while we rode on in silence. I kept my peace, enjoying the heat of the sun as it beat down upon us. I didn’t need to mind touch Bráíenn to know he was unaccustomed to discuss such things, which, among his people, were done but not much talked about.

Finally he said, “My son Páli is something again. He is what we call moon-fathered, and what your people term ‘a changeling.’ My other sons, Leannian and Welrenc, both older than he, are as bold and wild as you please. They drive their father mad, when they aren’t filling him with pride.

“Then Páli arrived.” Bráíenn sighed. “I blame myself, for after those two I now longed for a daughter, and perhaps the Blessed Mother was reminding me that it is She, not I,

who decides. Anyway, a daughter came later, and another after her. I shall tell you their names when you meet them, but at this moment they would be no more than a flock of sparrows flitting about in your mind.

“In any case, even when he was a youth, I could tell that Páli was different from the others. He would wrestle with them, yes, but he defeated his opponents by cleverness, disdaining strength. The others toughened up; he remained slim and supple, and grew more clever still.

“His brothers protected him, and, of course, I was head of the clan—in partnership with Ádísá, my wife. Otherwise, he would have been treated like a jay caught in a clamor of ravens. Perhaps he understood this himself, for often he would simply mount his horse and disappear into the plains, sometimes for hours, sometimes for days.”

Bráíenn suddenly reined in and brought Eanflæd to a halt. “She’s started limping,” he explained as he quickly slipped to the ground, “probably a stone caught in her hoof.” He reached up a hand to help me down.

“You might as well stretch your limbs,” he said, adding with a smile, “and apply some ointment to your own hurts.” It wasn’t at all a bad idea, and, slightly embarrassed even so, I soothed the sores between my legs.

Meanwhile, Bráíenn deftly lifted up one of Eanflæd’s forelegs and tucked it under his arm. Then he pulled a small knife from his boot, and, speaking soft endearments to the horse to keep it calm, worried out a nasty shard of stone.

Bráien্ন tossed it aside and looked hopelessly around at the barren mountainside. “Out on the plains,” he said, “I would hunt for a sprig of *heällemot*, which would staunch the blood and numb the hurt. But there will be no finding it here.”

I took down my pack. “I have some of it in powdered form,” I said, adding, “I’ve had a little experience treating horses.” This, of course, was a patent untruth. However, I *had* watched Alfrund do so during our wanderings.

“If you wish,” I went on, already rooting around for the necessary, “I could make a concoction that will quickly set, and so seal the wound from further abuse until you have a chance to treat it properly.”

“I accept your offer with gratitude,” Bráien্ন said, with a new touch of respect in his voice. It was all very well to be a *Nithaial*, I thought, amused, but to be able to heal a horse—now *that* was something.

I made the mixture and, while he held the hoof, worked it into the puncture. As I did so, the horse trembled, but neither struggled nor kicked, and so it was soon done.

I wasn’t sure how well this would hold up on such a stone-strewn path, and said so to Bráien্ন.

He nodded. “It will be tender, in any case. So I think I’ll let you ride while I walk beside you for a bit.”

I made to protest, but he cut me off. “This way is treacherous to men as well as beasts, and I don’t want you on my hands with a turned or broken ankle. Besides, one of us has to keep an eye out for trouble, and neither of us can do it

if we have to constantly watch our feet.

“Besides,” he said, “if you are to stay among us for a while, you will need to feel comfortable on horseback. Otherwise, your days will be spent among the children and their keepers.”

Before I could protest more, he led me to Eanflæd’s left side, and boosted me up. If I knew little about treating horses, I knew nothing about riding them—and were it not for my power to mind touch, I would have mounted Eanflæd in a state of terror. But a mere brush of her mind told me she was spirited but sweet-tempered, and adored her master. As long as he was beside her, no foolishness of mine would perturb her.

Astride her now, however, I realized how much I had depended on Bráíenn’s broad back—not merely as something to cling to, but to block out the sight of the precipitous plunge just beside us. The feeling of the path, firm beneath my feet, was one thing; balancing myself on a moving horse’s back was quite another. My head swam.

I closed my eyes, thinking I would keep them clamped shut until we reached the foot of the mountain, but that was worse. Every step the horse took filled me with fresh terror, all the more so because we were descending, and my seat was that much more unstable. I opened my eyes again and fixed them firmly on Eanflæd’s ears.

Bráíenn had said nothing this whole time (a mere moment, really, I thought with a shudder), neither to com-

fort me or to poke fun at my obvious terror. This realization brought back to me our conversation about horses and boats, and I felt a flash of understanding. *Balance*. It was just the same. To anyone who had never been in a small boat, its instability made capsizing seem not only inevitable but imminent. But when you found your balance, that sensation vanished. No, it *more* than vanished.

Desperately clinging to the sides of a boat, you were nothing more than dead weight, dangerous to yourself and anyone else in it with you. But when you found your balance, your body's confidence gave you *power*. It wasn't at all like standing again on dry land, but something much more exciting. After a time, you began to crave it when you found yourself ashore too long.

I suddenly laughed out loud. I had been missing it, ever so long! But being so far away from the sea, I hadn't even realized it. And Eanflæd, with a mind of her own, was in some ways even better. My body relaxed, I loosened my legs from their frantic grip. I still wasn't easy looking down the side of the cliff, but at least the terror had passed. Riding might even be something I might learn to like.

"You won't believe this," I said to Bráíenn, "but being on Eanflæd's back has made me realize how much I miss being out on the sea. Now I do hope I get to take you for a sail with me. Except, after a while, it will be *you* doing the sailing and me lying back with my hands trailing in the water."

"Why do I find that so easy to imagine—that last part,

I mean,” he replied, laughing. “Yes,” he added, watching me ride for a moment before returning his attention to the broken path beneath his feet, “you have begun to find your seat. But you have to stop digging your feet into her sides. Hold fast to her with your legs.” He turned to look where he was going, but when the horse snorted, he added, “*Gently*.

“Always remember, *Nithaial*,” Bráíenn explained, letting his words slip behind him for me to catch as he carefully picked his way, “that horses aren’t stupid. They watch our ways and they see these are wolf ways, not horse ways. How we stride, how we talk, how we regard them—with that focused, calculating, predator’s gaze—everything about us tells them we are hunters of the herd, not fellow grass eaters.

“Then we try leap on their backs.” Bráíenn gave a snort, not unlike Eanflæd’s own. “What is called ‘training’ a horse is really explaining to it, ‘Yes, I am a predator; yes, I have seized hold of you and could kill you; but today is not your day to die.’”

“It is the same paradox that occurs when a warrior takes a defeated opponent as his slave,” I said. “Willingly accept or die. It is no choice, yet it is a choice.”

“It is exactly the same,” Bráíenn agreed. “Slave and horse both surrender their spirit, and as it moves their masters, they give some of it back. We among the Lhennad give as much back as we can. None among us are allowed the use of a saddle or bridle until we can ride a horse without them.”

“Ah,” I said. “I wondered about that. So *you*, despite being leader of your clan, haven’t yet earned your stirrups.”

Bráíenn gave a bark of laughter. “No,” he said, adding, “none of us have.”

He looked back at me. “You *are* a sly one, no mistake. But, remember, now that you are comfortably seated on Eanflæd, your task is to scan the horizon for any movement at all. We can discuss our way with horses once we get back to the *hrosbyre*.”

“The... horse barn?” I asked, puzzling out the word.

He nodded with a slightly sideways movement of his head that meant both yes and no. “It’s a word from the old tongue. Your people would say it means ‘the stables.’ But for us of the Lhennad, it means simply, ‘where the horses rest.’ In other words, home.”

We went on for a while in silence. The warm, basking heat had gradually become scorchingly hot, and the light refracting from the sheer stone cliff beside us was occasionally blinding. As Bráíenn had directed, I regularly shaded my eyes and looked out over the plains for any sign of movement, but saw only that the heat had drawn moisture out of the earth. The distant horizon, once as clear as a pen stroke, had now become a blur of haze.

The heat and the humidity had me sweating freely, so much so that I considered summoning a rain cloud to cool us down, but realized that would be a bit conspicuous. So, instead, I wiped my face once again with my sleeve, asking

as I did so, “Does this wretched scree go on *forever*?”

Instead of answering, Bráíenn lifted an arm and pointed directly ahead of us, where a small wispy cloud of what looked like smoke hung over the trail.

“There are two reasons why this route is mostly avoided by smugglers,” Bráíenn said. “One is that the long stretch we’ve just traveled is barely passable, and then only in the summer; the other, which you are about to encounter, is by far the more dangerous. It is a flume that drops straight down the side of the mountain, and while there’s not much water flowing through it this time of year, there is still the gap in the path which must be leaped over. The jump is difficult, and it is a perfect place for an ambush.”

“If there are better ways,” I asked, “why did Nastor and Fransen choose this route?”

“That’s a very good question,” Bráíenn replied, “and, when I asked it, they had a reasonable answer. It’s by far the quickest and, because smugglers mostly avoid it, it’s rarely patrolled—the best of all possible things for those with the nerve to exploit it. Furthermore, they claimed to have found a solution for getting their goods past the gap.

“However, you’ll notice that those two arranged things so that *they* descended in the first light of morning, not at midday, like we’ve been forced to do. And if they’ve managed to alert anyone to our coming, we’re very neatly trapped.”

He stopped and, as always when he did, his horse

halted just behind him. “You’d better dismount,” Bráíenn said. “We’ll leave Eanflæd here and check things out on foot.”

I had started to lift my leg over the horse’s back, when I felt it give a violent shudder. I brushed ever so lightly against her mind and immediately absorbed what had spooked her—she had picked up the scent of blood, of *horse’s* blood.

I took hold of Bráíenn’s arm. “No,” I said. “You stay here, too. If there is anyone waiting for us, they’re after me, not you.” When he started to refuse, I added simply, “That isn’t a request, Bráíenn. It’s an *order*.”

The firmness with which I said that surprised me as much as it did him. The palpable feeling of danger around us made me set aside the flirty Jessan I had been since my arrival in Sondaram. Suddenly, I had become the *Nithaial Galgaliel*—or at least the Jessan who had fought his way through the hordes of corpses in the Valley of the Dead. My senses deepened. Now I could smell the blood myself, and hear the flies that buzzed around it.

I sidled over to the edge of the path and looked down. A good distance below, a spur of rock jutted out from the face of cliff. It wasn’t very large, but big enough to interrupt the fall of a horse as it fell down the cliff. The stone must have ripped its body open, for it was soaked in blood and a glistening length of gut hung from it like a pennant.

I stepped back at once, fighting off a shudder of re-

vulsion. Of course, the animal could have slipped and fallen while trying to leap across the flume. I was close enough to see the gap in the path, and how drenched by mist the stone was on either side.

I continued to creep up, until I could clearly hear the rush of the hidden water inside the flume as it plummeted downwards. I could also see the method that Nastor and Fransen had devised to cross the gap. Large iron spikes had been driven into the rock wall on either side of the flume, and a stout rope strung between them. The heavy packs would be pushed across on it, leaving the horses unencumbered when they were made to jump the gap. Then they were quickly loaded up again on the far side, and the caravan was on its way.

That was it, then, one of the horses must have slipped. I could see through the mist now to the far side of the gap; no one was waiting for us there—the path was empty as far as the eye could trace it. And, as Bráíenn had promised, the path from here on was clear of rubble.

It was such a pleasure to walk on firm ground, that I continued on, to have a glimpse inside the flume itself—and immerse myself for a few seconds in the cooling mist. The falling water had cut its way so deep into the rock that it was impossible to see until you reached the very edge.

I used my powers to wave away the mist; then let myself slowly float out over the gap, so that I could have a clear view of the rushing, plummeting water inside. As I hung in the air watching it rush down, I felt a surge of power not at

all my own. The water took the form of a giant hand and arm, which scooped me into its fingers, lifted me up, then threw me with great force down the side of the cliff.

I was so offended by this—water was *my* element—that it took me a full moment to take stock of my plight. It was a good thing I hadn't been thrown at the rock spur, or my own innards might be dangling from it next to the horse's.

I caught myself, inverted the force of my fall, and shot back up as if released from a catapult. This time, however, I wisely kept my distance from the flume, floating in front of it, yes, but out in the open sky. When nothing happened, I allowed myself to float in closer, until, again, the hand reached out to seize me. This time, I dispersed it into a cloud of mist.

Two more times the hand reached out, and two more times I made it dissipate. Then a face formed in the water, ancient, all but hidden in watery strands of hair. Its eyes were clear and cold.

"Who are you, spirit, that you treat the *Nithaial Gargaliel* with such disrespect?" I asked, not out loud, of course, but by mind-touching its aura. Even brushing against it, I felt a deathly coldness that melded icy water with immeasurable age.

"I am who I am, the spirit of this place," it replied, in a voice that was little more than a whisper. "I know you not, and care nothing for your place among the gods. I am older than all of them and bound to none."

“Even so,” I said, “all spirits of water and of air must submit to my will. It would be wise of you not to put my powers to the test—any more than you already have.”

Its rheumy eyes stared intently at me for a moment, then closed. “I have reason for my wrath, godling,” it said softly. “I grant none passage here, but neither have I prevented it. Until these spikes were hammered into my sides.”

The eyes opened again. “Iron!” it snorted. “I can rust that to nothing. But only the death of the violators could wash away the foulness of their deed. To claim right of passage without even asking my leave! I have cast them all down, and I shall do the same to any others who try to pass this way... until the spikes have rusted to nothing and I have forgotten the offence.” It fell silent for a moment, then added, “That will take many thousands of years.”

“If I remove the spikes and destroy them,” I asked, “will you allow me and my companion to pass?”

When it hesitated, I said, “If you refuse, I’ll honor your decision and return the way we came. But neither will I do anything to protect you from further violations. Men are more determined and devious than you might think. And I have the power to protect this place.”

The water spirit thought some more, then replied with a whispery laugh, “If you can remove these spikes, *Nith-aial Galgaliel*, I shall carry you and your companion down the mountain myself. But, yes, yes, you can both pass, for the boon of your safeguarding.”

The face vanished into the water, and the flume became as it was before the water spirit appeared. I floated back to the ledge, gesturing to Bráíenn to approach. As he did so, I seized hold of one of the spikes and pulled.

If I had been Niccas, I could have simply ordered the rock to release it, and the spike would have slid out into my hand. I myself could call down a bolt of lightning and melt it out of the rock, but I didn't think that the mess *that* would cause would exactly please the water spirit.

Bráíenn was soon beside me, and I explained what happened, and what I was doing. "My powers might be strong enough to pull them from the wall, but I'm not sure, and I don't want to waste them. I don't know when I'll be able to refresh them again."

Bráíenn seized hold of the spike and pulled on it with all his strength. He grunted. "That has been rammed in tightly, and no mistake." He looked at me, and added, "If we can cross without removing them, why don't we just do so, and let time rust them out? Obviously, the water spirit wasn't expecting you to do this."

I didn't answer his question because I thought it best he not know what might happen if I succeeded. Besides, my reasons would be hard to explain—a desire, I suppose, to prove something to the water spirit.

However, I hardly gave any of this the benefit of a moment's attention. A phrase of Bráíenn's had provided me with the solution to my problem. I went to Eanflæd, opened

my pack, and rooted around until I found the unbroached container of Warrior's Friend that Caelas had given me. I removed the lid, scooped some up on my finger, and spread it around the spike, just where it entered the stone.


I then put my hand on the spike, closed my eyes, and began coaxing the unguent down to the tip of the spike, between it and the stone. The iron had been roughly forged, so this proved easy enough. I picked up a large stone and repeatedly tapped the end of the spike, so that the vibrations would work the unguent even into the places where iron was wedged tightly against rock.

"Try pulling on it again," I said to Bráíenn, and stood aside as he did so. This time there was practically no resistance at all. "Just like pulling a cock from a tight quim," he said, astonished. He pushed it back in and pulled it out once more. "Just like," he said. "What *is* that stuff?"

"I'll explain later," I answered. I didn't know what the water spirit would think of using the Warrior's Friend to free the spikes, and thought it best not to find out. "I'll jump over the gap and remove the other one."

I did so, and this time gave myself the pleasure of easing the spike out of the rock. As it slid out, I noticed that it did have a certain heft in the hand that reminded one of....

But I never finished the thought. True to its word, the spirit sent out not one but three watery hands to seize hold of Bráíenn, Eanflæd, and myself. These were not simply hand-shaped masses of water, but a complex braid of fast-

moving interwoven currents, the energy of which was more than able to bear our weight. Wrapped tightly in them, only our faces left free, we were borne swiftly down the flume, almost as fast as the tumbling water itself, the cliff reduced to a blur of stone. 

Chapter 12



OUR DOWNWARD PLUNGE ended in an enormous splash, as the watery hands suddenly released us just above the pool at the bottom of the flume. I plummeted down into its dark and icy waters and almost as quickly shot back up to the surface. There I found Eanflæd, water streaming from her flanks, struggling up the bank at the pool's edge, still carrying our packs.

However, there was no sign of Bráíenn. Could he even swim? I took a deep breath and dove deep into the pool. Fortunately, the water was crystal clear and all I needed was a few strokes toward where the falling water hit the pool to spot his flailing arms. The undertow had caught him and was holding him down, while spinning him about in the turbulence. At this point, he probably had no idea which direction was up and which down.

I seized hold of him, brought him to the surface, swam him to the shore, and dragged him, unconscious, up onto the bank. Then I sent my power flowing into his lungs,

flushing them of water and filling them with air. Water gushed out of his mouth and nostrils, his chest expanded, then his body shook with a spasm of coughing. His eyes flew open; he reached over and seized hold of my arm.

“Name of the Goddess!” Bráíenn exclaimed, when he was able to speak, “that was close. Did you bring me back from the dead?”

I shook my head, smiling. “No. That, I think, is beyond my powers. I’m just glad I got to you before we had no choice but to find that out.”

Bráíenn shuddered. “Help me up,” he said. “Let’s get into the sun and shed these sopping garments.”

We moved out of the shade cast by the trees that surrounded the pool and climbed up on a large rock that was baking in the sun. There, we undressed and draped our clothing over the hot stone, finally lying down on it ourselves. Our bodies were so cold that its heat felt good, as did that beating down on us from the sun.

“We should unload Eanflæd and spread out everything in our packs to dry, as well,” Bráíenn said. He closed his eyes and groaned, then added, “later.”

He reached over where I lay beside him and found my hand. “You saved my life, *Nithaial*,” he said, holding it. “I owe you a great debt, since I doubt I’ll ever have the chance to save yours.”

I said something in reply, I hardly know what. My mind was drunk with desire. Like Caelas, Bráíenn was all

muscle, but his were not those of a soldier, bulked up for fighting with heavy weapons. Bráíenn's were hard but tightly sculpted, and his body—tanned, lean, tightly knit—was as close to Faryn's as any I had yet seen, given the difference in their ages.

This alone would have been enough to make me dizzy. But there was also the thin sprinkling of copper-colored hair spread across his chest, the smooth, high forehead, the flat planes of the cheeks, the dusky bulge of his privates, the dark, rough skin of his nipple plates, almost too large to fit into my mouth. And how I hungered to suck on them.

What was worse, I knew that he would respond if I reached for him. I had just saved his life. He was shaken and grateful and would be like wet clay in a potter's hands. Or maybe not. Or maybe not.

The problem was that when I had had sex with men who genuinely preferred women, it was they who had reached out for me. Most recently, of course, there was Hestál, but with a shudder my mind pushed his image aside and reached all the way back to Faryn. *He* was the problem.

Lying beside Bráíenn, I felt it all wash back over me, those sunny afternoons out at sea in Grannell's leaky boat, the happiness I felt when we sailed home and I could just lie against the side of the boat, my body lightly touching his. Then that last night, when he had taken me... tears began to leak out of my eyes.

I shook my head to fling them off me, then looked

over at Bráíenn to see if he was watching this. No, not at all—he had dropped off to sleep!

I had to smile. That said it clearly enough, and in a way that filled me with affection for him. In his sleep, he had let my hand slip from his, and after a moment I silently got to my feet. I stood on the stone, our clothes all spread out beneath me, and looked back at the pool.

The flume fell onto a ledge a good height above the pool, and the water spilled out into a genuine waterfall. It was early afternoon now, and the sun was passing over the mountain; shadows now reached down the cliffside. Only where the water left the flume and burst over the ledge did it catch the sun, sending out a beacon of glittering light.

I lifted my hands above my head and summoned the Goddess's blessing upon this place, asking Her to fill all who came here with the same sense of awe I was feeling now. Let all who view this place feel what is eternal touch their souls, and be washed clean of all the petty calculations of the moment. So did I try my best to keep my promise to the water spirit.

When I was done, I felt the water calling me, and entering it with an easy running dive, let it swallow me up. Before, my concern for Bráíenn filled my mind; now I could surrender my being to it. I hadn't even thought to take a deep breath before my plunge—the *Nithaial Galgalíel* was as much at home in water as in air.

I swam easily and quickly, drawn by the place where I had rescued Bráíenn, where the waterfall hurtled into the

still waters of the pool. I let it catch me up as it had him, but made no attempt to fight it. Instead, I let it toss me this way and that, my limbs extended, my hair swirling about my face. The pang of my unrequited desire was rinsed away, replaced with a peace of mind as deep and clear as the water that had swept me into its embrace.

Eventually, however, a summoning reached to me through the roiling currents—someone, Bráíenn, was calling my name. Not in fear but, nevertheless, with some urgency. I bade the flow release me, and found myself shooting out of the turmoil at the very bottom of the pool.

There, toward the center of the pool, in the murky darkness, a glint of color caught my eye. No light reached down this far, not when the sun had passed over the mountain, and yet it was as if a beam of sunlight had flickered across a precious stone.

My thoughts were almost entirely concerned with Bráíenn's summons, but I kept an eye out for this thing as I swam back the way I had come. The jewel flashed again, this time right beneath me, and I kicked my way to the very bottom, and saw it, a large gem, fixed to the hilt of a sword, the blade of which was buried in the mud.

I seized hold of it and easily pulled it free, releasing a cloud of mud as I did. The moment my fingers closed around the hilt, I felt the answering touch of power meeting power—the blade was under an enchantment. In the gloom, I could see only that the blade was whole and unruined, and

that, out of the water, it must be quite heavy.

It certainly was too heavy to swim with. I got a firm grip on the hilt, then used my powers to propel me through the water. It was only when the bottom of the pool began to rise up to the shore that it occurred to me that I had been underwater this whole time. No wonder Bráíenn had been calling for me. I thanked the Goddess that he hadn't leapt in, thinking it was his turn to rescue me!

When I stood up, waist deep in the water, I simultaneously swung up the sword to show it to Bráíenn. As I did, the blade gave off an aura of reddish light. Even while I did this, I became aware that Bráíenn was standing at the edge of the pool, fully dressed, accompanied by several members of his clan.

The naked *Nithaial Galgaliel* emerging from the sacred pool brandishing a magic sword—it was like something out of a story, and, as I splashed through the water toward them, I felt like a total idiot.

When I reached them, I reversed the sword and presented it to Bráíenn, who took hold of it cautiously. He hefted it, examined it, then brought it with him to the top of the stone where we had been lying together. There, he held it up so that the blade was struck directly by sunlight.

There was a gasp from the others, who, along with me, had climbed up with him. For the light revealed that the blade was chased with runes, which no doubt were the source of the sword's enchantment.



“This is obviously a horseman’s blade,” Bráíenn said, “forged long and narrow, so that it reaches far and can be wielded with one hand. Now, listen.” He lifted the sword and swung it above his head. As he did so, the blade produced a high-pitched wail that sent a shiver down my spine.

He lowered the blade and explained, “The sword’s name is Bloodsinger, and that is its song. It was last wielded by Raedwald Endmost at the Battle of Gray Fens. All of his company were killed at that battle, and Raedwald fled, some said out of cowardice.

However, we are of his clan, and we believed that, above all things, he would not let the sword fall into the hands of our enemy. It was the battle emblem of our nation, a thing of great power. And, sure enough, it was never found by the enemy—and we of the clans did not go looking for it.”

Bráíenn looked at me. “You see, after the Battle of Gray Fens and the disappearance of Bloodsinger, we sought truce with the Kingdom, and agreed to surrender our swords and spears, rather than see still more of our people slaughtered. Now we hunt only with the bow.”

Bráíenn sighed. “I have half a mind to throw Bloodsinger back into the pool. To keep it would put the clans at great risk—and for what reason? If it has rested here peacefully so long, why shouldn’t it continue to do so... forever.”

He looked over at his companions. “What say you? Dýrfinna?”

Dýrfinna was one of two women among the riders, fair of face, with a shock of auburn hair, tied plaited behind her head and bound there with colored ribbons, exactly as the men. She spoke with a clear and thoughtful voice. “The difference, Bráíenn, is that before it was hidden and now it is revealed, not only to you but to all of us. To throw it back into the pool won’t change it back to what it was, but only put it—and us—at the mercy of anyone who chooses to dive into the water and seek for it.”

There were murmurs of assent among the others. “I agree with Dýrfinna, Father,” said another, a young man with much the same build and looks of Bráíenn, and the same long golden hair. “Besides, there must be a reason for its reappearance.”

The speaker turned to me. “I am named Leannian, son of Bráíenn, *Nithaial*,” he said. “Permit me to ask—did you just happen upon the sword... or did it summon you?”

I pursed my lips, thinking. “Well,” I said, “‘summoned’ is too strong a word. But though the sword lay deep in the murk, a flash of light from the jewel in its hilt caught my eye. And it flashed again when I swam over it. So, surely it signaled to me.”

Leannian looked at his father. “So, what say you?”

Bráíenn looked somewhat put out. “I answer Dýrfinna by saying that it need not go back into the pool. The

Nithaial Galgaliel can arrange a safe and hidden place for it.

“And to you, Leannian, I say that it was not *me* the sword summoned, but the *Nithaial Galgaliel*. Another reason why *he* should have it, whether he chooses to wield it or hide it again.”

I had been listening to this whole conversation with my heart sinking lower and lower into my chest. And I had thought Bráíenn would be thrilled with my discovery! But when he spoke those last words, my mouth dropped open in astonishment.

“You found it, you retrieved it, so it is your responsibility now, *Nithaial Galgaliel*,” Bráíenn said, returning Bloodsinger to me, adding without the slightest hint of irony, “wield it wisely and well.”

Wondering why I had ever wanted to have sex with this man, I took the sword. There was no chance of me wielding it wisely *or* well. Bráíenn had had no trouble swinging it around his head, but, as for me, just holding it was starting to make my wrist hurt. It was the last thing I wanted to lug around on my travels. There just had to be a way to give it back.

Nothing came to mind, however, so I took it with me to the edge of the rock, where I sat down and began pulling on my clothes.

As I did so, I heard Bráíenn ask his son, “How did you find us so quickly?”

“A clan spirit in the form of an eagle guided us, Father,” Leannian replied. “And that reminds me. Our way here

took us along the foot of Whiteface, and we came across signs of a great slaughter. We should go back and see if we can discern its meaning.”

“What you saw was most likely the remains of the smugglers who preceded us,” Bráíenn said dismissively, “two men, several horses, and packs of salt and dried fish.”

Leannian hesitated. “That may be all it was,” he agreed, “but it seemed more than that. It will only take us a moment to look and see.”

Bráíenn nodded. “You’re right,” he said. “I had forgotten that I was expecting an ambush on the trail down. It would be worth discovering by whom.” He nodded at me. “The *Nithaial* will need a horse, or someone to ride with.”

“He can ride with me, Father,” Leannian answered. “Sihtric can easily bear us both.”

SIHTRIC WAS EXACTLY the sort of horse I feared the most. A large and imperious animal, it stamped its feet and tossed its head as we approached, giving me a look that was anything but docile and friendly.

“Before me or behind me?” Leannian asked courteously, and I replied, “Behind you, I think. Until I mounted Eanflæd yesterday, I had never ridden a horse.”

Leannian looked at me, astonished. “In all your life?”

I nodded. “Except as baggage. I come from a place where horses are nearly unknown.”

Leannian shook his head. “It is a large world, and a

strange one, *Nithaial Galgaliel*. I hope to comprehend it all someday. My father is the first among us in generations to venture over the mountains” — here he gave me a rather charming smile — “and, lo, he came back with *you*. So, now I beg you, tell me something of the world beyond the Plains of Lhennad.”

He leaped smoothly onto the saddle, then reached down a hand and helped me mount behind him. Unlike Eanflæd, Sihtric’s very body seemed to quiver with nervous energy, as if at any moment he would toss us off his back and bolt. Without even noticing I was doing so, I was already clinging to Leannian like a limpet, even though the party had not yet set off.

One of the other riders came up beside us and said to Leannian, “You volunteered to carry an extra rider, but you found a lover, instead!”

I blushed and loosened my grip.

Leannian replied, “He is not familiar with our ways, Gaerdon, and also I think Sihtric is toying with him.”

The other laughed. To me, he said, “*Nithaial*, among us, when you share a horse with its rider, you grasp his belt with one hand—when the horse is actually moving.”

This sally brought universal laughter, since by now everyone was listening to the exchange.

I was stricken with embarrassment, but I knew I would lose face with them if I remained silent.

“Truly, Gaerdon,” I said, “this isn’t a horse I’m on

but a demon, and I wasn't clinging onto Leannian — I was trying to find a way to hide inside him."

Gaerdon burst into laughter. "Well said," he replied. "Sihtric is not a horse many of us would dare to ride—at least alone." He added with a wink, "I think no one would think less of you if you held on to Leannian's belt with both hands. Just keep them where we can see them!"

We were setting off even as Gaerdon spoke, and he fell back, having set off another round of laughter with this last sally, while Leannian rode at the head of the group, beside but not quite neck to neck with his father.

The site of the slaughter was close by, since the water spirit had merely tossed his victims clear of the flume and the pool. From the path, all one saw was where some of the falling bodies—horses and human both—had hit ledges or other projections from the cliff face, leaving behind splatterings of gore and shreds of skin or clothing.

However, once we left the path, it quickly became clear that the slaughtered included several others besides the traders. Our arrival sent off a loud clamor from any number of crows and a scattering of ravens, who were already feasting on the carrion. They settled into the trees above our heads and flung down insults as we dismounted, for the horses would come no closer.

"This is no border patrol," Bráíenn said in a low voice as he surveyed the remains. At least eight bodies apart from those of Nastor and Fransen lay broken and bleeding here

and there about the site. Their fall had torn apart bushes and shattered small trees. The splintered trunk of one of these had impaled one victim, who had fallen onto it after a pack horse had hit it first and snapped it. His body remained there, high in the air, and some of the crows were already finding a perch on its splayed limbs.

Leannian bent down and pulled over a nearby body, turning it so that it was now face up. The soldier's face had been crushed by the fall, but it was the livery that he wished to examine. He squatted down and looked it over carefully, then drew out the soldier's sword and examined it.

"I've never seen such trappings as these, Father," he said. "Have you?"

Bráíenn shook his head. "It's all made of costly stuff, though, isn't it? And there's no hint of tarnish on that blade. This is no ordinary issue."

He turned to me. "That is what truly puzzles me, *Nithaial*. What soldierly dress is costly *and* battle-ready? In truth, the uniforms of most of the Kingdom's soldiers I've met have been neither the one nor the other—cheap and worn, with the armor, such as there was, well-worn and unpolished. These men... " he hesitated, his brows knitted, finally saying, "must belong to some elite force we know nothing about."

Leannian, with a sharp, violent motion, ripped a patch from the dead soldier's jacket and stood up, passing it to Bráíenn. He, after looking at it, in turn passed it to me.

“It is a rune, I think, not an emblem,” I said, “but of what I have no idea.”



Bráíenn turned to the others and called out, “Dýrfinna!” The rider separated herself from where the others had gathered and came to us. He passed her the patch.

“You know something of these things,” he said. “Do you recognize this rune?”

She glanced at it and smiled. “Yes,” she said. “It was one of the first ones I learned. It is the number eight.”

Leannian laughed. “No mystery there,” he said. He took the patch and tossed it back onto the corpse, adding dismissively, “Take it with you to Ais Dysmassia.”

As he did so, Bráíenn and I exchanged glances, but he said nothing. Instead, he turned away, saying, “Let us leave this ill-omened place.”

“By your leave, wait,” said Dýrfinna. “We others have noticed something that we wish to show the *Nithaial*.”

She brought us over to where they were standing, and when we had joined them, she took hold of my shoulder. “Look over there,” she said, pointing to a mangled bush.

I did. “I see nothing, Dýrfinna,” I finally said.

She shook her head in agreement. “Now,” she went on, “look instead at that single leaf fluttering in the breeze.”

I did so, and took in a sharp breath. Something appeared in the corner of my eye, a dark shape tangled amongst the branches. When I looked directly at it, it disappeared. But when I focused on the leaf, it was back again.

Dýrfinna could tell that I now saw what she and the others had seen. “It is something magic,” she said, “and we dared not approach it.”

I made my way to it carefully, more concerned about inadvertently stepping into carrion than any danger from the thing in the bushes. As I approached it, however, I caught a vile stench unlike anything I had ever smelled before, so overpowering that it made my stomach turn and my eyes water.

Holding my breath, I reached into the bush, and groping about, felt the brush of fabric. I seized hold of it and dragged it out of the clinging branches.

I held it out, still holding my breath. It was a cloak of some sort; the interior of which was a mottled gray. By now the stench had reached the others, forcing them to take several steps back.

“In the name of the Blessed Mother,” called out Bráinn, “what wretchedly nasty thing have you found?”


For the moment, I ignored him. I took hold of the cloak in both hands, lifted it high above my head, and, closing my eyes, brought spindrift from the flume this way on a brisk breeze. When it reached me, I sent it swirling through the garment, letting it then dissipate into mist.

After several minutes of this the stench was everywhere, even reaching and unnerving the horses, but the stink of the cloak had become bearable, if hardly pleasant.

I swung it over my shoulders and pulled its hood up and over my head. Now the fetid stink was again almost unbearable, but I endured it long enough to approach the gaping riders, then tossed it off me.

There were cries of amazement, tinged with fear, and, although I offered it, none cared to try it on themselves.

Bráíenn glanced at Leannian. “It is never wise to speak the name of Ais Dysmassia aloud,” he said. And, to me, he added, “Among the people of the Lhennad, death is said to wear just such a cloak. Because of it, he can approach those he intends to claim unseen, until he seizes them.

“This day has had far too much magic in it for my taste. And this is the worst of all. If you wish to keep this disgusting thing, go empty one of the bundles of salt fish that fell from the pack horses, and fold the cloak up in its wrappings. That should keep the horses from bolting. And do it quickly. Even now, we’ll have to ride hard to reach the *hrosbyre* by sundown.” 

Chapter 13



BRÁIENN'S EXHORTATION TO HURRY had made me expect that we would soon be galloping at full tilt across the Plains of the Lhennad toward the clan's encampment. But, once the path veered away from the cliffs and simply vanished into the tall grasses, and the horses were urged to go faster, we moved at a fast trot instead. I found that with my hand firmly clasped to Leannian's belt, I could maintain my balance, and even, as time passed, learn to meld myself to the horse's rhythm.

With no path to follow, the riders spread out, with Bráíenn in the lead. Leannian had not forgotten what he had said to me earlier, and, as we rode, he had me tell him of my travels, and especially about the sea. Now that I was entering the world in which the Riders of the Lhennad spent their lives, I began to understand why they might be fascinated by the notion of a world of water.

Here on the plains, the grasses rose halfway up the horses' legs, and a man on foot would have had to wade

through them, as he would the sea. But the horses seemed to swim through it—all the more like the sea when the wind passed over, setting everything in motion. Sitting on Sihtric's back, I could watch the wind pass over the plains, not as a single great wave, but like great invisible hands, brushing wide swaths here and there as their whim took them.

It was different from the sea, and yet hauntingly similar, being at once intimate and vast, alive with a purpose all its own. Unlike the sea, however, here it was really the seasons that ruled. In spring and early summer, when these grasses were flush with green, they had a different, sweeter song. Now, in late summer, turned sere and yellow by the lack of rain and the long hot days, theirs was a brittle, melancholy whispering, prophesying death.

Bráíenn broke into our conversation—and my own separate thoughts—by looking over and gesturing for us to ride up beside him, something Leannian accomplished with a mere shake of the reins.

Then Bráíenn said to his son, “You’re not happy with my disposition of Bloodsinger.” The sword, along with my pack, was being carried by one of the other riders, and, after the visit to the place of slaughter, I had almost forgotten about it. But obviously Leannian had not. His father’s remark—for it was not a question—had an immediate and powerful effect. Even though I was making no effort to touch Leannian’s mind, I sensed an outspill of strong emotion.

“I accept your decision, Father,” Leannian said.

“I know,” Bráíenn assented. “But that isn’t the same thing as saying you agree with it.”

Leannian was silent for a moment, then said cautiously, “I understand that we have no desire to restart the war with the Kingdom. But one sword, even a magic one, seems not enough to be construed in such a way. It is an artifact, a part of our heritage. It is fitting that we should welcome it back, and hold it in a place of honor among us—not just give it away, even to the *Nithaial Galgaliel*.”

Bráíenn looked around to make sure we were out of the others’ easy hearing, then said in a low voice, “Prince Caelas wishes the clans of the Lhennad to join with him in overthrowing the Amethyst Throne. That is the summation of my parley with him. If we do and willingly accept his suzerainty, we will be granted the freedom to live unhindered on the Lhennad. Within its boundaries, the clans would hold sway over all things.”

“Father!” Leannian said, his voice tight with emotion, “If we rose up against the Kingdom, they would slaughter us all. And the insurgency itself would hardly fare better, from what little I hear.”

Bráíenn nodded. “What you say is true, and Prince Caelas is fully aware of it.” He looked over at his son, and at me. “Everything, I repeat, *everything*, depends on the *Nithaial* completing their quest. Already, they have resurrected Faeýstirran, Sondaram, and Wethrelad. Only Ernfardast remains. Once it is brought back, Gostranar will spring into

being, and He Who Cannot Be Named will face the full force of powers equal to his own. That will open many eyes and unloose many hearts that secretly despair at the close alliance between Gorzungâd and the Amethyst Throne.”

He let Leannian digest this for a moment, then continued. “From this follow two things. First, our best way to help Prince Caelas is to do all that is in our power to ensure that the *Nithaial* succeed. Until this happens, Bloodsinger should remain with the *Nithaial Galgaliel*, because the time for us to appear to take possession of it is surely when Gos-tranar is again the center of the Holy Wood, and the battle will be more equal.”

We rode in silence while Leannian digested all this. Finally he nodded his head, and said, “I apologize, Father, for any doubts I harbored. I really thought you wanted to get rid of the sword.”

Bráíenn smiled. “So I wished our companions to think. Both you and Dýrfinna had good arguments, but neither of you knew the enormous risk entailed in keeping it. He Who Cannot Be Named would hardly think of its reappearance that we had merely reclaimed an artifact and meant it for nothing more than ceremony. That sword contains powerful magic—does it not, *Nithaial*?”

I thought of telling him that Maerdas could now be named, but realized that Prince Caelas would have already told him that. No doubt he meant for Leannian and the others to digest these things one by one.

“Yes, I think so,” I said aloud. “Certainly for the one who knows how to summon it. Was King Raedwald Endmost able to do so?”

“Who knows,” said Bráíenn, sighing. “There is so much we no longer remember.”

As he said these words, I remembered who *would* be able to wield its magic, far more than I. And suddenly I knew what needed to be done with the sword Bloodsinger.

“This is what I advise, then,” I said. “Neither give me the sword nor keep it nor throw it back into the pool. Instead, bring it to the Death Home of King Azraham. He, if anyone, will know how to summon its powers. And no one could keep it as safe as he.”

Leannian snorted. “And just leave it there lying on the grass? None of us would be so foolish as to go inside, even if we found a way to do so.”

“No,” I said. “I am certain Azraham, son of Mehadam, will greet you personally to take possession of it. Your knees may shake in terror, which is only the response that is due him, but he will welcome the chance to hold it again.”

I took hold of Leannian’s arm. “Know,” I said, “that not so long ago I lay unconscious on that Death Home, and Azraham came and spoke to my companion, advising him on how to help me. These are not ordinary times.”

I could sense that my words had left Leannian stunned. Bráíenn reined in Eanflæd until he was right beside me, then said in a low but penetrating voice, “When I

said you were a sly one, back on the trail,” he said, “I spoke as innocently as though I were a newly birthed foal. I had no fear of you then, nor do I now, for I mean to be your friend. Even so, I now see that doom is thick around you. It touches everyone who comes near you, and pulls them toward unknown ends.”

I nodded my head glumly in agreement. What he said was all too true.

He reached over and punched me lightly on the shoulder, then said to his son, “Think about all this at length and with care because I shall need your counsel.”

As he said these words, the shadows from the mountains reached and passed us by. The sun was setting behind them. But before any of us could interpret this as an omen, a cry went up. The sun still shone on the plains ahead of us, and it had illuminated the flutter of banners in the distance. We were nearly upon the clan’s home, and in the distance riders were setting out to come and greet us.

The riders met the others with whoops and cries, and we raced to the encampment at full tilt, each horse and rider racing the other. It required far more skill at riding than I possessed to keep my seat on Sihtric, and now I clung to Leannian’s belt with all my strength, praying that it wouldn’t snap from the pressure. (Later, he would show me the bruises the buckle made, digging into his stomach.)

So I arrived at the *hrosbyre* of Bráíenn, son of Artair, and his clan, and was made welcome there. Just in time,

too, for I had barely been greeted by his wife, Ádísá, a grave but comely woman, when I felt a fierce pain in my arms and legs, as if I were being ripped apart. Involuntarily, I gave a cry, as I lifted up my arms and stared at them. When it happened again, the cry accelerated into a scream, and I fell to the ground, my body shaking in agony. At the same time, a black cloud began spreading across my mind.

“Carry him to the healing house,” Bráíenn ordered, and several riders bent down to pick me up. As they did so, the pain intensified beyond the point where I could bear it, and I passed out, my own screaming ringing in my ears.

WHEN I OPENED MY EYES, night had come, perhaps come for some time. My mind was clear but I was afraid to move my limbs. So I lay there without moving and stared at the ceiling. The room itself, which was the entire building, was dome shaped, held up by a clever contrivance of slender, interlocking tree limbs, each about the height of a man. These supported a covering of leather hides, tightly stitched together.

“Even so,” I said, unknowingly muttering my thoughts aloud, “they must leak when it pours.”

“Incessantly,” replied an amused voice, “even though we coat the seams with fat. Fortunately, it doesn’t rain much on the Plains of the Lhennad.”

I turned my head slowly in the direction of the speaker—who, it turned out, was squatting right beside me. It was a young man, at least as young myself, whose gaze radiated

such intensity that it firmly intercepted my own. Even so, I could tell that his appearance was striking. Dark eyebrows crossed his narrow face like a black slash, shrouding his glittering eyes, and setting off a daunting aquiline nose.

“Are you the healer?” I asked.

He shook his head. “That would be Gunniue, or one of her daughters. But she has washed her hands of you, so to speak, convinced that you suffer from an affliction of magic, not of nature. We of the Lhennad are—with apologies, *Nith-aial Galgalíel*—made nervous by manifestations of power. It has done us little favors and caused us many injuries over the centuries.”

I sighed. “*Now* I learn this!” I said. “So, then, are you my guard?”

Again he shook his head. “I apologize for being so uninformative,” he said, smiling. “You see, I stole in here to see you, thinking you sound asleep, and never expected you might speak. Otherwise, I would have first introduced myself, in the proper fashion. I am Páli, third son of Bráíenn and Ádísá.”

Unthinkingly, I reached out and seized his hand. “And, to you—in private, at least—I am Jessan,” I replied, falling silent as I realized what had I done. But there was no real pain, just the aching memory of it.

I struggled up to a sitting position.

“I don’t think you’re supposed to move,” Páli said, placing a hand on my shoulder as if to restrain me.

"Probably," I replied. "And you're supposed not to be here. So we understand each other, I think."

Páli smiled, and, as he did so, his face lightened, the severity melting into simple seriousness, touched with native caution.

"How late is it?" I asked, feeling a trace of regret as he removed his hand.

"Very late," he replied. "The owl has already flown and scattered dreams among us." He smiled again. "So you and I are doomed to have a dark sleep this night."

As he said those words, I felt the late night chill in the air and shivered. "Come lie here with me and share my blanket," I said. "I would talk with you awhile."

He gave me a quick glance, then shook his head.

"I'm sorry," I said quickly, choosing a likely misreading of that gesture. "Unlike you, I've been sleeping all this while. I didn't think that you're probably longing for your own bed."

"No," he said, "I, too, would like to talk. But something my father said...." He stopped, hesitating.

I felt myself blushing. But before I could think of anything to say, he continued. "It's why I left the entry flap tied open. I would have no respect for myself if I felt I had been pushed, if ever so gently, into your bed."

Now I really *was* dumbstruck. "What *did* he say?" I finally stammered out.

Now it was Páli's turn to look nonplussed. He glanced

away. “He said he had told you all about me.”

I thought back. “The *only* thing he told me.” I said firmly, “was that you were ‘moon-fathered,’ which I took to mean that, unlike the others of your clan, you seemed to possess....” I tried to think of a delicate way of putting this, and started again. “That the Blessed Mother might have given you certain... powers.”

Páli’s eyes widened. “Really? *Nithaial Galgaliel*, I blush for him. Compared to you, I..., I...,” he made an aimless gesture with one hand. “I possess nothing. *Nothing*.”

He started to get up, but this time it was I who restrained him. “If you leave now, I’ll pursue you to your own bed, even if I have to look into every one in the entire *hrosbyre*!”

“We don’t have *beds*,” he replied, distractedly. “We sleep on straw mats, just like the one you’re lying on.”

“Well,” I responded, “that will just make it easier. Now stay and let’s have this out. He told you that he heard I have a certain reputation, didn’t he?”

Páli’s eyes widened. “My father? He respects you far too much to say anything so... scurrilous. He simply mentioned that he had persuaded Dýrfinna not to come to you tonight to offer you the hospitality of the clan.”

It was his turn to blush, something that I couldn’t help but savor. It made him all the more attractive.

“So the idea was,” I said, “that you might provide that service yourself?”

“He would never order me to, Jessan,” Páli said,

speaking my name shyly, “but he thought I might *want* to.”

Finally, I was beginning to get the drift of all this. How, I silently cursed myself, could I have been so *thick*?

“But, in truth,” I said gently, “your father thinks you have had more experience in this... hospitality giving than is in fact the case. Which means it would all be far more *complicated* than he could imagine or you cared to tell him.”

I felt the strongest pang as I said these words, thrust back to the first time Alfrund and I had shared a bed. But this time, *I* was Alfrund, and I could have wept, simply from realizing how much I missed him.

Meanwhile, Páli, who had seemed so bold when I first laid eyes on him, was staring fixedly at the ground beneath him, even as he nodded assent.

“Páli,” I said. “Please look at me.” When he did so, I went on, “It is not the custom of my people to offer such hospitality, and it would have made me feel as awkward and foolish as it would you. We of the Kingdom sleep with each other either out of love or lust, or, if we’re very lucky, out of both.”

He smiled, a little. “We of the Lhennad know both those emotions,” he said, “but we are not so likely to act on them. Among us, the clan is everything, and love is apportioned accordingly. We are to make it go around, not hoard it for our own pleasure.” Our eyes met. “Lust can be different, because it is not as lasting. Even so, it is seen mostly as an affliction.”

I nodded ruefully. “Well, it certainly can be one,” I

replied. “And before you think I’m speaking from long and hard-earned experience, you should know that *all* my own explorations in these things happened in the past year.”

He looked at me in astonishment. To be honest, I heard my own words with almost as much surprise. But it was true. In fact, it had all happened in much less than a year. I saw no point in telling Páli how far I had gone to make up for lost time. He could learn that sort of thing on his own.

“How old are you?” I asked.


“Just sixteen years as of Heyannir—the month of the summer moon,” he replied.

“So,” I smiled, “we’re almost exactly the same age.”

As he ingested this equally astonishing fact, I reached over, took his head in my hand and kissed him, with such intensity that we were both panting when we eventually broke apart.

Then, with a swift sharpness, he slapped my face, jumping up to his feet as he did.

My hand had gone involuntarily to my sore cheek, I looked at him in shock. Why had I earned this? And *why* hadn’t my powers protected me?

Páli’s face was impassive, but his eyes glinted. “Sleep now, if you can, Jessan,” he said. “I’m coming to steal you away at daybreak. We’ll go riding out on the plains, and I then shall show you who I really am.” 

Chapter 14



AT DAYBREAK, as he had promised, Páli came and shook me awake. I had not slept for long. My mind was unable to escape the meaning of the sudden, terrible agony that had wracked my body. Following so soon after the fierce pain I had suffered the night before in the mountains—what was happening was obvious enough. Niccas was being tortured and the pain was passing on to me.

I could only hope that we were sharing it together, letting him endure less. My nerves still quivered from the shock, and it was only with great effort that I managed to finally calm them. But nothing could quell the storm in my mind, my feelings of helplessness and rage.

By now, I understood the value of having a horse and knowing how to ride it, and I was very grateful to Bráíenn for teaching me this. But there could be no lingering for long among the Lhennad, and absolutely no dallying with Páli. He was obviously high-strung and difficult, not at all the sort

that was best suited for me.

This came back to mind when Páli woke me. He was carrying a steaming crock of mare's milk, which, once I was dressed, we quickly drank down, companionably taking turns together. This helped to ease my hunger and also to warm me up, for there was a chill in the early morning air. Even so, I refused to let myself warm much toward him.

Páli had also tossed me a change of shirt when I started pulling my clothing on, a replacement for the blood-stained one I had been wearing all the day before. This one was made in the odd manner of their clothing, which is mostly made of brightly colored fabrics, with hems and seams done with leather, worked until it was supple and quite soft. This shirt differed from the ones that the riders had worn only in that the lower part of each sleeve was made from a long piece of leather, wrapped several times around itself to increase its thickness.

Instead of a tunic, with leggings beneath, as people of the Kingdom wear, the people of the Lhennad, men and women both, dress in loose blouses tossed over tight-fitting pants, these being made with leather on the inside of the leg and cloth on the side facing out.

Also, not using stirrups, the riders wear boots made entirely of soft leather, and these entirely cover their calves. Consequently, their trousers only reach halfway down the lower part of the leg, worn on the outside in bad weather but otherwise tucked inside the boots. Because the pants are

belted, the shirts are not, and float freely about their bodies when they ride.

The men and women distinguish themselves both from the cut of their clothing and the by the way the colors match—the men favoring bold contrasts while the women prefer more subtle ones. Páli's shirt was colored the palest of blues, while the leather hems and edgings—and his boots—were all dyed jet black. He wore wide braided leather bands on each wrist, dyed a deep red, with a matching one binding his hair.

Two horses, both mares, were waiting for us patiently outside. His horse was called Svanr, and was entirely, strikingly silvery white. He rode her without saddle or bridle, and, for all his slightness, made a striking figure once he was on her, not least because of what he had chosen to wear.

For me he had brought a horse named Tifridh, which Páli had raised from a foal. She was a roan, her coat a chestnut brown shot through with white. He introduced us, having me stroke her nose. I could tell, gazing into her eyes, that she was at once gentle and spirited and a bit of a flirt. I fell in love with her at once. Then Páli helped me mount her and we made our way through the encampment.

The sun was barely peeking over the horizon, cooking fires were just being lit, and only those fetching water were out and about, apart, of course, from the sentries, who nodded at us as we rode out. The moment we were on the prairie itself, Páli brought Svanr to a fast trot, and Tifridh im-

mediately followed suit, waiting for no direction from me.

This unnerved me for a moment, but Tifridh soon persuaded me that she was exactly the horse I needed after an afternoon on Sihtric—responsive far more to what my body said than my inept attempts at command. Like a skilled dancer with a novice, she taught me by letting me experience myself as someone who really *did* know what I was doing. Because she kept coaxing me to meld my body with hers, I learned what a horse wanted from its rider—and by the time the sun was fully up, I felt I was fast becoming a horseman rather than a passenger.

Páli brought Svanr up beside me, and, for the first time that morning, smiled. “She likes you,” he said, “like no one else who has ridden her, apart from me.”

“I love her,” I said. “I climbed up onto a horse, and made a friend.”

He nodded at that, and we rode together in companionable silence. After awhile, I said for a bit, “Páli, there’s something you might explain to me.”

He looked over at me quizzically.

“If I followed what your father told me,” I continued, “one first learns to ride a horse with no saddle or bridle. Only when mastery is complete are these comforts allowed. And yet here *I* am, riding with both, and there *you* are, riding with neither. The logic of this is that you are a dunce and I possess amazing natural gifts.”

Páli burst out laughing. “What my father *didn’t* tell

you is that we learn to ride even before we can walk, and on a foal born the same time we were. I and my first horse were children together and grew up together, and this is the same for all. Because of that, we of the Lhennad are all part horse, and the animal itself is brother or sister to us.

“So Svanr is my sister, and while I do saddle her, if need be, I still treasure this closeness.”

He smiled at me. “Perhaps I really don’t want to grow up. Besides, first thing in the morning, what could be easier? Only not bothering to dress. And, believe me, when I was younger, on a day like this I never did.”

“As for you, an outsider, we of the Lhennad know that without such aids as a saddle and bridle you would be helpless on a horse. And you are too old to start learning on a foal.

“Now come,” he said. “We’re almost there. Let’s try a faster pace.” He urged Svanr on and I let Tifridh race after him, and found how exhilarating it was to go flying over the plains. I was also now saw that this place—as flat as it might look when viewed from afar—was really not uniform at all.

The few streams that flowed down from the mountains had gradually dug out small and narrow gulches where, protected from the winds, small trees often grew. There were also hollows that would appear out of nowhere, sometimes steep, other times shallow. A rider ahead of the rest who rode down into one would simply vanish from view, then in a moment reappear again, as if by magic.

Also, because of the protection from the wind that

the hollows provided and fact that the rainwater drained into them from the surrounding prairie, a variety of plants grew there that appeared nowhere else. When we first rode down into one, I realized that it was in places like these that Bráinn found his *heällemot*.

Páli led us down into just such a place, shaped like a wide shallow bowl. A tree grew there, the first real tree I had seen since we crossed the mountains. It had a short trunk that quickly diverged into spreading branches, covered with dark glossy leaves. To one side of it a small surface well had been dug, at the bottom of which glistened a puddle of water.

We dismounted, and as the horses drank, we stretched ourselves, and I looked about. Beside the well, there was a ring of stones meant to contain a fire, and a small bundle of kindling had been left nearby.

I turned to Páli. "You come here often," I said.

"Every day, if I can," he said. "Even if I can spare only an hour or so. And, always, until you, I come alone."

"What do you do here?" I asked. It was a fine and secret spot, but the idea of Páli spending hour after hour here, day after day, in no one's company but his own, huddled before a small fire or in the shade of the tree, seemed lonely and sad.

"That's why I brought you here, to show you," he replied, and began to strip off his clothes. I was wondering if he expected me to do the same when he paused and said, smiling to take the sting from the words, "Since you're keeping your

clothing on, courtesy would have you turn your back.”

A bit nonplussed, I looked the other way.

After a moment, he said, amusement still in his voice, “Now you may turn around.” He stood casually naked before me, his clothing piled neatly on the ground beside his feet. He had taken off everything, including his neck and arm bands, even the thong that bound his hair. His body was deeply tanned, well formed, firm, and supple. He had less body hair even than I, just a small trail of delicate black hairs that led down his stomach to the thicker patch around his sex. That, too, was well shaped, darker in color than the rest of him, and, even relaxed as it was, nicely thick.

Páli watched me taking all this in, a smile flickering across his lips. Then he gave a low whistle, and Svanr, who had already lifted her head from the water to watch him expectantly, came to him at once. He leaped up on her back, then turned his head toward me.

“I shall be back in a moment,” he said, “and when you hear me coming, *watch*.” He dug his heels into Svanr’s flanks, and they rode up and out of the hollow.

I listened to them ride away. Then, for a moment, there was silence, followed by the sound of galloping hooves heading back this way. The two of them suddenly appeared again at the crest of the slope. But this time, Páli was standing upright on Svanr’s back. Just as she approached the edge of the hollow, he shouted a command. The horse skidded to a sudden stop, sending Páli flying over her head.

As he moved through the air, he stretched his arms out wide. In a spark of time, his body became a blur, shrunk, blossomed feathers, became a black eagle. Its wings beat strongly, audibly, sweeping it rapidly beyond the hollow. By the time my brain grasped what I had just seen, the eagle was gone.

Svanr reared up on her hind legs, whinnying loudly, and, somewhere out of sight, the eagle screeched in answer. Then the horse trotted down the incline into the hollow and rejoined Tifridh, where the two began to playfully butt each other with their heads. Clearly, this was all familiar to them.

I waited, staring into the sky, until the eagle — Páli! — came into view, already high up in the sky. There it, he, began to soar in large, lazy circles, never quite passing out of my sight. This went on for some time, until, in a flash, the bird dropped like a stone, talons extended, wings pulled back, and vanished.

The silence was broken by a thin, high-pitched scream that broke off instantly. A moment later, the eagle swooped into view, a prairie rodent dangling from his beak, flying just a short span above the grass. Once over the hollow, he rose up, and, in a single, graceful movement, dropped down on a branch near the top of the tree.

There he proceeded to rip apart and devour his prey with fierce and efficient concentration, tearing off and tossing down to my feet patches of bloody fur and — landing with a soft thump — the animal's head, its eyes still bulging in terror. When the eagle had finished, he groomed himself briefly, shook himself, then bent over, fixed me in the eye,

and gave a short, hoarse cry.

I understood everything now—starting with why the thick leather padding had been sewn to the lower half of each of my sleeves. More importantly, I understood what Bráíenn had been trying to tell me, why that eagle in the mountains had come to me when I had called.

But were the two eagles one and the same? I held out my arm, and the bird spread its wings and launched himself from the tree. As the other had, this one flew in low, then rose up just at the last minute to land softly on my arm.

The moment we were this close to each other, I knew the answer to my question, although that answer dragged many other questions in its wake. His beak was still stained with blood, and he brought with him the faint, sweet-sour smell of his meal.

“You *were* the same eagle as before,” I said to him, knowing even as I did so that he would not understand my words. Páli was a shape changer, but his current powers let him maintain only minimal contact with his other self once he crossed over—when he became an eagle, he *was* an eagle, almost entirely.

Leannian had told his father that an eagle had guided him and the other riders to the pool, and Bráíenn had made no comment. Páli had been that eagle, too.

I lifted my other hand slowly. When the eagle gave no sign of fear or alarm, I gently ran my fingers down his breast. The feathers were cool and resilient to the touch, but

the heart they covered beat so strong and fast that I could feel its pulse against my fingertips.

The eagle closed his eyes and made a soft clucking sound as I stroked him, and this went on until Svanr gave out a loud snort and stamped her foot. Immediately, the bird opened his eyes, cocked his head to one side, then spread his wings and leaped from my arm. But instead of flying away, he shape-changed. The feathers turned into skin, the wings into arms, the talons into feet. In a blur of motion, the eagle became Páli again, standing naked before me.

He looked at me fiercely. “Now you have seen what none of the others has,” he said. Then he gestured with his head, adding, “Someone is coming. I’d better get dressed. Bring over the horses—we’d best ride out and meet them.”

“They” turned out to be Dýrfinna and two other riders, who reined in when we rode up to them.

“There you are!” she said, speaking to Páli. “Father sent us to get you. How will we ever find him? we asked. Ride due north, he told us, and Páli will find you. And so you have.”

“I wanted to give the *Nithaial* a feeling for the Lhen-nad,” Páli said, “and time has moved faster than we.”

He turned to me. “There is a feast in your honor, which I suppose I should actually deign to attend.”

The others laughed. I saw that Dýrfinna’s eyes kept moving to my left cheek, which meant there was a bruise there from Páli’s slap last night. Her face had that speculative “have they done it yet” look—probably our body language

was baffling her. Páli's coolness pushed the gaze even further away. Nothing at all about *him* said "lad deeply in love."

"Don't worry," Dýrfinna said, visibly brushing these surmises aside, "there's plenty of time. But they're already heating the water for the guest's bath, and they've ransacked your wardrobe for something for him to wear after he takes it." Her eye fell on the shirt I was wearing. She gestured at it. "Páli! That was a shabby old thing to lend him."

He shrugged and turned to me. "Has anyone told you yet that Dýrfinna is my sister?" he asked me. "Courtesies have been astonishingly lax."

"Well, we hardly ever have a chance to practice them with strangers," she replied, defensively. "Mother has already roundly scolded me for it."


She looked at me. "I apologize, *Nithaial Galgaliel*," she said. "I should have spoken up yesterday, as Leannian did. It was your coming out of the pool with that sword. That and the place of slaughter..." She shook her head. "We of the Lhennad are not usually so discourteous."

"Your brother has washed all of that away, with his exceptionally gracious deference," I said in my best formal manner, bowing to Páli from Tifridh's back as I spoke. Telo would have been proud of me.

"Your eminence is far too kind," Páli replied, returning the bow. "Or, rather, a total liar."

He and I both burst out laughing. In a moment, Dýrfinna and the others joined us. "All then is as it should be,"

she said, “Páli setting the example for us all.”

And we all rode back to the encampment. 

Chapter 15



DÝRFINNA HAD BEEN JOKING, naturally, about raiding Páli's clothing box for something for me to wear — he was too slender for me to fit into his pants or shirts. Moreover, the bath was to be taken outside in a small leather-lined pit, my modesty preserved only by the tact of anyone who happened by.

However, fragrant grasses and assorted herbs had been floated in it, and the nice hot soak left me refreshed and invigorated. Telo had packed an elaborately embroidered shirt, and while no one could say I blended in with the rest, I certainly rose to the occasion.

The feast was held in what the riders termed the *lang jært*, or great hall, which was built like their own *jærts*, or homes, but much longer. The guests all sat on the ground, or rather on sleeping mats, which had been spread in an oblong around a space in which the food had been set, an array of spit-roasted game, ranging from antelope to rabbit to prairie rodents to game fowl.

I had expected to be seated on Bráíenn's right, with, I hoped, Páli or Dýrfinna to my left. But there were no such formal arrangements—before I knew what was happening, two of the riders from yesterday had dragged me down beside them. “Acwellen at your service,” said the one on my left, a burly man with a thick, copper-colored beard.

“And I am called Geira, *Nithaial Galgaliel*,” said the one on my right, a woman near my own age, with braided blond hair, a bold look, and an infectious smile. “I would be honored to bend my bow in your service.”

“Well met, and generously offered,” I replied. “But my needs now are simpler. I have never feasted with your people before, and I need someone to take me by the hand, and keep me from playing the fool.”

She laughed. “We see nothing complicated about it,” she said, “but we forget that strangers have other ways. You see the food,” she went on, waving her hand at the spread laid out before us. Then she pointed to a long forked stick that was set beside me. “You take your dagger or small-knife, cut a choice mouthful...”

Acwellen nudged me with his elbow. “Watch,” he said. Knife already in his hand, he leaned forward, sliced a piece of meat from the loin of an antelope—“the only tender meat on these fuckers,” he muttered. “If someone serves you a chunk of leg, be prepared to chew on it for the rest of the meal”—and speared it. Then he sloshed it about in a shallow bowl of what looked like herbs and meat drippings,

and shouted, “Renweard! Sink your fangs into this.” When Renweard turned, the morsel was already heading straight for his mouth. He leaned forward so as not to get any grease dripped onto his shirt, and neatly caught it.

As I watched this in astonishment, I heard my own name being shouted, and turned to find a forked stick a few finger lengths from my face. I opened my mouth and took in a juicy piece of—prairie rodent.

Páli and I locked eyes, sharing a moment of secret understanding. The meat was gamy but tasty, even more so its coating of sauce, which was salty and pungent.

Acwellen nudged me again. “Spit the bones in there,” he said, passing me a bowl that had already been used for this purpose, “and link your arm with me.” When I did so, he guided me in lifting up a drinking jug with two spouts, one for his mouth and one for mine. We both took a long pull on its contents, which I guessed to be, again, mare’s milk, but this time potently fermented.

This double-drinking was an insidious practice, because you couldn’t stop until your companion did, or else the *airaig*—as the stuff was called—would spill over and run down inside your shirt. And it seemed I had barely put down the jug when Geira was urging me to lift one up with her.

Thus went the feast for me. Having learned my name from Páli, everyone wanted to give me a bite, and one isn’t supposed to refuse—just cram the new morsel in with all the others already in your mouth. I soon learned to pace this by

turning my head slowly and chewing quickly, chunks of antelope leg included.

Finally, though, the novelty of feeding me wore off a bit, and I was able to offer a few bites to Páli and Dýrfinna. As the edge of appetite became dulled, riders began to burst spontaneously into song—sometimes a single voice, sometimes with others joining in, and other times with two or more vocalists battling one song against another.

When the singing had become clamorous and the carcasses mostly picked clean, Bráíenn picked up a horn and blew on it. Its sound was not musical but a penetrating blat that got everyone's attention. At once, everyone in the room got to their feet (some, as they rose, stabbed one last, overlooked morsel with the tip of their daggers and ate it themselves).

I sighed with relief. But the feast was far from over. The resting mats were pulled back to form a larger circle, as the platters of meat were cleared away. Everyone sat down again, and plates of honey cakes were passed around, and the drinking jugs were refilled.

Then the coverings set over the smoke hole in the roof were pulled away, allowing a shaft of sunlight to fall onto the center of the circle. There two elaborately carved wooden stools were brought out and set on the ground in the light.

As soon as they appeared, conversation dropped to a murmur, and when two figures entered the circle, even

that fell away. One was an old man with a great beard, who walked with the aid of a staff. The other was a woman, not nearly as old, who carried a harp. Both were dressed in robes of the finest material, the fabric shimmering in the sunlight, displaying bright strands of different colors that wound and swirled about each other in eye-bewitching patterns.

Once they were settled on the stools, they sat for a moment allowing the tension to build. Then the woman sounded the harp and the man began to chant. His voice must, at one point, have been achingly mellifluous, but now it had the cracks and fissures of age, a roughness, and, occasionally, even a brokenness to it. The frailty of his voice, however, only added more power to his tale. This, no doubt at Bráíenn's request, was the part of the *Lhennadàr* that tells of the loss of Bloodsinger.

I sing of Raedwald Endmost, king of all the Lhennad,
He who wielded the great sword Bloodsinger,
Who crushed our foes, not once but many times,
Until an evil curse shut his mind to its great powers.
Unknowingly, he faced his enemy at the Gray Fens
Without enchantment's aid, and was brought down,
Bloodsinger lost, the people sundered into clans,
Forced to live by stealth and cunning in their own land.
Aye, mighty and proud was Raedwald Endmost
More so even than Sigisgard, his father, who
Also killed many in battle and ruled wisely in peace.

The *Lhennadàr* is, of course, the great saga of the

Riders of the Lhennad, and is now available for all to read, so I shall quote no more of it here. What was astounding—and greatly moving—to me, was that regularly during his recital, he would pause, the harpist would strike a chord, and the whole room would break into song. These were often very sad, and tears would streak down the faces of the singers as they sang. I had never heard anything so powerful as this, and I listened as if wrapped up in a spell—as indeed I was.

Once the old man was finished, he bowed his head, and the room was utterly silent. Then he and the harpist stood up and lifted their hands, and everyone in the room roared their approval, leaping up and stomping their feet as they did. Now, surely, I thought, the celebration was at an end, and began looking around for Páli and Dýrfinna.

But no, everyone sat down again, and, after a moment, two men leaped out of the crowd and strode to the center of the circle. They bent down, faced each other, and then began to fight. For the briefest of moments, I thought that this might be one of the male mating battles that Bráíenn had described, but it quickly became apparent from the self-righteousness with which they attacked each other, that it was something else.

Acwellen, who still sat beside me, leaned over and bellowed in my ear, for the room was filled with shouts of encouragement, outrage, and congratulation, “So do we of the Lhennad resolve our quarrels, and clear away bad blood.”

Sure enough, after the two men were covered with

bruises, and one was bleeding copiously from his nose, the two looked at each other. An understanding flashed between them, and they stopped fighting and embraced.

The next to get up was a man and a woman.

“Husband and wife,” Acwellen muttered. “This is a different sort of fight.”

Indeed it was. The woman shouted out her grievances at the man, he responded in kind, all to the enjoyment of the crowd. This continued until she burst into tears and struck him with all her strength in the chest. It was a good blow, sending him staggering backwards.

He gave off a roar of fury and ran to her, seized hold of her, and lifted her up over his head, and threw her into the crowd. The onlookers were clearly expecting this, caught her easily, and set her back on her feet. This happened two more times, the blow, then the tossing, until they, too, embraced, and, arms wrapped around each other, left not only the circle but the gathering itself, followed by knowing laughter.

“There will be a foaling nine months hence, by my oath,” Acwellen said, linking his arm with mine for another go at the jug of *airaig*. Because this required my total concentration, I didn’t see Páli emerge from the crowd and cross the circle to where I was sitting. The first I knew of his presence was when he took my hand and pulled me up onto my feet.

It is the time to introduce me to the entire clan, I thought, puzzled as to why Bráíenn wasn’t doing it himself. Most likely he had asked his son to do it for him. Bráíenn

had been downing his fair share of *airaig*, while Páli appeared more sober than anyone, myself included.

As he led me to the center of the circle, I tried to summon up the sort of speech that Caelas would wish me to make, summoning the Riders of the Lhennad to his cause. By the time Páli stood me in the center and stepped back, facing me, I had managed to stitch together some phrases that I hoped would seem appropriate to the occasion.

We stood there looking at each other, and I gave him a slight nod, to tell him I was ready to speak. Instead of turning to address the crowd, however, he suddenly slapped my face, on the opposite cheek from the one he had struck the night before. As I stared at him in astonishment, he jumped up into the air and kicked me with both feet, sending me flying to the edge of the circle and into the crowd.

A great roar went up, some cheering for Páli, but others, to my astonishment, for me. Someone pushed me hard, sending me staggering back into the circle, and saying at the same time, “Go on, lad, give him a good fight.” I had done my share of scuffling when I was a boy, although until Faryn stood by my side, I had rarely come out on top. Consequently, I hadn’t a single clue as to how I should fight back. Put Telo and me in a ring, and I would have a chance, but not with Páli.

On the other hand, it would be mortifying to just give up or—as I would rather have done—run away. So I approached him slowly, assuming the same crouching posture

as he. His expression was of pure determination, but I also noticed a glint of amusement in his eyes. He was *enjoying* this!

Again, when I got close enough, he leaped up to kick me back into the crowd. But, if I had no fighting skills, I had supernaturally quick reflexes. I jumped aside and, as I did, gave his legs an upward blow, throwing him off balance.

He fell onto the back of his shoulders with a thud, as the crowd roared. However, he used the momentum of his fall to keep rolling backwards, and with a shove of his arms, leaped back onto his feet. Of course, I had just stood there watching, making no attempt to take advantage of his fall.

In fact, I was cursing my powers. *Why weren't they protecting me?* My mind turned the question over, this way and that, searching for an answer, stopping only when Páli, who had been circling me warily, moved in for another attack.

This time he struck me in the chest with the flat of his palm, and, when I failed to deflect him, did so again. However, this time, I moved quickly backwards, seized hold of his arm, and, catching him off balance, swung him into the crowd, which promptly pushed him back into the ring.

"You're cheating, asshole!" he hissed at me, when we were circling each other again.

"I'm fighting the only way I can, you shit," I muttered back. "Want me to give up and lie down?"

"Don't you dare insult me like that," he replied, and feinting with his right hand, struck me a hard blow on my

head with his left. And, while I was reeling from that, he moved in and, seizing hold of me, lifted me up and, getting momentum from a running start, threw me into the crowd again. This time I was caught by Acwellen.

“How do I win this thing?” I asked, watching Páli strutting about, waiting for my return. Rage was boiling up inside me.

“Not by fighting the way you have been,” he replied, laughing. “The moment one of you pins the other to the ground by his shoulders, the fight is over. Right now, Páli is just toying with you. You’ve got to do better.”

Inspiration struck and I turned to him. “Guide me then, Acwellen. Let me link minds with you, then you show me what to do.”

He looked at me in surprise, then in amusement. “All right, *Nithaial*. Let’s do it. We’ll take him down a peg or two. But right now you’d better look behind you.”

Even as he spoke these words, I felt Páli seize hold of me. In a flash, I found myself flung back into the center of the circle, and with such force that I couldn’t keep my balance. I fell flat on my back.

The moment I did, Páli was astride me. “Shall I finish you off now?” he asked. “Or throw you about some more?”

A few minutes ago, I would have welcomed surrender. But now my blood was up and I wanted the fight. Instead of answering, I levitated, lifting him up as well as myself. Then I flipped over, sending Páli, caught completely by

surprise, flying onto the ground.

And this time, guided by Acwellen, I didn't wait for him to get up. He was still on his knees when my kick caught him in the stomach, and when he doubled over from the pain, I seized hold of his hair and yanked him onto his back, pulling out a fistful of his hair at the same time.

Before I could drop down on him, however, he went rolling over, leaped to his feet, and struck me as hard as he could in the side of my head, making me see stars.

I could feel Acwellen's roar of rage shaking through me. Even while half blinded by the pain, he made me dive at Páli, hitting him with all my weight, and sending him tumbling onto his back, with me on top of him. Blood dripped from somewhere on my face onto his dress shirt.

Instead of seizing hold of Páli's shoulders, Acwellen had me get hold of his arms. That way I could force Páli back without allowing him to hit me. We struggled with all our strength, arm muscles forced to the point of agony, sweat beading our foreheads.

When Páli realized that I was the stronger one, he began to writhe, trying to twist from under me. But I was also the heavier one. Then he went suddenly limp, letting his eyes roll up in his head. If I had been alone, I would have let go of him in alarm.

But Acwellen knew this little trick, too, and took advantage of it by forcing down Páli's arms, so that the back of his hands now pressed against his own shoulders. His eyes

met mine—the amusement was gone, replaced by pure, penetrating fury.

As I felt that strike me, I suddenly recalled his father saying of his son, “he defeated his opponents by cleverness, disdaining strength.” As if reading my mind, Páli slid as far under me as he could, then threw up his legs, trying to catch me in them and wrench me off him.

His own trick was his undoing. Using all his strength to get his legs around me, he no longer had enough leverage to fight off my downward pressure on his arms. His shoulders, both at the same time, were pushed flat against the ground.

The moment that happened, he closed his eyes and went limp. I leaped to my feet, full of the dizzy feeling of animal triumph. I raised my arms to the crowd, which was now in full shout. Then, releasing my connection with Acwellen and calling on my powers to help me, I reached down, grabbed hold of Páli, lifted him off the ground, and flung him over my shoulders, holding him there with outspread arms.

Then, to the gathering’s vocal delight, I carried him out of the tent and off into the dark, straight to the healing house—and my sleeping mat.

fORTUNATELY FOR ME—or Páli, really, since I would not have noticed—the mat was actually there, left there, no doubt, for any in need of the immediate attention of the healer. Surely it was the only one not brought to the *lang ærn* for the festivities. I lowered him onto it, lifted his shirt,

unbuckled his belt, and yanked off his pants.

My pack was right where I had left it; the container of Warrior's Friend right at the top, brought up from the depths of my belongings because of the adventures of the day before. To say that I was erect would be to say nothing; my cock was *rigid*. Defeating Páli in the public eye had given me little pleasure; I was going to take it now.

"So now you're going to rape me?" he asked, spitting out bubbles of blood as he did. His tone was hostile—mocking and defiant.

"I'm going to *take* you," I said, as I rubbed on two fingers' worth of the lubricant, "I'm going to fuck the shit out of you. Now lift up your ass."

When he did so, I pushed the pack under it, pushed his legs forward. Holding him like that, I shoved my cock between his ass cheeks, starting low and sliding it up until it found his hole. As soon as I did, I spread it open and entered him. Páli gave a cry of pain.

I ignored it. His blows had caused far more hurt than my cock could. I pushed in further, shuddering as I felt the heat of his body, his tightness.

I let go of his legs, grasped his thighs firmly, and drove myself in and out, in and out, fast and deep, grunting out loud in the fever of it, my movement quickening.

Páli was groaning now, meeting my thrusts despite himself. I reached with one hand, fingers still greasy with lubricant, and seized hold of his own cock. In a few strokes I

had him stiff, and now I matched these to the rhythm of my fucking, pulling on him hard.

“No,” he gasped, “no, no, no.” This, perversely, excited me all the more, so much so that I began to lose control. Unable to sustain the thrusts, I pushed as deep inside him as I could get, then exploded into him. As I came, I grabbed the head of his cock with my fingers and shook it mercilessly, making him spill, first all over my hand and then all over himself. I shuddered violently, closed my eyes, dropped my head, then fell down beside him.

We were both panting heavily. When I caught my breath, I reached over, told hold of Páli’s head, turned his face toward me and kissed him, again and again, long fierce couplings that left my mouth full of the taste of his blood.

Then, everything spent, I fell onto my back and stared up at the ceiling. “Shit,” I said, “I hurt everywhere. I’ve never had such a beating.” I could not even touch myself without causing more pain.

“It’s the same for me,” Páli answered. Then, after a moment, he added softly, “I’m amazed. You fuck like one of us.”

There was something in his tone that made me look at him. He gave me a wry look, then reached over and brushed his fingers gently across my face. “You have won me, fairly and truly. I never imagined you would be such a fighter, never.”

“You said I was cheating.”

“And you believed me?” He smiled. “It was a taunt;

you praise me to say it struck home. We can only fight with what we have.”

“Why are you bleeding from your mouth?” I asked. “Before I wasn’t thinking, but now, I, I....”

He shook his head. “Nothing serious. One of your blows drove my teeth into the inside of my cheek.”

He laughed. “You should see your face.”

I looked at his. “You’re just looking in a mirror,” I said. “Dark purple bruises blossoming everywhere?”

He nodded. Then asked in return, “One eye swelling closed?”

“By the Goddess!” I exclaimed, relieved. “I thought the eyeball was dislodged. Did I pull out a clump of your hair?”

“All of it, by the hurting,” Páli answered. “I’m glad there’s some left. I, I....” He stopped talking and his eyes widened. His mouth fell open.

“I have given you power,” I said.


“Yes,” he said. “More than I ever imagined.” He clenched his eyes shut, then seized hold of my hand. “Come close to me,” he whispered. When I began to shift, he stopped me. “No, not with your body—too much pain. With your mind.” He lifted my hand and pressed the palm against his forehead. “Come into me.”

I closed my own eyes, focused my mind as best I could, pushing aside the aches and pains, moving softly, carefully, into his mental space.

Páli opened himself to me, first cautiously, then, all of a sudden, freely, as if I had somehow got past a wall. Immediately, I sensed his power, flapping its wings, frightened of this thing that approached it.

“Calm it,” I whispered. “Let it know what comes.”

Páli mutely nodded his head. The fluttering began to slow, then stopped altogether. It began to perceive what approached it was a being like itself, a possible companion, then, finally, a mate. Courting began—approach, retreat, approach again—not head on, but sidewise somehow, edging together, touching, now melding. It was not the male pursuing the female but the seed entering the egg. Something new was born. Páli wrapped it up carefully, gently, and tucked it deep inside himself in a safe place.

As he did, I withdrew, so that our minds were no longer touching. Then I felt his body quiver. I opened my eyes and looked at him. His own eyes were still clenched shut, but tears were seeping from out of his eyelids and running down his cheeks. I held his hand, and felt wet beads slipping down my own face, as well. 

PART FOUR



HALLS OF
BLOOD

Chapter 16



BLACKNESS AND PAIN. But alive. But alive. What did I remember? There was the plunge down, yes, the floor beneath us, so far away at first, then, quickly, all I could see, until I couldn't bear to look and closed my eyes. But the moment of impact never arrived. I had regained enough of my powers for the flagstones to recognize me and let me pass, and what lay beneath them did the same.

Had I been in *full* possession of my powers, how far would we have fallen? The very thought made me shudder. Still, if I had managed to get to Ernfardest and take possession of the forces of earth, I could have guided what happened. Instead, we were in free fall, only no longer in air, but in stone. No doubt we first fell right through the dungeons, but that happened so quickly that I caught not even a flash of light, a whiff of stench.

Now, solid rock. This is hardest to remember, because it was so frightening, so strange. As my power waned,

I could feel it melting around us. It was no longer like air, but became like water, only lighter at first, then thicker and thicker. And thicker. Like tree sap. Molten lead.

As it hardened, my terror grew. What did it profit us to escape the wrath of Maerdas, only to find ourselves encased in stone, deep in the heart of Gorzungâd? Soon, too soon, we were barely moving. There was no air to breathe. Everything closed in around us. No air at all. My lungs gasped, but nothing filled them except what they had just exhaled. My mind was going dark.

But just before I passed out, just before we were frozen in stone forever, the stone spit us out. We tumbled into a cave, a tunnel, some sort of passage deep in the stone. The air was stale and old, but it was air, nonetheless. I took a deep, deep breath—and passed out.

When I came to, nothing had changed. I lay in total blackness, the boy on top of me, cool and limp. The boy. I couldn't quite remember his name. But I knew who he was well enough.

Then a hand touched my shoulder. I could see nothing, and gave out a cry of alarm, wrapping my arms around the boy.

"Don't worry, Niccas," a familiar voice said. "It's me. I find I can come to you in this place."

"Iannas!" I cried. "And this time I'm not dreaming." I reached out one hand and, miracle of miracles, touched his leg. I turned my body, gently sliding the boy onto the ground on my

other side, then made to get up. But the pain was too great.

“Come, please, lie beside me,” I whispered, full of terror lest he leave me. But no, he settled down on the ground beside me. I could feel his body, touch his face. I brought him to me and kissed his lips. His breath was so cool, and mine was so hot.

“I’m not dead, then,” I murmured, “and you’re not alive. And yet this isn’t a dream. Am I almost dead? Can you feel my body the way I do yours?”

I could feel his smile. “Always the next question before I can answer the first. Yes, I can feel your touch. And I long to touch you, but I dare not.”

“Why? Why?” I whispered, closing his hand in mine and bringing it to my chest.

“Don’t, Niccas,” he whispered. “This isn’t the place. Besides, when you die, if you wish to keep your mind, you must refuse to visit old desires. Lying with you, all that effort is now for naught, and I must start all over again, the moment I leave you. And I won’t make it harder for myself than I already have.”

I couldn’t bring myself to release his hand, but I moved it so that it, and mine, pressed against him, not me.

“What place is this, that allows us to be together?” I asked, after a long painful silence.

“Have you enough power to cast a light?” Iannas asked in reply.

“I think so,” I answered. That required almost noth-

ing of me. “But... but... I’m afraid...” I couldn’t finish the sentence.

“Of what you will see when you look at me.” Iannas finished the thought, then sighed. “I’m not sure, to be honest with you,” he said, “but I can tell you it won’t be what you saw when Prince Poëstil revealed my ruined corpse. All that has long been devoured by rats and crows, the bones picked clean.”

I lifted my free hand, palm upwards, and made a gesture. A ball of light instantly floated above it. I had turned my head away from Iannas as I did so, and I gasped at what I saw. The walls, the ceiling, the floor were all as one. We were inside what seemed like the organ of some animal, an artery, perhaps.

Everything was glazed blood red, and the surfaces gently bulged with the shapes of the muscles and sinews that pressed against it. Directly above us, the surface was puckered, like open lips revealing the dark mouth that had spat us out of the ceiling.

Without thinking, I turned to Iannas in my shock, and there he was, as he had been before, lying beside me. The difference was that now he had eyes, large and brown, with streaks of green, framed with delicate lashes.

He smiled. “So you do see me as we both would want.” He reached out and touched my hand. “But remember, beloved, I am dead. This is not illusion, but it is magic, from the power that flows in this place.”

I couldn't take my eyes off him. I wanted to wrap myself around him and hold him forever, but his words were enough of a caution to hold me back. It wasn't only he who had a painful task awaiting him, stifling the yearning that reached on beyond hope.

"You keep calling where we are 'this place,'" I said at last. "Doesn't it have a name?"

He nodded. "More than one, in truth," he answered. "You've seen the walls. That is the work of those who made this their home. They took centuries to craft its rooms and passages to mimic the inner organs of some beast, perhaps one much like themselves. You seem to have fallen into a vein? an artery? Some such passageway. Artful, isn't it?"

I shook my head. "Artful but horrific. Who would wish to live in such a place."

"*Viri*," Iannas said simply. "A very ancient race. Many of them sleep now in these chambers, dried and desiccated, waiting for new life. I have come in part to help you avoid them. They have been waiting over five hundred years for someone like you—well, maybe not you, *Nithaial Elimiel*, for your blood is that of a half-immortal. But your companion, certainly."

I had entirely forgotten about—his name now came back to me—Sepharan. I glanced over at him, still motionless and limp. In the light, I could see a trickle of blood running down his neck. The neck band must have cut him when it snapped open.

“He will be of no interest to them,” I replied. “I fear he is dead.”

Iannas laughed. “The boy is wide awake and listening to us,” adding, “are you not, sly one?” spoken directly to Sepharan.

Sepharan fluttered his eyes, opened them, looked around him in astonishment, and whispered, “Niccas! Where are we?”

I gave him a nudge with my elbow, adding, “Save that for your grandmother.”

He groaned, then slowly pushed himself up, until he was leaning against the wall, his arms wrapped around his knees, listening as I explained to Iannas why the boy was in my company. I was more honest about this than I would have been to anyone else, and not because he might very well already know. Concealing something shameful from Iannas was beyond imagining. He was the first person in all my life I longed to make my *twerë*, and he was dead.

This thought stilled my talk, and I became aware that Sepharan was tapping my leg. I looked at him, thinking he was about to object to some of my comments about him, which were, all in all, not exactly flattering.

But no, he wanted to speak to Iannas. “Honored visitor,” he began, after a moment of hesitancy in which he had probably stopped himself from saying “honored dead one,” “are the *virī* what we call vampires? He who cast us down told me that they once lived in caves beneath Gorzungâd.”

“You may call me Iannas, Sepharan,” Iannas replied. “What Maerdas told you had a grain of truth, although it would take you much searching through his sack of lies to find it.

“To start with, this mountain was the *viri*’s home until Maerdas decided to build Gorzungâd on top of it. When Maerdas failed to at all efforts to enslave them, he spent an entire year having his servants find every exit from this place, no matter how small, and had each one walled up with huge blocks of stone. This gladdened the hearts of the inhabitants of Lorithar—most of them, anyway—who feared the *viri*, and knew they were all but defenseless against them.”

I don’t know how much of this Sepharan actually took in, because the moment Iannas spoke Maerdas’s name, the boy’s face turned white. “You know *his name*,” he stammered out. “You even *said* it! How can you still be...”

“Alive?” Iannas said, finishing the thought and gently mocking the boy at the same time. “The curse on anyone speaking his name has been broken—didn’t you know?”

The boy shook his head in astonishment.

“Well,” Iannas said, “there’s no time to tell that tale now.” Turning to me, he asked, “Did you never speak the name when you were imprisoned in Gorzungâd?”

I shook my head. “I thought it might be unwise,” I said. “Maerdas probably knows the enchantment is broken now, but I was too shaken by what had happened to even think of taunting him about it.”

I thought for a bit, then added, “No, apart from the time you came to me in a dream, the only person who spoke that name in my presence in Gorzungâd was Sepharan. He said it three times, in fact, although I heard him say it only twice.”

The boy had certainly regained all his wits, for instead of looking shocked, he glanced down at me and smirked. “*Perfos malas, Maerdas mistor*! The opening spell! Of course. Unless you were one of the very few given protection, to speak those words would mean certain death.”

Then his eyes opened wide and he exclaimed, “No wonder you asked me to say it as we fell.” He reached out and seized my other hand. “Niccass, I never even thought....”

I gave it a squeeze back even as I shook my head. “Magic is never simple,” I replied. “I knew the curse had been broken, but I didn’t know if the releasing spell would actually work if spoken by anyone other than you.” I looked at him and smiled. “That was not the time to find out.”

Iannass suddenly sat up. “There is something moving somewhere in these halls,” he said in a soft voice. He looked over at Sepharan’s wound, which was still gently oozing blood. “Perhaps the *virii* have sensed our presence. The very smell of human blood has the power to reanimate their husks, at least for a while.”

The word “husks” made me shudder. Truly, I knew nothing of the *virii*, or how they straddled life and death. Growing up in Lorithar, I had, of course, heard tales of them, but those were meant to terrify children, not to instruct them.

Iannas turned to me. “Niccass, lick one of your fingers well, then press it firmly against Sepharan’s wound.” I looked back at him in surprise, but he gave no explanation, just gestured that I should do as he directed. The boy gave a little cry of pain when I touched the cut, but the bleeding immediately stopped.

“Now,” Iannas added, “tear a scrap of cloth from your shirt, mop up all the blood, and burn it.” Again, I did as he told me, finally holding up the bloody rag to the ball of light. It was instantly incinerated. I noticed with pleasure that though the flames licked my fingers, I felt no pain and suffered no burn.

I had, naturally, squatted next to Sepharan to do these things, and now I stood up, Iannas rising with me. Sepharan tried to get to his feet, failed, and fell back against the wall. He looked surprised, then angry and frightened. “I’m too weak to get up!” he said. “What’s wrong with me?”

“Perhaps you’ve lost more blood than we know,” Iannas replied. “Niccass, give him a hand.”

Sepharan reached up and I took his hands and hoisted him up. As I did so, a wrenching pain shot through my arms and legs, and I almost cried out. My powers might be slowly accumulating again, but they had done nothing to ease the hurt in my joints.

Iannas sensed my pain. “I hadn’t realized how much that one session on the rack damaged you, beloved,” he said softly. “I thank the Blessed Mother there wasn’t another.”

He turned to Sepharan, who, once up, was able to stay on his feet, although he looked slightly dizzy. “You have wizardly powers, do you not?”

The boy instantly looked completely alert. “Yes, Iannas,” he said. “Although I’ve yet to find a way to use them.”

“Well,” Iannas said thoughtfully, “I know some spells, but haven’t the power to work them. Among them is one that should ease Niccas’s pain, and that won’t cause problems if you misspeak it. Unfortunately, the wizard who originally wove it, added some... embellishments to make it seem even more impressive than it is. For these I apologize, but for the spell to take effect we have to perform them.”

He gestured to Sepharan. “Take hold of the flesh on Niccas’s forearm,” he directed. “I’m going to whisper the spell in your ear. Then Niccas will extinguish the light. As soon as he does, recite the spell, and, as you do, pinch his arm with all your strength. Can you do all this?”

Sepharan nodded with complete self-assurance. Iannas glanced at me. “Sorry, Niccas,” he said, “but I do think it will be worth the try.”

I shrugged. It did sound like the worst sort of magical trickery, but Iannas was no fool. “Sepharan can pinch me until I yell if he eases my joints at the same time,” I said. “Let’s do it, and get out of this place.”

Iannas bent down and whispered something in the boy’s ear, then whispered it again. The second time, Sepharan nodded firmly. “Slowly, remember,” Iannas added as

he lifted his head and stepped next to me, taking a firm grip on my shoulder to steady me.

“The light now, Niccas,” he said, and I snapped my fingers to extinguish it. Immediately, Sepharan pinched my arm, so fiercely that he might have been using iron tongs. As he did so, he solemnly intoned, “*Hax pax max, Gesryma adimax.*”

As soon as the phrase ended, I felt an intensely soothing sensation sweep through me, intensely pleasurable at first, then slowly fading to a glowing feeling. If we felt good the same way we feel badly, this is exactly what it would be like. The pains in my joints were gone; it seemed, when I moved my body, as if they had never been there.

“The light, Niccas,” Iannas whispered in my ear. I lifted my hand and brought it back. My eyes fell first on Sepharan, who was looking puzzled, as if he felt the spell had failed.

“It worked,” I told him. “It’s amazing. Thank you.”

I put my arm around Iannas. “And thank you, *love*,” I said. “I feel more like myself than I have for ages.”

Iannas sighed. “It won’t last forever, alas, and I’m not sure it can be repeated. Let’s see if we can’t find our way out of here and find you some help, while we can.”

IANNAS LED US, moving cautiously but with amazing surety, through a vast maze of tunnels, some so narrow we had to crawl through them on our hands and knees, and one that we had to wriggle through like a snake or an eel.

As we went along, I couldn’t help staring again and

again at the surface of the walls. I've already said that they were red as blood, but the red was translucent, giving view of the surface beneath it. This was mottled, variegated in subtle ways, as if the *viri* who created it had first pored over the texture inside real arteries and veins, then set themselves the task of replicating it, greatly enlarged, in their creation here. And to be seen by whom?

"Do these passageways shed light as the *viri* pass through them?" I asked, "or do they just know the way in the dark? There are certainly no obstacles to trip them up."

"The walls actually shed light constantly," Iannas said, "but it is a light the human eye cannot perceive." He glanced at me. "Your eyes, *Nithaial Elimiel*, should be able to, however, if you instruct them to. Douse the light for a moment, and see if that's not so."

We paused while I did so. First there was total blackness, but knowing that there was light to be seen, I told my eyes to find it, and they did. It was a dark, pulsing red that, rather than illuminating us, turned us into black figures against a background of crimson. But every detail of walls now sprang to life, and one could easily find one's way.

"My wizardly powers let me see it, too!" exclaimed Sepharan, unself-consciously repeating Iannas's phrase, his face radiant with delight.

"Ah, well," said Iannas. "Then let's do without any other. That ball of flame was almost as dangerous as the smell of the blood. These ways have never known any other

sort of light save what they themselves emit.”

We were now in a passageway wide enough for Iannas and me to walk abreast, and he began explaining in whispers where he hoped to take us, what he was trying to find. While these tunnels were red, there were others that were a pinkish white. While most of the passages were like the blood vessels, the *virī* had replicated all the internal organs as well—heart, lungs, stomach, etc.—these being vast chambers which once all had a special purpose.

The exits were all similarly analogous: the eyes, the nostrils, the mouth, the ears, and so on. To each of these the *virī* had ascribed a purpose, sometimes obvious, sometimes not. The purpose of the exit to which he was taking us was one of the former sort. And the passage that led to it had the color and rippled texture of a digestive organ, namely the small intestine.

“You’re taking us out the *asshole*?” Sepharan asked, in an offended voice. “Couldn’t we at least leave through the thing’s prick?”

“You’re assuming that the *virī* made it in the shape of a male,” I interjected, before Iannas could reply. “More likely they gave it the form of a female. Isn’t that so, love?”

Iannas nodded. “Yes,” he said, “and there are *very* good reasons for not passing through its womb.”

He glanced at Sepharan. “Most of the exits point toward Lorithar,” he said, “since it was to the city that the *virī* mostly went to hunt their prey. If Maerdas is watching out for

you, most of his attention will be directed there—perhaps all of it, if he’s forgotten the one little opening on the far side.”

“This place is so vast!” I said, after we had slid down a long, looping tunnel barely large enough for us to fit into. “Were there really so many *virī* here, ever?”

Iannas shook his head. “No,” he said, “otherwise there would have been a state of war between them and the human inhabitants of Lorithar, which, despite the unease, never quite happened. The doom of the *virī* demanded this of them, and they believed that once their work was completed, the beast would come to life and bring an end to the world.”

“Wow!” Sepharan said. “No wonder they kept expanding the place. Then Maerdas came along and it was the *virī*’s world that ended.”

Again, Iannas shook his head. “No, Sepharan, they completed the beast, then went into hibernation, waiting for the end of the world. If Maerdas had meant to kill them off, he would have had to send his men into the tunnels with torches to burn the husks, and most likely none of them would have come back out alive—or dead, for that matter.”

He glanced at me. “Isn’t it a saying in your city that no one can fight the *virī* in their own lair?”

I looked at Iannas in surprise. How would he ever have known that? But it was true. “Yes,” I answered. “It is usually brought up when one has to deal with a nest of wasps.”

“Well, that’s where you are now,” Iannas agreed. “Right in the middle of one. 

Chapter 17



AND ON WE WENT through the crimson gloom, and I became increasingly baffled as to how Iannas could possibly find his way in this utterly bewildering maze. Not only had I lost all sense of direction, but also any clue as to the passage of time. Here it went by as if in a dream, with minutes the same as hours.

Then the light in the corridor began to dim, until it was half what it was before. Now gloom became murk, and it was impossible to make out even the wall beside me, and I had to orient myself by tracing the fingers of one hand along it, while holding tight to Sepharan with the other.

“Night has come to the outside world,” Iannas explained. “In the old days, it would be time for the *virī* to venture out into the dark.”

“So the legends are true,” Sepharan said, “that vampires... the *virī*, I mean, are afraid of the light.”

“‘Vampire’ is a word that better describes humans who become addicted to the *virī*’s bite,” Iannas said, “but

even then, legend has almost everything wrong.

“In any case, to answer your question, no, *viri* are not destroyed by sunlight. But it hurts their eyes and, unless they expend a great deal of energy, its brightness weakens the illusion they create. That brings the risk that they might be seen for what they are. And, usually, they don’t *have* a great deal of energy, unless they’ve just fed. So, they prefer the night, because darkness serves them well.”

“Darkness isn’t serving *us* well, Iannas,” the boy lamented. “I feel like a shadow swimming through blood. Are we getting *anywhere*? And can’t Niccas use his light?”

Iannas sighed. “You’re tired,” he said. “And so, probably, is Niccas. I can see some things that you can’t, but with the fading light, I’m starting to feel less sure about the way. I’m going to do some quick reconnoitering, and leave you both here to rest for a bit.

“Niccass,” he went on, “cross over to the other wall and run your fingers along it.”

I did so, and almost immediately came upon an opening. I groped into it, and discovered it was a small hollow, meant to replicate an abscess or something like it. As I reached inside, my fingers fumbled over some strangely textured lumps formed on the wall. The *viri*’s fidelity to reality was getting close to making me vomit.

Even so, Sepharan and I nestled together inside it, and, after a totally unnecessary warning to stay where we were, Iannas vanished.

I was soon fighting off sleep, but the boy was restless, and soon prodded me. “I think he’s truly gone,” he said. “Can we talk?”

“If you whisper,” I said, inwardly sighing. “Just keep it short.” I knew that when the spell wore off, my pain would be all the greater for all this walking. A little sleep seemed like a very good idea.

Sepharan shifted so that he would whisper in my ear. “I want to tell you something strange,” he said. “When I first came to Gorzungâd, Maerdas gave me a servant my own age, whose name was Teffan. He disappeared one day and I never saw him again, but when I first laid eyes on Iannas, I would have sworn it was he. In fact, if I hadn’t already been listening to the two of you talk, I would have had no doubt at all.”

I caught my breath. “What did this Teffan look like, then?” I asked.

“He had a head of bright red hair and greenish-colored eyes,” Sepharan answered. “Just like Iannas, I guess.”

“No,” I said. My mind was spinning again. I put my hand against my head to try to stop it. “Iannas has long black hair and dark brown eyes.”

Sepharan reached and pressed his hand against my shoulder. “I’m sorry, Niccas,” he said, “but whoever our guide is, he—or it— isn’t your former lover. I think he must be one of the *virî*. They have the power to show themselves as what we most desire to see. But he couldn’t be Iannas to

you and Teffan to me. And you're the one whose trust he wants."

"That can't be so," I whispered back, even as my pulse stopped and my body turned to ice. "That wasn't just someone who *looked* like Iannas. He perfectly imitated his way of speaking, his intimate gestures, his awareness of the difficulties that come when the living meet the dead. No one but Iannas could manage all that."

"Did you mind touch him?" the boy asked.

"You can't mind touch the *dead*, Sepharan," I protested. "There's no brain there to enter."

"So you didn't," the boy went on remorselessly. "And I'll tell you something else—that magic spell business was all a big fake. Those so-called magic words did *nothing*. He made up all that stuff because he needed to have the light put out so that he could bite you, and me to pinch you so you wouldn't feel it when he did.

"It was all over too quickly," I argued, even though my heart was drowning in an acid pool of pain. "He couldn't have drawn any blood."

"No," Sepharan agreed. "He already drank mine while we lay there unconscious. That's why I'm so pale and weak. But remember when he told us that vampires are humans who become addicted to the *viri*'s bite? I'll bet that means that they first inject their victim with something that keeps them from struggling by calming them and dulling their sense of pain. That's what he was doing for you—and

I've even figured out why."

"Enough, Sepharan," I hissed at him. "*Shut up!*"

"Because," the boy went on relentlessly, "he wants you to break open one of the exits that Maerdas sealed so the *vir*i can escape, or at least..."

I seized hold of Sepharan, who no doubt thought I was about to throttle him. Instead, I clamped my hand over his mouth and held it there. It was true that his revelations hurt like lashes from a knotted whip, but I had silenced him for another reason. Something had fought its way through the smothering tide of despair and now had all my attention.

I closed my eyes to sense it better and pressed my head against his. "Smell!" I whispered in the boy's ear, so softly that I couldn't hear the word myself, easing the pressure of my hand against his mouth. "Don't move or make any noise at all."

The fetid stench was now unmistakable, and I knew it all too well. A wraith ghoul was slowly coming down the passageway, stalking us. And it would find us trapped, and ready for the taking.

I held tightly to Sepharan, and my fear must have somehow communicated itself to him, for his body was shaking with terror. Or maybe the stink was enough—in these close quarters you could almost feel it rotting your nostrils and poisoning your brain.

Now we could hear a coarse slobbering sound, and I could all but see that round snouty mouth with its nest of

needle-like teeth, thrusting forward, hungrily tasting the air. I kept forgetting that the air in the tunnels wasn't actually viscous, and that the thing might still be some distance away. But there wasn't any doubt at all that it was in *this* tunnel, heading *our* way. And if, fresh from bathing in the torrent of power at Fæystirran, my powers were no match for it, what could I hope to accomplish now?

The urge to pick up the boy and flee was almost overpowering. There was no way we could outrun it, but at least we wouldn't be just sitting here, waiting for our death. However, as I struggled to decide what to do, Sepharan stuck his head out of the abscess and, in a surprisingly firm if high-pitched voice, intoned, "*Prescast wearun difernost.*"

Immediately there was a scream of rage, followed by a cloud of dark, oily smoke that stank of a stench too revolting to be borne. Gagging, I forced us both out of our hiding place and, holding tightly to each other's hand, fled down the passageway in the opposite direction—or so we hoped—of the wraith ghoul.

We had gone about twenty paces, fingers touching the wall to guide us, when another passage opened on that side. I stepped into it, the floor disappeared beneath our feet, and we shot straight down for a bit before the tunnel began to curve upwards. Even so, we had hardly begun to slow down when it sent us twisting through a series of turns, then spat us out into a much larger tunnel. We skidded across it, slid halfway up its further side, and dropped back down onto

the floor, our heads reeling.

“I thought that spell worked only on horses,” I groaned, once my brain stopped spinning.

“Well, it’s the only spell I know,” Sepharan said with some dignity. “So I *had* to use it. Probably no one ever tried it on one of those... *things* before.”

“They’re called wraith ghouls,” I said. “They’re horrible. I had to fight one once and it almost killed me.”

“Well, now you know how to defeat them,” the boy said with satisfaction. “Once again I saved your life.”

I glanced over at him, but he was staring around at the passageway, his mouth wide open. I immediately saw why. Where before the surface of everything had been crimson, here it was a pale pinkish white. We had stumbled into the bowels of the great beast.

“Let’s get out of this place!” Sepharan said, pulling me to my feet. And, when I was standing, added, “Which way do you think we should go?”

“This is the way out,” said a voice, and a figure emerged from the gloom. It was Iannas. “Did a wraith ghoul find you? And you escaped from it? When I heard Sepharan speak I could hardly believe my ears.”

“You aren’t Iannas—you’re one of the *viri*!” Sepharan exclaimed. “You’ve been fooling us all this time!”

Iannas glanced at me. “Do you also believe this, Niccas, my love?”

I looked back at him, my insides wrung as tightly as a

wet rag. “It doesn’t matter what I believe,” I answered, stumbling over the words. “What matters is whether it’s *true*.”

Iannas nodded slowly. “Despite the homilies, most often it is the lie that is simple while the truth is a confusing tangle of snarls and knots,” he said. “It would be foolish to stand here while I struggle to unravel it for you. Let us hurry on to the anus of the beast, and I’ll try to explain as we go.”

He beckoned us to follow him, and started down the tunnel. But when we both hesitated, he stopped again and added sharply, “Come! If you refuse to trust me, you’ll never escape from here. You think all you have to do is find a rough patch of stone. But once Maerdas sealed the exits, the *virī* used their craft to make them as one with the walls. That was the last task—doing that, they finished the beast.”

“Let’s go,” I said to Sepharan, and held out my hand. He took it and we hurried after Iannas, as I still had to call him. What choice did I have, really? *Virī* or not, he had done nothing but try to help us. Besides, he hadn’t denied the charge—if anything, his tone of voice suggested he already knew that our discovery was merely a matter of time. Would a real *virī* be that... fatalistic? The knife was still in my heart, but suddenly it had stopped twisting round.

The light here was milky and dim, but it was not nearly as thickish seeming as had been the crimson light in the blood vessel passageways. We could find our way much more easily, and we soon caught up our guide.

It was soon apparent that he had told us the truth

about the right direction. The walls and ceiling suddenly narrowed considerably, changing what had been almost a kind of hall back into a winding tunnel. Furthermore, its surface was now deeply corrugated, although the ripples were stretched wide enough so that walking on them, while tiring, wasn't actually painful.

After a while, I let go of the boy's hand and moved up so that I was beside Iannas, and told him, "I await your explanation."

He sighed. "Well, to start with, you have to understand that the *viri* do not exactly prey on humans, unless you think of tapeworms as predators. And the *viri* are a lot more benign than those. Yes, they drink human blood, but it takes only one good drink to give them substance, and that's all they take. They're not ravenous, and, in the ordinary course of events, they are no real danger to humans.

"However, if one found his way into this place he *would* be in danger, for if enough *viri* encountered him, his body would soon be drained dry." He moved his head slightly, and said in a lower voice, "which is just what I feared might happen to the boy... still fear it may happen, or worse."

He was silent for a while, letting me digest this, then continued. "The *viri*'s capacity for mimicry is at once astonishing and mechanical, for they have about as much understanding of human ways as a tapeworm does.

"They are capable of a sort of mind touching—they seek out an identifiable nexus of yearning in their victim, then

replicate it, taking all their cues from him. Human speech is meaningless to them, nor do they have any body parts that could replicate it. It all happens in the mind.

“However, *you* are not a human but the *Nithaial Elimiel*. They could not touch your mind. Should we meet one in this passageway, you would see it as it is, a spindly, fragile creature with arms that can also serve as wings.”

“But,” I started, then swore, for Sepharan had just trod on one of my heels. He had edged up as close behind us as he could, not to miss anything that was being said. He muttered an apology but did not fall back a finger’s length.

Iannas held up a hand. “If you’ll just listen, you’ll find that I answer your questions without your having to ask them,” he said. “As you already know, the *viri* are neither alive nor dead, but exist in some strange state that is both. They suffer neither hunger nor thirst nor the imperatives of sexual or emotional need.

“They seek blood so that they can gain the physicality necessary to delve and shape and compose the passageways in their nest. In that regard they resemble a race of immortal ants. All this”—he gestured at the walls, “the texture, the color, the emitting of light, comes from their bodily excretions.

“The point of all I’m telling you,” he went on, sensing my impatience, “is that their will is that of the nest. This, and the fact that they are, by nature, accessible to Ais Dysmasia, means that they can sometimes be inhabited by the dead

who still possess desire strong enough to do so. Then, once one enters a *viri*, it is no difficult feat to usurp the will of the nest and get it to do one's bidding."

"As the one you inhabit now obeys you," I said, comprehension dawning.

Iannas nodded. "It was a very delicate business with you, Niccas. I had no idea if I would succeed. But your love for me was human enough and strong enough to make it possible. I was so afraid that when you opened your eyes you would see..."

I finished the sentence for him. "A strange amalgam of tapeworm, ant, and bat."

"Exactly." Iannas smiled. "I could still show you it, if you wish."

I shook my head. "No, thank you," I replied. "This strange bargain gives me more of you than I ever thought I would have. When Sepharan persuaded me that you were a *viri*, I felt my heart begin to die."

Iannas caught hold of my hand and squeezed it. As he did, I had to fend off the image of the *viri*. But it *felt* like Iannas's hand, and so I clung to it gratefully.

"Ghosts!" Sepharan said suddenly from behind us. "That's what ghosts are! A dead soul inhabiting a *viri*!"

Iannas answered, "Yes, sometimes, certainly. But let's not venture down *that* path, at least right now. I have other news, and none of it good."

"The wraith ghouls," Sepharan and I said simultane-

ously. I could tell from the tone of the boy's voice that he was clearly dying to tell Iannas about his spell, but I made a hushing gesture. I wanted first to hear what Iannas had to say.

"The wraith ghouls," he repeated in agreement. "They are everywhere down here, and very hard to evade. Each of them is seeking the husk of a *viri* to inhabit. This gives them great power to cause mischief of the worst sort. And I have no idea who is letting this happen."

He shook his head. "Somehow, the bonds that separate the world of the dead from that of the living are weakening. Such vile and abominable beings should never have been let loose among the living. That they prey on the dead is revolting enough."

"I battled with one at Fæystirran," I said, "and Sepharan drove one off with a spell just moments ago."

"I *destroyed* it!" the boy said.

Iannas looked back at Sepharan. "Well!" he said. "I underestimated your powers. And, also, I want to apologize for drinking your blood. It was necessary, you must now see, for me to help you both. But I'm glad it harmed you as little as it did."

"Tricking me into saying that fake spell was worse," the boy replied, with a genuinely wounded tone. "It was very insulting."

Iannas shook his head. "Yes, Sepharan, I see that it was, although it's a testament to your real powers that you realized immediately that it was a fake." He then softly re-


peated the spell. “*Hax pax max, Gesryma adimax*’—it has a long history, that incantation, among fraudulent soothsayers and healers, and it has awed princes as well as paupers.”

He looked back at Sepharan. “But not you,” he said. “And so, bit by bit, you unraveled all my deceptions.”

No one Sepharan’s age could be that well buttered and fail to glow, and he was no exception. “Well, it wasn’t all *that* hard,” he said, adding, as if to comfort, “although you *were* very clever. But it was nothing compared to using that spell against the wraith ghoul. That was *real* magic!”

Sepharan wasn’t going to let the matter drop until he had at least punished Iannas with a good swipe of his claws. But his catty remarks—you weren’t so smart, anyway; I’m the one possessing real magical spells—were delivered with such gracious condescension that you could only smile. Iannas caught my eye and we exchanged one.

Sepharan paused to let his remarks sink in, but not for long, distracted by his impatience to exert those magic powers again. “I can’t wait to work that spell on the next wraith ghoul we meet!”

“Forgive me, Sepharan,” Iannas replied, “but I myself hope we meet none. We already have plenty enough on our plates as it is.” 

Chapter 18



NOT SURPRISINGLY, given the particular nature of the passage and its destination, we encountered neither *virī* nor wraith ghouls as we hurried down it. But true to the bowels it mimicked, the tunnel wound on and on and on. The undulating surface of the floor began to punish our legs, and eventually we were staggering with fatigue.

“We’re just a bunch of turds,” Sepharan moaned, “heading for the exit. I can’t wait to see how the bards manage to turn this into a heroic lay.” He mimicked the voice of an eager child. “Oh, please, recite ‘The Escape of the Living Shit Balls’ for us. Please!”

He said the last “please” with such whining intensity that I couldn’t help breaking into laughter. “Don’t worry,” I said at last. “The bards always seem equal to the task. They’ll call our flight ‘Through the Bowels of the Beast,’ and make this into something quite heroic as well as terrifying.”

“If we make it,” Sepharan muttered. “Don’t you have

the feeling that we're being followed?"

In truth, I had had that feeling for some time now, but because I caught no whiff of wraith ghoul, and because the surface of these tunnels constrained mind-searching, I kept my silence, trusting that our guide would alert us if we were in danger.

"It is a flock of *viri*," Iannas said. "They scent Sepharan's blood, but we have something better to offer them.

"Besides," he added, when the boy gave an audible gasp, "Niccas has power enough to hold them back."

"What besides blood do we have to offer them?" Sepharan asked. "The sight of Niccas juggling globes of fire?"

"Ah," Iannas said, "better than that." He turned to me. "Niccas," he said, "cast a light down the corridor."

I lifted my hand, summoned a light, then, with a jerk of my hand shot it down the passageway ahead of us. It went about a dozen arm lengths or so, then suddenly stopped, illuminating what seemed to be huge, tightly pursed lips.

"Behold the butthole!" Sepharan shouted, and ran ahead of us. "Wow!" he said. "Look! There's a huge prick shoved into the opening."

"An example of Maerdas's unique sense of humor," Iannas replied. "Again, we must put our fate into Niccas's hands."

He looked at me. "In case you wondered," he said, "the *viri* don't exactly defecate. When they have extracted everything they need from the blood they drink, they exude delicate castings that they crumble into powder and mix with

water to produce a powerful adhesive. This orifice,” he gestured to the elaborately detailed anus, “was used to dispose of the rubble produced by their tunneling. Even so, it amused Maerdas to plug it with a phallus shaped of pink granite. For us to escape, you’ll have to find a way to shift it.”

“Thanks a *lot*,” I said, looking at the massive thing. “You’d think by now it would have gone limp and fallen out.”

As I spoke, a rustling noise could he heard approaching down the passageway. The *viri* had caught up with us. But, as Iannas had said they would, they stopped several arm lengths behind us.

Curious, now, I sent the ball of fire back the way it had come, until the *viri* were caught in its light. They were just as repulsive as I had imagined them, strangely skinny beasts with hunched shoulders, long limbs, and taut gray flesh.

Their faces were featureless, save for their mouths, which were small and perfectly round, and their eyes. These were large and liquid, with wide pupils tinged at the edges with greenish brown, and almost beautiful. The ball of fire caused them no consternation, although they shaded their eyes against the light with their hand-like claws.

“I am one of them, Niccas,” Iannas said from behind me. “And I plan to lead them from the nest so that they won’t become body slaves to the wraith ghouls.”

I looked at him in surprise. “Where will they go? What will they do? Start building their beast all over again?”

Iannas dropped his head. "I don't know," he answered in a soft voice. "Die, most likely. But it is both cruel and stupid to leave them at the mercy of those phantoms."

I looked at them, then turned to regard Iannas.

He sensed that movement, and looked back up. Although the illusion he cast made his eyes seem no larger than my own, I could now see by their coloration and shape that they truly belonged to a *virī*.

"Yes," he said, "if the spell falters, it is one such as they that you'll see standing beside you."

"It's a price I'm happy to pay," I said. "I wonder if it would be better to see and know the *virī* who has given you a home."

Iannas smiled, fully, sweetly. "The *virī* would prefer the illusion," he replied, "for it would be frightened to know it was observed. But I love you all the more for saying that."

I wanted to hold and kiss him, because I knew our time together was almost gone. But if the *virī* had pursued us, the wraith ghouls would soon be on the track of them. So I squeezed his hand, summoned back the light, and turned my attention to the plug.

As Iannas had said, it was chiseled from pink granite, rounded at the end, and a cursory effort had been made to give it the head of a cock. But that was not what interested me. I put my hand against it, closed my eyes, and sent my thoughts into it, to measure its length and heft.

What I especially wanted to know was whether it ex-

tended further inside the cavern than it did outside it. And I soon had my answer: Its base was flush with the rock face outside. It would have to be shifted inwards.

I gestured to Iannas to step back, but I kept Sepharan by my side. I was afraid to put the boy that close to the *viri*, or, rather that far from my protection, especially as my attention would be totally devoted to the task at hand.

Fortunately, the carved ring of muscle holding the stone protruded a bit into the passageway. I had Sepharan stand pressed against the wall on one side, while I pressed up against it on the other. Then, I closed my eyes and began to feel my way into the stone that ringed the phallus, commanding it to shift the thing bit by bit in our direction. Instead of having the carved ring of muscle shit the shaft out, in other words, I was having it draw it in.

This required a force of concentration I had become unused to, and my body shook from the effort. Not only did I have to call on all the power I had, I needed to apportion it with extreme care, so that every bit would be wisely used.

This took my total attention, and if a horde of wraith ghouls had attacked right then, I wouldn't have been aware of them until their snouts were boring into my chest and beginning to suck out my vitals. But this didn't happen, and ever so minutely, the stone began to shift the granite.

I find it hard to summon the words to describe this. The stone became as flesh without becoming soft. Instead, I gave it a hardness that was flexible, that could still be grasped

and pushed without it cracking or splitting. It moved, and as the granite shaft protruded further and further into the chamber, its own weight began to pull it free.

At first, I could feel the weight shifting, even though nothing moved. Then, when it finally did begin to slide, it happened so quickly that it seemed to shoot out of the hole, flying right past Sepharan and myself, moving with such force that it went sliding a good distance across the floor.

Fortunately, Iannas had the presence of mind to leap out of its way, and the *viri* scattered back down the tunnel.

All of this absorbed merely a speck of awareness, for my attention, all of our attention, was directed to the hole, or rather what appeared beyond it, a luminous circle of night sky.

However, I had only a moment to absorb this sight, to inhale the rush of sweet air that now flowed in, before we were mobbed by the frenzied *viri*. I threw my arms around Sepharan, but they had no interest in him.

One by one they climbed into the hole and launched themselves into the night. What I had before taken as hunched shoulders were, in fact, folded wings. As each *viri* leapt into the sky, these flew open, a translucent membrane held in shape by a spider's web of cartilage and tiny bones.

A hand seized hold of my shoulder, a voice spoke in my ear. "I must go with them, beloved." I turned to Iannas. Shock had struck me dumb, but he could see the pain written on my face.

"Like them, I have to feed," he explained, "or I can

be of little use to you.”

“Can’t you just draw more blood from Sepharan?” I asked. But merely to ask the question was to know the answer—the boy had already given all he could spare.

Iannas gently shook his head. “Don’t worry, Niccas. I should be back before sunrise. I have no intention of abandoning you while you are still in this place.”

“And then?” I asked.

“Then I shall have to leave you, at least for now.” When he saw the pain in my face, he reached up and gently caressed my cheek. “You knew that, Niccas,” he said. “As a *virī*, I cannot travel during the day, and I lack the stamina to attempt great distances at night. But I’ll tell you my plans when I return.”

“Best to go then,” I said, and to take any sting from my words, leaned forward and kissed him. The impression of lips met mine, but already, the potency of Sepharan’s blood receding, I could sense the creature behind the illusion. Once this sensation would have disgusted me; now, it only made me sad.

Then, the last *virī* sprang from the hole we had made, and was gone.

“**P**ERHAPS YOU SHOULD EXTINGUISH THAT,” Sepharan said, pointing to the globe of fire. “It can probably be seen for leagues. There may be no skal-gür aloft, but Maerdas has soldiers out there patrolling, night and day.”

I snapped my fingers, and the light vanished. A gibbous moon hung in the sky outside, and more light came in than was cast by the soft glow of the walls.

“Are we to wait here for Iannas?” the boy asked. “I say we should climb out and start the descent. We’ll want to be down and away before sunrise.”

I hadn’t thought of that. What Sepharan said was true. It would be foolish to wait here, when we could be on our way. But Iannas wasn’t a fool.

“Hold onto my legs,” I said, “and I’ll take a look outside.” It was a simple matter to get up to the opening, but, unless you were a *virī*, not so easy to look out, since the edges of the rim had been sharply rounded on the outside as well as within. I braced myself on this and leaned out, Sepharan clasping me tightly.

Any hopes of finding a great mound of rubble heaped up just below us faded instantly. Below me, a sheer cliff face dropped into darkness. The rubble was no doubt down there somewhere, but it was no help to us.

Once I shook off the swoon-making vertigo, I looked to see if there was anything that might provide handholds enough for us to hope to climb down. There was, I saw, not too far below us, a narrow ledge. The fall of debris had eventually worn it away directly beneath me, but if I could somehow hold on to something and swing a bit to the left or right...

But to what purpose? Below the ledge was nothing, and, while I couldn’t see where it led, the odds were slim that

it led anywhere at all. As for just climbing down on the ledge and waiting—even if we could figure out how to do that—meant risking everything on the hope that Iannas could make it back before sunrise. Otherwise, as dawn broke, the skalgür would find their breakfast helplessly awaiting them.

Sepharan was frantically tugging on my legs. He wasn't strong enough to pull me back in, but I had no reason to stay here, either, so I eased myself back inside the tunnel.

Before I could open my mouth, I saw the horror in his face and looked where he was pointing.

Down the corridor came a crowd of what were obviously *virí*, but they had taken on the shape of humans. The leader of them appeared as a woman with an attractive face and long, braided tresses of blond hair that reached down to her waist. Her arms were held out to Sepharan and tears streamed down her cheeks.

She was crying out, “Naelas! Naelas! Naelas!”

“It's my mother,” Sepharan said in a small, tear-choked voice. “Behind her is my father, my brother Istvas, people from my village....”

I seized hold of his arm and squeezed it hard. “They're *ghoul wraiths*, Sepharan. By the name of the Sacred Mother, *cast your spell*.”

“I *know* what they are,” he answered. “I just can't. It's my *mother*. *You* cast it.”

I hadn't paid any attention to the cursed thing. I couldn't remember a single word of it.

Without even thinking what I was doing, I mind-touched Sepharan, found the spell, and, as he struggled against me, made him cast it.

“Prescast wearun difernost,” he shrieked, and burst into tears.

Nothing happened. When the boy saw this, something—wounded pride, the thought that if the spell didn’t work this might actually *be* his mother—made him cast it again, this time in a firmer, steadier voice. *“Prescast wearun difernost.”*

Again, it had no effect at all.

A reason why it hadn’t popped into my mind, but this was no time to consider it. In one frantic motion, I seized hold of the rim above the opening, swung myself into it feet first, twisted over onto my stomach, grabbed onto Sepharan, and pulled him through it after me as I slipped out into the night. Even as I did this, I commanded the stone beneath me to produce a foothold, which appeared beneath my feet just before my slide turned into a fall.

Immediately, I leaped to my left, and the boy and I fell onto the ledge, or, rather, I fell onto the ledge and he fell onto me. The shock of the fall caused such pain in my joints that I almost screamed aloud. The *viri*’s toxin had finally worn off.

Sepharan was still crying, from the shock of seeing his mother, his shame at the failure of his spell, the fright caused by his fall.


I pulled myself into a sitting position, drawing him up with me, and wrapped an arm around him. I felt bad about how I had used him, especially since it had come to naught.

I tried to think of how to apologize to him, when he wiped his tears away with his sleeve, and asked in a soft but steady voice, “What now?”

A good question. Inhabiting the *viri* as they now were, the wraith ghouls could fly—if they couldn’t already. The Demon Lord Mazh’dagh had said something about that, but I couldn’t remember what. When I had leapt out to the ledge, it wasn’t because I hoped to escape, but just to put off the end for a few more moments.

“I guess we pray,” I answered. “There’s nothing left but that.” I gave the boy a hug. “I’m sorry, Sepharan, that it should end like this. I’ve grown fond of your company.”

Sepharan suddenly climbed up on my lap and threw his arms around my neck. “Don’t be sorry, Niccas,” he said, the old lilt back in his voice. “If I die in your arms, I’ll go straight with you to the Hallowed Halls.”

“You little *schemer*!” I said, suddenly full of love for him. He must have sensed it in my voice, because he was actually smiling as we kissed goodbye—the sound of bat wings, many, many of them, beating just over our heads. 

Chapter 19



THE ATTACK OF THE WRAITH GHOULS never came. The sound of beating wings, rather than growing louder and louder about our heads, almost instantly began to fade away. When I opened my eyes and lifted my head to look over Sepharan's shoulder, I saw that every one of the *viri* was headed straight toward Lorithar.

The call of blood, especially after eons of waiting, overwhelmed the wraith ghouls' control. Or perhaps these, too, craved to gorge on blood themselves, and realized there wasn't enough here to satiate them. They would, after all, be coming right back—and we were going nowhere.

"Iannas will return first," Sepharan murmured confidently in my ear. The boy was exhausted, and almost the moment after he said these words, regular and gentle breathing told me that he had slipped off into sleep.

I turned my head and gave him a soft kiss. The boy hadn't said so, but this was surely the first time he had been outside of Gorzungâd since he arrived. And what a miserable

taste of freedom this ledge afforded. Even in the poor light, I could see that it began to narrow a short distance away, gradually tapering into nothing. And while I could call hand- and footholds out of the rock, Sepharan hadn't the strength to use them to climb down—and if the *viri* bite wore off when I was only halfway down....

I shuddered. Yes, Iannas would be the first back, but what did it matter? The wraith ghouls would rip his little flock of *viri* to pieces. And then?

I was too sleepy to parse these beads any further. Already, I had nodded off twice, then snapped back awake when my muscles relaxed, and the boy's weight began to pull me forward. Carefully, I turned and laid him down on the ledge beside me. Then, my head facing his, I eased myself down on my side.

The stone was just wide enough for that—and for Sepharan to lie flat on his back without falling off. I reached up and put my hand on his shoulder to keep him from shifting in his sleep, and immediately joined him there.

A persistent tugging woke me up, an experience so peculiar that it confounded my sleeping brain. “Not *sleepy* brain,” I thought sluggishly, “*drugged* brain.” As I groggily tried to parse this, my body tilted, then slid off the ledge.

Now, I *was* awake. My eyes flew open to find that I was being carried off by several *viri*. Well, not exactly. I was too heavy for them to fly with me, and the whole clutch of us were falling together, their outspread wings beating desper-

ately to try to break the fall.

One each was holding onto my arms and legs, a fifth had grasped hold of my belt. Iannas, or one of the others, must have bitten me—else I would be racked with pain, especially because my limbs were not only bearing my body’s weight, but were stretched apart to give the *virī* room to open their wings.

I could see that they were suffering, too. Their wings were distorted from the strain, the skin stretched as taut as a bladder. Even as I looked at them, the wings of the *virī* holding my right leg suddenly burst into shreds. It dropped like a stone, wailing thinly as it did. But another immediately took its place, before the same thing happened to the others.

The descent was quick, for it was little more than a controlled dive. Only a moment later, they all released me at once and were thrown back into the sky as I hit the ground with a bone-jarring thud.

I might not have survived it if we had hit the rubble heap, but the *virī* had brought me down at an angle, swooping past the broken rocks to the marshy ground beyond. I lay there, half stunned, watching Sepharan’s much slower descent. He was so light that the *virī* might have actually flown off with him had they wished to, but they brought him down and dropped him right beside me.

The boy sprang to his feet immediately, his eyes sparkling. “Now *that* was worthy of an epic,” he said, extending a hand to help me up.

I groaned, took hold of it, but managed only to sit up. I could only imagine how I would feel when the effects of the *viri*'s bite wore off. There was a flutter of wings at my other side, and I turned to find Iannas squatting beside me.

"Thank you, beloved," I said. "If I were Jessan, lord of the air, my descent would have been more graceful."

Iannas smiled. "But you are Niccas, lord of the earth, and heavy as a stone. But here you are, at the cost of only one of us."

I opened my mouth to speak, but Iannas shook his head. "The sun is almost up," he said, "and we have to find some cave close by where we can wait out the day. So you must listen now, and well."

Iannas reached out and took my hand. "The *viri* inhabited by the wraith ghouls arrived before we ourselves were done, and I saw one at work. The *viri* drink blood, but those fiends guzzle it, and this one sucked its victim dry, probably devouring his soul as it did so. His corpse was stone white, as if carved of alabaster.

"This means there are bad times ahead for Lorithar, and destruction for any *viri* who venture there without a wraith ghoul to protect them. So the rest of us dare not remain anywhere near the city, for we shall be hunted out and torched.

"So I shall lead them, bit by bit, to the Broken Teeth. We shall find a cavern there close to Shavagar-Yasí, a good place to hunt, and a safe distance—if any distance is safe—

from Lorithar and Maerdas and the wraith ghouls. There, I also mean to seek out Rabih, who—even more than you, I fear—needs my guidance. The Order of the Narrow Blade has been driven from the city, and Rabih, abandoned, is being hunted. And, clever as he is, without my help, he may well soon be facing the rack himself.”

“Will the two of you flee to Fæystirran?” I asked. “You will be welcomed there if you do.”

“I did think of that,” Iannas replied, “but I fear that we would have to wait there far too long before you could come and bring us away. So I shall try to guide him through the mountains or, more likely, around them, to the east.

“If we succeed, I shall then come, with him or alone, as he desires, to find you, beloved. Perhaps by then, you’ll be residing at Gostranar with Jessan.”

He shook his head. “I can still peer into the future, but the doom of the *Nithaial* is not for mere seers—even dead seers—to know. I feel that the worst of your ordeal is over. Even so, things will not be easy for you, not yet.”

“I could predict *that* myself,” I muttered. “Your plans for yourself make complete sense, and are what I would do myself. Give Rabih my love when you find him, even if he sends me none in return. But what should *I* do now?”

Iannas regarded me gravely. “You have no choice, Niccas. You must continue on your quest to reach Ernfar-dast, and complete the Four.”

“I know *that*,” I replied, almost surlily. Although I

meant what I had just told him, that didn't mean I was any less sore of heart for losing him. "I mean, what should I—*we*," I added, gesturing to Sepharan—"do *now*?"

"Hurry to the west," Iannas said, nodding in the direction. "A short distance from here is the road that leads to Lorithar. Both troops and supplies pass along it constantly, so it is well cared for, with culverts regularly placed to let the marsh drain through. Hide in one of these until empty waggons start returning from Gorzungâd.

"Catch a ride on one of these to Lorithar. Waggons are constantly bringing supplies from there, and the empty ones are doubtless searched perfunctorily, if at all, when they arrive back at the city gates."

He paused to see if I was following all this, then brought his advice-giving to a reassuring end. "I'm sure there's no special watch out for you—Maerdas, I hear, has his own problems right now, and, anyway, believes you to be buried alive in stone."

He bent down and we kissed; his lips, now that his *virī* had fed, felt exactly like they had when he was alive. He put his hand on my shoulder and looked into my eyes. "Farewell, beloved. I know we shall meet again."

He rose, turning to go, but paused to say one final thing. "Remember to disguise yourself as a blind man when you get to Lorithar. Otherwise, your demon eyes will cause soldiers to seize you as soon as they come upon you—if you aren't stoned to death in the streets, first."

FIRST WE HAD TO HIKE FOR HOURS through the guts, now we're stuck in the shit," Sepharan complained, as I rooted around for the boot that had stayed behind when he had last pulled his foot out of the muck.

"Here it is, damn the thing," I grunted, hauling out something that could just as easily be the rotten carcass of a marsh rat as an item of footwear. Wrinkling my nose, I emptied it out and handed it over. Then, shading my eyes with my hands, I scanned the sky while Sepharan, his face twisted in disgust, pulled the boot back on and took a tentative, and audibly squelchy, step.

"Let's get on," he said, tugging at me. I took his hand, lest he be suddenly swallowed by the mire, and, after a quick glance upwards to make sure no skalgür hovered over our heads, we slogged on.

Before Gorzungâd had perched on top of it, the mountain had been frightening enough, savage, steep-sided, impossible to climb. *Carrsceaft* it was called in the Old Tongue, Stonespear, and you could still see why—even though Maerdas had lopped off its point to build his fortress. Its sides looked as though a godling stone carver had chiseled it into shape, scarping it with his blade into long vertical slabs, each slightly leaning inwards to where the next started up.

On top of this loomed Gorzungâd, a sheer tower of dark gray, rough-faced stone topped with a single, jet black battlement. Huge openings punctuated this all the way round, arches carved into the stone, behind which stood watchers,

one would think, or, perhaps, Maerdas himself, brooding as he stared across the distance at Lorithar or down at the marshes, with their fetid pools and stunted plant life, all wilted by poison so as not to offer cover for anything larger than a marsh rat or a coney.

This was the question, then—why, despite the puzzling absence of skalgür, hadn't we been seen, seized, and dragged back to Gorzungâd? True, we had rolled in the muck to coat ourselves when we realized we had no chance of making the road by daylight. But it was a fool's ruse, and we both knew it.

So, one had to think that Maerdas was already informed of our presence here, and was now standing in one of the archways in the battlement, watching our progress with bitter amusement, savoring the moment when he would set loose the skalgür to rip us apart, or summon from their kennels or pits something even more fearsome and vicious.

The sky had just started to turn gray-pink when Iannas left us. Now the edge of the sun was visible on the horizon, and we could already make out waggons on their way to Gorzungâd. Iannas had been right: the road *was* close. It just wasn't close enough.

The problem was the marshland. The ground was only intermittently firm, and there wasn't always a clear path around the boggy parts. Apart from the constant worry that one of them might be deep enough to suck us in, struggling through them was exhausting and consumed far too much

time. But no troops came to seize us, and the sky was still empty—of skalgiur, at least. For a bank of clouds was rolling in from the southeast, ominously dark with the threat of rain.

By the time we did reach the road, these were close enough for us to see individual flashes of lightning. But our luck continued to hold. Just ahead of us was one of the culverts Iannas had mentioned, a dank and narrow tunnel, lined with slime-coated stone, a noisome rivulet flowing through it.

The good news was that we could easily see through it from one end to the other. Nothing lurked inside, at least until we arrived to do so ourselves, and with care we could press our backs against one side and brace our legs against the other, and sit without getting soaked.

We fitted ourselves in, although not until Sepharan had wiped a hand over the stone and looked with disgust at the green scum that now coated it.

“Yes,” I said, “another shirt about to be ruined. You shall have to visit your tailor when we reach Lorithar.”

Sepharan visibly brightened. “My shirtmaker, you mean,” he replied. “He used to come to Gorzungâd specifically to fit me, sweating in terror all the time.” He looked thoughtful. “I can almost remember his name....”

Then he caught my look. “What?” he exclaimed in horror, totally misinterpreting it. “You don’t think Maerdas bothered to cancel the account!” He pondered this horrible notion for a moment, then shook his head.

“No, *he* wouldn’t. That would be Sirdias’s task, and

Sirdias is..." the boy with obvious satisfaction, drew two fingers across his throat. Then he exclaimed, "*Ficcar*, that was his name! He's probably already been summoned to fit my replacement, poor little shit."

The thought of Sepharan, who by now was the spitting image of a guttersnipe, casually strolling into the premises of Ficcar the shirtmaker and ordering an armful of expensive new shirts, was so pleasurable an image that I preferred to savor it rather than to reply.

"For myself," I said, instead, "the first thing I want to do in Lorithar is to find a fat meat pie, then stuff my pockets with pippins and salted nutmeats, to munch at my leisure."

Sepharan instantly forgot about the shirts. "I think I'll have a whole roast chicken, a loaf of fine bread, and as many spice cakes as I can carry."

"With lots of ale to wash it down with," I added dreamily.

"Sweet white wine for me," the boy replied, "afloat with raspberries, beside a bowl of sweet cheese curd."

I groaned in hunger. "Well, wizard," I said, "can you conjure up a pocketful of silver coin to pay for all this?"

"I've never paid for a thing in all my life," Sepharan answered with utter seriousness. "It's up to you to pay my way now."

As we huddled there, waggons were constantly lumbering by. But they were all heading toward Gorzungâd, not away from it. "The road is too narrow for most of them to

pass by each other,” the boy explained. “So, they start from Lorithar long before sunrise, so as to be unloading by high sun—however they determine that on a day like this—then they all start back, one by one, in the order that they came.

“So we still have a time to wait. Can I ask you some questions while we wait?”

I looked at him. “Why not?” I replied. “I may ask you some in fair turn.”

“Yes, but me first,” the boy said. “Tell me the story of how you come to have your demon eyes.”

So the next few hours passed, getting the story first to the Forest Grymaeld and Fyrewourmhaem, with many questions about both Helias and the Order of the Narrow Blade, then more questions about Teshnar’ad, which all too quickly degenerated into queries as to what he had done to me and I to him, the appearance of Dracon Wælfyra, the flight to Fæýstirran, the encounter with the wraith ghoul and the *strykul*, the ride to Shavagar-Yasí on the back of Nisn’zahsk, and on and on.

The boy had many questions about Iannas and, especially, Rabih, When I answered these to his satisfaction, he asserted with eerie confidence that he and Rabih were destined to become lovers. The thought of those two hand in hand seemed terrifyingly fitting, although what Rabih would say when he learned, first, that Sepharan was a wizard, and second, the way he had become one... well, that was a train of thought I decided it would be wiser not to pursue.

More to the point, my throat was parched to the point

of near speechlessness. I had vowed to drink no water that flowed from or near Gorzungâd, but only the vile appearance of the stream that trickled past us kept me from throwing myself face first into it—that and the fact that I knew any moment now a deluge was set to fall from the sky.

“No more questions,” I croaked, before he could get out the next. “Let *me* ask one. Is Naelas your real name?”

The boy was both surprised and unsettled by the question. But, after a pause, he answered it. “My *real* name? At birth I was given the name Naelas, yes. But Maerdas, who wanted to possess all of me, said, when I was brought to Gorzungâd, that I was now to be Sepharan.”

His eyes had been cast down when he said this, but now they lifted and found mine. “Why did you ask me this?”

“Truly, I don’t know,” I replied in a hoarse whisper. “Perhaps it was because the *viri* extracted the image of your mother from your memory to tempt you with. That made me wonder how much of your former life remains in you, despite Maerdas’s tamperings.”

“I remember my mother. I remember myself as Naelas. Other things,” the boy replied. “But the memories are the ashes of a fire that has burnt itself out. As Sepharan, I learned to deceive Maerdas and manipulate his minions enough to keep my spirit alive. Naelas couldn’t have done that, but Sepharan could—and did.”

“Perhaps Sepharan came into existence to protect Naelas,” I said.

The boy shook his head. “You still don’t understand. Naelas had to die so that Sepharan could live. Maerdas didn’t kill him, *I* did. My doom for that is to be Sepharan forever.”

As he spoke these words, the rain began falling. First it came down in fat, heavy, separate drops that splashed noisily into the marsh outside. As we scrambled to the mouth of the culvert, the storm began in earnest, and we climbed out into a roaring downpour.

Neither of us cared. Let it drown us, if it first assuaged our thirst. We let it rinse our hands, then cupped them and let the water collect there and run into our mouths. When we had drunk our fill, we stood there, arms outspread, and let the pouring rain wash away the filth of Gorzungâd, the dust of the *viri*’s nest, the muck of the marshes.

In mere moments we were soaked to the bone, but returning to the culvert was out of the question, for the water had already risen half up its sides. I was wondering whether it made sense to look for better shelter, when Sepharan seized hold of my arm. He was shouting something, but in the roar of the rain, I couldn’t make out the words.

Realizing this, he pulled my head down so that my left ear was level to his mouth. “A waggon is coming! Can’t you feel it?”

It was true. The heavy weight of the thing made the ground tremble. I could sense it despite the battering assault of the rain. Soon it lumbered into view—first the long team of oxen, then the waggoners—the driver and his assistant—

wrapped from head to toe in waxed, heavy stormcloth, then the waggon itself, half again as long as an ordinary goods cart, with high wooden sides, and a stormcloth cover held in place with straps.

It moved at the pace of a leisurely walk; the rain kept us hidden as we climbed up the bank and ran after it. The backboard was pulled up, but it was much shorter than the sides, and posed no problem. I untied the leather strapping that kept the cover above it from flapping out, then boosted Sepharan over, leaping in after him.

There we were then, dry enough and safe enough, and on our way to Lorithar.

HERE WAS A PILE of coarse, thickly woven packing blankets tossed in the front of the waggon. Sepharan made his way straight to them and wrapped himself in several, making himself almost invisible in the gloom. After I managed to re-tie the leather strapping in a simple slip knot that could be released in a flash if need be, I made my way to him and seized hold of some of the remaining blankets for myself, then looked around. I had never been in such a waggon before.

The space was close and dark, with water dripping through the weather cloth in several places where its wax coating had been rubbed away. Gray light filtered in as well, revealing oddments of debris bouncing around on the wide-planked floor. Although the sides of the wagon were constructed of rough and splintery wood, the floor was planed

smooth, to allow the waggoners to slide their cargo into place, then to tie it down with the ropes that currently lay in tight coils beside us. There was a small flap cut in the weath-ercloth to let them look back inside the waggon, but with the rain beating down on their heads, there was little chance that anything we did would catch their attention.

The road that lay between Lorithar and Gorzungâd was well kept, but, even so, the ride was brutal. If one of its heavy wheels struck a stone or stumbled into a pothole, the waggon would lurch violently from side to side, all its joints groaning. When the wheels bounced over a large rut, we were tossed into the air; if there were several ruts, we were also shaken until our teeth rattled.

Occasionally, with the worst of these, we would hear a string of foul curses from the waggoners, who suffered this jouncing just as much as we did. Unlike us, they were also in a position to do something about it. But the rain made it just as hard to see as to hear, so there was no telling a pothole from a puddle.

They, at least, had the sides of their bench to cling to, while we had nothing. Finally, it occurred to me to string a rope from one side of the waggon to the other, which gave us something to grab onto. Then we piled up the rest of the rope coils to serve as cushions, and tried to settle in for the ride.

However, we had barely installed ourselves in this new arrangement, when Sepharan yanked away the part of the blanket that was serving him as a hood, complaining,

“These things stink almost as much as a wraith ghoul.”


“I don’t know if wraith ghouls smell,” I answered, “but their cloaks certainly do. Perhaps they’re made of these blankets, once they’re suitably ripe.”

Sepharan, having decided to forego the hood and simply let the leaking stormcloth above us drip onto his head, merely groaned in reply, and we fell again into silence. But this exchange reminded me of a thought that had crossed my mind earlier.

“That spell of yours—what was it *supposed* to do?”

“Something unpleasant to horses,” Sepharan replied. “The only reason I chose it was because there weren’t many spells in the tome that didn’t require something I didn’t have, like cat’s blood or lizard tongues. Why do you ask?”

“Because I suspect it worked not on the wraith ghoul itself, but on its *cloak*. Made it burst into flames, if the gagging black smoke is any indication, and producing a stench that was too much even for its wearer. That’s why, when the wraith ghouls discarded them to inhabit the *viri*, the spell didn’t work.”

Sepharan thought about this for a bit. “Magic,” he said eventually, shaking his head. “Sometimes, magic can really suck.” 

Chapter 20



THE RAINS HADN'T SLACKENED when the waggon finally drew up outside the north gate of Lorithar, followed by some shouting between the head waggoner and the guards there. I went to the connecting flap and cautiously eased it open a tiny bit, to find out what was going on.

Because of the storm, the convoy from Gorzungâd was arriving very late, and the guards, it seemed, were trying to determine how many waggons were coming along behind us. Ordinarily, the gates would have been shut and locked for the night, and the guards were angry at being kept out in the dark and the wet. They refused to believe that the head waggoner hadn't a clue.

The argument ended when the head waggoner let loose a volley of oaths, and, cracking his great whip over their heads, started the oxen moving. Whether the guards liked it or not, he was taking the waggon through the gates. I let the flap fall shut, and Sepharan and I made our way to

the rear of the cart.

The moment the gates were on the other side of us, I jerked the slip knot and freed the back covering, yanking it with such force that the leather strapping came free in my hand. Immediately, I boosted Sepharan over the backboard, then leapt after him. As I hit the ground, there was an ominous throbbing in my joints. The *viri* bite was finally wearing off.

We were standing on the main thoroughfare that ran from the gate straight into the heart of Lorithar. It was wide but unlit, and the waggon was already vanishing into the rain and gloom. I was tempted to run after it—perhaps we could find refuge for the night in the waggoner's ox barn.

However, we would be just as likely to run into a patrol—the wisest course seemed to be to look for shelter closer by, in the dark and narrow ways in this part of the Old Quarter. I took Sepharan's hand and we set off.

A back lane appeared on our left almost immediately, and I cautiously led the way down it. Our best hope would be to find some doorway not already claimed by an equally desperate street roamer, where we could huddle out of the rain and consider such options as we had.

Tomorrow, with luck, we could make our way to the Order of the Narrow Blade or to the house of Porphoras, although neither idea attracted me. I had had enough of being swept up into the plans of others. But what else was there? We had no money, and nothing of value to exchange for money. If anyone were to help us, it would be strictly out

of their good heart, and such a person was less likely to pass by here than the Steward of Lorithar, Lord Lissator himself.

As we felt our way down the alley, I realized I was holding something in my hand. It was the length of leather strapping—I had not only undone the slip knot, but yanked it totally free.

Well, I thought, once we came to a resting place, I could tie it around my waist, shaping the packing blanket now cast over my head into something faintly resembling a robe and a hood. I was mindful still of Iannas's caution about showing my eyes. With this blanket bound around me, I would be not only hidden but most likely given a wide berth. The soaking it was getting was, if anything, making it smell even more.

Sepharan tugged at my elbow. "Look over there," he whispered.

What the boy had seen was a dimly glowing ball of flame-like orange, hung over a doorway a short distance ahead of us. As we approached, I could make out no sign-board. A house of ill repute? But why *here*, of all places? And besides, that globe was at least half magic, glowing brighter as we approached.

Just then the door under the globe eased open, and I caught Sepharan's shoulder and pulled him hard against the nearest wall. A head was now poking out the door and looking up and down the lane. We must have been invisible to it, for the door opened wider, and a thickly cloaked and furtive form came out and hurried away.

“That was no one to meet in a dark alley,” I whispered. “Let’s get away from here as quickly as possible.”

But Sepharan shook his head. “I’m shivering all over from the cold and wet, Niccas,” he said, “and I’m starving. That place can provide us with food and a fire. I’m going in. Come with me or stay here and wait—whichever you want.”

And with that, he pulled away from me and dashed out into the rain. I made a grab to stop him, missed, and ran splashing after him, but he beat me to the door.

There was a graven, goatish face set into it, carved of wood. Yet when Sepharan came to a halt in front of it, its eyes opened and its lips pursed.

“What might you want, alley scum?” the thing asked in a high-pitched voice.

“Mind your tongue, glyptos,” Sepharan replied, “and look at this.” He reached into the neck of his shirt and brought out the thin gold chain with the tiny pendant with Maerdas’s emblem. I had completely forgotten about it.

The image opened its eyes and glanced at the emblem. Then they opened even wider. “Deepest apologies, master,” it bleated. “We seldom have someone of your stature visiting these humble premises.”

“Just stop blathering and let me in,” Sepharan answered, “and my companion, as well.”

We heard the snick of a lock disengaging, and the door swung open, revealing a dimly lit hallway. Sepharan walked in as if he owned the place. On one side, a stairway

ascended to the next story. At the end of the hall a beaded curtain hung over a doorway, obscuring but not hiding a further room. Sepharan immediately went down the hall, shoved his head through the curtain, looked around, then, beckoning me to follow him, went in.

I swore inwardly, wrung out the sopping blanket as best I could on the carpeted floor, and leaving a smelly puddle behind me, pulled it back over my head, rewrapped myself, fastened it to me with the strap, and followed Sepharan through the curtain.

What I stepped into, when I did, was very like the common room of a tavern. There were tables scattered about, a few of them occupied with extremely unsavory-looking villains; a fireplace with logs quietly burning; a chest-high cabinet, its back facing the room, on which drinks were poured. Behind this, muscular arms akimbo, eyes regarding our entry suspiciously, was the innkeeper.

Sepharan was already waiting for me at a table in the darkest corner of the room. As I made my way to him, I could sense the innkeeper coming around the cabinet and headed in our direction.

“Don’t say a word!” Sepharan whispered, as I sank into a chair beside him. “Keep your face covered and let me handle this.” Then, in a louder voice, he said coolly, “Greetings, Lamminas.”

“Greetings, strangers. You may know my name, but I do not know yours. So let me tell you: This is a *very* pri-

vate house. I see that the glyptos let you enter, but that's not nearly enough for me. What purpose brought you here?"

Sepharan looked pointedly at the tattoo on Lamminas's shoulder. "We have come from your master and have business in the city. We require your help."

"My master!" the innkeeper sneered. "Who would that be?"

"Should I speak his name to you?" Sepharan asked, his cool voice now icy cold. "His *real* name? I have that power." Again, he pulled the chain out from under his shirt, and held it so that Lamminas could see it.

It surprised the innkeeper, but he was not as awed as the glyptos had been. "A nice trinket," he said, dismissively, "but it means nothing to me."

"Touch it," Sepharan commanded. This time Lamminas's eyes did widen. He reached out a hand, but hesitated.

"Touch it, you fool!" Sepharan said in a slightly louder voice. "We have no time for your games, let alone your insults to The One Who Cannot Be Named."

At this, Lamminas completely lost his nerve, and fell to his knees. "Please, master, no. I am heartily sorry for my suspicions. I swear I shall serve you well."

Sepharan paused just long enough for sweat to bead on the man's brows before answering. "Get up and sit down," he hissed. "You're drawing attention to us."

Lamminas immediately got to his feet and scrambled hastily into a chair.

“My name is Niferas,” Sepharan said. “Remember it. I am a favored one—I have been in His presence many times.” The boy pointed to me. “Do you know what *that* is?”

Lamminas looked at me for the first time, and when he did, his face turned white. He immediately looked back at Sepharan, but couldn’t get any words out of his mouth.

“Yes, it’s a wraith ghoul,” the boy said. “Its... aroma should have told you that even before you looked.”

Lamminas closed his eyes and put his hand to his forehead. Perhaps he was wondering whether he had hitched his waggon to the wrong star.

Sepharan leaned toward him. “*Are you listening to me?*”

The hand dropped with a thud onto the table. Lamminas nodded so vigorously that his whole body shook, and he finally forced out some words. “Yes, high master Niferas,” he stammered. “Of course I am.”

“Good,” said Sepharan, now speaking in his sweetest and most seductive tone. “We arrived in the city just after dusk. We were making our way here when my... companion decided to find his supper. While he was away feeding, a footpad surprised me and snatched my purse. He had vanished into the gloom before the spell of ravening had a chance to leave my lips.”

The boy’s eyes held Lamminas’s in their grip. “Fortunately, nothing of any value was taken...” Sepharan shrugged dismissively. “Just several pieces of gold.”

Lamminas smiled weakly, as if fearing this might be a joke, but also fearing that it wasn't.

"So," Sepharan continued, "this is what we need. First, a private sleeping room with the fire lit and a good meal. My companion may have dined but I'm famished."

Lamminas looked pained. "Cook's gone home, and..."

"Send out for some food, then. A whole fowl at least, or, better, a roast loin of beef. And send up some wine while we wait." Sepharan's tone was again edged with ice. "Don't make me tell you your job."

"Who will pay for this?" Lamminas was proving surprising thick. "I have to account..."

Sepharan smiled. "Just say my name," he answered. "You'll be astonished at the effect it has."

"Very well, high master," Lamminas said. "Is there anything else?"

"Of course," Sepharan replied, looking mildly surprised. "In the morning, I expect you to replace both my purse and its contents."

He enjoyed watching the shock spread across the innkeeper's face, then added magnanimously, "Oh, a fistful of silver will suffice—I'll send to Gorzungâd for the gold."

"Thank you, high master!" Lamminas replied with undisguised relief. Then, emboldened by this show of clemency, he pleaded, "Please mention my services when you do."

"Perhaps," Sepharan replied carelessly. "Right now you might bring us to our room."

SEPHARAN AND I LAY SPRAWLED on a capacious bed, the remains of an impressive feast scattered on a large tray that lay between us. We were both a little drunk on the wine that had accompanied the food, our fingers were greasy, and yet we still tried to find space in our stomachs for one more bite of meat or bread.

Sepharan was, of course, highly pleased with himself, and not content until we had gone over his triumph from every possible perspective. He was now giggling over my one contribution to the whole affair. When we were climbing up the stairs behind Lamminas, some imp made me hiss with all the sibillance I could muster, “Still hungry, master.”

The innkeeper, who was directly behind me, literally leapt up three steps, and gave off a smell strong enough to reach me through my protective wall of stench.

“Our good host shat himself,” Sepharan was saying. “If I hadn’t slapped you down, he might have thrown himself over the landing.”

What the boy had actually done was to hiss back at me, “Not now! Later!”—a statement that was sure to give the innkeeper a sleepless night.

“How did you know his name?” I asked.

“Mind-touched him. How else?” The boy was genuinely puzzled.

“I thought you recognized him from...” I started to reply, but he instantly interrupted me.

“*Gorzungâd*?” Sepharan was incredulous. “Someone

like him would *never* have been brought into the presence of Maerdas, unless he had behaved *very* badly. And I wouldn't have met him even then." The boy shuddered. "My life there wasn't *that* bad."

He took a bite of honey cake and chewed thoughtfully. "Well, yes, it *was* that bad," he said, finally, "just not bad in that particular way."

"And what would have happened to him," I asked, "if he *had* touched the pendant?"

Sepharan pulled it out of his shirt, looked at it, and dropped it back around his neck. "Something terrible, probably. In fact, I should get rid of it before it turns on *me*."

I was only half listening. The rain was still beating hard against the shutters, fastened over the room's two windows to protect them from the storm. Even so, I heard or sensed someone coming down the hall. I slid off the bed and threw my blanket robe about me, stepping back into the gloom beyond the candlelight, as a tentative knock sounded at the door.

"Enter," Sepharan said in a bored and slightly put-upon tone. What an insufferable brat he must have been, I thought, and not for the first time, when he had the power of Maerdas's besottedness behind him.

A boy, Sepharan's age or a little younger, came in, bearing a steaming basin, a piece of toweling thrown over his shoulder. He looked around the room until he spotted me in my corner, then made sure he went to the other side

of the bed.

“If you permit, High Master Niferas,” he stammered, “I am here to clean you for sleep, and, if you’ve finished eating, to take away the tray.” If he was astonished at how much Sepharan had managed to put away, he gave absolutely no sign of it. In fact, he kept his eyes resolutely cast down.

“Oh, very well,” Sepharan said. He stood up, pulled off his shirt, and threw it on the floor. “Clean that and have it ready for me when I wake up,” he commanded, as he submitted himself to the boy’s ministrations.

The lad delicately removed Sepharan’s smalls, then had him step into the basin, and washed him all over. He did the job with care, lifting up each of Sepharan’s arms, and, giving his bent back to Sepharan as a support, knelt down and carefully lifted and cleaned each of his feet.

Sepharan wrinkled his nose at the aromas rising from the wash water, but they seemed pleasantly salutiferous to me, all the more so since I knew he wouldn’t think of having the boy leave the basin and toweling behind for me.

Once Sepharan was gently but thoroughly toweled dry, the boy removed the tray from the bed, folded back the sheets, and began removing everything—the basin with its now dirty water, the tray with all the remains of our meal, the wine bottle, the toweling—and placing it in the hall.

Then he came back in, closed the door, and stood beside Sepharan where he lay, now well tucked in, on the bed. “Master Lamminas said I was to offer myself to you,

should you wish it,” he said softly.

Sepharan half sat up and looked over the boy speculatively. He was skinny, had raw hands, and there were marks on his face and neck. Even so, he wasn’t entirely unattractive, possessing clear green eyes and dark curly hair.

I didn’t wait for Sepharan to respond but gave out a loud hissing noise. As Lamminas had, the boy jumped, backwards, an arm span away from the bed.

Sepharan sighed. “Not this time, it seems. But remind me when I have my purse that I promised you a coin.”

“Thank you, high master,” the boy gasped out, and fled to the door. He was about half through it when Sepharan called out, “Your name?”

“Dectas, if it please you,” the boy replied.

“Tell Master Lamminas I would have only you to serve me, Dectas,” Sepharan said, “and that he should relieve you of your other duties. And mind you, first thing in the morning, bring me a large bowl of porridge, with lashings of cream.”

When I was certain the boy had gone, along with all he had removed from our room, I bolted the door, blew out the candle, and climbed into bed next to Sepharan.

“What did you think would happen when he climbed into bed with you?” I asked. “Lots of tickling?”

“I’m just *curious*,” the boy replied. “Anyone can enjoy feeling someone else’s body.”

I sighed. “Yes, and while you took your pleasure,

you'd be pushing Dectas another step toward becoming a love boy, just like you."

"Just like *me*!" Sepharan said indignantly. "Niccas! How can you compare me to that alley whelp?"

"Would you prefer it if I said, 'becoming a love boy, albeit not a high-class one like you'?"

There was a long silence, then Sepharan said, "I'm sleepy. Do your strictures prohibit snuggling when we're finally together in a comfortable bed?"

I smiled. "No," I said. "Come here." I extended my arm, and Sepharan moved up against my side, putting his own arm across my chest. I folded my arm back over him, and, head on my shoulder, he soon slipped off to sleep.

I had a hard time following him. Earlier, Sepharan had explained to me how places like this, devoted to feeding and sheltering the servants of Maerdas, existed in all the cities of the realm, protected with spells so that they were visible only to those whom his powers had marked.

Sepharan had been a little too clever by half when he gave his name as Niferas, clearly calculated to enrage Maerdas should news of our visit ever reach him. But this would not happen unless one of his agents was clever enough, on hearing Lamminas's tale, to connect a boy in the company of a wraith ghoul with the vanishing of Sepharan and a *Nithaial*.

More likely, he would think this the sort of business the less he knew about the better, and simply reimburse the innkeeper. For those who lived under the shadow of Gor-

zungâd, lack of coin was never a problem, and Maerdas's agents well knew the value of spreading it about.

So, this private inn was probably the safest place for us in all of Lorithar, and we were now bedded down for the night—thanks to Sepharan's boldness and quick thinking. A wraith ghoul! I smiled again, this time more broadly. What a strange turn of events it was to be made thankful for such a horrible stink. Still smiling, I joined Sepharan in the realm of dreams.

I WOKE MYSELF WITH A SCREAM. As I slept, the last of the *viri* toxin had worn away. The day before, every joint in my body had been abused in every conceivable way, and now the time had come to pay the piper.

The scream had been caused by Sepharan, shifting in his sleep, pressing a leg against my knee joint. But the explosion of pain there had set off all the other joints as well, and I woke to the terrible fear that I had been strapped back onto the rack.

I forced my eyes to focus and found myself staring into Sepharan's startled face, and suddenly saw myself as he saw me, eyes wide with terror, face crumpled with pain. His hand was pressed against my mouth, but it was too small to do anything but muffle my groans. My agony was insufferable, beyond my capacity to bear, and I could think of only one thing to do to treat it.

I pulled Sepharan's hand from my mouth. "Pull away the covers," I gasped. And, when he had, I pointed to the

joint of my left knee. “Hit me there,” I said, forcing the words out one by one. “With all your strength. Hit me there.”

The boy looked at me in astonishment. “Niccas!” he said. “I *can’t*.”

I seized his shoulder with such force that he winced from the pain. “Do it, damn you,” I shouted. And when he still didn’t respond, I shook him violently. Sepharan’s face was a mask of terror and incomprehension, but he balled his fist, then, with all the force he could summon, slammed it down on the joint.

The pain shot through me and exploded in my brain with the brightness of a lightning flash. Then all went dark, and I fell deep into a well of blackness.

I emerged from it after what must have been several hours, finding the room suffused, if dimly, with sunlight, and my body encased—entirely, it seemed—in icy cold compresses, soaked in a sharp-smelling solution.

“It doesn’t *smell* soothing,” a voice said, agreeing with my thoughts. “But your joints will find it so.”

“Have, already,” I whispered, trying, and failing, to turn my head because of the compresses packed against my neck. The pain was still there, but had become a whisper to what it was.

“Who are you?” I asked. “Where is...” I almost said Sepharan, but remembered in time to stop myself. “the boy? Niferas?”

“I’m right here, *Sirdias*,” the boy replied, somewhere

out of my line of sight. I grasped the emphasis, thinking as I did that Sepharan could have been a touch more tactful when assigning me a false name.

“I sent Dectas to find the best healer in all the city,” the boy went on, “and he brought back Master Alfrund, an herbalist. That’s who’s treating you now.”

So, I thought, Sepharan has brought the serving boy into our little plot. Well, what other choice was there?

The herbalist’s face hovered over me. He was younger than I had expected, but certainly possessed the gravitas of a master healer. Our eyes met, and his widened slightly at the sight of my demon eyes.

“Do you know what this place is?” I asked.

Alfrund nodded, with a slight wry smile.

“And,” I continued, “you’re willing to treat someone like me?”

“My profession is healing, not judging,” he replied. “In any case, you seem to me to have suffered much more evil than you’ve inflicted.” He paused, then gently asked, “The rack, was it not?”

I looked away. The very gentleness of his asking made my throat close up, leaving me unable to speak. Sensitive to this, the herbalist turned away, and gave instructions on how the compresses should be resoaked and reapplied with great regularity.

To my surprise, I realized he was speaking to Dectas, not Sepharan.

Alfrund turned back to me. “Don’t worry,” he said, again as if he had been reading my thoughts. “The boy is surprisingly deft at this business. You’ll be in good hands.”

By now, my voice had come back to me. “I face a long and dangerous journey, master herbalist, and every day I put it off, the more risky it becomes. How long before I can leave, even if it be on crutches?”

“You weren’t planning on walking, I hope,” came his reply. “If so, you had better pray to the Blessed Mother—or whatever god you call your own—to perform a miracle. Without drugs, you’ll never again be able to walk without pain, and if you abuse the drugs—well, my guess is that you got yourself into this condition by doing just that.”

“True enough,” I admitted. Then I grasped what he had just said. “You mean I have no hope of healing, ever?” I asked, shaken. “It’s not merely a matter of time?”

Alfrund sighed. “The effects of the rack are permanent, my friend. Some ligaments are stretched out of shape and will remain ever so, others are ripped apart. There are no healing arts that can repair such damage. None.”

“Very well,” I said, keeping my voice firm for Sepharan’s benefit. “So, am I condemned to a cart full of straw, or can I ride a horse?”

As Alfrund pondered this question, I could feel him regarding me with surprising intensity. I also thought I felt a hesitant mind touch, but if so it was too delicate for me to be certain. His aura was completely that of a healer—com-

passionate, attentive. Even so, his interest was unnerving. I was tempted to brush him with my own mind, but this house would have many listeners, perhaps even a summoner.

“I wouldn’t risk a horse,” he said at last, “but perhaps you could survive a very placid mule. Of course, the cart would be best by far, ruling out a carriage, but such are not meant for traveling great distances, and might generate unwelcome curiosity. Few would consider shipping hay or straw across the country a profitable enterprise. The road patrols are very edgy these days, I’m told, and might wonder what you were *really* up to.”

I nodded. “A mule, then,” I said. “But I’ll still need something to help with the pain, especially for the hip joints.”

“I’ll prepare an ointment,” Alfrund said, “which should work well enough unless you overdo things. If that happens, you’ll need to lie up and find another herbalist who can treat you.”

He let that sink in, then asked, “Are you able to tell me in what direction you’ll be headed?”

When I hesitated, he added, “I ask only to advise you on what herbalists you might consult. I know many, and not all are as knowledgeable as they might be.”

“I think I can trust you that much,” I said. “North. Far, far to the north.”

He nodded. “I’ll prepare a list, then, and bring it back when I check up on things tomorrow morning. But prepare yourself. Once you’ve passed Tarrusor, the way is difficult,

and the roads dangerous—far more than any other place in the kingdom. And, in my herb gatherings, I’ve traveled it from one end to the other.”


He rose to go, turning his attention to Sepharan as he did. “I should be here just after the sounding of the mid-morning bell. Please be waiting for me—I have no fondness for being interrogated by a glyptos, especially one at a place like this.”

He left, taking Dectas with him to guide him to a street he knew. Once I heard the door close, I let the tears that had been gathering in my eyes stream down my face.

Sepharan came and sat beside me.

“Pain,” I whispered. “So much pain.”

“I know,” the boy said. “It’s terrible.” He reached over and lightly stroked my forehead.

After a bit though, his face brightened. “But just think, Niccas—a mule! Maybe two!” 

PART FIVE



THE SEARCH
BEGINS

Chapter 21



THE PLAINS OF THE LHENNAD lay far below me, dazzlingly washed with sunlight. Despite this height, I could see every blade of grass with such distinct clarity that my eyes seemed like scrying mirrors. In fact, this intensity of focus—plus the saturated brilliance of the colors—at first had soon made my head hurt. But now, several flights later, I was more used to it, although when I opened my real eyes, the world still seemed drab and dull.

Among many other things, the power I had given Páli through our lovemaking allowed our mind link with each other to be nearly absolute. We would ride out in the morning to the hidden spot, undress, surrender to each other, and then, while I lay in the shade with my eyes closed, he would shape change into an eagle, and bring me with him up into the skies.

So much to describe and so hard to find words to do so! I absorbed the restless alertness of his mind, the ferocity of his spirit, fired by the heat of his blood. Then there was

the sensation of having wings, tautly stretched, sensitive to every shift in the wind. Up in the sky, the air is always moving, not only from here to there but also up and down. And one part of Páli's mind was always attuned to this, meeting each shift of current with a flick or tilt of the wings.

The intensity of his vision can only be hinted at, since human sight is a poor thing in comparison. Páli's eyes caught shades of color I had never discerned before, and saw colors I had never seen at all. His eyes not only caught every detail on the ground far below us, not only were the colors richer, but everything I saw seemed to *glow*.

We hunted. Páli wasn't particular—he fed on prairie rats, mice, snakes, rabbit, fox cubs. His eyes seemed to probe into every patch of grass, his vision keen enough to tell the texture of a rabbit's fur from a swatch of bunch grass.

And, the moment he spotted prey, his eyes focused on just that, ignoring all else. That change of focus meant that, simultaneously, we were falling. The wings simply let go of the air; we dropped like a stone.

My own mind couldn't keep up; I had to pick the memory apart later on. It happened as abruptly as a hovering hand swats at a mosquito, or would be if the insect was the size of a lamb. Sometimes the rabbit jinked away at the last moment, and the talons closed on nothing, the wings already feverishly beating to bring us back up into the air, leaving a shriek of rage floating behind.

Otherwise, there was the intoxicating sensation of

talons thrusting into flesh, the satisfying *weight* of a meal. There was rarely ever any struggle, since talons do more than grip—their victim is stabbed with an entire set of knives. Then, instead of a shriek of rage, our ascent was heralded by a thin spray of blood, as a tiny heart quivered and died.

This, after the first time, is when I withdrew. There is something unnerving about the voracity of a raptor. Only a shark, perhaps, has the same single-mindedness of appetite. Páli devouring a rabbit reminded me too much of the relentless hunger of the *skalgür*, as they attacked again and again when Alfrund and I stood on that ledge overlooking the bay at Cytheria. Perhaps my squeamishness came from the fact that I first learned what it was like to be a rabbit.

In any case, after he had fed, then groomed himself, Páli would swoop down and, just as he landed, assumed his human form again. Then we would lie together for the rest of the afternoon, just as we were doing now. I was lying on my back, and Páli on his side, running his fingers through the patch of pale and delicate hairs that had begun to appear on my chest.

“Páli, love, I’ve been with you now for almost a week,” I murmured. “You’re making me totally forget that I’m on an important quest. I *have* to find Niccas.” I tried to inject some urgency into the last sentence, and almost succeeded.

“We’re not keeping you here against your will, *Nith-aial*,” he replied, giving my chest hairs a sharp tug and making me yelp.

“No,” I agreed, giving his chest a sudden push, and leaping onto him when he fell over, making sure to pin his arms with my legs. “But you *have* taken away my will, which is even worse.”

He smiled at me smugly. “That’s because I’ve been sucking out all your powers,” he said, “and adding them to my own. Soon you will be little more than my horse boy.”

He used these stinging words as a feint, swinging his legs upwards and trying to wrap them around me. “Don’t even *think* of it,” I said, bending forward just in time. “I’m on to all your tired tricks.”

He grunted and let his legs drop back, but I could feel his body beneath me, muscles tightly drawn, nerves alert.

“Truce?” I asked. “After all, you started it. And I want to talk to you seriously for a moment.”

Páli sighed and relaxed his body. But I was quite familiar with that trick, too. “No,” I said, “you have to *say* it.”

“Truce, truce, truce,” he replied. “Besides, I always win in the end.”

It was true. After our first, public fight, he was *almost* always the victor. Not only because he had more skills in such things than I, but he had far more tolerance of pain.

So, yes, he won, but I had the feeling that each time he won, somehow he felt he had lost. Did he want me to fight harder, or was he looking for something else?

“You want to know how things are progressing,” Páli said, interrupting my thoughts. It wasn’t a question. He knew

that as well as I did, and went on without waiting for a reply.

“Well, first of all,” he said, “after much pleading, I have convinced father that I should accompany you on your quest.” He paused and looked up at me. “That is, if you *ever* get off my arms.”

Somehow it had slipped my mind that releasing him was part of what “truce” meant. I reluctantly got off him, too excited by what he had said to lie back down.

“Really?” I asked, sitting beside him.

He gave me a “I just said so, didn’t I” look, and went on. “Now we’re waiting for some word about your twin’s whereabouts. If we have to start out not knowing that, it will be almost impossible to catch up with him.”

I nodded. My best thought was to go to Lorithar—a city I had never been to, and where I knew not a soul—hoping to hear some rumors or to track down someone who might know, like the alchemist Porphoras.

“Has your father sent out spies?” I asked.

Páli laughed. “Spies! Can you imagine, say, Acwellen skulking about, trying casually to elicit the location of the *Nithaial Elimiel*? He’d be laughed out of town—if anyone could understand him.”

He glanced at me. “You must have noticed that we speak the Kingdom’s tongue after our own fashion. Many outlanders find it impossible to fathom.”

What Páli said was true, but then wherever I had gone, the common tongue had been twisted this way or that.

I noticed it first with Orien, who spoke with such smoothness that the words in his sentences seemed like bricks fastened with mortar—whereas we coastal folk just piled them up like stones shoved together to make a wall.

Alfrund's way with words was different still. He ran them together so that you had to listen hard to catch their drift. But then they swept you along like the dancing waters of a brook.

The people of the Lhennad, on the other hand, spoke with a burr that at first seemed rough edged, but, once you grew accustomed to it, seemed more like they were savoring each word before they spoke it—and they looked at you expectantly when they did so, as if they were about to offer you a choice morsel and were waiting to see you how enjoyed it.

"Well, that's certainly true," I answered. "It's rare, indeed, when I understand anything you've said."

"Don't I know it," Páli said, sighing. Then, articulating each word separately, asked me to pass him the water bag, a bulbous thing made, I was sure, from horse intestines. Certainly, the water always had the taste of them.

I was laughing as I tossed the bag to him. Speaking that way he had, in fact, emphasized the cadences that make the people of the Lhennad's way of speaking so distinctive.

"Try a little harder," I said, "then only Svanr will understand you."

Páli sat up, untied the knotted length of gut that served as the bag's stopper, expertly slipped his finger in

it to spread it apart, crooked them so the water wouldn't all run down his arm, then lifted the bag up and let the water sluice into his mouth.

When he had drunk his fill, he reversed the process, holding the sack between his legs, and bending over to re-tie the knot. I was just thinking that holding the sack *between* his legs wasn't the most sensible way of doing this when a jet of water struck my face and momentarily blinded me.

Of course, I instinctively lifted my hands to my face, making it all the easier for Páli to pin them down when he jumped me, and forced me down on my back.

"You *scum*," I spluttered. "I thought we had a *truce*."

"Not after you insulted all the clans of the Lhennad with your calumny. We alone speak the tongue as it was meant to be spoken, before you outlanders made it the tongue of tradesmen and dolts."

"I meant a compliment!" I gasped, lying through my teeth.

"That only our horses can understand us?" Páli shifted suddenly, moving his legs so that they pinned mine—a good trick that I had yet to master. "A compliment to our *horses*, you mean," he went on, "and a confession that they speak the tongue better than you."

"Sometimes I like you better when you're an eagle," I said, struggling vainly.

"Ha," he replied. "And you the prey? You know what would happen then...."

“Yes,” I said. “What I *don’t* understand is why you don’t do what the same urge tells you to do now.”

“Pluck out your entrails?” Páli grunted. “I plan to, with great pleasure.”

“No, you pathetic moult,” I gasped. “To fuck me.”

Páli froze for a moment, just long enough for me to suddenly buck, throwing him off me.

“Admit it,” I said, leaping to my feet, and backing away from him. “That’s what you *really* want.”

“We can’t talk about this,” he said. “You defeated me before all the others, and then you took me. That’s how it is with my people. *You* won the right to be the dominant one.”

“Great,” I said. “And *you* won’t be dominated. So, where does *that* leave us.”

“When you want to take me, I surrender,” he replied. “What happens when we wrestle is something else.”

“No it’s *not*, Páli,” I shouted at him. “Look into your heart before you say such things. Otherwise, you’ll make me hate you.”

Páli swore, and turned his head away. After a moment, he muttered, “If I had won the fight...” But he couldn’t find the words to finish the thought.

I squatted down beside him. “I won the fight because I was angry at you,” I said in a low voice, “angrier than I’ve ever been in my whole life. By the time you were pinned, winning wasn’t enough. I wanted to *kill* you, even though I love you. I combined the two by ravishing you. But that

didn't mean I wanted to *always* ravish you. And I certainly didn't want things to be like *this*, either."

I let my fingers drift across his leg, then spoke softly into his ear. "Fuck me, Páli," I said. "I'm not one of your clan and I'm not bound by its accursed rules. Fuck me."

He still wouldn't look at me, but he also couldn't hide the fact that my words, or perhaps merely my fingers, had started to stiffen him. I got down on my knees, and took his cock in my mouth, and let the tip of my tongue run up and down the delicate wedge of skin on the underside of his knob.

We had made love this morning when we first arrived, me in him, as usual. So, the little wooden container of Warrior's Friend was somewhere near by. I groped about for it, and, suddenly, felt it thrust into my hand, the top already removed.

I gave him a last, lingering suck, and let his cock slowly slip out of my mouth. I scooped out a small amount of the slippery unguent onto the tip of the finger, then, after carefully placing the container out of harm's way, rubbed it over his cock, mixing it with the spit that already coated it.

I looked up at him. "When I fuck you," I said, "I have you on top, but the only way I can get the ramming I want is for you to enter me from behind."

"That's the way of the men of the Lhennad," he said, then broke into a helpless smile. "Not that that matters, of course."

"I'm all for the traditional ways," I answered, smiling

back, “at least now and then.” I proffered him the container. “Why don’t you work a bit of this into me, as well?”

I got down on my knees, spreading my legs and lifting my rear up into the air as I did. A moment later, I felt an exploratory finger slip inside me, then another, and another, and another! Two fingers from each hand, to be precise, and, from the feeling of it, not the littlest ones, either.

“Páli!” I exclaimed. “What are you doing!?”

“Looking around a bit,” he replied. “I want to know where exactly my cock will be going.”

I now felt the fingers stretching me open, wider, then wider still. “By the Goddess Mother, it’s dark in there,” Páli murmured. “Turn your butt up higher, toward the sun.”

I did as he told me. I would never have imagined how completely exposed this made me feel—the darkest door in my body suddenly pulled open for all the world to look inside. I could feel my face blushing all over, the heat of it spreading down my chest. And, even as it did, my cock began quivering violently.

“Pali, stop,” I gasped. “You’re going to make me spend right now.”

“Ah,” Páli said. “In that case, I’d better remove my fingers. But I want you to hold your hole open yourself, just as it is now.”

“I can’t do that!” I groaned. Sweat was beading on my forehead.

“Oh, yes, you can,” Páli replied. “You just don’t know

it. What else are your powers for? Use... them... right... *now!*" And he pulled his fingers free.

He was right. As he spoke those words, I put all my attention on that ring of muscles that surrounds my hole, and, by holding this firmly in focus, I discovered that not only could I keep it where it was, but actually open it wider.

"That is *amazing*," Páli grunted. "Now you're going to make *me* spend. But first, I think we should clean you out a little."

He filled his mouth with water from the sack, bent down, pressed his lips against me, and forced the water up into me, then immediately clamped my buttocks together, my insides quivering like a spooked horse.

He held me like this for a moment, then let go.

"Now, squat!" he ordered.

I did and immediately voided. Both the sensation of all that liquid churning inside me and the shame of spurting it all back out were so strong that they left me dizzy. I felt disoriented, and part of me wanted to leap up and run away. But even if I had given in to that impulse, nothing would have happened. I was now totally under Páli's control.

When I had surrendered like this to Caelas, his power had come from his massive body, the size of his cock, his aura of command. But with Páli, a boy my own age, slender, skittish, not quite as well-endowed as I, it came entirely from the fierceness of his will, the sudden explosion of his desire. Before, yes, he had been complaisant during our lovemak-

ing and satisfied after it. But this was something different.

He pulled me away from my mess, and made me bend over again.

“Open up,” he ordered, and when I did, he exclaimed, “you’re all pink in there. It’s a wide open boy quim!”

He took his cock, inserted the head into the open hole, and shook it, so that it beat against the muscle ring. Again, the sensation was so intense that I almost fainted. My own cock, which had gone limp during the mouth-administered clyster, was rampant again.

Because Páli and I were mind-linked, he was as much aware as I of the waves of almost agonizing pleasure he was causing, and, now as he slowly pushed inside me, he, like I, could feel my inner passage expanding to take him.


“Grip me now,” Páli gasped, and I did so, clenching the muscle ring so that it held his cock in a tight grip. I could sense him savoring the fucking I was now taking, as much as he savored giving it to me. And I, in turn, was as intoxicated by this as by the motion inside me, the depth of his thrust, the shock when his knob pulled out entirely, and I remained spread wide to take it back.

When I spent, I shot so strongly that I left a trail of cream across my chest, neck, and chin, with a splattering of it all over my face. It was his awareness of this that made him explode himself, pumping a hot flux of seed deep inside me, and crying out as he did so.

We collapsed together in a half swoon, our minds

slipping apart even as our hands reached out to touch each other ever so lightly. Oh, Páli. I lay beside him and let my thoughts caress what I had just absorbed.

This one fuck had turned something deep within him. Before, despite his powers, the customs of his people held him hard in their grip. Now, becoming what he wanted to be rather than what they had formed him to be, it was he who held *them* in his power. Páli was destined to weave a new tapestry of belief for the clans of the Lhennad, one that contained all the familiar colors and patterns, and yet was different, larger, with unexpected spaces to explore.

As these thoughts flowed through my mind, I turned to look at my lover with new eyes. I found his head turned toward me. Our eyes met, he blushed slightly, then reached over and pulled me to him. The kiss he gave me was astonishingly gentle, and it lingered for a long, long time. 

Chapter 22



THE FOLLOWING DAY was much like the previous one. We had ridden out to our secret place, undressed, made love, and then I had sprawled lazily in the shade of the tree, while my mind went soaring with Páli as he hunted.

Again, like yesterday, by the time he returned and assumed his human shape, we were both ready for sex. This time he wanted to enter me while I lay on my back, and we found that, properly positioned, the two saddles, piled on each other, made this an easy matter.

Páli had given up trying to make me bend my body enough so that I could look down my own hole—neither my magic nor my body were limber enough—and we had discovered that uncontrollable laughter is not the world's best aphrodisiac.

Still, we had persevered, and now Páli was pushing deep inside me, my body aswim in sensation, my eyes locked with his.

“Deeper!” I moaned. “Deeper!”

In response, he spread me wider and ground in, until I could feel the hairs of his crotch grinding against me, and his purse pressing hard just below. This pushed me over the edge and I spent, astonished as I did that there was anything left in me to come out. My body shuddered violently, its pulsations feeding the frenzy of his thrusts.

I could sense him on the edge, and when he shouted, “Shit! Shit!” I opened my eyes to watch him as he came. To my surprise his head was twisted upwards, as if searching the sky. Simultaneously, he shape-changed, and, suddenly, he was no longer in me, and outstretched wings were beating against my body.

The thought that the strength of his release had made this an involuntary part of his lovemaking left my mind as soon as it entered it. He was already rising off my body, fighting his way up into the sky, his wing strokes deep and rapid, conveying frantic urgency.

I shook away the somnolence that had followed my spending, and, oblivious to the sticky mess on my chest and face, closed my eyes and mind-linked with my lover, plunging my consciousness into the fierce, focused heat of pursuit.

Páli’s eyes were tracking a bird, flying fast to the west, a small dot still. He was at once chasing after it and trying to get above it so that he could snare it in his talons—a feat that was calling on all his strength and quickly devouring his reserves.

This was why he preferred hunting ground prey, when everything was over in a matter of seconds, and the pull of the earth did most of his work for him. As I felt him push himself to the limit, then force himself to stay there, the part of me that was still myself wondered why. He had already eaten well this morning, he had pulled himself away from our lovemaking just as he was about to climax... in order to catch—I could now, through his keen eyes, make out what it was—a *pigeon*?

The bird flew steadily west but not at its fastest, for it was as yet unsuspecting of our pursuit. And why would it be? Eagles rarely if ever chase down a bird in flight, and never when the odds were as poor as this. But Páli never wavered, and if he had not caught the thing, I think he would have simply dropped from the sky in exhaustion.

But now we were over it, if by just an arm's length, and pulling even with it, the neck feathers with their iridescent green, the black-dappling to the light gray wings, all as clear as if seen under an enlarging glass... Then, the moment of awareness, of panic, the burst of speed, but too, too late. A loud snapping noise; the bird simply vanished.

Páli's own wings instantly stopped beating, his racing heart began to slow a bit, as, wings outspread, he swung around and began the long glide back to me.

THE PIGEON FELL TO MY FEET. A strident flurry of wings, then the eagle turned into Páli, who instantly collapsed beside me. His eyes were closed, his chest

rose and fell in long sobbing gasps. I shifted so that I could cradle his head in my lap and stroke his hair.

“Don’t worry,” he said at last. “When I’m *really* exhausted, I can’t change back. The first time that happened I thought I had become an eagle for good.”

He sighed, opened his eyes, and looked up at me. “At the time, I thought it wouldn’t be such a bad fate.”

“What was all *that* about?” I asked.

Páli groaned. “I don’t want to move, and I don’t want *you* to move, either. Where’s the pigeon?”

I looked over to the pathetic lump of feathers that it was, lying in the dirt well out of reach. A thought, no, more like a little door, flashed open in my mind. I focused my powers, lifted the little corpse from the ground, and drew it toward us. I hadn’t counted on it actually accelerating. Before I could halt it, it smacked me in the face.

“Pfaah,” I said, catching hold of it.

Páli snickered. “A warrior pigeon, no less,” he said, adding, “look at its legs.”

I did. “Each one is wrapped in a bandage,” I replied, saying what I saw.

“Gently untie each one,” Páli said, “*carefully*. We want to bring the bird to the Gates of Karn looking as untouched as possible.”

This grew still more puzzling. I carefully picked apart the tiny knots, and found that the ties were sewn to the bandages. I unfolded the first. The cloth was as thin as gos-

samer and minute writing covered it so densely that it hurt the eyes. I had to hold it close to my eyes to make out the letters, then found everything was written in code.

“It’s all in cipher,” I said, my heart sinking.

“Curse it,” Páli replied. “See if the cipher was created by magic. If it is, you should have the power to make the true text reveal itself.”

But no, I could sense no powers entwined in the ink or the fabric. Besides, Caelas would need Orien always at hand to decode it, and, of course, making the mage privy to everything.

Páli correctly interpreted my silence, and sighed. “Fold it back up carefully and refasten it to the pigeon’s leg,” he said. “Then open the other one.”

Easier said than done. Whoever folded this filmy wisp of a fabric was as talented as the person who had written out the tiny text. Or, perhaps, they simply had the luxury of a table on which to do it.

Finally, in exasperation, Páli sat up, took it from me, and set to work himself, directing me tersely to open the other one.

I did, and my heart trembled with joy. Again, the script was tiny, but I knew it so well—it was the hand that Alfrund used to write entries into his *enkiridion*, but this time addressing me. I began to read it aloud.

Dearest one, may this piece of butterfly wing
find its way safely into your hands. I write to

tell you one amazing thing: I've seen Niccas!! In a private inn run by agents of Maerdas, no less, but he seemed neither a prisoner nor (Goddess forgive me for the thought) in league with them. ∞ I was brought to the inn because he is badly injured and in terrible pain. Maerdas, I fear, had him on the rack. I treated him but could not reveal myself. He evaded my mind touch, and I dared not speak in a place where the walls have ears. ∞ He is with Sepharan, a youth of fabulous beauty and amazing self-possession, who seems devoted to him. Since then, they have obtained two mules (the least painful way to travel, save a palankeen) and are now on the high road to Tarrusor, on the way to Ernfardast. ∞ Lorithar is awash with rumors these days, among them that Niccas has sworn allegiance to Ra'asiel, and even taken a demon lover. I believe none of this, but his eyes do have a demon's shape, and he must shroud his face whenever he is in public. ∞ As for myself, all too briefly—Timon died soon after your triumph at Wethrelad. I then made my way by horseback to Lorithar, and had been but two days at Porphoras's house when a servant boy appeared at the door, sent by Sepharan without Niccas's knowing, asking for the name of a healer to attend to a friend who dared not reveal himself. ∞ Taking my cue from this,

I, too, kept Porphoras in the dark. He is a good man but there are dark currents in this house, and terrible things have come to the city. My hand to your heart, my lips to your own—your loving *twerë*, Alfrund. ∞ One last thing. I advised them to tell anyone who asked that they were heading north to find the Tarn of Subtle Waters, a mythical place of healing. None will know where it is, but all will have heard of it.

“Jessan!” Páli exclaimed when I had finished. “What a maze you’re leading me into! Every sentence in that letter holds another mystery, hidden in the one that came before. Do you make any more sense of it than I do?”

I shook my head as I handed him the letter to refold. It, too, could be brought to the Gates of Karn, for Caelas and Orien to ponder on. “I know more of the names, I suppose. Porphoras is an alchemist and Alfrund is an herbalist, and, as you heard, my *twerë*.”

“And what does that mean?” Páli asked. “Your teacher? I know the word in the Old Tongue means ‘bonded.’”

I looked at him in surprise. “Don’t you have this practice among your people? A ceremony in which you declare before all your love and eternal fealty to a friend or lover?”

It was Páli’s turn to shake his head. “Our oaths are all sworn to the clan, even the marriage vow. It is only because of my love for you, an outlander, that I can imagine such a thing.

He hesitated, then added, “If I had been born among your people, do you think you and I would become...”

“*Twerën*,” I said for him.

“*Twerën?*” he repeated. “I ask only to learn if one can make the vow to more than one.” His eyes were fixed assiduously on his fingers, which were even now tying the message back onto the dead pigeon’s other leg.

“Without a doubt,” I answered. “It is how we outlanders make our own clan. In fact, I have two *twerën*... well, *had* two, for the briefest of moments.” Tears suddenly flooded my eyes. “The first, Faryn, died on the rack just after I swore my troth to Alfrund.”

I wiped the tears away with my arm, and looked down at Páli. “It isn’t only a maze into which I’m leading you, my love.”

His eyes met mine and he briefly touched my mind, letting me feel his fierceness, his stubborn pride. No words could have chided me so gently or so thoroughly.

“However, to answer your question,” I went on, strangely comforted, “I already consider you my *twerë*, and if you consent to be mine, I now make my vows to you, with all the Plains of the Lhennad to witness.”

“I do consent,” Páli replied, his voice solemn. “Let my vows sit in the Hallowed Halls, right beside your own.” Then, in a different tone, he added, “Here, put this pigeon somewhere and come to me.”

“So,” I SAID, SOMEWHAT LATER, “that was your plan? Hoping to spot a pigeon bearing messages and to chase it down? Then to ride up to the Gates of Karn with it, and say, ‘I found this lying on the plains, and wondered if it might be yours’?”

Páli laughed. “It sounds feeble, but it was the best I could do. Your Prince Caelas told Father about the pigeons, saying that half, at best, completed the journey, and asked our help in finding out why.”

Our eyes met. “No, it’s *not* me,” Páli protested. “That was my first, and I sincerely pray, my last. My guess is that the soldiers of Maerdas hunt them with falcons, more to keep them from reaching Prince Caelas than from any hope of decoding them.”

He yawned and stretched, limber as a cat. “We should be heading back,” he said, and called over the horses.

We dressed ourselves and saddled up. It was our custom to race each other back to the encampment—not that I had any chance of winning, but to improve my horsemanship. Tifridh and I had become quite close, and my fondness for her knew no bounds—so much so that I was nervous about asking if I could ride her on my coming journey. I would be devastated if she should somehow be killed because of bearing me.

Now she moved as sinuously as an otter beneath me, hooves seeming barely to brush against the ground. As always, Svanr took a commanding lead. But Tifridh understood that I had no desire to overtake him, and was content

that she should move at her own pace, which was quite fast enough for me.

As we rode, I parsed every word of Alfrund's letter, lingering on such words as "rack." The pains that had felled me when we first rode into the *hrosbyre*—they must have come at the same time that Maerdas was having Niccas tortured, and they were meant to warn me that he was close to death. Or perhaps even to provide a path to him... how ridiculously little did I know about my powers, about *us*, Niccas and me. If he had died... But he hadn't. Perhaps by taking some of his suffering onto myself, I made it possible for him to survive. I swore under my breath. I would have taken still more if it would have kept him from being maimed.

Meanwhile, bad things were happening in Lorithar, affecting even the house of Porphoras, one of the most important members of the Guardian Circle, and someone for whom Mathias felt so much affection. And Ra'asiel? The Opposer? How would Niccas have encountered Him? Páli was right. Alfrund's letter was a maze of mysteries, almost all of them discomforting.

Perhaps, I thought, we, Páli and I, should ride to Lorithar and speak to him face to face. But as soon as the thought glowed to life in my mind, the grim reality of the situation snuffed it out. Alfrund had not only pointed to the right haystack, but had given us a clue, as well. Now we had only to find the pin.

When I arrived back at the *hrosbyre* and dismount-

ed, handing Tifridh's reins to a horse carer, Páli was already pushing aside the curtains to his family *jært*. I followed him in and almost ran him down, since he stood just beyond, impatiently waiting for Bráíenn, who was deep in consultation with some other riders of the clan.

Adisa, Páli's mother, came over to us, took her son's hand and mine, and, stepping backwards, led us both to her own sitting place. Her own hands were dyed a deep brown from nutshell soakings, which she was using to stain reeds for basketweaving.

When we reached that side of the *jært*, she turned to me and spoke a welcome. Her eyes were blue and bright and saw much—it was from her that Páli had inherited his powers.

“You two seem good for each other,” she said.

“Yes, mamma,” Páli replied, blushing and glancing down at his feet.

“The omens are so obscure,” she said, looking back at me. “I've never seen the future appear so torturous. But I know you are about to depart, and take my son with you. May he serve you well, *Nithaial Galgalíel*.”

“I love him dearly, and will protect him with all my powers,” I replied.

Adisa shook her head. “No, it is his task to protect *you* with all *his* powers. Never forget that. Love is a precious gift, but you mustn't let it cloud your eyes.”

She squeezed my hand, adding, “I know. You seek

to comfort a mother. But we of the Lhennad know the doom of sons. It means more to me that you have strengthened Páli's powers, and perhaps given him others he has yet to discover." She gave a slight smile. "So, in that, at least, you have already kept your promise."

There was a sound of stirring from the circle seated with Bráíenn. He rose, embraced each, and, as they departed, beckoned us to come to him.

"I see, for once, that you return from your excursions bearing game," he said, nodding at the pigeon, "and surely enough to feed the clan."

Páli grinned. He knew that Bráíenn recognized what he saw. "Gesryma smiled upon us, Father. One of the messages is in cipher, but the other was plainly spelled and addressed to the *Nithaial Galgaliel*. We have the news we have been waiting for."

Bráíenn sighed. "As you know," he said to me, "we trade with outlanders, and I have asked all the clans to bring us their news." His face took on a wry expression. "Fortunately, many traders chatter whether we wish it or not. Otherwise they would surely notice our interest, since we are as likely to ask for news as to offer to buy the trader's own horse."

He shook his head. "Even so, while we have heard much, we have learned nothing—at least pertaining to the whereabouts of your twin. The kingdom, however, is in ever-increasing turmoil. Rumors are many, and they all bode ill."

Bráíenn put his hand on Páli's shoulder. "So you

have outfoxed us all.” Then, to me, “So tell me, *Nithaial*, if you will, what it is that you have learned.”

I told him everything in Alfrund’s letter, for I retained it word for word in my mind. Bráíenn listened with great concentration, shaking his head as he did.

“All these places,” he grunted, once I had finished. “Some of the names I have heard, yes, but I could lead you to none, for I hardly know where they might be.”

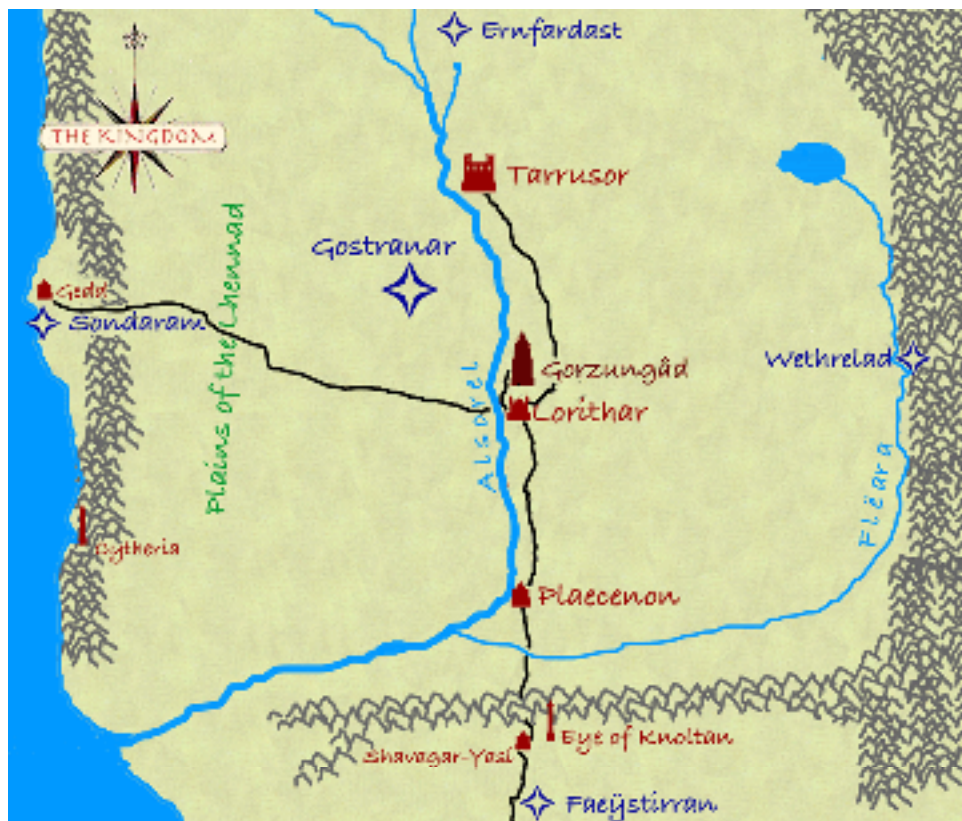
“Have you no maps?” I asked.

“Caelas showed me one,” Bráíenn replied, “and marvelous things they must be. But what would *we* do with such a thing?” He waved his hand, embracing all of the Plains of the Lhennad with the gesture. “We know *our* land as we know the palm of our hand, through travel, song, the wisdom of our horses. No map could record such things. And, otherwise, it would be like mapping the sea.

“Páli,” he said, “go ask your Mother for a snip of reed. Jessan here”—and he actually used my given name—“is going to teach us of maps.”

I could hardly admit that I knew little more of them than he did, having myself only seen one in the hands of Caelas. But, like Bráíenn, I had seen the point of them immediately, and had made note of what was shown there.

So, Bráíenn and Páli pulled a carpet aside to reveal the bare, packed earth beneath it, and I took up the reed and began to sketch.



“The King’s Way,” I said, “runs from Plaeecenon to Tarrusor, with Lorithar at its midpoint. There are, of course, many other roads, including the one that goes to Gedde and another to Shavagar-Yasí—much used but of no concern to us. I draw them in, though, because they are all that I remember from looking at Caelas’s map.”

I glanced up at Bráíenn to see if he recalled anything more, but he shook his head. He and Páli both had the frowning puzzlement of students the first time they trace their letters. I understood at once that if Bráíenn had grasped the

idea of a map, he hadn't absorbed many particulars.

"Well," he said, "your best hope, then, is that you can catch up with them before they reach Tarrusor, while they are still on the King's Way."

I nodded, even as Páli asked, "Jessa, can rivers be added to a map as well as roads?"

"Of course," I said. "Any physical thing."

"Well, then," he said, "show us the course of the River Alsorel."

Obligingly, I traced a squiggling line across the dirt.

"There, you see," Páli said, pointing to it.

"See what?" I asked.


"See, O map reader," he retorted, "that it cuts us off from the road all the way from Lorithar to Tarrusor. I may not know maps, but I know our lands border on the river all that distance. That means there are no outlander towns where we might find a boatman to row us across."

"He's right," Bráíenn agreed. "To the south, where the plains end, there are many towns along the river. But north of Lorithar, there are none. The Plains turns to marsh along the river's edge, right up to the borders of Wisferon, the Holy Wood.

"You will either have to ride to Lorithar, which will put you far, far behind them, or else ride north, skirting the Holy Wood, to where the Alsorel passes Tarrusor. You will have no problem crossing the river there, but Niccas and his companion may well be past that city by the time you arrive there."

I felt my heart sink. But then the import of Páli's words sank into my head, and a thought flashed across my mind. "What if," I asked, "we rode *through* Wisferon?"

Both Bráíenn and Páli looked at me in shock, which almost immediately was washed away by sheepish comprehension. Bráíenn even smiled.

"Of course," he said. "In that case, yes, you two would have a chance—depending on how easy it is for even a *Nith-aial* to pass through the entire Holy Wood." 

Chapter 23



WE HAD BEEN RIDING for three days across the plains, and it had all seemed like a waking dream. Once we had traveled a few leagues from the *hrosbyre*, we began to encounter herds of antelope, some of them extending as far as the eye could see, and at other times smaller herds of shaggy-coated wild oxen, that Páli called *gyag*.

When these appeared, we would occasionally also sight a small pack of wolves, loping along in the background, somehow conveying the illusory sense that they just happened to be passing by. The antelope seemed equally unconcerned, but Páli told me that they were watching the wolves like hawks, and, for that matter, us, as well.

We rode for two spells, the first from morning to midday, and the second, from late midday to early evening, moving at an easy pace, so as not to tire the horses. There were three of us, and six horses, because Bráíenn had insisted—wisely—that we bring extra mounts at least until we

sighted Wisferon, and someone to bring the extra horses back once we did. Otherwise, should one of our horses step into a prairie rat's burrow and break a leg, our quest would be over before it had rightly started.

Cœnred was the name of our companion, a youth the same age as ourselves, with a merry disposition, and thrilled beyond words for the chance to ride this far from the clan home. Indeed, he all but wept for joy when he saw the first herd of *gyag*, for in the ordinary course of events, he told me, these were rarely sighted, even by the clan hunters.

“Even harder to kill,” he went on, “since the ill day we were forced to give up carrying spears. You have to fill one with arrows to bring it down, and even then it's chancy. You'd be surprised at how fast they can run.”

Cœnred was scanning the herd as he spoke, and I could tell that for a broken pence he'd go after one anyway. It was a mark of high esteem among the clan to have killed one. “The trick is to drive them up to the edge of a hidden gully. Those at the very head of the herd try to stop, but the force of those charging along behind forces them over the edge, so that they fall and break their legs. Then we feast for weeks.”

I sympathized with the yearning in his voice, for there was no feasting for us. While in his company, Páli would not shape-change, so we had to make do with dried strips of meat and coarse travel cakes made of pounded berries and seed. Even if game had been on hand, it was rare that we could safely start a fire among the sere late summer

grass. We spent the nights bundled up together under the horse blankets, rising in the morning as stiff and full of ache as old men.

No fun under the blankets, either, for though Cœnred was comely enough—with ruddy skin and a mass of curly hair—Páli's elbow was always ready to dig into my side the moment I gave the boy a flirtatious glance. It was true that Cœnred gave no indication of knowing about Páli and me, but I'm sure that was out of politeness, not ignorance. Casual sex between clansmates was one thing, with an outlander like myself, it seemed, quite another—except, perhaps, as a courtesy, and with Páli at hand, that became moot.

On the second day we had crossed over the road that linked Gedd with the outside world, and while we kept an eye out for patrols, it was empty in either direction as far as the eye could see, the king having cut off all trade. The road itself was no more than a track, the soil so compacted from the centuries, that no grass could force its way through. But it grew in profusion on both sides of it, so it must take a keen eye to keep to the track in rain or dark.

The road from Gedd up to the Gates of Karn was as good a road as I had seen, apart from the King's Way, which Alfrund and I had crossed on our trip west. But now I understood why traders came with a string of pack animals, rather than driving a team of oxen from the comfort of a waggon.

Two days later, around midmorning, Páli rode up beside me. "You may not have noticed," he said, "but we've

been riding up a slow rise since last we stopped. We're about to reach the top of it, and then we shall see Wisferon spread out ahead of us. You and Cœnred sit down and have something to eat and drink, while I go and scout. When I return, we'll wait until dusk, then see if we can make it to the wood without notice—and discover if *it* will let us in, once we do."

There was something oddly stilted about his saying this that made me realize that it was a speech made for Cœnred's benefit. What he was actually telling *me* was that he was going to shape-change once he was away from us, and do his reconnoitering from the sky.

So Cœnred and I settled in, and after we washed some travel bread down with the goatish brew from our water sacks, I got him to tell me about his various hunting exploits, fixed a look of interest onto my face, and slipped away to mind link with Páli.

As I did so, I recalled the chatter of the apprentices as they told Alfrund and me the news of the world, and told us how Maerdas had not only cast a spell to keep any from entering Wisferon, but had his soldiers constantly patrol its borders. Since the Holy Wood was itself enchanted, and allowed none to enter it except those invited by the *Nithaial*, it was apparent that the sole purpose of this effort was to capture me, or Niccas, if we should seek refuge there.

Páli was already wheeling about, high in the sky, and at first I saw only the plains spread out below us, and a glittering thread that was the River Alsorel, for we had traveled

east as well as north. But as Páli turned, slowly, from left to right, Wisferon appeared before me. From this height, it seemed less a forest than a vast expanse of green and shadow, spreading out and on as far as the eye could see. There were hills there and steep valleys, some still shrouded in mist despite a long day of summer sun. From this height it looked impassably dense and dark and unwelcoming. I expected to feel a surge of recognition when I first laid eyes on it, but, to my surprise, a shiver ran through me instead.

As to the land surrounding the forest, I could see no sign of Maerdas's patrols. This made sense to me. Whatever entrance there was to Wisferon, be it road or path, it would be found on the far side of the forest, giving access to travelers who approached Gostranar from Tarrusor, the imperial city. And, had I ridden here straight from the Gates of Karn, I would be approaching the Holy Wood from further west.

Páli suddenly swooped down, hunting perhaps, since I saw nothing else that would have caught his eye. He passed over a scattering of mounds, too large to indicate prairie rat burrows and too oddly shaped to be graves. They were covered with grass and seemed peaceful enough, at one with the landscape around them.

I felt someone prod me. It was Cœnred. "You drifted away," he said, amused. "My idle boasting must seem small indeed to one like yourself. I apologize, *Nithaial Galgaliel*."

"No, Cœnred, I apologize to *you*. My eye was caught by an eagle circling up in the sky, and I was thinking how

beautiful it was, and how effortless its flight. Better to ride on one of those than even a horse, I think.”

Cœnred laughed at the very notion. “And have it lay you an egg for supper when you dismounted,” he replied. “But I shouldn’t jest. You know that the eagle is the spirit brother of our clan. Look.”

He pulled up his shirt and revealed an eagle tattooed on his chest, directly over his heart. “All of us have one,” he went on. “Once, it was how the clan sorted out their dead after a battle with the outlanders. But the custom continues even now.” He glanced up at me. “And, from what little I hear, they may soon serve the same purpose as before.”

“Páli doesn’t...” I started to say, and realizing what I might be revealing, shut my mouth.

“Have such a mark?” Cœnred finished the sentence for me, giving me a knowing look as he did so. “I know. At his initiation into manhood, Winwæd—our bard and priest, you saw him at the gathering—forbade it, saying he had had a vision in which it was revealed that the eagle would manifest itself in Páli in an unforeseen way.”

Cœnred shrugged. “He was spared a lot of pain, I’ll tell you that.”

“But what is pain to such as us?” said a voice, and Páli, who had crept up on us through the high grass, suddenly stood up and gave Cœnred a smack on the side of his head. A moment later, the two of them were locked in a tussle, swearing, and rolling about on the ground.

But not for long. Cœnred was vigorous but undisciplined, and Páli soon had him pinned in a lock. He demanded no surrender, just let the realization of his captive's plight sink in, then released him.

The two of them unself-consciously brushed themselves off and came and sat down with me.

"So what did you discover?" Cœnred asked. "Not much, I gather, or you wouldn't have expended so much effort sneaking up on us."

"Effort?" Páli said smirking. "You're lucky I wasn't a herd of *gyag*, or you would have been trampled to death before you knew what hit you.

"Anyway," he went on, ignoring Cœnred's rude noise, "I saw no sign of patrols. The way to Wisferon seems quite clear. The only thing that gave me pause was the grass."

We both looked at him in surprise. I closed my eyes and called back what I had seen from Páli's eyes, but made out nothing remarkable.

"Yes," he said. "Once you cross the rise, all the grass that grows around Wisferon, at least as far as I could see, is witchery grass. I've never seen anything like it."

Cœnred swore. "There are small patches of it here and there all over the plains," he told me. "We have to watch out for it because it can poison the horses. It is also said to bring bad luck. It does worse if you try to burn it—the smoke leaves a vicious rash wherever it touches, including inside your lungs, if you breathe it in."

Turning to Páli, he asked, “How far to the forest?”

“At least a league, maybe two,” Páli said. “I’m sure The Unnameable One caused it to grow there for a reason, but out on the prairie, we’ve ridden through patches of it many times. Once we’re in the Holy Wood, we’ll find a stream and wash down the horse’s hooves and fetlocks.”

He shrugged, then looked at me. “Jessan, do you know this weed?”

I shook my head. I had been mentally leafing through Alfrund’s *enkiridion* as Cœnred spoke, and I found nothing remotely like it. Perhaps Alfrund knew of it, but kept no record because it was so malevolent, or, worse, knew of no ointment or balm to treat it.

“Well,” Páli said shortly, “we haven’t the time to skirt the Holy Wood, so we’ll have to take our chances. Farewell to you, Cœnred, and keep clear of the *gyag*.”

The two of them embraced, and then he hugged me as well. “I think I’ll come to the top of the rise and see you off,” he said. “It would warm my heart to watch you enter the Holy Wood. No one for countless years has witnessed such a thing.”

“Good,” Páli said. “If it weren’t for the wicked weed, you could accompany us right to the forest, and peek between the trees.”

Laughing, we mounted, and rode over the crest, Cœnred leading the string of horses behind him. He halted at the edge, while Páli and I made our way cautiously down

the slope.

Now that I knew what to look for, I saw exactly what Páli meant. Witchery grass was a wolf in sheep's clothing, mimicking the regular prairie grasses. But when you looked more closely, you could see that it was fleshier and coarser—and something else again. The horses realized this at once, for they balked when we came to the edge of the stuff, and refused to go forward. None of our urging, even a sharp prod of the heel into their flanks, could make them step into the grass. Indeed, even as we ordered them to continue, they kept edging backwards until we gave up.

“Páli!” Cœnred shouted. We turned. He was leaning forward on his horse, observing our dilemma. “Perhaps if you wrapped their hooves and legs with...,” he began, when the bank of earth under his horse's forelegs suddenly gave way, spilling them forward.

To keep from falling, the horse galloped down amidst the collapsing earth, and Cœnred, trying to keep his balance, forgot to let go of the lead attached to the others. Thus, the whole string of horses, one after the other, came bolting down the slope behind them.

With the others hard on its heels, Cœnred's horse, when it reached the witchery grass, leaped into the air with all its strength. It landed a good distance beyond us, with the other horses following behind.

Simultaneously, several things began to happen. Our own horses, alarmed almost to madness, reared and reared

again, whinnying all the while, as Cœnred's horse, screaming in pain, plunged forwards, twisting itself over on its side as it did. At first, I thought it had broken its legs, but then I saw that *it had none*. Where the forelegs had been, there were now nothing but bloody stumps waving in the air.

As his horse fell, Cœnred had jumped clear, and was even now staggering back to his feet. But the side on which he had landed was a mass of blood and muscle, his clothing and skin completely eaten away.

Páli screamed his name, and Cœnred turned his face towards us, just in time for us to see his eyes roll up in their sockets as he pitched face forward into the grass. At once, his body began to puddle from underneath, as if it were melting away.

The same thing was happening to the horses. Only two had managed to keep from falling prey to the grass, and they had bolted over the rise and vanished. A third had fought its way out, only to fall over, writhing in agony, blood gushing from where its hooves had been. It was as if these had all been crudely hacked off just below the fetlock.

Páli was too stunned to move, but I mind-touched both our horses and sent them scrambling back up the bank and over the ridge to where we had been before. A mephitic, corrosive stench was rising up even as the bodies vanished, and I recalled Cœnred's comments about the danger of the plant's toxic fumes.

Over the ridge, the air was fresh enough, but I kept

us riding until I was sure we were safe, then reined up. Páli looked at me, his face ashen, then turned away, leaned over Svanr's side and retched, violently at first, then in spasms, until there was nothing left to come out.

I reached over and closed my hand on his arm, but said nothing, dealing as best I could with the images that clung like leeches to my own mind. Chief among them was one of Cœnred. He had fallen towards us, and his outstretched hand kept clenching and unclenching, as if trying to grasp hold of something, even while his arm dissolved into sludge. Finally this, and the smell of Páli's vomit, was too much for me, and I bent over and sent the contents of my own stomach spewing.

Then, together, silently, Páli and I rode back to where we had all been sitting before, dismounted, and collapsed onto the grass.

“**W**HAT DO WE DO NOW?” Páli asked. It was an hour or so later. I had been the first to get up. I went to Svanr, unfastened the water bladder, rinsed out my mouth, then splashed some more over my face. Páli sat up while I did this, and so I tossed it over to him.

“Can Svanr and Tifridh make their way back home alone?” I said, asking a question in return.

Páli lowered the bladder and looked at me in surprise. “It's a long way,” he answered. “I suppose they could. They're both very smart, and this time of year the wolves won't bother them. That would be the worst thing. Otherwise, they'll just

be following our tracks back the way we came.”

He also rinsed out his mouth, then took a long drink. “Are you thinking we might swim the river? If we could swim it, the horses could, too—but we can’t. I don’t suppose you can part the waters, or you would have already said so.”

His voice was tight. He was very much on edge. I came down and sat beside him, and told him of the time I had held back the Flëara, how difficult it had been, with the force of the river sending the water flowing over the banks.

“Compared to the Alsorel,” I concluded, “the Flëara is but a bubbling brook.” I shook my head. “Even in my full power, I would need to understand many more things before taking such a risk.

“No, I mean to take you to Wisferon. To hold you in my arms and fly there. I have the power to do that, but not to bring the horses with us, as well.”

Páli sighed. “That would be something of an arm-load,” he agreed, glancing sideways at me.

I smiled, and gratefully put my hand on his arm. In a moment, he pulled me down onto the grass with him, and we held each other.

“Poor Cœnred!” he whispered into my ear. “What a terrible way to die.”

“He died so that we might live,” I answered. “Let us honor him for that.” I turned my face toward Páli’s. “Fate gave him his role the moment we failed to grasp what was before our eyes.”

“Fate gave us a much longer time than a moment,” Páli answered. “Remember the mounds I saw, in my eagle self? The ones that looked like graves? They were, but not for men... antelope maybe, or *gyag*. For some reason they were stampeded over the ridge, and met the same fate as, as...” He couldn’t finish the sentence. After a moment, he shook his head and went on. “Once the witchery grass devours, I suppose, it grows right over the remains.”

He groaned and turned away. “What a fool I was! Oh, Cœnred, I’m so *sorry*.”

Suddenly I understood. “You and he...” I began, but couldn’t find the words. Now I understood the nudgings. How little I still knew about Páli, his growing up, his everyday life. My flirting with Cœnred was just rubbing salt in a wound that I didn’t know even existed.

Páli nodded. “Just puppies. Not like you and me. He knew that, too. But he was my friend and protector, and begged to come with us. One last...” he groped for the word, tears forming in his eyes, “*escapade together*.”

After a moment, he stood up. “Action is the best salve for grief,” he said. “Let’s try this plan of yours.”

We gathered together what baggage we could carry, with strapping cut from the horse gear so that we could make ourselves pack frames once we were within the Holy Wood. Then we mind-touched Svanr and Tifridh to make our farewells, and sent them on their way.

We watched them go until they were mere dots on the

horizon, then carried our packs to the edge of the rise—making sure we were a good distance from the place where we descended before.


“You’re sure this will work,” Páli said, saying it more as a dubious statement than a question.

I took out my wand and, arm outstretched, waved it around us. A circle of blue light appeared and floated down to our feet.

“Yes,” I answered, returning the wand to its sheath and taking him in my arms. The light shimmered brightly, and we became weightless, and floated up into the air. A breeze caught us, and, slowly at first, then faster, blew us over the witchery grass to Wisferon. There was a narrow verge outside the line of trees, about the width of an arm, where the weed stopped and plain grass grew. I set us down on that, as lightly as dandelion down.

Before us, was a tightly linked, living wall of trees. But even as I looked at it, the roots began to twitch and slide, and a passage appeared between two thick-trunked oaks.

“This is my *twerë* Páli,” I said aloud, taking his hand. “Where I may go, he may go also.”

Then, without a backward glance, we hoisted up our baggage as best we could, and made our way into the Holy Wood. 

Chapter 24



AS WE PASSED THROUGH THE RING OF TREES, we heard a rustling and creaking behind us. Trunks edged back together, branches entwined with branches, and all was as it had been before we arrived. Once we passed beyond this barrier, we found ourselves in a shaded bower, the ground beneath it carpeted with moss.

The forest of my boyhood fought a constant battle to stay alive. Its nearness to the sea meant that the soil was thin and poor and shallow, because an armlength down, there was nothing but solid rock. Roots had precious little to cling to, and every fierce storm bowled trees over like a clutch of nine pins. Dead trees decayed between living ones, the ground was stony, and the new growth that replaced the fallen grew in dense patches everywhere.

Wisferon, at least the part of it where we now stood, was nothing like that. At once peaceful and mysterious, it immediately gladdened the heart. The trees were spaced well apart and branched out widely, providing a canopy of dappled

shade. Nor were they especially tall, no higher, really, than a boy could throw a stone. Many were covered with blossoms, the petals of which occasionally fluttered down like little butterflies, illuminated in snatches of sunlight.

Birdsong came from every direction; the birds themselves, of different colored—and sometimes multicolored—plumage, flitted from tree to tree or soared deftly through the open space beneath them. A squirrel appeared suddenly and sat on a root, just ahead of us, its forepaws dangling, obviously curious and unafraid.

“Perhaps you should speak to it,” Páli said, “and ask the way. This is all very lovely, but I’m not quite ready to spend the rest of my life here, wandering about in a happy daze.”

He spoke with the slight irritation that a raptor must feel, seeing all this game and knowing none of it was for catching. Peaceful kingdoms must be rather boring to carnivores.

“Páli!” I said, laughing. “Do you think that the arrival of the first *Nithaial* in Wisferon in countless years would go unnoticed? Haven’t you felt the presence, too?”

He nodded. “Felt it, yes. Conversed with it”—he glanced quickly at me—“how would I dare?”

As soon I stepped between the first of the trees, my mind was touched by its presence, something large, powerful, and pleased to be awakened from a very long nap. It communed with me, not through words, but through shapes of awareness, in the manner that one understands things in the midst of a dream.

“Because you are my close companion and have power in your own right,” I answered. “Just open yourself to it, and inquire where we should be going.”

When he looked at me incredulously, I nudged him, and said, “Go on. There may come a time when you *have* to do this, so make yourself comfortable with it now.”

Pali’s face took on a fixed expression, and his eyes, although open, barely saw. I had to catch hold of his elbow and pull him aside just before he tripped over a root. Then he nodded slightly, and turned to me.

“If we continue on as we are now going,” he said, “we shall shortly come to a pool, where we can refresh ourselves and wait to be met.”

“You’re leaving out the most important thing,” I rejoined.

He grinned. “We can drop our baggage right where it is. It will be collected and brought directly to Gostranar—bit by bit, by squirrels and rabbits.”

As he made his little joke, he punched my arm, then started running on ahead. I chased right after him, and soon passed him by, giving him a shove as I did. He may have it all over me on the back of a horse, but I had walked all the way to Wethrelad, and my legs were knotted muscle over bone.

I heard the pool almost before I saw it, for a spout of water rose high up from its center and came splashing back down. Mysteriously, it left no ripples, for the pool’s surface was as clear and smooth as crystal. It was so clear, in fact, that

the bottom looked much closer to the surface than it was. I found this out quickly, because, after stripping off my boots, I jumped straight in. I swam to where the geyser shot up, and, calling my power, sent myself down against the upward current, just for the pleasure of feeling it rush over my body.

Once my feet touched the stones that lined the bottom, I could feel a current of water flowing across my feet. The pool had been placed under a spell that kept the water constantly moving, gathering itself at the bottom and shooting upwards to make that sparkling jet.

This movement was so soothing that it was only after a minute or two that I realized there had been no answering splash. I swam back up to the surface to find Páli, squatting down on one of the lichen-covered stones that edged the pool, with a look of dread on his face.

“If you had gotten caught down there,” he said, anger in his voice, “I would have had to sit on my haunches here and watch you drown. I *hate* deep water.”

The seedpod popped. Of course. Like his father—like all the Riders, no doubt—he couldn’t swim.

“Take off your boots, Sky Soarer,” I said, “and jump in. Swimming is little different from flying.”

When he still hesitated, I added, “Of course, if you prefer, I can just have you lifted up and dropped in the middle of the pool.”

“You horse turd!” he exclaimed. “And you would, too.” He looked at me fiercely, but when I lifted my hands out

of the water, he said “Oh, fuck it!” sat down, and pulled his boots off, then, unlike me, everything else as well. Leather doesn’t take all that kindly to soaking, and he wore it everywhere.

Now, stark naked, he stood at the pool’s edge, looking from me to the water and back to me again, biting his lip.

“Right here,” I said, slapping my hand onto the patch of water by my side. Páli bared his teeth at me, gathered himself together, and jumped, his limbs flailing.

To avoid a black eye, I slid under the water as he came down, and watched him hit the water with a splash, sending a cloud of bubbles rising to the surface. I slipped up behind him, gently wrapped an arm around him, and brought us both up to the surface.

“All right,” he gasped, once he had his breath back. “You got me in—now what?”

“Spread out your arms and fly,” I answered, getting my face drenched with water as my reward.

“No, Páli, you’re already aloft!” I spluttered. “Just move them gently.”

“Then you should have said ‘soar,’” he retorted. But the flailing was replaced with a smoother motion, and, with pleased surprise in his voice, he said, “Ah, I see what you mean.” He was buoyant, in control. I loosened my arm around him, to show him so.

“Move your legs the same way,” I directed. And, when he did, I let go of him and turned, so we could face

each other. “Now you’re floating,” I said.

Páli dipped his mouth just below the surface, drank, and lifted it again. “This water is so cool and refreshing,” he said. He took another sip, but then made a face and spit it out. “I just wish I had tasted it before *you* jumped in.”

“Very funny,” I responded. “It is considered an honor to taste water blessed by the feet of a *Nithaial*.” Ignoring his snort, I went on, “Do you want your lesson to stop here, or would you like to master swimming, as well?”

Páli looked at me, considering. “Can you breathe underwater?” he asked.

“Yes,” I replied, puzzled by the question. “Although I don’t have gills, if that’s what you were wondering. The water simply turns to air in my nostrils.”

“If you had gills, I think I’d have noticed by now,” Páli said. “After all, I’m intimately familiar with every other part of you. The reason I asked is that I want to wrap my legs around you, fasten my mouth to yours, and have you bring me down to the very bottom of the pool.”

Our eyes met, and I understood. The Holy Wood, with its deep peace, had made the lingering pain of Cœnred’s terrible death increasingly harder to bear. He wanted somehow to shut it all out, and be alone with his grief, and with me.

I took him in my arms, placed my hands under his bottom, and, as he clutched me with his legs, joined my mouth to his, and let us drift down, down, until I was resting on the cool stones at the very bottom. As the water turned

into air in my nose, I inhaled it, then let Páli suck it out of my lungs, breathe it in, and send it bubbling out of his nose.

As we did this, I gently kneaded the muscles in his back, working my way slowly up his spine. His eyes were closed. If tears were seeping out of them, they were immediately swept away by the current of water that swept ceaselessly across the bottom of the pond.

This flow was soothing just by itself, but we were in Wisferon, and the water had healing qualities of its own. My mind had touched Páli's sorrow so that we might share it together, and so I could feel his spirit being lifted, the current slowly swirling his darkness away.

By this time, my hands had reached his shoulders. After I had eased the stiffness in the muscles there, I reached up higher, cupping his head gently in my hands. As I did so, he gently pressed his tongue against mine. As tongue nuzzled tongue, I felt my cock begin to swell.

My first feeling was shame, that I was aroused by Páli's grief. But, no, it wasn't that. Holding Páli as he grieved had quietly stoked my tenderness until it was licked with flame. I dropped my hand to his buttocks, and spread his cheeks apart, so that my prick could nestle in the cleft between them. Once I had done so, I felt his muscles there clasp it firmly. He was feeling the heat, too. Grief and lust have never been strangers.

Even so, given the situation, entering him was not readily possible. But that hardly kept waves of desire from

sweeping through us, and with such strength that we no longer knew where one of us stopped and the other began. There was a dizziness of ecstasy to this that was different from but equally as delicious as spending. And it went on and on and on.

I dearly loved Alfrund and always would, but our relation was such that we never wrestled or raced each other or galloped madly for no reason on the plains. Even my relationship with Faryn, blessed be his soul, was more like that of an adoring younger brother.

But in Páli I had a friend, a lover, an equal—for his powers, if less than mine, were unique and special. I loved him, hated him, fought with him, and lay with him. Holding like this, a world unto ourselves, our breath the very air that sustained us, was like nothing I had ever known, and I realized with a pang of sadness, that many in the world would never know it, even if, deep in their hearts, they would always yearn for it.

These thoughts, these emotions, the physical intensity that shook our bodies, finally ran its course, and I stood up, my lips still locked to Páli's, carried him to the surging column of water, and let it snatch him away and carry him up to the surface, and, perhaps, even higher....

I INTENDED TO COME RIGHT BEHIND HIM. However, a movement caught my attention at the surface of the pool. I looked up and saw what at first appeared to be two small animals staring down at me, with narrow faces and

large black eyes. Otters? Then Páli burst out of the pool, the animals jumped up in alarm, and their shadows revealed them as two large stags. The “otters” had been their snouts, poking into the water to drink.

I was already on my way to the surface, arriving just in time to grab hold of Páli, who had been sent shooting up into the air, only to fall back with a huge splash into the pool. So, dressed in sodden clothing, carrying a naked, spluttering, and swearing Páli, I emerged from the pool to greet the guardian spirits of Wisferon.

Using my power, I lifted the two of us out of the water and brought us to the edge of the pool. There, I set Páli onto his feet, joined him, and, with a wave of my hand, drew a thick cloud of moisture out of my clothing and sent it floating off over the pool.

The two stags watched all this gravely, as though I were practicing a religious rite. They were large and handsome animals, with coats of deep reddish brown, true kings of the forest, wearing their massive crowns of antlers proudly. When I stepped forward and held up my hand, they both raised their heads, opened their muzzles, and gave forth a low rumbling bellow that ended with several grunts.

Then the one on the left took a few steps forward and mind spoke to us both. “Welcome to Wisferon, the Holy Wood, *Nithaial Galgaliel* and companion Páli. We are come to bear you to Gostranar, your once and future home.”

I came up to the stag slowly, raised my hand, and be-

gan to stroke its nose. It closed its eyes in pleasure. Páli, observing me, came and did likewise to the other stag. As I did this, the animal allowed me to mind touch it, which I did with equal delicacy, discovering that there was no clear point where the animal ended and the spirit that inhabited it began.

“Yes,” it said to me, “we are like you in this, *Nithaial*, in that we are allowed to experience mortality, passing in time from the newly dead to the newly born. This gift was given us so that we would know the true meaning of the spring’s first growth and the autumnal falling of leaves. For we are not only the guardians of this place but the shepherds of it, also.”

“From what we have already seen of your care,” I answered, “I look forward to seeing more. It is, I wager, a long ride to Gostranar.”

“Had you arrived on horseback,” was the reply, “it would have been a trip of several days. Riding on us, however, it will be the same in hours—or faster, if speed is your desire and not the chance to see something of your demesne.”

I smiled. “I *do* wish to see it, and my beloved will treasure every moment he is given to ride such great creatures as yourselves.” I paused as a thought came to my mind. “Do you have names by which, in courtesy, we should address you?”

“Our spirit names are very, very long, *Nithaial*,” it replied, “for they serve other purposes than those for which men use theirs. But you may call me Ouras and my companion Saiphar, if it please you—‘East Wind’ and ‘West Wind,’ in the Old Tongue, for so shall we bear you.”

He was as good as his word. Once Páli and I had climbed onto their backs, the two stags began what felt like an easy trot. But the ground actually flew beneath their feet, for when I looked down it had become a blur to my eyes. However, if I looked ahead I could see clearly enough—although I had to attend, for something missed was out of sight before I thought to turn my head.

I must have missed much, then, but I saw enough to enfold me in awe. There were no mountains in Wisferon, but there were steep hills and narrow valleys, some with streams rushing down them that we cleared without even seeming to leap. We passed through open glades that dazzled the eye with wildflowers, through copses of spruce, dark and thick with resinous scent, raced alongside a lake, the water of which was covered with a blanket of mist, out of which, on the far side, poked the broken remnants of an ancient tower.

Eventually, we followed a trail that zigzagged up the side of a steep hill, and came out of the trees just below the crown of it, so that when we reached the top we had a clear view of all of Wisferon and beyond.

There we dismounted to stretch our legs and relieve ourselves, albeit retreating to the trees to do it discreetly. As Páli remarked, “I feel it sacrilege enough to shit in the Holy Wood without doing it where all can see for leagues around.”

When we climbed back up to where the stags waited (they, of course, had simply let drop as they ran), we saw a sow bear and its cubs busily berrying on the far side. Páli

clutched my arm to keep me from walking on and possibly startling them.

“I can hardly breathe from the joy of it,” he said at last, his eyes sparkling. “Wait here for me.”

He slipped out of his clothing and, facing down the way we had come, began to run, threw out his arms, and in a flurry of motion, became his eagle self.

I thought he was going to fly headlong into a tree, but at the last moment he swerved, came about, flew over my head, circled the bear family, then soared away over the forest. I watched him until he was a dot in the sky, then came up to where the stags were browsing, sat down beside a promising clump of blaeberry bushes and began to forage for my own dinner.

It takes a lot of them to make a meal, and I was so busy gathering them—so tartly sweet, plump, and juicy—that it wasn’t until I felt a nudge at my back that I realized that one of the bear cubs was poaching from the same bush.

Bears are rare in the forests that come down to the sea, but they aren’t unknown, and figured as much in the cautionary tales of my childhood as foxes and wolves. So I knew that only a fool would ever come closer to a bear cub than its mother, let alone allow one to brush up against his side.

“Move along,” I muttered to the cub, as, simultaneously, I backed away. But it ignored me—or rather, took my retreat as invitation to push its way even further into my part of the berry patch. And, sure enough, the mother bear, notic-

ing what was happening, came barreling over, teeth bared.

I jumped to my feet, unsure as to what I should do, especially because the second cub, following its sibling, was edging around to my other side. I had just decided to use my force to lift myself up in the air, when the sow suddenly slowed down, stopped, reared up on her hind legs, and regarded me fixedly.

I returned her gaze, mind touching her gently. She looked aside, shook her head as if awaking from sleep, dropped down on all fours again, and began using her claw to rip berries from the bushes again.

As she did this, I delicately pursued my contact with her, not to keep her peaceful—I had done nothing to calm her in the first place—but because the sense of her was so powerful and familiar, even as it was so very difficult to comprehend.

Stories that tell of animals talking have no sense at all of what they would say if, in fact, they could. The mind of a bear is all attention to the immediate—listening, seeing, and, above all, smelling—with an intensity that men will never know, for they push it back in order to think and feel.

However, for a bear it *is* thinking and feeling. They know their own cubs more by smell than by sight, and each cub is not just a single smell but a vast amalgam of them, as complexly intertwined as any tapestry. Suddenly I could understand why the guardian spirits of Wisferon chose to inhabit deer. All evanescent themselves, they were given a

realm of pure sensation in which to luxuriate.

I made my way to the stags, for I had a question to ask Ouras. “If the Holy Wood is a place of sanctuary,” I said, once I reached him, “are animals forbidden to kill each other? Is Páli violating the spirit of Wisferon by hunting, as I know he is now doing?”

“He is, at this very minute, devouring a squirrel,” Ouras replied. “Wisferon is a sanctuary from the evils of this world, not from the cycle of life and death. Men have gained dominion over animals because animals respect that cycle and men do not—even though they are just as subject to it.”

He took another mouth of grass, chewed it slowly, swallowed it, then added, “You just ate some berries as I am eating grass. Life passes back and forth among all living things. So there is no rule here that bears must eat only berries; or wolves, cake.”

“Or eagles, porridge,” I added, smiling, and left Ouras to his grazing. I went to the very top of the hill to watch for Páli’s return. There was no sign of him, and as I turned to scan the sky, my foot was caught between two stones, and I almost stumbled. It was easy enough to pull myself free, but, curiously, as I did so, I sensed power sleeping beneath me—not the vast, ever-present power that served Wisferon, but something local, distant, obscure. Looking more carefully, I saw that there were many of these stones, and that they were arranged in a pattern.

I took out my wand, held it straight out, and waved it in a half circle, releasing all the moisture in the grasses that grew between them. The grass turned sere, then crumbled, then a breeze blew the shattered bits away. Next I drew more moisture from the air itself, turned it into rain, and set that beating against the stone, washing them clean of dust and other debris.

As I did this, I was joined by the other stag, Saiphar, who had been watching what I was doing. “It might be wiser, *Nithaial Galgaliel*, not to wake those stones from their slumber.”

“I just wanted to see them more clearly,” I replied. “You see, there is a pattern there, formed by the stones of pink granite set among the white. Is it a rune? Do you know what it means?”

“They are called *dagmast* stones, and they are very, very old,” Saiphar replied. “The name, in fact, is that of a rune that was used in the Ancient Sorceries. It means ‘the carrier.’ The stones were laid here when the houses of Gesryma and Ra’asiel were in harmony, and wizards obedient to the one had commerce with those obedient to the other.”

“So if I stood on them and called up their power...”

“You would be whisked off to one of the great temples of Ra’asiel, and find yourself surrounded by people of the egg,” Saiphar said, completing the thought. “*If* you were able to master the power. They were not meant for the *Nithaial*, so I don’t know whether you could. What I do know is

that it would be a dangerous and foolish thing to do—thus more in keeping with your twin’s behavior than your own.”

I looked at Saiphar in shock. “Why do you say that?” I demanded, my face turning red.

The stag tossed its head and snorted. “Your companion approaches,” Saiphar said. “We should reach Gostranar just before dark.”


“Answer me, Saiphar,” I said, my anger cooled not one whit by what he had just said, nor by the sight of Páli alighting on the spot where he had left his clothing.

“Ah,” the spirit replied. “Dangerous and foolish behavior has its role in the scheme of things, you know. Why have two *Nithaial*, if both are clever and sensible and always fortunate in their doings?”

“I don’t understand,” I said.

“Which is why I thought it better not to answer you,” Saiphar replied equably. “These are questions you should address to Alcaron, Head Steward of Gostranar.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but received a reply before the words formed on my lips.

“When you meet him tonight,” Saiphar concluded. “That is, *Nithaial Galgaliel*, if you and your companion Páli would care to mount up.” 

Chapter 25



EVEN IN THE GATHERING DUSK, we knew at once when we had arrived at the outskirts of Gostranar. It was circled at a distance by a ring road, just like the tower of the necromancer Jaçazal. But here it was lined with graceful rows of cypress on either side, as was the way that led directly to the ruins.

However, we did not travel this to the end, but instead turned off onto a narrow path that soon entered a thick grove of ancient beech trees, their trunks so massive that it would take four men, arms outstretched and hands clasped, to encircle just one of them. As we passed through, their leaves began murmuring, even though the air was still. If all of Wisferon was sentient, this part of it was fully alert.

We then entered a small clearing, where the stags came to a halt.

“We leave you here in good hands,” Ouras mind spoke, “but Saiphar and I are always a mere summons away.” We dismounted and embraced them both, exhausted but

also nervous at being left alone.

Ouras sensed this, and added, “Alcaron and the others remain hidden out of deference to Saiphar and myself, and perhaps because they are timid about meeting *you*, *Nithaial*. But they are here and will greet you soon.”

And with that, both stags lifted their heads and uttered their mournful bellow, then wheeled about and vanished in the dark.

The moment they did so, fire stones began to glow, at first one, then a few, then several. Each was held by a person of great beauty, male and female both, of human shape, if somewhat slighter, but with an aura that carried with it whispering traces of power.

“Welcome to you, *Nithaial Galgaliel*, and to your beloved companion,” said a clear, musical voice, and one of the glow stones, of a delicate blue, was lifted high so that I could see the speaker. “I am named Alcaron, high steward of Gos-tranar and, above all, your humble liege.”

Many words came to mind on my first viewing of Alcaron—young, lithesome, enchanting, proud—but, pleasingly, humble was not among them. I stepped forward and embraced him, and, after the briefest of hesitations, he embraced me back.

When I stepped back, there were tears in his eyes. “We have waited ever so long for this happy moment, *Nithaial Galgaliel*, and I feel in my heart that there are happier moments yet to come.”

He turned to Páli. “Welcome to you—Shape Changer, Eagle Friend, and Companion,” he said. “Please consider me your friend and liegeman as well.” The two clasped arms.

Alcaron turned back to me. “*Nithaial Galgaliel*,” he said, “with your permission, I shall explain what you see about you until you signal that I have tired your ears, or your patience.”

I smiled. “As long as your explanation leads us at some point to a bit of supper,” I said, “please speak away.”

“We have a feast awaiting you,” he said, smiling back. “Blaeberries are hardly enough to sustain anyone.” He glanced at Páli. “And one squirrel is only marginally better. Let us take you there now, and save introductions for the table.”

He then gestured for us to follow him, lifting the glow stone even higher, but to little effect on the surrounding murk. Alcaron must have sensed this, for he spoke to one of his attendants, who quickly brought us glow stones of our own. The dimness lightened, and we could make out a path that led in the opposite direction whence we had come.

“This is the way,” Alcaron said. As we followed him, he added, “The trees do not care much for fire, so we use it as little as possible. We each carry a glow stone at night to light our way, and when we all gather together then, there is passable light.”

We passed in silence through the trees, and came into another glade, in the center of which was a long, low table, cloaked in various cloths of exquisite weave, and cov-

ered with platters holding roast meat, many different kinds of fruit, stacks of seed and honey cakes, and blown-glass bottles, each of a different and curious shape, containing beverages of equally different colors.

Other ornate cloths had been laid on the ground around the table and on these we were to sit, Páli and myself at the head of the table with two young children facing us at the other end, and Alcaron to my left. All the other places seemed to be taken by chance, with no thought of rank or privilege.

However, before we sat, each person there, excluding Páli and myself, held out their hands, the right one of each holding up their glow stone. The empty, left hand, was placed under the right hand of their neighbor, while the person on the other side did the same to them. So, all hands were joined.

Then the two children opposite to us began to sing, in clear and silvery voices, a hymn to the Blessed Gesryma. As they did so, the glow stones dimmed, and a sense of great peace flowed through the chain of hands. Fatigue and hunger were battling for my mind, so I absorbed rather than listened to the words that were being sung.

This stopped though when Páli, noticing that I was drifting, squeezed my hand hard. Startled out of my half doze, I realized with a shock that everyone at the table—except, of course, my companion—was gazing at me with the deepest of reverence. A flush began stealing up from my chest as I

listened to the words that the children were singing.

Welcome Son of the Blesséd Goddess,
To your hallowed house,
Let the rain be your blessing on us,
The wind your gentle touse...

And so the song continued. Probably in the olden days, the *Nithaial* were well accustomed to this; perhaps they even welcomed it—their lives having been disciplined so that the private and public, the human and godlike within them merged seamlessly. But I was shaken through and through.

Páli, who had linked his mind with mine even as he had squeezed my hand, in case the physical warning proved not enough, had nothing but scorn for this. “You are who you are,” his mind hissed. “It *is* all one and the same. At one moment I am the rider; at the next, the eagle.”

“But what should I do?” I groaned back, feeling myself wilt before this bombardment of worshipful affection, even as a plant shrivels under too much sun.

“Well,” Páli retorted, “why don’t you just *glow*.”

I thought for the briefest moment that he was joking, but then, as if something inside me leapt at his suggestion, I felt my body exude a shimmering blue light. I touched Alcaron’s palm, letting this power flow from me into the linked chain of hands. It went from person to person until it reached the children, and they began to glow as well. As they did, a quiet sense of awe and exultation swept through everyone there, and tears began to flow from every eye.

The hymn came to an end, the last words floated among us and drifted away, leaving behind a deep silence. I let go my hands and quelled my power. The glow stones brightened and were placed gently in silver sconces set around the table to receive them.

Everyone sat down and began to eat and drink and talk, softly at first, then with more animation—everyone that is, except for Páli and myself, who ate and drank, then ate and drank some more.

The roast meat was boar, which I had never had, the drink in the glass bottles proved to be various fruit wines, some sweet, some tart, and mead, fermented from honey, clear and golden in the glass. I glanced at Páli, who was discovering with great delight that there was more to drinking than fermented mare's milk.

I turned to Alcaron. "Although this may surprise you, High Steward, I can eat and listen at the same time, even when devouring a meal as delicious as this. So, if it please you, explain to me who you are and how you come to live here in the Holy Wood."

He smiled and bowed his head. "It is said that good talk adds zest to even the finest feast, so I am honored to comply with your request. And, as it turns out, the answers to both your questions are so entwined that it would be hard to answer one and not the other."

He paused to think for a moment. "But let me ask a question of you, first. Is it said among men that Maerdas,

the Fallen, destroyed the Houses of each of the Powers and Gostranar, the Home of All?”

I nodded. “Yes. I was told by a learned mage that razing them to the ground was the first manifestation of his absolute power—and his desire to destroy all memory of the *Nithaial*.”

All other conversation at the table had now faded entirely away, although there was a murmuring after I spoke.

“Well,” Alcaron said, “all good lies contain a grain of truth buried somewhere within them. The Houses all fell when Maerdas killed Orffëas, his twin, the *Nithaial Galgaliel* who preceded you.

“At the same time, he was forbidden entry to Wisferon, the Holy Wood, so that he could seek no comfort here from his torments—and, also, perhaps, to keep him from pursuing and killing our own ancestors in his great and terrible wrath. In response, by wile and magic, he made sure, at first, that none could enter here without his knowing. Then, as he grew more powerful, he prevented anyone from entering at all.”

Alcaron’s eyes met mine. “You are our first visitors in almost a thousand years—nine hundred and seventy-three years, four months, and sixteen days, to be exact, for Maerdas was twenty-six when he did the deed.”

“So, you were here already,” I said slowly, adding, “your ancestors, I mean.”

He nodded. “There were then two races that served the *Nithaial*. One of them, of course, was that of men. They

provided the many attendants who were charged with all forms of service, from caring for the *Nithaial* themselves to welcoming, housing, and serving guests, and performing all the many other tasks required of a great house and its even greater pair of masters.

“Then, we Waldrônur came to Gostranar to ask for asylum. We were forest dwellers who found our haunts increasingly encroached upon by the presence of men. We wished to live in the Holy Wood, undisturbed by hunters, trappers, charcoal burners, and killers of trees.

“This the *Nithaial* granted us, and, in return, we offered the fairest among us to to serve as acolytes, performing the prescribed acts of worship and singing the hymns of praise, and also simply lightening the hearts of *Nithaial* by our mere presence, for we have quiet hearts and graceful ways.”

As Alcaron said these words, my mind went back to Orien, sitting on the deck of the Tejj, telling me that he imagined that I would choose my acolytes “for the beauty of their form and of their singing voice.” If those who were sharing this meal with me now were any indication, the previous *Nithaial* had very much the same tastes.

“When Maerdas gained power,” Alcaron continued, the men who served Gostranar fled in terror, “but we Waldrônur simply vanished into Wisferon, where he could not pursue us. And here we have stayed, awaiting your return.”

“Waldrônur,” I said thoughtfully, “Those Who Speak To Trees. I have heard rumors of you, but in those tales you

are half the size of men, dress yourselves in leaves, and caper about like children — when you aren't playing mischievous tricks and stealing eggs from under the farmer's hens."

Alcaron laughed. "Well, that last part might well be true. We've always been fond of eggs. But as for the rest, memory has played its usual tricks, teasing out the essence of something, then shaping reality to conform to it. We are not as men, but the differences, at first glance, are more subtle."

I nodded. "I admit that I initially took you for human," I replied, "but even in this short time observing you, I see that your physical proportions are more pleasing, your movements more graceful, your minds more harmonious."

Alcaron laughed. "In other words, a little *too* perfect to be true." He glanced at Páli. "Although I must say I see no way in which we differ from your companion."

"That's because you barely know him," I answered, and winced from the kick I received under the table.

Once I had recovered from that and taken another swallow of the sparkling apple wine I was enjoying, I said, "I count less than three dozen of you around the table, including the children. Is this all of you?"

Alcaron shook his head. "We Waldrônur often prefer the company of trees to our own kind. Even our children wander off on their own and vanish, to emerge from the forest decades later, total strangers to us all. Only they tell their tale will we realize who they are. Other times, someone will appear who has never set foot among us before, born and raised in

some distant part of the Holy Wood.” He shook his head. “We have no idea as to how many of us there truly are. But certainly many more than you have seen this night. However, if you wish, many of them can be summoned. The debt we owe to you can never be repaid. Should you need it, we shall gather as one.”

Alcaron smiled. “Awareness of your return is already making its way through Wisferon, by tremor of root and whisper of leaf. Many will come to pay you homage, and of them any number will remain to serve you — whatever the need, be it great or small.”

I smiled in reply. “All who live here serve the purpose of the Blessed Mother, whether they know how or why. Now that I have returned, my wish is only that they find their own true way. Others can be brought here to wash the dishes.”

As I spoke these words I heard a sound, half groan, half sigh, and felt Páli slump backwards onto the ground. My eyes met Alcaron’s. “You spoke of introductions,” I said, “but it would be easier for my tired mind if all were to introduce themselves separately, as we meet. As it is, I am very sleepy, and my companion seems to be... even more so.”

There was a ripple of laughter around the table, and again I realized that everyone here had been hanging on my every word—at least those close enough to hear them.

As we rose, I touched Alcaron’s shoulder, adding, “But first summon the children who sang the hymn of welcome.”

He sent someone to get them, while we stood to the side, so that the clearing of the table—indeed, of everything

in the glade—could begin. However, the two, one a boy, the other a girl, were soon standing before me, each staring studiously at the ground.

“Now, then,” said Alcaron gently, “speak your names to the *Nithaial Galgaliel*, for he is not known to bite.”

The girl was the first to raise her head. Her face was framed by a shock of curly, chestnut-brown hair and sprinkled with freckles. I guessed that she was about ten years, or so, and her companion, slightly younger.

“I am named Krisma, your Holiness,” she said in an unhesitant voice of exquisite timbre. “And he,” she went on, nudging her companion, “is Melloras.”

The boy, hearing his name, now also looked up. His hair was a deep gold and as unruly as the girl’s. “Your singing did me great honor,” I said, “so I wish to give you a small reward. Let us hold hands again.” I held out one of mine to each of them. Summoning my power, I slowly levitated them up into the air, higher and higher, until my arms were fully extended.

I let them float there for a moment, letting go my hands so that only the tips of my fingers touched them. Then, just as slowly, I brought them down so that we were face to face. “Now, tell me, would you like to sink back to the ground, or continue floating for a bit?”

“Floating, absolutely,” answered Melloras, adding, perhaps because of a prompting glance from Alcaron, “Your Holiness.”

I remembered a conversation with Caelas held so long ago, and almost replied, "You mean 'Highest of All High,'" but stopped myself. It would take many years before they realized I was just joking.

So, I gave each of them a little push, and they went floating off toward a gaggle of their friends. These grabbed hold of them, and soon they were being drawn all about the glade, like floating chariots.

I bent down, seized hold of the unconscious Páli, and hoisted him over one shoulder, turning, when I held him fast, to Alcaron, saying, "To bed."

He, seeing what I was about, had retrieved our glow stones. "To bed," he repeated, smiling. "Please follow me."

Everything so far had been so much out of an old servant's tale that had we been led to a sleeping place high up in the spreading branches of an elm or even to one hollowed out of its trunk, I would hardly have blinked an eye. But as my eyes grew accustomed to the dark around us, I saw that there were stone cottages scattered all through the trees, and it was to one of these that Alcaron led me.

The door was already open, from which poured a welcoming light. We stepped into a well-kempt space, with a shiny wooden floor scattered with small rugs, a stone hearth in which a small fire was fluttering, chairs, a table, and many other homy things, most importantly a large bed, heaped with feather mattresses. To see it was almost enough to make me fall asleep on my feet.


Alcaron helped me strip away Páli's garments and get him tucked safely into bed. The sheets were soft beyond imagining and still fragrant with the familiar scent of the herbs a good housekeeper tucks into a blanket chest.

We heard laughing voices approaching, and then two young women came in, one bearing a large jug of steaming water; the other a wide basin heaped with a pile of toweling. The basin was set down on the floor, the toweling removed, and the steaming water poured in.

"Oresla and Nanasnia," Alcaron said, introducing them. "They would be honored to bathe you, if you so desire, or—since you may consider yourself bathed enough for one day—we can leave you to your peace."

"If they could just lift the basin onto the table," I said, "I'll be more than content."

"Blessed be your sleep, then," Alcaron replied. "The fire is a bit of magic and will take care of itself. No one will disturb you until you open the door."

The three of them bowed their heads and touched their foreheads, then went out, closing the door behind them. I was already tossing off my clothes. I went to the basin, bent down, plunged my hands into it, splashed my face clean of dinner, and toweled it dry. Ignoring the *feasinar* twigs with their crushed ends, meant for scrubbing my teeth, I stepped backwards, tumbled onto the bed, wrapped myself around Páli and a blanket around me, and hurried off to join him in the realm of dreams. 

PART SIX
~
NORTH

Chapter 26



THE TWO MULES WERE NAMED Smetna and Porro, and a fine sight Sepharan and I must have been, as we wandered from one side of the highway to the other, whenever they spotted something that tempted them to browse. Thus did we learn how to ride a mule, one lesson at a time.

Observing other mule drivers, we stopped to cut switches from a thicket, then at the first town we came to at a saddler's for blinders, and, finally, in the town beyond that, at a market stall for some carrots. The switches became bait-danglers, for appetite, being constant, proved a better motivator than a momentary sting on a tough hide. Mules, however, while stubborn, are hardly brainless, and we soon found it necessary to let them occasionally actually catch up with the carrot, and eat it.

We learned these things quickly, and by the afternoon of the first day we were proceeding at a decent—and decently straight—pace.

“The King’s High Road” the way to Tarrusor may be called, but though it marched out of Lorithar with curb-bordered, stone-paved, statue-lined elegance, it took only two or three leagues’ travel before it shriveled into a packed-earth road only slightly superior to the one I had taken east to the Forest Grymæld, in the company of Prince Lidæas ffyr Lissator.

Most trade traveled between the two cities by river, so there were no great waggons here, nor, once we had traveled a day, much traffic at all. Most of our road companions were on foot, and made up the usual complement of such company—journeymen seeking a new master to expand their craft, the down-at-luck fleeing creditors or angry spouses, the occasional troupe of mummers or solitary minstrel eking out a living by wandering from town to town, and others of that ilk.

Now and then during the day we were passed by small groups on horseback—a nobleman and his party seeking a boon from the king, or by merchants of things small and valuable, escorted by two or more armed guards. We were also occasionally overtaken by the King’s Patrol, which chased down highwaymen and other brigands who were foolish enough or too preoccupied not to hear them coming.

You can’t be raised in a family of trader-merchants and not know that no purse would be too small for those who preyed on travelers, and that Sepharan, all by himself, would be considered very desirable plunder.

So, to the boy's fury, I had his hair chopped short, then dyed it dark with nut stain. Then I rubbed dirt into his face, after I made small blots all over it and his hands with blueberry juice. This, as it faded, turned a scarlet hue and gave him the look of someone barely recovered from the pox. I, myself, with my broken body and the dirty rag wrapped around my eyes, well resisted both the covetous and even the curious—the patrols passed us by without a second glance. Whether it would keep us safe from the less particular among the brigands, only time would tell.

I observed all this through slits cut carefully into the rag bound round my eyes, although I had to discipline myself not to turn my head to watch when travelers passed us by. Sepharan, after his initial sulk, grew increasingly chatty as the day passed, whether out of boredom or his pleasure in the novelty of riding Smetna.

Much of this was the idlest sort of chatter, but it distracted me from my own gloomy thoughts, and, after his display of ingenuity and sheer brazen self-assurance, I felt I owed him as many descriptions of Rabih, his merits, his physical appearance, his many clever feats, as might be asked of me.

Alas, this infatuation with Rabih did not lessen his interest in making love with me, either out of a desire to increase his powers, sheer curiosity, or other, more complicated reasons that would take a long and careful unraveling. That I was attracted Sepharan, I had no doubt. Like Helias, like me,

he had been torn from his family when he was young, and that makes for a peculiar kind of kinship, and I think we who share it immediately recognize one another. But this very fact also led to my hesitation. After all, I had learned something from my time with Helias. As with him, there were two Sepharans, one the boy who had been “tasted” by Maerdas, and whose soul had gone into hiding.

Maerdas had done a far better job at his corruption than had Stalcas, and Sepharan, for all his youth, was not only quite at ease with his seductive powers but actively interested in exploring their extent.

If I were one who simply desired the attentions of a pleasure boy, with an eye only for his loveliness, there would be no problem. But I had no desire to stroke his body if I couldn’t also touch his heart. With Helias—well, I cling to the belief that, for the briefest of moments, I managed that. He was riddled with cracks, even fissures, that let me through.

In Sepharan, though, I found nothing like that. He offered himself for his own purposes, and to give into his wiles would mean that the other, hidden boy, would be forever beyond my reach. The result would leave a poisonously bitter taste, knowing that I would be failing Sepharan far more than myself.

Strabas the Elder has famously written that there are only two ways to teach a boy, either by beating him or seducing him, and that the latter method was by far the most rewarding. This, no doubt, has had a great effect on the re-

cruitment of tutors. But I wonder how much it has done for the educating of boys.

Claras, our family tutor, was besotted with my brother, Rosfyn, who was amused but indifferent, and as educable as a wooden board. Meanwhile, Claras barely tolerated me, the claimed child, who absorbed learning like a dry cloth wiped across a wet floor.

Looking back, I suspect that I might have been susceptible if the tutor had been swoony over me, instead. He was a lanky man, with sparse, stringy hair, and more than the hint of a stammer. Still, he had much book learning, and, on the rare occasions he revealed it, more than a touch of wit. I suspect, had he desired to, he could have played me as though I were his fiddle.

I smiled at the thought. Rosfyn would have played *him* the same way, as Sepharan was close to playing me. However, most who quote Strabas to their favor choose to forget that he instructed the tutor not to make love to the boy, which was an abuse of privilege, but to use the tension between them to draw him deeper and deeper into study, which was admirable. The occasional caress was a fine thing, but the end must always be education, not copulation.

Claras himself had taught us this, using the text as a bait in the hopes of catching Rosfyn. I learned it then but I understood it only now, and, in doing so, realized, with a pang in my heart, the sweetness of the affection between Rabi and Iannas. And that in itself was enough to keep me resisting both

Sepharan's charms and his opportuning, hoping to find a way to turn them against themselves.

Since we would be riding Smetna and Porro for many days, I was cautious in my demands on them, letting them browse every hour or so, and pause to drink when we passed by a stream. I made a pact with Sepharan that we would spend the night at an inn when there was one at hand, but we would not press on when dusk arrived in hopes of finding one.

Those who have done little traveling will be forgiven for imagining the High Road between Lorithar and Tarrusor as possessing a wealth of inns, but this was not the case. Furthermore, there were two types of these—nodhalls, which were spaced a day's walk apart, and served the needs of those who traveled on foot; and hostelries, which were spaced a day's ride apart, and served those who traveled on horseback.

By my calculations, traveling at a mule's pace, we would arrive at a hostelry around eventide every other day, and perhaps every fifth day, find ourselves outside a nodhall. I had had no experience of either, but, Alfrund, the herbalist, had dismissed nodhalls as mostly jack-itch-a-beds, often offering nothing but hay strewn in a large room, with which, for a split pence, sojourners could make their flea-ridden nests.

In consequence, I had planned that we spend the first night out of doors, in some soft, mossy spot, with a small fire to keep us company. However, my calculations hadn't taken

into account our dawdling at the saddler's, nor the condition of my joints, which, despite the much easier motion of the mules, were now throbbing with pain.

Of course, Alfrund had provided me with a powerful medicament for this, but it came with the warning that the more I used it, the less effective it would become. He advised that it would be better if we traveled only enough so that a good, soothing ointment would ease my pain and let me get my rest.

So, when we came upon the first nodhall, despite the fact that it was a ramshackle place, with sagging timbers and gaping holes in the wattle and daub, I realized I couldn't face a night outdoors. I swallowed my qualms, sending Sepharan inside to ask what accommodations might be available for travelers with more than a split pence to spend.

He, however, had the sense to accost a stable boy instead, from whom he learned that the peddlers who hawked their goods from town to town, slept with both their mule and their goods in the stable. For a pence to pass on to the innkeeper and a split pence for himself, the boy said he would make sure that we were well attended to.

The stables were behind the inn—an extension of it, actually, and I wondered if the straw passed through the back door from horse to guest, or guest to horse. But that in the stall to which we were led was clean and sweet. The boy, whose name was Clænicas, made me a soft bed of it, and helped me lie upon it.

Once Smetna and Porro were settled into the next stall, Clænias departed, and Sepharan rubbed some of Alfrund's ointment onto my aching joints. Its soothing effect brought me indescribable relief, and without even realizing what was happening, I fell into a deep and dreamless sleep.

I AWOKE WITH A START to find Sepharan kneeling beside me, a bowl of steaming pottage in his hands. This pose—and the darkness—shook me, because for a horrible moment I was convinced that I was back in Gorzungâd, and all that had happened was a dream. But, no, despite the fact that dusk had come, I could make out the shape of the stall, and certainly catch the smell of our mules, a sweet scent indeed compared to the stench of my former cell.

"It's not all that bad," Sepharan said, mistaking my reaction. "The meat, I think, is rabbit, the porridge is made of dried peas, and the cabbage pieces mixed into it are sour but not actually spoiled. The ale, on the other hand, was watered, and even the mules refused the bread."

I found I was very hungry, and began spooning it in. There was more savor to it than I imagined, since potherbs were free for the picking, but almost no salt at all.

"Did we remember to bring a salt sack?" I asked.

"Yes," Sepharan replied, "and I've already mixed some in. You can have more, of course, if you're feeling improvident."

I smiled and shook my head, asking instead, "How long did I sleep?"

“A long time,” Sepharan answered. “I spent the time with Clænicas. He showed me how to brush the mules, and give them water, and then to help him clean the stables.”

“I’ll bet he did,” I thought to myself. Gifts like that didn’t come along every day.

“So we have become fast friends,” Sepharan went on. “Later, when his tasks are done, he is going to teach me how to play pebbles and bowls. By day he is the stable boy, but by night he clears the tables and washes up.”

A look of understanding passed between us. Sepharan was playing someone else like a fiddle.

“Are we still alone in the stables?” I asked, lowering my voice.

The boy shook his head. “There are two merchants sharing the stalls with us, as well as a self-proclaimed soothsayer and performer of miracles. He plucked the split pence he gave Clænicas from the boy’s ear.”

Sepharan snickered. “Afterwards, Clænicas said that ‘if he was magician enough to take coins from my ear, he might have looked for a silver one.’ He’s no fool.”

I turned my head, this way and that, sensing the presence of the others.

To my surprise, Sepharan mind spoke, saying, “The first two are already asleep; the other is inside the inn, no doubt magicking the well water out of the ale. Even so, perhaps it would be best if we talked like this.”

He took the empty bowl from me and set it with the

wooden spoon to one side. Then he laid down beside me, resting his head on his hands.

“You’ve been learning some new tricks, yourself,” I said, replying in the same manner.

Sepharan snorted—out loud—then mind-spoke. “Tricks! It’s real magic, and it’s not easy at all. You first have to learn tell to the aura of one person from another, and then how to shape your speech so that it touches the right one. I’ve been practicing on Clænicas, and the first time I tried it the horse we were grooming almost jumped out of its stall.”

I laughed, then groaned from the stab of pain that shot through my neck. Time on the rack destroys you like nothing else. I tried a pair of crutches that Alfrund had brought, but the pain they made in my shoulder joints almost caused me to faint.

Sepharan had been tracing these thoughts, until I batted him away. Then he asked the question that had long been tormenting me. “Now that the neck band is off, isn’t your own magic starting to cure you?”

It was my turn to snort. “Maerdas drained me dry. And the power required to bring us safely through the stone floor wrung everything out of me, then some more. My prayer is that the pure flow of force at Ernfardest may be strong enough to knit my body back together. But, then again, it may not—although surely it will ease the pain.”

“Why wouldn’t it heal you?” Sepharan asked indignantly. “Magic can do anything! And you’re a *Nithaial*.”

“It would be best to not even mind speak that name,” I replied. “And magic can’t do everything, not even nearly. If I lost my arm in battle, magic couldn’t grow it back. It could give me a false one of great ingenuity that might fool others, but it would never fool me. And even there—can you imagine what it would be like to have every joint in your body suffused with magic?”

Sepharan stretched himself all over like a cat to ease his own joints, tact not being one of his strong points. “It would be like living in a dream,” he began, sounding almost wistful, when we both heard the sound of the stable doors being pushed open.

A moment later, there was the dim glow of a lantern, and a young voice, which must belong to Clænias, said, “These stalls are all vacant along here, sir—and, as you asked, close to the door.”

“They’ll do well enough,” said a strangely familiar, belligerent voice. “I have a whole pence for you if you treat them nicely, and a silver bit if you can do something else for me.”

Clænias, who must have been long used to similar overtures, replied with easy circumspection, “Anything within my humble powers, sir.”

“I am seeking two friends of mine, and think they might be staying here for the night,” the voice continued. “There are two of them, a badly crippled fellow with strange eyes, and a handsome young lad, as pert as you please. Have you seen any such?”

Clænicas paused, as if thinking. “Well, sir, I mostly see only those guests who come by horseback. There, we have some merchants, and what I suppose you would call a mountebank. But none with boys. Have you looked inside?”

“Ah, you see, I wish to surprise them,” Lamminas said, for it was certainly he, our previous host, who now spoke to Clænicas. “They must have tortured poor Dectas,” Sepharan whispered, before I could cover his mouth, for Lamminas was still speaking.

“But if *they* saw me before *I* spotted them, I couldn’t taste the pleasure of their astonishment,” he continued. There was a noise that sounded very much like a cuff to the head. “Now, could I?”

“No, no sir,” Clænicas stammered. “You want me to go into the common room, then up to the sleeping room, to look about for them, myself.”

“So you are a clever lad, after all,” Lamminas said evenly. “Good. And, as I told you, a silver bit awaits you if you find them for me. Now, they may...”

The stable door had been creaking open as he spoke, but what stopped him in mid-sentence was an explosion of noise. All the horses at that end of the stable began to rear up and frantically whinny, their hooves crashing against the stall boards. Immediately after, the merchants who were sleeping in accompanying stalls, were shouting, thinking thieves had come among them.

“By Gesryma’s holy quim!” Lamminas bellowed

above the din, “get that *thing* out of here.” Then, in answer to something we couldn’t hear, he added, “that’s because our own horses have been drugged up to their fucking nostrils!”

The noise increased, however, as one of the horses, in its panic, began to kick its way out of its stall. There was the sound of splintering wood, curses, a loud grunt, then sudden silence, followed by the thick smell of fresh blood.

“You killed it!” Clænicas cried out.

“Shut the fuck up, boy!” a furious Lamminas shouted back. “It was about to kill me, wasn’t it?”

“Only a wraith ghoul would scare the horses so!” Sepharan whispered in my ear. “They must *really* be looking for us!”

In the excitement of the moment, I had let my hand fall from his mouth. At least he had had the sense not to mind speak—I was already using all the power I had to block any sense of our presence.

I shook my head. “They can’t stay now,” I whispered back, “unless they’ve brought the king’s men with them.”

There was a rush of feet as Clænicas went running past our stall, followed immediately by the thud of a dagger or other heavy knife burying itself into a post. Our former host must have thrown it after him, and missed.


“Shit, shit, shit, shit,” Lamminas swore. Then, speaking to someone else, continued, “I *know* they’re hiding in that fucking inn. Let me dash in and find ’em.”

“And kill everybody in the place?” a strange voice

asked. “It’ll come to that. They’re as roused as a nest of wasps. And your friends have doubtless had the sense to run off into the woods. Let’s get clear of this place, ride on a bit, and wait for morning. Whether they ride on or head back, they won’t escape us.”

There was a coarse laugh, and another voice added, “We’ll turn Sniffer loose. Nothing gets by *it*. Certainly not those two. It’ll hunt them down no matter where they run.”

There were grunts of assent, the sound of horses being mounted, then shouts as the riders burst out of the stable, riding their way through the crowd that had gathered outside to help catch the supposed horse thieves.

The wraith ghoul must have revealed itself, for there were cries of terror and the sound of men scattering in all directions, as the riders vanished into the night. 

Chapter 27



I DECIDED THAT OUR SAFEST COURSE was to stay just where we were until morning, but it was a while before I was able to sleep. First, there was the removal of the dead horse, no easy task, even for several men. Then there was a row between the merchants and the landlord, which served no purpose, since the landlord wasn't to blame for what happened and the merchants hadn't been robbed. But they had been scared near to death, and now needed someone on whom to vent their fury.

The moment that this was over, Clænias snuck into our stall, dragging Sepharan away to help him pull the dagger out of the post. I heard them both grunting as they struggled with it, then the thud, followed by laughter when it suddenly gave way and they both fell in a heap onto the floor. The last thing I heard before I sank into a doze was the sound of their fading voices. Despite all the excitement, neither was prepared to forgo the game of pebbles and bowls.

Nor did I feel any surprise when, on awakening at

the first hints of dawn, I found Sepharan sound asleep beside me, a satisfied smile on his face and an ugly and well-worn dagger lying on the straw by his side. Apparently, he had mastered the game very quickly.

I caught the sound of light footsteps approaching, and in a moment Clænicas slipped into the stall. Our eyes met, and his widened in astonishment. I cursed myself—the bandage over my eyes had slipped off during my sleep, and I wasn't yet used enough to its presence to have noticed.

Well, there it was. I made a motion toward Sepharan. "He's sound asleep," I said, keeping my voice quiet, "but if you've come to get your dagger back, take it."

Clænicas gave it a quick, longing glance, but said, "He won it fair and square. No, Master, I wish to speak to you."

I patted the straw on the side of me opposite to Sepharan, and the boy came and sat there. He had level, intelligent eyes, set into a not unpleasing if not especially clean face. His body was hardy and there was no cringe about him—the innkeeper might not be the best of hosts, but he seemed to treat his servants fairly enough.

"We owe you a great debt," I said, "for not giving us away to those intruders—at the very least the silver bit you were offered to betray us."

Clænicas's face brightened. "Many thanks, Master, although he would have learned nothing from me, even if he had promised me a bag of gold. He was the sort who would give it to me just for the pleasure of seeing my dismay when

he took it back again.”

“That’s Lamminas to the very eyebrow,” I thought to myself, but merely nodded in reply. Seeing that Clænius was still staring at my eyes, I said, “I’m under an evil enchantment. You’ve already guessed that I’ve been tortured.”

This statement clearly impressed him—both because it took him into our confidence and greatly raised Sepharan and myself in his estimation.

He nodded gravely. “You escaped, assisted by Sepharan, and now they are pursuing both of you.” He glanced over me at the sleeping boy beside me. “I saw through his disguise at once. Is he really a prince? Under his clothes, he is as delicate and pale as one.”

“You are close enough,” I replied, “in all your surmises. But the less you know, the less danger for all of us. In any case, was this what you came to speak to me about?”

The boy shook his head ruefully. “I near forgot,” he admitted. He paused to collect his thoughts. “What you have just told me, I think, will make what I have to say all the more interesting. The horse that was killed last night belongs to Ormaël, a traveling mountebank, who performs magic and tells fortunes to the credulous.”

The boy glanced at me to make sure that I was following all this. Assured by my nod, he continued. “Ormaël has stayed with us many times, and he and I have become friends. He has even taught me some secrets that none but his guild are allowed to know.”


Then, thinking I might be shocked by this, added, “Of course, I’m sworn to secrecy. As I shall consider myself to be regarding all I have heard from you.”

We were interrupted by a loud neighing several stalls away, followed by the soothing voice of a merchant as he tossed a saddle over the animal’s back.

Clænicas had instinctively started to jump to his feet, but then sank back. “I have to get to my chores,” he said. “The thing is—Ormaël has a covered cart but no horse, and you have two mules but no place to hide from your pursuers.” He said no more, but made the common gesture for a deal—one hand clasping the other—followed by a questioning look.

“It is you who are the prince,” I said. “When you have a chance, send him to talk with me. You must already have a reason to think that he might entertain such a bargain.”

“Ormaël is also someone who is more than he seems,” Clænicas replied, tossing over his shoulder as he hurried away, “But that you shall see for yourself.”

 RMAËL WAS ACCOMPANYING CLÆNICAS when the boy brought us our breakfast. This he passed to me, gave Sepharan a light kick, and went away, making no introductions. The mountebank settled himself easily into the straw across from us, and I regarded him curiously. I had decided not to bind my eyes, but rather pull my hood up so that in the dim light of the stable it would obscure my face.

To be honest, I had expected to meet a greasy-voiced charlatan with the smell of bad ale about him. But the man

who was now sitting across from me was lean and serious, with penetrating dark eyes and a sharp visage. This was emphasized by a head of dark close-cropped hair, matched by the rough stubble about his mouth and chin, and tempered by the cool amusement with which he said, "The bread is almost edible when it is well sopped."

He nodded to our bowl, in which chunks of the same floated in a murky but steaming broth. "You had both better eat it while the heat can still make up for the absence of savor. I am content to sit and wait."

Sepharan, who had been shaking himself awake, seemed unsurprised by our new companion. He burrowed into one of our packs, produced the salt sack, and blessed the dripping bread with a sprinkling of it.

The bowl was not large, and Sepharan and I, both quite famished, made short work of its contents. It was only while wiping my face with my sleeve that I remembered I had not offered to share it with our guest, and apologized.

Ormaël waved a dismissive hand. "When you have stayed in this establishment more than once, you learn to bring your own provisions. I broke my fast accordingly."

He then leaned forward. "Clænias has vouched for you and told me that you and I are in a position to do each other a favor. But I have only to meet you to know that my cost, should I accept the arrangement, is considerably higher than yours. What have you to say about that?"

As he spoke, I had made a decision about Ormaël,

and so pushed back my hood. His eyes, like Clænias's, widened when he saw mine, but, unlike the boy, he regarded them with thoughtful curiosity.

"I will answer any reasonable question," I answered him, "but before I do, let me ask one of you. You would not succeed at your art without possessing keen powers of observation and the mental acuity to make use of them. Looking at me now, what do you see?"

Ormaël smiled slightly. "And from my response, *you*, obviously, have the ability to perceive how much you can trust me. Well, fair enough. I see someone who has fallen into the hands of a torturer. Who is heavily weighted with magic, and with the power to keep that hidden. Who has a young companion who also has powers which he is not at all adept at hiding—it was through him that I gathered the extent of your own.

"And finally, I see someone who is being hotly pursued, but not, it seems, by agents of the king. That being so, I must ask myself, in deep puzzlement, whether it is The Unnameable One who is after you. And, if it is He, I continue to wonder, how you could ever have escaped from His clutches? Rumor has it that He somehow has managed to renew His waning powers, and sent fresh terror to wander through the land. Is it possible that you have brought this about, somehow, yourself?"

Sepharan raised himself so his mouth was beside my ear. "*We should kill him right now,*" he whispered.

Ormaël stared coldly at the boy, then turned his head to me. “You should teach the boy not to speak until spoken to,” he said, “or someone else may feel obliged to do it.”

Sepharan, however, was not one to roll up in a ball when snarled at. “I can hold my tongue when I need to,” he spit back, “but not when some vagrant warlock chooses to taunt us.”

There was a sudden, blurred motion, then a loud *thwack* as two daggers simultaneously sank into the board behind Sepharan’s head, a blade pressing against each of his ears. One of the mules in the stall beside us gave out a bleating cry, and moved hurriedly away from the wall.

I looked at Sepharan to make sure he was undamaged, then turned back to Ormaël. “Daggers are not what a mountebank is supposed to have up his sleeve,” I said curtly. “So—you frighten him for being right? For recognizing you for what you are?”

“Actually, I prefer the term ‘traveller,’” Ormaël said mildly. “And I wasn’t taunting you or the boy, because my suppositions were only that—up until now.”

He paused and glanced at Sepharan, who had become very, very still. “As for scaring him, he’ll now know what happens when you take an idle jab at a wolf. Because, make no mistake, that is exactly what I am.”

As he said this, I could feel his mind probing at my own, persistently, cleverly, like a squirrel trying to coax a last bit of nutmeat from its shell.

We sat in silence for a moment, each of us digesting what we had just learned. Although reason would have me get us as far from Ormaël as I could, instinct whispered that a wary, suspicious, and dangerous ally was just what we needed at the moment.

It was Ormaël who spoke first. “I, too, have just come from Lorithar, where the talk everywhere is that Daughters of the Moon have declared the time of the *Nithaial* has come to an end. They have even produced a babe that they say was sent by the Holy Mother to succeed them.”

“I wish the infant much luck,” I said. “She’ll need every bit of it.”

“No, not ‘she,’” Ormaël said, “at least not yet.”

He was referring to the fact that boy witch children have the choice at the age of twelve of changing their sex or being declared warlocks, then cast out of home and family, to survive, if they can, on their own. Since there was a bounty on their heads, few managed to do so. If Sepharan was right, though, Ormaël was one of them.

“And why are you telling this to me?” I asked.

“I wondered if you had heard it, too,” he answered easily. “Because this infant is rumored to be your son—if, indeed, you will admit to being the *Nithaial Elimiel*.”

Sepharan, who had been very slowly easing himself down and out from under the two daggers, gave out an audible gasp.

“If you know that much,” I said, “you know that su-

pernatural beings are incapable of fathering babies.”

Ormaël nodded. “So they say. But these are strange times—very strange times. There are others who declare that the father is a wizard named Helias—but then wizards aren’t supposed to be able to sire children, either.”

He shrugged. “Either way, this heresy has been sweeping across the Kingdom, attracting as it does an increasing number of adherents. The temple hierarchs are furious, but—and this is most curious of all—The Unnameable One has so far permitted its spread.”

“You mean Maer...,” but Ormaël interrupted me with a sharp gesture. “The enchantment against speaking His real name may have been broken, but with His new powers, who knows how long that will be so? Better to be safe, especially because He certainly knows when anyone speaks it. Why attract attention?”

“Indeed,” I replied. “That’s something we risk every moment we linger here. So, tell me, Traveller, with all this now in the open, are you willing to give us a place in your cart in exchange for our mules? If so, we can continue this discussion, later, in some place of relative safety.”

He had long since stopped his probing, and wasn’t prepared when I took a firm grip onto his own mind. I showed him my strength, then released him.

“Or, if not,” I continued, “are you planning to prevent us from leaving on our own? Because, one way or the other, the time has come to show us exactly what’s in your purse.”

He shook his head. “No, *Nithaial*, it is time to show me what’s in yours. You have yet to answer my question.”

“Fair enough,” I said. “What you said about the cost to you is quite true. But now that we’ve met you, I can see you could easily afford to buy a new horse for your cart, if it came to that. So, something else must have drawn you.”

He nodded slightly. “That part’s been satisfied,” he replied. “I wondered who you might be, and now I know.”

Again I made to reply, and again Ormaël lifted his hand to forestall it. “Curiosity brought the mouse to the cat,” he said, “and maybe it’s true that you have the power to kill me. But if you do—and if the secret histories are to be believed—you also have a gift to offer that would well repay me to come to your rescue. Something methinks your companion has already benefited from.”

This time Sepharan jumped to his feet, his eyes blazing. He pointed his finger at Ormaël and shouted, “*Prescast wearun difernost*.”

Ormaël looked at him in astonishment, then burst out laughing. “Not the wisest spell to cast in a stable, little idiot,” he said, when he had his breath back. “But spoken like a true mage. If we can be friends, I can teach you some better ones than that.”

The effect that this offer had on Sepharan was as powerful as it was instantaneous. His body, which had been rigid with fury, suddenly softened, like that of a barking dog’s surprised by a friendly pat.

Ormaël's eyes met mine, and he offered me by mind touch what he was feeling about this exchange, which was simply affectionate amusement.

"As you both have correctly surmised," he said, "I have adopted the guise of an indigent oracle and miracle monger to gull the watchers, snitchers, and delators who are everywhere. I know this because I am one myself—a private intelligencer, selling what I discover by stealth to those who pay the most to learn it." He shrugged. "These days, even a warlock must pay his way. Now, at least, you know the worst."

"Your every statement makes me want to distrust you the more," I replied.

He nodded. "As you should. I *am* wicked, without a doubt. But I'm not evil—and I owe no allegiance to the witch-clan, I can swear you that."

He stood up, wrapping his black cape tightly about his body. "In any case," he concluded, "you don't have to say 'yes.' All I need to hear for the nonce is that the answer isn't 'no.'"

I returned his glance, feeling Sepharan straining to keep himself from answering for me.

"It isn't 'no,'" I said. The boy gave a glad shout, jumped to his feet, and began pulling the daggers free.

HERE WERE MATTERS TO ATTEND TO. Clænius was summoned to adjust the cart's harness so that Porro could draw the cart. Then, Ormaël hoisted me up in his arms as easily as if I were a child and carried me out to

where it waited. There, he laid me gently in the bed of straw, neatly tucked inside a blanket that Sepharan had prepared for me. At the same time, the two dagger wounds in Smetna's flank were examined and cleaned.

"It's a good thing she didn't see which one of you threw them," Clænicas remarked as he smeared on an ointment made of *heällemot*. "Horses never forget but they do forgive, whereas mules never forget *and* never forgive."

"When we're out on the road, then, I'll tell her it was you who did it," Ormaël replied. "You have more practice than I in dodging mule kicks."

Clænicas glanced up and smirked. "Not for long, I'll wager. I can tell she's sizing you up."

Ormaël, who was at that moment feeding Smetna a carrot and stroking her nose, merely snorted. When the boy was done, the warlock took his hand and spilled silver into it. "Hide this away someplace where you can lay your hands on it at a moment's notice," he admonished the boy. If that crew returns here, flee at once, and flee far."

The two embraced, and then, seeing Clænicas's longing glance, Sepharan hugged him, too, whispering something in his ear as he did so that made the boy blush.

"Your little friend doesn't waste any time, does he?" Ormaël muttered to me as he tied Smetna's halter to a ring on the back of the cart. The two mules would have to spell each other, for the cart had no harness that could take two animals to draw it at once.

Finally, Ormaël untied and unrolled the painted canvas sides, on which were painted all sorts of magical symbols surrounding a figure with deep-sunk eyes, a long, white beard, and a hand held searchingly over his eyebrows. He fastened these down, leapt up into the driver's seat, and reached down to haul Sepharan up to sit beside him.

Then he snapped the reins, the cart shuddered, and we began to move, first from out behind the stable where the cart had been left, then out of the inn's yard entirely and onto the King's high road, heading north. The cart took the road more easily than the waggon from Gorzungâd, and my pallet made me even easier. I could travel a great distance, if I could lie like this.


Ormaël turned and stuck his head into the cart.

"I forgot that Clænicas rather skimped the introductions," he said. "By what name should I address you?"

"My name is Niccas," I answered in confusion. "You are welcome to call me that."

"Indeed, I shall not," he said, "unless you would like me to paint 'herein travels the *Nithaial Elimiel*' under the portrait of the soothsayer."

"I understand," I replied. "I once learned to respond to the name of Jaemas, and still could, I think."

Ormaël nodded. "Jaemas. Good enough. But prepare yourself to be presented if necessary as 'Mafatynas the Mysterious,' and to act accordingly." He smiled. "Sepharan and I are but your humble servants, Master." 

Chapter 28



THE CART RATTLED ALONG THE HIGH ROAD, the outside world a shadow play that flickered across its eastern canvas wall. The cart's jouncing was painful but it was bearable pain, and for the first time since our escape I had enough time by myself to sort out my thoughts.

These lingered sadly for a moment on the fate of Dectas, the servant boy who had helped us in Lorithar. Alfrund, the herbalist, had said he would spirit him away from Lamminas and take him on as an assistant. But something had gone wrong—perhaps Dectas had slipped back to say goodbye to someone or to retrieve a prized possession, and had been seized. And if Dectas had been made to talk, Alfrund has already had some unwelcome visitors.

That Lamminas was among our pursuers could be only by orders from Gorzungâd. He couldn't desert his post on his own, even to pursue the purseful of silver that Sepharan had guiled from him—although he would, no doubt,

take great pleasure in retrieving it.

In any case, it was Lamminas alone who concerned me, because he knew exactly what we looked like. There was little doubt that we would meet that party on the road, and I needed to think out now what I should do if Ormaël was unable to talk us past them without their searching the cart.

I rolled over onto my side, and examined my environs more carefully. The canvas side opposite to the one with the portrait of the soothsayer was painted on the inside, most craftily, to fool the eye into seeing curtains, folds and all. These were as if parted slightly in the center, revealing a deep blue night sky with a full moon and a scattering of stars. The moon had the face of a woman in it, her eyes shut, her expression one of someone lost in dreams.

The floor of the cart, I now saw, was designed to be a sort of cabinet turned on its side. There were many small doors there, their hinges set flush with the floor, that opened by means of brass pull rings. I rolled onto my side, pulled open the one nearest to me, and began to explore. I suddenly understood what I had to do.

SURE ENOUGH, we had traveled no further than a league or two from the inn when there was a sudden sound of horse hooves all about us, even as Ormaël reined Porro in, and the cart ground to a halt.

“Where are you headed, mountebank,” demanded a gruff voice. “And how come you to have a surfeit of mules?”

“We are traveling to the next village, my lord,” said

Ormaël in reply, “and I obtained the mules in exchange for my horse, which was slain last night at the nodhall just behind us.”

“That was a generous exchange,” remarked the other, “two mules for a dead horse. Old Jorfas must be losing his grip.”

“The innkeeper had no claim to them,” Ormaël replied, “and their owners had fled into the woods. He just wanted to put an end to a difficult situation.”

“Enough of this chatter!” said another voice. “Sniffer sought the two in those woods all last night.”

“Hold your tongue!” snapped the first. “Sniffer’s not back yet, so who knows what success it had.”

“Probably gorging itself on some poor farmer’s cow,” said yet another voice. “I’ve never seen anything with such a hunger for blood.”

“Be glad it’s not you,” snarled the first voice. Then, speaking to Ormaël, “Did you see the two of them in the inn?”

“Aye,” Ormaël replied. “A cripple huddled in a thick cloak, accompanied by a saucy lad as pretty as this one here is poxy.”

“That’s them, all right,” said a voice that was clearly Lamminas’s. “And did you tell them their fortunes?” he asked, with a sneer in his voice.

“They sat apart from the rest of us, and wanted no company, least of all from a prognosticator,” Ormaël replied.

“But their doom was like a black cloud over their heads—although for themselves or for others, I know not.”

“Sniffer will answer that for you,” came the reply. “Let us see what you have in the cart.”

“Our master rests in there,” Ormaël said, cautiously. “It isn’t always wise to disturb him.”

“Your master! So there are *three* of you?”

“Oh, aye,” Ormaël answered. “That’s his portrait on the scrim. Mafatynas the Mysterious. Him to scry, me to hawk the curing tonics, and the boy here to serve us both and tend to the mules.”

“Well, well,” said Lamminas. “Let’s have our fortunes told, boys, what d’ya say?” There were grunts of assent, then the snick of a dagger being pulled from its sheath. Speaking to Ormaël, he added, “If we like them, I’ll cross your palm with coin. If we don’t, I’ll cross your throat with steel. Fair enough? Now, get on with it.”

I heard the sound of the straps being unbound, the creak of the roller as the covering was raised, then a gasp of astonishment. I was sitting on my pallet, wrapped in a threadbare robe of dark blue, onto which had been stitched a multitude of stars and several crescent moons.

A scrying mirror lay on the floor in front of me, and I held one hand over it, using my power to cause a pulsating rose-colored globe of light to float on its surface. The gasps, however, no doubt were elicited by my gaping eye sockets, from which fresh rivulets of blood oozed down my face.

The rose-colored globe turned a darker red, and formed itself into the face of a fiend. “Lamminas, Lamminas,” it croaked, “you have failed at your task. Through your stupidity, your prey has escaped. Run if you wish—Sniffer cares not whether you are its midsup or its dinner.”

As I had the fiend speak these words, I slipped into the mind of each of them, planting a seed of panic. Lamminas tried to speak, but I choked his tongue.

“You can do nothing,” I had the fiend chortle. “*Nothing*.” I then caused the hand holding the dagger to burn as if the flesh had caught fire. And, indeed it had, for the stench was there for all to smell. The knife had barely struck the ground before the men all scattered, leaping on their horses and riding away in all directions into the surrounding woods.

In a moment, only one horse was left—the drugged animal that Sniffer rode, when the thing wished to pass for human.

There was a short silence, then the sound of someone scrambling into the cart—Sepharan. He threw his arms around me. “That was so amazing, Niccas!” he cried. “And those eye sockets—they fool me still! Can I try them on?”

“You don’t understand, boy,” Ormaël answered for me—as he had to, for I was in the midst of passing out. His voice was thick with incredulous dismay. “The *Nithaial Elimiel* has somehow managed to pluck out his own eyes.”

WHEN I CAME TO, I was lying in someone's arms. Ormaël's. My head lay against his shoulder, and he held me gently, but firmly enough to keep me from moving when the cart bounced over a stone. My body was shaking, as though I had a fever. The shock to my body had been terrible—much worse than the pain. I am used to pain, even horrible, mind-wringing pain.

I felt for one of his hands, and held it fast. "We're moving faster than before," I murmured.

"We are," Ormaël replied. "I undid all of Clænia's hard work, and hitched the wraith ghoul's horse to the cart. The more the drug wears off, the faster it goes, and little wonder. As for the ghoul itself, without its mount, I doubt that it will chase after us. It is much more likely to go after Lamminas."

Ormaël shuddered. "But it's you I want to talk about. I treated your eye sockets as best I could. Each is now packed with a bit of cloth soaked in a curative."

I managed a smile. "One of your own?"

He squeezed my hand. "You mean those compounded by Mafatynas the Mysterious, out of twenty-seven different secret herbs and medicaments?" he asked. "No, those are mostly distilled spirit tempered with honey and bitters. I did you better than that."

I felt, rather than listened to, his words, comforting in their ordinariness, where I was now thrust into a new and rather frightening world. Well, that wasn't quite true. It had

always been there in the back of my mind, but now it was everywhere—an infinite space, swirling with energy, which constantly formed itself in concentrated nodes, which then unfolded and faded away.

I already knew that these nodes were the force's way of communicating with me, or perhaps my way of communicating with it... it was impossible to tell. It would take several lifetimes to feel at ease in this landscape, but already I was practised in moving about in it—whenever I mind touched someone, for example, or caused my power to affect them. One of those nodes would link me with Iannas, and probably another with Jessan, if I wanted that. But it would be dangerous to wander far afield without a guide.

“Can you tell me why you did such a terrible thing?” Ormaël had asked that question a while ago, and it remained, floating in my head, until I noticed it and chose to answer.

I sighed, and started to shake my head. Terrible thing! What in my life recently hadn't been terrible? When I saw Iannas's crumpled body in the Eye of Knoltan, I also saw the beginning of my doom, although it had taken me much more suffering before I accepted it. But Ormaël deserved to know, and perhaps he could explain it to Sepharan better than I could myself.

“My only goal now is to reach Ernfordast,” I said, my voice only a little louder than a whisper. “The one thing that can surely stop me now are the wraith ghouls. Up until now, I have been lucky, partly because they are not used to

this world, and partly because the necromancers who summoned them were not skilled in using them.

“However, now He Whose Name Cannot Be Spoken has a horde of them at His command. And He sent them into the caverns beneath Gorzungâd, where they used their powers to merge with creatures who—at night at least—can trick others into perceiving them as human. Even when I was whole and with all my forces at my command—and a wand with which to wield them—I could not defeat even one of them. What could I do now against many?”

As I had been talking, I had freed my hand from Ormaël’s own and slid it under his shirt, reaching up until I found one of his nipples and, pressing that against my palm, closed my fingers around the solid muscle of his breast. The moment I did so, the shaking eased. I just lay like that, breathing in his thick, musky scent, feeling him freeing the wards around his mind and taking me in.

“At the bottom of the greatest weakness,” he murmured, “sometimes unimaginable strength can be found.”

I nodded. “So it may be. By taking my own sight, I have pushed aside my bodily life and taken residence in the hidden world of the powers. Not only am I not distracted by the visible world, but the loss of vision has made the spirit realm far more apparent to me. Soon, it will become *my* world, and the other one a place I visit through your eyes or Sepharan’s, as I need to.”

It was true. They say that a blind person suddenly

given sight can initially perceive only a maze of vague shapes and dazzling lights. Their eyes, although now working, still have to learn to see. Such an effort is so exhausting that after an hour or so, they often have to cover their eyes. Only sleep offered me that sort of refuge, and I realized I desperately needed it—*now*.

I AWOKE TO FIND SEPHARAN SOUND ASLEEP on one side of me, and Ormaël asleep on the other. A cool breeze gently flapped the cloth sides of the cart, bringing in with it the sweet smells of the night.

Sepharan stirred, seized hold of my hand, then lifted his head to whisper in my ear. “Do you want the piss jug?” he asked.

A very practical question, and, of course, I suddenly realized I did. “Yes,” I whispered back.

“I thought you might,” he said, pleased at his thoughtfulness. “It was hard enough for you before.”

Sepharan helped me use it, then rolled over and, pushing the cloth scrim aside, emptied its contents onto the ground, setting the jug down beside him with a thud.

He turned again to my ear. “Niccas,” he whispered sternly into it, “you scared me to death.”

I smiled, despite myself. “I’m sorry,” I whispered back.

“Well, Ormaël said you *had* to do it,” he said. “And that I was to serve as your eyes from now on.”

Since he didn’t sound unhappy at the idea, I nudged

him and asked, “Think you can manage that?”

The boy considered the question. “Hmm,” he said finally, “I don’t think I can do the whole five hundred years. Eventually, we’ll have to find you someone else.”

“I’m sure you’ll choose just the right person,” I said. “But right now we can both go back to sleep.”

I slept and woke and slept some more, all while the days slipped by and the cart continued on its way to Tarrusor. My waking periods were short and exhausting, my sleeping was full of terrifying dreams. At a certain point, though, I could barely tell them apart.

There is no way to make words directly convey what I experienced; conveying how the People of the Egg see the world was nothing compared to this. After all, they see, hear, and listen, just as we do. But the world which I now explored was never meant to be experienced by touching or seeing or hearing. My mind struggled, then struggled harder to make sense of this rush of mental sensation, to apprehend shapes that it knew were there, but which it couldn’t make any sense of, try as it might.

Then it occurred to me to think of what I was doing as what an artist might, if he had shape and color and light, as well as sound and smell and taste to work with—to apply these things to this world instead of trying to find them there. So I spread out my hands and spread the color green across the plane that flowed around and beyond me—and suddenly, there it all was, spread before me, reaching in ev-

ery direction as far as the eye could see.

Unlike a field of grass, or even a painted scene, however, this plane was in constant motion. Ripples surged across it, whorls suddenly opened up here and there, swirling pits without bottom, that closed again just as suddenly. There was not just one green, either, but multiple shades, some resolutely distinct, others melding subtly with their neighbors. And I had only to tip my head, to become aware of another plane of force that intersected with this one.

I made that one blue. It was like but not at all the same as the green one, less agitated, moving around me in a slow circular pattern, with parts of it eddying off into complex movements of their own. And, as I stared across it, I felt the horizon shifting—now this blue plane was the level one, while the green one now tilted at an alarming angle.

At first, I thought myself to be stationary, the still center in all of this. But as my perceptions sharpened, I realized that this was an illusion—that I, too was in constant motion, sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly, over distances that were unconnected to those that existed in the physical world.

For example, I came to sense the nearness of a great flow of force, and, concentrating on it, found that it had acquired a visible if colorless clarity, and the same smell as the sweet, crisp mountain air that I had flown through with Dracon Wælfyra when we skirted the Wall of the World. I had found Wethrelad, and the Spirit of the Air!

From there, I quickly found my way to Faeÿstirran,

and found to my joy that I could immerse my spirit—although, alas, not my physical body—in the flow of force there, and as it filled me, I began to radiate a brilliant red light, which sent tendrils of color radiating in all directions.

But, perhaps, all this was now a dream, for a golden shape suddenly formed beside me, took on the appearance of Sepharan—if he had been dipped into molten gold. His hand reached out and gently shook me, the colors faded, everything was black, and when I strained to see, all that appeared in my vision was a network of blood vessels, floating haphazardly before me.

I felt for Sepharan, found his knee, and held onto it. “What is it?” I asked, although my nose already told me that he had brought me something to eat.

“Supper,” he replied. “Stewed barley with mutton.”

“Help me up,” I said. Sepharan set a folded cloth into my lap, and placed on this a large shallow dish. Finally, he folded my fingers around the handle of a spoon. By bending over the bowl and letting what spilled fall back from where it came, I made a passably good job of the meal. Sepharan hadn’t mentioned the bits of turnip and the chopped onion grass—all in all, it was very passable, and I was voraciously hungry.

“There’s some bread to mop up the last bits,” Sepharan said at last, when I was vainly scraping the bowl in search of those very things. I set the spoon down, took the crust, and polished the bowl with it.

“Where are we?” I asked, my mouth still full. I heard

voices and knew we were outside an inn, but there seemed to be more than that, as well.

“In a market town,” Sepharan said, with the unimpressed voice of someone who had seen Lorithar. “It’s called Falmest—or something. The important thing is that it’s but a day’s ride from Tarrusor.”

“And where is Ormaël?” I asked. I felt foolish to be so out of it that I had to ask these questions. But Sepharan seemed to find nothing strange about them.

“In the inn, asking things,” the boy replied. “He’s already discovered that there’s a track that cuts off to the northeast on the far side of town. The plan is that if you—well, ‘returned to us’ is the phrase Ormaël used—by tomorrow morning, he would ride the horse into the city and attend to some business there, while we would take the cart, drawn by Smetna and Porro, along the track, bypassing Tarrusor entirely. Then he would take the east road from there and catch up with us.”

I digested this. I was finding it hard to keep myself in the physical world, so drab and dark, when the spirit world drew me so powerfully. This, I had to admit, was dangerous, even if my most important tasks would be accomplished there. And it would be wrong of me to abandon Sepharan.

“How long have I been... like this?” I asked.

“Well, almost four days since I talked to you last, and handed you the piss jug. Speaking of which...” His voice trailed off into an unspoken question.

“No, not now—I feel dry as a bone. Four days! I’m sorry, Sepharan. Was I delirious?”

He shook his head, forgetting that I couldn’t see him. But he sat close enough to me for me to sense it.

“Sometimes you seemed awake, but you weren’t, really. Other times you were asleep—that’s when you muttered and groaned. But you never spoke to us, or responded when we shook you.” He quickly added, “Not hard, of course. But Ormaël said we had to get water into you somehow. So, we took turns wetting a cloth and squeezing it, so that water dribbled into your mouth.”

“I could use a good drink now,” I said.

Sepharan took the bowl from my hands and set a jug into them. When I sniffed its contents before I drank, he laughed. “Niccass! It will be some time before I play a prank like *that* on you.”

I shook my head, but I was too busy drinking to explain. For this sort of thing, my nostrils had become my eyes. And, indeed, I could smell the clay of the jug and the well from which the water had come. I drained the vessel and returned it to Sepharan.

“Back to sleep?” he asked, gamely but not happily.

“No,” I said. “Enough of that for now. Talk to me. Do you like Ormaël? Do you trust him?”

Sepharan thought this over. “Did you know that panthers will kill their male cubs, if the mother isn’t there to protect them?”

I laughed, and it was a good feeling. “It’s like that, is it?” I asked. “But, silly boy, *I’m* your mother.”

He giggled. “I hadn’t thought of that. I guess you are. But what I meant was that when you’re awake, we’re all a kind of family. But when you withdraw, and it’s just him and me, something changes, and I’m alone in a cage with a half-tamed savage animal.”

He paused again. “But, with you, yes, I trust him. He’s very devious and reserved, but not in a bad way. Just in a dangerous way.”

“You can learn a lot from him, then,” I said, more to flatter Sepharan than anything.

He nodded again, and I could taste his seriousness. “If he would just let me,” he said.

I reached out and felt for his hand. When I found it, I said, “You told me that he had explained to you why I took my sight. Do you have any questions he didn’t answer?”

“Yes!” the boy said. “The most important one!”

“What do you mean?” I asked, genuinely confused.

“How you *did it*,” Sepharan said. “He didn’t think to ask. I can’t imagine why. It was the *first thing* I wanted to know.”

I almost laughed again, but I checked myself. It was really nothing to laugh about. “Iannas told me about how it happened to him when I first met him. Just like you, I wondered. I imagined him being seized as a child and...” I shook my head. “But it was nothing like that.”

“It is a ceremony. When he was ready to be initiated into the circle of foreseers, he was washed in special waters, and came and kneeled before a golden chalice. He opened his eyes as wide as he could, and willed his eyeballs to fall out.”

I turned my head toward him, regardless that I couldn't see his face.

“There's nothing holding them in, you know, except your eyelids. Even a violent sneeze can dislodge them, in some people, anyway. So, he struggled and struggled, and at the right moment, his sponsor struck him suddenly on the back of his head, and out they fell, hanging at the end of their nerves.”

I answered Sepharan's question without his having to ask it. “Yes, he could still see—right up to the moment when they were cut off with a slash of a knife, and fell into the chalice. Iannas said he heard them when they hit. It wasn't a soft sound, either, but more like two peeled boiled eggs.”

“What happened to them?” Sepharan asked, in a voice where horror mingled with utter fascination.

“To his? As I remember, they were doused with de-natured spirit and set alight. When the fire burnt itself out, the chalice held two jewels. But there was no pretense of magic. Iannas said that his sponsor had placed them in the chalice before the ceremony. The spirit of his eyes was said to pass into them, and these were the two stones he treasured most.”

“All right,” Sepharan said impatiently, “then what

happened to yours?”

I shrugged. “Ask Ormaël. They’re probably still in the scrying bowl. That’s where they fell when I cut them loose. And after that, of course, I couldn’t see.”

“I was here when he put that away,” Sepharan said. “Let me look....” There was the sound of one of the flaps on the floor being pulled open, then a grunt of disappointment. “The bowl is empty,” he reported with chagrin, “and wiped clean.” Another flap was lifted, slammed shut, and so on, until I heard a little cry of triumph, and the clink of glass.

“He put them in here,” the boy said. Then, remembering I couldn’t see—that, in fact, he was holding my eyes in his hand—added, apologetically, “in a small glass flask.”

I was getting annoyed with this game. “And what do you want me to do now?” I asked. “Pop them back in?”

“Niccas!” Sepharan exclaimed, in a hurt voice. “They have *power*. Don’t you dare discard them! There’s a *reason* why your eyes took this shape.”

“Maybe that’s why I plucked them out,” I retorted.

“No,” Sepharan said, his voice suddenly calm. “I know you better than that. You’ve never been ashamed of them for a single moment.”

“All right,” I said. For some reason I was mollified by this—either the statement, or the tone in which it was said. “What do you want me to do?”

“What Iannas did with his,” the boy replied. “Except since you have the power of fire, you can do it yourself.”

I heard the squeal of glass against glass, as Sepharan removed the vial's stopper.

"Hold out your hands," he said. And, when I did so, he eased one of my eyes carefully into each. I felt the rim of the vial touch my hand—apparently, Sepharan's ghoulish interest in my body parts didn't extend to touching them.

They felt smooth in my palm and surprisingly heavy. "Now what?" I asked.

Sepharan snorted in exasperation. "Stop being so difficult, and just *do* it."

Well, I thought, at least they deserve immolation. I focused my attention on them, sent a flame rising up from my palms to encompass them, then willed it to burn with a fearsome heat. As I did so, I heard Sepharan gasp.

"They're changing, not burning," he cried.

And so they were, for at that very moment I could see them myself—two glowing oblong shapes, clear as the finest crystal and the deep gold of molten honey.


"*Now* you can pop them in," Sepharan said.

I thought of the conjured fire imp burning its way through Porphoras's work table. These two globes were equally as hot. But I was, after all, the *Nithaial Elimiel*, and in my power. I slipped them into my eye sockets.

As soon as I did, they gave off a flash of light. And in that light, for that single moment, I could see everything around me, Sepharan, still holding the glass vial, the cloth sides of the cart, the floor scattered with brass pull rings, the aston-

ished face of Ormaël, who had just climbed into the cart.

I saw them not as I would have before, but bathed in a brilliant golden light. And a transient one, for almost immediately, the darkness fell again. Then, the true power of these orbs revealed itself. At last, I had found my way to the power that Teshnar'ad had given me, and it transformed everything that had gone before. Now the real world was visible, not as it was, but how the invisible powers that flowed through it impacted on it, transformed it, and became one with it.

What I apprehended was a world of stunning beauty and awesome power, with tendrils of terrifying malignity shot all through it. I saw with the eyes of a god. 

Chapter 29



“IMAGINE,” I SAID, “that you are bird flying high among the branches of a deep forest. The branches are covered with leaves of all colors and flowers that release every conceivable scent. Many other birds are also flying through this space, and all sorts of animals—some tame-seeming, others frightening—roam everywhere on these branches, and often leap from one to another. Sometimes they call out to you; a few times they know your name.”

“What else?” I was lying beside Ormaël, both of us naked, Sepharan sprawled on the driver’s bench at the front of the cart, sound asleep. The warlock had, in fact, cleverly offered to teach him a few simple spells, and had cast a sleep spell over the boy while ostensibly teaching it to him.

“Well,” I went on, “now *also* imagine that the sky beyond the branches keeps changing color, that when you look down, you see the branches aren’t connected to any trunks—in fact, when you look down, you can’t be sure that you aren’t

really looking *up*. And to make things just a bit *more* confusing, a sudden breeze (from any direction) can catch you...”

“Stop, stop,” Ormaël said, laughing. “I’m already as confused as anyone could ever be. And,” he went on, “although you don’t say so, I expect that none of this is as recognizable as branches or birds or snakes?”

I sighed. “No, not nearly. I feel as though I have just been born all over again, and am as helpless as a babe.”

“Mmm,” Ormaël said, “I must say you don’t have the body of one, or, for that matter, of someone who has been languishing in a dungeon.”

“‘Languishing’ is hardly the right word,” I murmured. Ormaël was kneeling over me and gently kneading the muscles of my legs, working his way up from my feet. He had already done this to my arms, which now were splayed out blissfully to the edges of the pallet.

True, that bliss was now and then punctuated with a stab of pain, intensely careful as Ormaël was. But they were nothing more than occasional rapids that the pleasure struck with glancing blows as it swept past. I was already erect, and, as those hands came closer and closer, my member all but cried out for their touch.

However, the hands were in no hurry. Ormaël had already gently lifted my legs apart, and was pressing his fingers into the muscles of each. He worked a distance up one, then up the other, with one hand beneath the leg, the other on top of it. Slowly they came, manipulating each muscle un-

til it surrendered to his touch, all tension fled.

Now, gently moving my legs closer together, Ormaël got on his knees astride me, slid his hands under my buttocks, seized hold of each cheek, and kneaded them as a baker would two recalcitrant lumps of dough, readying them for a baking. He did this for some time, ignoring my cock as it swung back and forth, in rhythm partly to his hands, partly to its own urgency.

His fingers now found the base of my spine, and the probing of his fingers there made me groan out loud.

“Mmm,” he said. “Nodhall for all sorts of nasty little imps. Time to shake them awake and send them packing.”

And, flee they did. I was now entirely in the physical world, the other closed off for the moment so as not to distract me. Even so, little particles of light flashed across my mind as the fingers found and released another cord of tightness.

As his hands moved up, fingers pressing into the muscles in my back, Ormaël shifted his own body forward, and the moment came when he was astride my cock, sitting on it, grasping it with his buttocks, and setting off sharp explosions of pleasure.

These not only passed through my body but through his, as well, for our minds were linked, and our closeness such that his hands were pleasuring himself almost as much as he pleased me.

In time, Ormaël reached my shoulders, then my neck, then the back of my head. Then, careful not to put all

his weight on me, he bent forward on his hips, touching his body against mine, his cheek, rough with stubble, pressing against my own.

“A warlock is supposed to have a heart frozen hard as northern ice,” he whispered in my ear. “But, *Nithaial*, I find you have somehow found a way to warm it. If this is an enchantment, call it off before I melt away entirely.”

“I thought it was *you* who had put the spell on me,” I answered, smiling, “as easily as you worked your magic on Sepharan. All these days have passed without our spending an hour alone together, and yet your hands know my body as if it had always been their home.”

“So they do,” Ormaël agreed. Then he sighed. “But your body is not your heart, and I sense that it is forever given to another. Am I wrong?”

“No,” I whispered. “Although he’s dead, I can’t let go. Even though he himself wishes me to, for my love has kept him from crossing over the River Cyll.”

“Truly?” Ormaël gave a soft gasp of amazement. “Well, you *are* a dangerous one to fall for! But it’s too late for me. Perhaps your heart can annex another territory, and let me be ruler there.”

“With deep forests and dark towers,” I replied, lifting my head and kissing him, “and magnificent horses to ride.”

He nodded, kissing me back. “And patrols of the king hot on our heels, as we flee together through the night.”

“Not so long ago, I could ride like that,” I whispered.

“I still have the horse....” Whynnya! The sudden thought of her made my voice falter. A tear slipped down my cheek.

“None of *that*, *Nithaial*,” Ormaël whispered sternly, flicking it away with his tongue. “Suffice it that, this night, you shall be the rider and I the steed.”

He reached over to one side of us and picked something up. I heard the sound of a stopper pulled, then smelled a surprisingly appetizing smell. Ormaël took a sip of it, re-plugged the flask, and set it aside, as he slipped down to my cock. He took it in between his lips, rolled his tongue around its head, licking around, then rapidly over its own little mouth.

I began to moan as he slipped me down his throat, which was as hot and slippery as wet velvet. That smell! now I knew it—burlnut oil, as tasty as it was oily.

I laughed. “Shall I pass you the salt sack?” I whispered.

Ormaël lifted his head, shaking it rapidly as he did so that the sensation was almost beyond bearing. “Not necessary,” he finally gasped. “Your cock is seasoned to my liking already. Have you never used it?”

I shook my head as he took up a folded blanket and folded it yet again.

“Lift your haunches a little,” he said, and, as I did, he wedged it under me. Sharp flashes of pain stabbed me momentarily, then faded away as I settled down again.

“Nut oil and cock make a tasty combination,” Ormaël

said, as he squatted over me, “but that is nothing compared with the sensation when it coats the insides of your hole.”

Without even touching my cock, he guided it to the right place in his cleft by flexing his pelvis. When it pressed against the right place, he opened himself to me. The ring of muscles there quivered, opened, then began gently nuzzling the tip of my cock. Our minds linked, we focused together on the head of my cock being slowly engulfed. The nut oil was so slick, the movement of his muscles so controlled, that it felt as if my cock was actually being sucked inside him.

Ormaël had said that he would be the mount and I, the rider. But, in truth, he was fucking me with his asshole. From what little I have seen of this, I would say my cock was thickish and long. But whether it was because of the nut oil or his mastery of his parts, taking me inside him to the very hilt... well, what came to mind—although I know the word is wrongly used—wracked him with ecstasy.

It is a false notion that pleasure and pain are opposites—they are more like twins, entwined together, one dark and one light, and often when you seize hold of one, you find yourself holding the other. At this moment, Ormaël knew them both at once, and that spurred his arousal. And this, in turn, pushed me to a new place, where hurt, too, became my brother. This sensation overwhelmed me, and I fear I spent sooner than my lover might have wished. But spasm I did, the pleasure and wrenching agony becoming as one.

At the end of it, I fell back, dripping with sweat, pant-

ing for air. As I did, Sepharan suddenly stirred, and I hastily brushed my mind over his, to make sure he still slept. He did, and deeply—a good thing, too, because Ormaël was hardly done with me yet. I felt him reach again to the side, and heard the stopper pulled out afresh from the flask.

“I feel your force already coursing through me, *Nith-aial*,” he whispered. “So, we must act quickly if I am to give you, in turn, a taste of the pure powers of witchery.”

Even as he spoke, he was turning his body around, kneeling so that he lowered his cock until it hovered just over my mouth. I raised my head, opened my mouth, and took it in.

Ormaël’s private parts had the deep odor of musk mingled with leather, and as I sucked, and licked, and tasted, I realized what he said was true—the rich, meaty flavor of the burlnut oil wet my mouth with such desire that drool ran down both my cheeks.

Ormaël, meanwhile, had worked his head between my legs and had taken my purse between his lips, gently sucking one of the orbs it held—and, when the sensation became almost beyond bearing, switched over to the other. To my astonishment, I was becoming stiff again, then even stiffer. And, only aroused the more by where it had just been, he took it in his mouth, sucking on me even as I sucked on him.

Because we were mind linked, our bodies worked together in seamless lust. I was aware of the sensation that shook his cock even as I tasted it, swallowed more and more

of it, until my nose was buried in his sweaty, matted thatch.

Of course, through the same link, I could taste my own cock as well, and—through my own convulsion of disgust—feel the excitement Ormaël took from its feculent ripeness. This time I could hold back no better than a lad first discovering he could toss his seed. I came again, felt his throat swallow, tasted the flavor of myself, even as the cock down my own throat shivered, jerked, discharged. Though I swallowed as fast as I could, it came in such spurts that it was oozing out of my mouth before I could get it all down.

Ormaël collapsed to one side of me, his body as limp as a sopped rag. The link between our two minds held, however, so I could sense his tentative exploration of his new powers, just as I was feeling my way with those he had given me.

The power of witches almost entirely affects the web of human life and the power of simples and minor magicks to alter it. Potions are one thing, for they only enhance by magic what a good herbalist could provide, but spells are quite another. In order to cast one, a witch must first seek within the spirit realm for the person who is to be the object of it. Witches never travel far, but they know what is near to them as intimately as any gamekeeper knows his wood.

Where, before, Ormaël would have appeared to me as merely a shape of shifting sounds and colors, I now saw him as the amalgam of forces that he was, and within that dense network, I could, if I chose, affect any strand I chose. And I had only to touch it, to sense what its purpose had

been, was, would be.

“Yes,” Ormaël murmured lazily, “you could play me like a harp, if you so wished.” He had been watching himself through my own perception, bemused and impressed.

“Can you see me the same way?” I asked.

In answer, he gave my spirit being his full attention, and I was astonished in my own right, for it was a dazzling flux, almost impossible to clearly perceive—and to try for long was to risk serious damage. Ormaël, in fact, gave me no more than a quick glance before he shielded himself again.

“Even to show you as much as I just did,” he said, “required mastery of the power you just gave me. Before now, I would never have dared even look for more than a blink, and would have been half blinded by that.”

He groaned, then rolled over onto his side so that he was facing me. “However,” he added, “we must turn our attention to this world for a moment. Did Sepharan tell you of my plans?”

Had he? I had to think a moment before it all came back to me, and I nodded. “You mean to ride alone into Tarrusor,” I said, “while we are to bypass the city. But must you? Can Sepharan manage the cart?”

“Yes and yes,” Ormaël replied. “Even so, I realize it isn’t without risk. But I have things I must do, and it would serve us well, I think, to learn what news—and hearsay—has made its way to the capital.”

“These things you ‘must’ do?” I asked. “Are they as

important as all that? I need your help, your *presence*, to find my way to Ernfardast.”

Ormaël reached over and ran his fingers down my cheek. “I know,” he answered. “But I shall be both careful and quick—as much as anyone can do such contrary things at once. And I have no secrets now from you... well, apart from one, which I’ll tell you in a moment.

“I work as an agent for a conspiracy among the aristocracy that means to overthrow the King and replace him with Prince Nevoras, the moment that Gostranar rises again.”

“A safe enough promise, given the odds,” I said, not without a trace of bitterness.

I felt Ormaël nod in agreement. “Bear in mind, though, in whose pocket Temblar resides. This alone is enough to give pause to the most resolute. Only when Gostranar actually appears will we know which will keep their oath. We should reach Ernfardast in less than a month—Prince Nevoras should know this and start his preparations.”

“Who is this Prince Nevoras?” I asked. “I thought the rebellion was headed by Prince Caelas.”

The warlock shrugged. “Caelas has support among the soldiers and, to some extent, among the common people, Nevoras has his among the aristocracy. He is the son of Temblar’s sister, and his accession would mean the continuation of the Amethyst Throne—much less threatening all around.

“Furthermore, Nassazia, bearer of the witch child, who has the conceit—and cleverness!—to call herself the

Anointed Mother, has set herself against Prince Caelas. What she might think of Prince Nevoras is not known.”

He sighed. “It’s all so complicated. Remember, I’m an agent, not an acolyte. As far as I’m concerned, Caelas and Nevoras can fight it out for the kingship, if they must... *afterwards*.”

Sepharan stirred again, moaning as he did so.

“He’ll wake up soon,” Ormaël whispered. “His own magic is working as an antidote to the spell. His sleep is already normal—we’d best be quiet so as not to wake him.

“While you were wandering in the other realm, Sepharan and I have been busy rubbing lampblack into the sides of the cart, thus disguising it as a....”

“Gravedigger’s carriage!” I whispered back, grasping now what he was saying. “I’ve been demoted from soothsayer to corpse.”

“Exactly.” Ormaël nudged me lightly. “No more performances as Mafatynas the Mysterious for you. I admit that playing a corpse is a role that takes less advantage of your gift for dramatic surprise. But, after a dusting with powdered chalk, I’m sure you’ll play it to perfection.”

Perversely, I took exception to this, and conjured up an image of myself—eye sockets two dark caverns in my shock-white face, arms extended, stumbling along in my joint-twisted shamble, groaning in pain, as villagers ran screaming in all directions.

Enough of a link still existed between Ormaël and me


for this image to pass instantly between us, and the warlock's body trembled violently as he tried to repress his laughter. But soon trembling gave way to snorting, and that to a gust of laughter, unstoppable once I joined in myself.

Needless to say, the shaking of the cart alone would have roused Sepharan from his sleep spell, and our laughter got him to sit up and stare at us in surprise.

"I was having the most wonderful dreams," he said, "and you two idiots had to chase them away."

He sniffed the air, sniffed again, then got up to his feet, muttering, "Let me teach you a sleep spell.' Catch me falling for that one again!"

He prodded me with his bare foot, and not gently, either. "When is it *my* turn?" he demanded, and without waiting for an answer, went to the back of the cart, cast back the flap, and began to noisily piss out into the dark.

As he did so, Ormaël pressed his lips up to my ear, kissed it, then whispered, "My secret is this, and forgive me for not telling you sooner. Whether or not you are truly the father of the witch boy, I am, indisputably, his uncle." 

Chapter 30



fOR SOME REASON, I had imagined the side road we were to take to be a barely passable track, wandering through a dark and interminable wood. But, so far as I could make out from occasional glimpses, the way was good and moderately traveled, and went along beside pastures, fields, and orchards, every now and then passing through the center of a village, and, occasionally, through a bustling town.

We soon discovered why this was so. Great lumber-bearing waggons regularly forced us onto the shoulder, if there was one, or into a ditch, if there wasn't. Given our supposed errand, passersby were willing to help push us back onto the road if Smetna and Porro couldn't manage it on their own. But it was a constant annoyance, and there was often a morbid one among them who begged for "just a peek" at the corpse. It was a sore temptation, every time such a one stuck in his head and clucked his tongue, not to grab him by the throat and teach him some respect for the dead.

Needless to say, when they did look, they saw me lying naked and deathly still on my pallet, whitened head to toe with chalk dust, funereal markings painted on my forehead and chest, and a modesty cloth tossed across my loins.

At one point, a patrol of mounted soldiers demanded that Sepharan show them the contents of the cart, and, after filling it with the sickly sweet stench of decay, I conjured up a host of fat, sluggish flies. When the side cloth was pulled aside, the greeting these provided was enough for Sepharan to be curtly ordered to get on his way.

Since Sepharan had flat-out refused to have his own clothing drenched with lampblack, Ormaël had sought out a peddler of used clothing who had a mourning cloak crammed into the bundle he carried upon his back. It was much too large for Sepharan, but for that very reason looked authentic.

Here was the corpse of a man with just enough coppers in his purse to pay for his body to be brought back to his village for burial. No silver for keening mourners, let alone a gold coin for a wooden coffin, horses decorated in black, a musician playing a dirge on a bag-of-pipes. So, let a servant boy be given the task, and told not to dawdle while doing it.

With Ormaël gone, I felt it was unwise to drift way into the spirit realm for long, although I had to fight hard against the temptation not to. I was bored and restless. No position seemed comfortable on the pallet, and the sun, beating down on the black cloth, turned the cart into an oven. This meant, in turn, that drops of sweat kept running across my body, mak-

ing me look like a corpse that had been left out in the rain. Ormaël's sack of chalk dust was not large, so every now and then Sepharan had to let the mules graze a bit while he tried to rub out the streaks with his fingers.

"Now you look like a corpse with leprosy," Sepharan said, after one such session. "If I were truly delivering you to a distant village, its inhabitants would immediately torch the cart, you, and probably me, for the luck of it."

I grunted dispiritedly.

"Also, your bed is flat as a pancake. No wonder I keep hearing you tossing about. You should come and sit up on the bench with me and keep me company."

"The coffin driver chatting with his corpse as they drive along—that's a touching picture," I grumbled.

"We have that wretched stench of a horse blanket in the pack," he replied, now committed to this notion. "You could drape that around and over you, and be Lord Death himself. They are cutting the hay in the fields, so I could steal you a scythe to wield—that would make it *perfect*."

Unlike the joking between Ormaël and me the night before, Sepharan was quite serious. He was bored as much as I was, and anticipating the reactions of passersby who saw Lord Death sitting companionably beside the driver of a coffin cart filled him with instant glee.

It was a measure of my own boredom that I actually entertained this idea for a moment. But a phrase Sepharan had just said set my mind on saner paths.

“Did you say they are cutting hay in the fields around us?” I asked.

I sensed him nodding. Then, remembering my state, he spoke up. “Yes,” he said, reluctantly drawing out the word. He already knew what I was thinking.

“Go gather some up and we’ll refresh my pallet,” I said. “That would make me rest more comfortably.”

“That’s hot and prickly work,” Sepharan complained. “Do I have to?”

“Being companion to a *Nithaial* isn’t all seedcake and sparkling wine,” I answered. “It’s time you learned that.”

Sepharan opened his mouth, realized I was needling him, and shut it again, determined not to give me the satisfaction of a retort. Instead, he muttered a swear under his breath, and started to climb out of the cart.

I felt a touch of guilt for speaking so shortly. And, besides, I had an idea.

I mind touched him. “Don’t be angry at me, sweet one,” I said. “I have an idea as to how we can relieve our boredom without me playing Father Death.”

My pallet was constructed, as all such are, by sewing up a fat rectangle of cloth, open on one side. The detritus is shaken out, and, usually, straw (sometimes with fragrant herbs or dried flowers mingled in) is stuffed in to replace it.

A flap as wide as the pallet itself is sewn to the opening. Once the contents are nicely flattened out, this flap is pushed in and spread over them, thus keeping them in place, and pro-

viding a second layer of cloth to protect the sleeper from being poked by errant stalks.

Sepharan, mollified by my last comment, made short work of all this, even making a second trip back to the field when it became clear that his first armload was not going to suffice. Soon I was lying on a much softer bed of sweet-smelling hay, and already in a better mood.

“My idea is this,” I said, as he shook shreds of hay from his shirt. “Pick out an interesting traveler who is going our way, and offer him a ride—if he will take it. At best, we might pick up some news, but, in any case, you will have someone to chat with and so pass the time.”

“Won’t that be dangerous?” he asked, barely managing to draw a mask of perfunctory concern over his obvious excitement at the idea.

I smiled. “I don’t think so,” I answered. “If anything, it will make us look all the more innocent. And you are hardly likely to let slip any hint of who we are or where our journey takes us.”

“And,” I thought to myself, “most likely our new companion won’t have the wit to make anything of it, should that happen.” In truth, now that I was back in direct contact with my powers, I feared no human agency short of an army.

So, in a bit, Sepharan was happily chatting with a journeyman seamster about shirts and their cut, and what fashions the princes were sporting in Tarrusor. From the sound of it, neither knew anything more about the subject than the

other, which always makes for the best conversations.

After that, there was a young harvester, with whom Sepharan flirted furiously, despite the other's solid wall of utter incomprehension. And then there was a farmer's daughter, bearing a basket of eggs to the market in the next town, who nicely left us some for our dinner.

This we ate—the eggs, and a fresh loaf of bread and plenty of butter, acquired by Sepharan at that same market—in a small copse by the side of the road, once Smetna and Porro had been watered and set to graze.

Sepharan had rolled up the cloth covering on the side of the cart facing away from the road, letting in a cool breeze. After we were finished eating, he cut us some twigs with which to clean our teeth, and we sat companionably together on the edge of the cart, legs dangling down, leisurely scrubbing and spitting the detritus into the bushes.

Eventually, Sepharan flipped away his twig and fell back onto the pallet, pulling me down with him. “Remember,” he said, “last night, when I said that you and Ormaël had woken me from a wonderful dream?”

I nodded in reply, although, in fact, I didn't remember, at least until he reminded me.

“In it, I was wrestling with Clænias, and he had my arms pinned over my head. It hurt, but it was worth it to have his body on top of mine, and knowing that if I gave up just then, he would kiss me.”

I smiled. “So, *did* you give up?”

Sepharan dug his elbow into me, saying, “Don’t be an idiot. Boys *never* give up.”

He let me digest this new fact of life, then said sadly, “The truth is that you and Ormaël woke me up before I found out. Do you think it’s ever possible to return to a dream?”

“I never have,” I confessed, “although I’ve never had one I wanted to go back to. Usually, it’s just the opposite.” queried, “Shall I drop the side again, or shall we sleep with it up? It’s already getting a little chilly.”

“Let’s leave it up,” I answered, “and drag out Master Stinky to wrap ourselves up in. I’ve already been shut up in here all the day long.” I didn’t add that I planned to stay awake all night, half in, half out of the spirit world, to keep watch over us.

Sepharan sighed. “Very well,” he said, “although only the Blessed Mother knows what *that* will do to my dreams!”

As he wrestled the blanket out of our pack, he said, “Do you have the feeling that someone is watching us? From very far away? It’s a very slippery feeling, and I can never quite seize hold of it.”

“No,” I said slowly. “I haven’t, and I’ve been spending a lot of time in the spirit world. Can you tell me anything else?”

Sepharan spread the blanket over me, then slipped under it himself, snuggling up next to me, making little disgusted noises as he did so. When he had settled in, he yawned, shook his head, and said, “Well, if you haven’t felt it,

what I think it might be is that foolish pendant that Maerdas gave me. I should have tossed it into the bushes the moment we left Lorithar.”

I hadn’t thought of that pendant since Sepharan had used it to frighten Lamminas. It still hung around his neck, and its presence had become one with my awareness of the boy, who, after all, had powers of his own. I focused my mind on it, and, sure enough, something well shielded could be felt pulsing like a heartbeat deep inside it.

As painful as it was to do it, I lifted my hand, and stroked Sepharan’s cheek with it. “You have outwitted them again,” I said. “You *will* become a major wizard.”

The boy’s pleasure in this praise literally made his spirit presence glow.

“When we meet Ormaël tomorrow, we’ll ask him what to do with it,” I went on. “Leave it at the crossroads, I expect, and let some traveler take it far, far away.”

Sepharan barely nodded his head. He was already drifting, but then some last thought came into his mind. “A bad thing for us, maybe,” he whispered. “But it means that Dectas wasn’t snatched away from Alfrund, wasn’t tortured, no need to worry anymore...” His sigh of relief faded into the soft breathing of sleep.

I WOKE HIM UP the following morning as soon as I felt the sun on my face, for today was when we could expect to cross the road that led east out of Tarrusor. Ormaël expected to be waiting for us at the crossroads. However, if he

wasn't there, we were to leave a marking to tell him we had passed, then continue on this same road, since Ernfardast lay far to the north.

It was a cheerful and sweet-smelling morning, and despite my lack of sleep, I submitted without grumbling to our meager breakfast of water and millet cake, and my fresh dusting of chalk powder afterwards. Then Sepharan hitched up the mules and we were on our way again.

The boy soon found someone walking along the road who looked like suitable company, and with the two of them chattering away, I felt it was safe enough for me to slip off for some sleep of my own. The only risk was that I might snore, or worse, talk in my sleep, but I felt Sepharan could rise to the occasion—if his companion stayed long enough to hear his explanation of the phenomenon.

So, sleep I did, and for a few hours, too, so far as I could tell. I was reaching for the water jug when I realized that the cart was moving in a strange fashion. It would move a little, then stop, move a little more, then stop again. The mules were grazing. Sepharan probably had had to get off the road to make way for a logger's waggon.

I pulled out the stopper from the water jug and took a long drink. It was only when I was replugging it that I realized that I could hear no sound of any approaching waggon. In fact, apart from the cart's creaking when it moved, I could hear absolutely nothing.

I called out Sepharan's name. When no answer came,

I was only mildly worried. He had probably stepped behind a tree to move his bowels. Even so...

“Hey! Sepharan!” I shouted. “Answer me!”

“He can’t,” a voice replied—from the spirit world, but with such clarity that I could actually hear its iciness. “I have sent him to wait for you at the edge of the River Cyll. Remember to bring his fare as well as your own, if you want to take him with you into Ais Dysmassia. For I’m about to send you there as well.”

“Who are you?” I asked, now thoroughly alarmed. I had entered the spirit world, but could find no trace of the speaker there.

“No one knows my name who lacks the strength to take it from me,” the voice answered. “But I will tell you *what* I am: The Second of The Eight, Acolyte Lords of the God of Death.”

“There is no such thing,” I retorted, although remembering Helias’s conversation with Dracon Wælfyra, doubt began trickling into my mind.

“The Absolute One does not reveal himself to humans,” came the sneering reply. “But Ra’asiel and Gesryma are merely the founts from which flow the streams of destiny; *He* is the sea into which all rivers drain. Figure out for yourself then who is the most powerful.”

From that logic, I thought, the lowest of cesspits was mightier than the purest mountain spring. Resisting the urge to point this out, I said, “So, you’re a necromancer. Like Jaçazal.”

There was a long silence. When the voice spoke again, it's tone was, if possible, icier still. "Don't taunt me, *Nithaial*. Before your twin destroyed Jaçazal, we were Nine. It was a grievous loss, and all our effort since is to ensure that this can never happen again.

"It is we who have loosed the wraith ghouls on the world, and set them the task of finding you," it went on. "Once Ra'asiel gave you the pendant, we had no choice. If the magic powers it contained were combined with your own—well, you would have become very hard to defeat. I curse the wraith ghoul who found it, then let itself be destroyed. We were so close to victory at that moment, so very, very close."

"Well, well," I thought. "Of course." And one of my hands began to grope for the pull ring that would give me access to my eye gems. I did this as silently as I could, for I had no idea whether my movements could be heard.

"That's why the wraith ghouls appeared in the caverns under Gorzungâd," I murmured, as I eased open the tiny flap. "Because Maerdas had sent for the pendant before you were able to get it from Prince Poëstil."

My fingers had found the jewels, but I wanted to piece together more of this tale before I slipped them into my eye sockets. "But there, this time, they were too late. By then, Maerdas had the pendant and had already tasted its power." This time allowing a touch of derision to slip into my voice. "Once again you were close to triumph, only to have it snatched from your hands."

A blow struck me and sent me flying against a corner of the cart. Pain shot through me, but my hand still clutched the two stones. I sat there panting for a moment, pulling myself back together.

“I told you not to mock me, *Nithaial*,” the necromancer hissed. “Maerdas is a wasted husk, and has no idea of what the powers he now possesses are meant for. He means only to turn them against you and your twin. With you gone, your twin has only half of the *Nithaial*’s power at his command. He will be strong enough to fight Maerdas off, but not to defeat him. The two will struggle in vain until the end of time.”

I took a gem in each hand and lifted them up to my face. “I thought that necromancers came from the People of the Egg,” I said in that language. “But you speak to me in the tongue of men.”

“I have eaten many human souls, *Nithaial Elimiel*,” the voice said indifferently, “far more than of my own people, who are harder to kill. But you are badly informed if you think no human practices our art. Half of us, now, were once men. We shared our power between us until we became neither one nor the other, which has given us more power still. Jaçazal disapproved of this merging, and would not take part in it. The result? He fought your twin like a demon would, and lost like one. That will not happen to any of us again.”

As he spoke those words, I could sense the necromancer moving closer, the sheer malignity of his presence making clear what he now intended to do. But at that very

moment, I slipped the gems into my eye sockets and perceived him. He was all darkness, but it was now darkness visible, and I could trace out the strands of power as they wove him into being. And once I apprehended those...

"Your name is Moçnaszh," I said, at the same time striking out with a stream of force meant to rend him apart.

A scream of rage and pain deafened me, even as the necromancer struggled to turn my own power against me. I warded it off, but the burst of flame set the cart afire. I rolled through the blazing cloth, fell to the ground, and, ignoring the agony, staggered to the driver's perch, where Sepharan's body lay crumpled against the backboard, blood running out of his mouth. There could be no doubt—he was dead.


"You are cleverer than I granted you." Moçnaszh's voice was now far less clear, and came from a much greater distance. "So I shall leave you to the wraith ghouls. You have outwitted one—let's see what you can do against a horde."

Moçnaszh then vanished into the murk, removing any hope of striking at him again. The pain of my fall had now caught up with me and I was barely able to keep from fainting dead away. I left the boy's body to the purifying fire, and pulling myself along the hitch, managed to release Smetna and Porro and fling myself onto the harness straps.

The two mules bolted a distance, then, as the temptation of the lush grass around them overcame their fears, began to browse again. As long my gem vision lasted, I watched the cart as it was reduced to charred wood and

glowing metal, and Sepharan's body melt away into ash.

My heart wept for him, but this was no time to linger and mourn. I had to get to the crossroads and find Ormaël, or *everything* would be lost.

I freed the mules from their harness, and, leaving Smetna to do as she wished, climbed onto Porro, and urging him on with mind and heel, headed north again. 

PART SEVEN

THE WAY TO
ERNFARDAST

Chapter 31



“As you can see, *Nithaial Galgalriel*, Gostranar did not crumble and fall into rubble like the homes of the Four Spirits—perhaps because Maerdas was forbidden entry even into the Holy Wood, perhaps for reasons not given us to know. In any case, the palace did not crumble; instead, it fell asleep.”

Alcaron, Head Steward of Gostranar, was following me up a short, broad flight of stairs. I preceded him, as courtesy demanded when a *Nithaial* entered his home of homes. I had imagined Gostranar to be like Sondaram, only larger and more magnificent, a palace above all palaces.

This was why I had thought that it, too, had collapsed when Maerdas had slain his twin—for, in the morning when I had come out to greet Alcaron, there was no magnificent citadel towering high above the trees.

“Let me show you Gostranar, while the morning dew still lies upon it,” was his reply when I mentioned this, and we walked the short distance there together, leaving Páli,

eyes blearly, to bury his face in one steaming cloth after another, all the while cursing his raging hangover.

To see Gostranar for the first time is to fall into a state of awed incomprehension. Nothing else could prepare you for what you saw, so unexpected and so expressive of a kind of splendor that men rarely think of when they mean to exalt or impress.

Indeed, the flight of stone stairs that Alcaron suggested we climb for a better view was as much an example of what I mean as anything. These spiraled in upon themselves, leading nowhere but to a small platform, their only purpose being to let you feast your eyes upon the stars or to surrender your body to the fluttering caresses of every passing breeze.

Gostranar was an exaltation of such things; it was a garden, a labyrinth, a palace whose parts some playful god had tossed pell-mell across a landscape. It was composed of endless mysteries; it was a place of pediments without buildings, obelisks, arches, colonnades, fountains, footbridges, statuary that was sometimes erotic, sometimes heroic, sometimes grotesque.

I turned to Alcaron and said, "If this is Gostranar asleep, then I'm almost frightened to imagine what it is like when it's awake."

He smiled and shook his head. "No, *Nithaial Galgaliel*, now that you are here it is fast awakening."

He gestured first to a pond, in which a mass of fra-

grant water lilies were blossoming, then to a copse where all the trees were simultaneously changing from bud to flower to fruit. As I looked, my ears picked up snatches of song, here a youth's meltingly lovely voice, then, somewhere closer, an equally heart-pulling response.

"The spirit of Gostranar remembers all that has been sung here, and calls up voices from the far, far past, when and if it so desires. Can you make out the words?"

I shook my head. The emotions within the words coursed through me, but any sense of the words remained just beyond my grasp.

"There are two singers," Alcaron explained. "One takes the part of Eruan, *Nithaial Elimiel*, calling out for his twin and lover, who was separated from him at the Battle of the Dark Rifts. Eruan was trapped and fighting for his very life, surrounded on all sides by enemies so much more skilled than he that to fight them he had to keep drawing on his magic.

"The other voice is that of Peldas, *Nithaial Galgaliel*, who is fiercely fighting his way back to his lover's side and urging him to never lose hope." It is a song of such power that few feel they have the right to sing it. Gostranar offers it to you as a very special gift."

"A gift and a reminder," I replied, with a deeply stricken heart. "Did Peldas arrive in time to rescue Eruan?"

Alcaron looked away. When he replied, he spoke to the view, not to me. "It happened so long ago that you will

have to seek your answer in the song.” He shrugged, still looking away. “Some of the legends say yes; others say no.”

I understood the hesitation in Alcaron’s voice. There was a sadness in the first voice that, now that I knew the story, sent tears streaming down my cheeks. “I must, must, *must* somehow find a way to *my* twin.”

Alcaron gently touched my hand. “We must find him for you, first,” he said. “And a little later, we shall. But I think your companion should be with us. For now let me show you the atrium where the powers reside.” And together we climbed back down the stairs.

A large portion of Gostranar was reserved for the use of the *Nithaial* alone, but there were no walls to seal it off nor any gate where one could seek admittance. Ordinary visitors, worshipping pilgrims, could wander about as freely as they wished, and never know this part even existed—and, if they did know, never see any evidence of it, no matter how many times they passed right by its many entrances.

The atrium existed in both places. It could be filled with pilgrims at the same time that the *Nithaial* visited it alone, revealing themselves only when and if they chose to do so. To reach it, you went down a great flight of steps to an open court, in the center of which was something that looked like an empty pool, on the edge of which were perched the graven images of four dragons, twice the size of a man.

These were striking statues, intricately wrought, spun into existence by magic, since they appeared to be

carved from gemstones—fire opal, aquamarine, onyx, citrine—of unimaginable size. Each was different in design, but all had outspread wings and all leaned over the basin, with their heads curving upwards and their mouths open.

“Yours, of course,” said Alcaron, “are the blue dragon, which symbolizes water, and the golden dragon, for the sun—and for the aether through which its light travels to warm and nurture us.

“The other two are your twin’s—the red one, which signifies fire, and the black one, for the night (which is the absence of the sun, and ruled by the moon) and the darkness that lies in the depths below our feet.”

Alcaron brought me to a spot equidistant between my two, and pointed down at the floor, where a mosaic made of the same gemstones showed the two dragons entwined. “This is where the *Nithaial Galgaliel* enters,” he said.

“At the same time,” and here turned to point across the basin, “the *Nithaial Elimiel* steps in from the opposite side. Each walks toward his twin until they are face to face, then each lifts his hands, palms forward, and moves them as if meaning to press them against the other’s.” He sighed. “It would be an insult to try to describe what happens then with mere words.”

Alcaron’s eyes lingered on the statue of the black dragon. “At the moment, of course,” he added, “there are only three of the four powers present. Can you sense them?”

Indeed, I could. Behind his back, and even as he had

been speaking, I had pulled off my shirt. I tossed it to one side, kicked off my riding boots, and jumped into the basin. It was more than time, I thought, for me to experience the combined force of my natal powers, and perhaps taste something of Niccas's, as well.

The moment my feet touched the surface of the basin, three of the dragons came to life. Their bodies flexed, their eyes blazed, their wings stretched out even wider, and a stream of power came shooting out of each of their mouths in a visible emanation, liquid as water, but with a fluency, a lightness that water has never possessed.

The bluish glimmer of the one power meshed itself with the golden glimmer of the other, creating a shimmering spectrum of every conceivable color from the palest yellow to the darkest blue, combining into myriad shades of green.

Unlike the flow of power at Sondaram and Wethrelad, this one didn't shoot upwards like a fountain. Instead, it streamed toward the answering reddish flow of the power of fire, which was rapidly expanding to fill the space left empty by the absence of Niccas's other power. The mingled forces around me never rose higher than the rim of the basin. Even so, as they coursed intoxicatingly through me, they also pushed me with them as they surged toward the basin's center.

There was an urgency to this that was somehow unnerving—and equally so was my realization that the air was full of sound, vibrations that though musical were so intense that they verged on the edge of discord. It was this, then the

distant sound of Alcaron's frantic shouting, that warned me that something was seriously wrong.

It was the absence of Niccas. It sank into me with sudden horror that I shouldn't ever have entered the basin without him stepping in with me. *It was only through us together that the four forces could be allowed to meet.* I could control those of air and water, but without Niccas even the single one of fire would consume and destroy me—not out of any evil intent, but because I had no way of controlling it.

Furthermore, it proved to be no mean feat to keep my footing in the surge. I was not walking to the center but gliding—there was nothing under my feet for them to grip. I spread out my arms and set all my power to redirect the flow. I knew it would be impossible to halt it, so I commanded it to roll over onto itself.

What I hadn't understood until my command faltered, then failed, was the urgency with which the forces yearned to become one. It was like trying to call back a dog that has just encountered a bitch in heat. Suddenly, its master simply no longer exists.

My delaying tactics had worked sufficiently for the force of fire to reach the midpoint first. There, as if it had slammed into an invisible wall, it began to rise straight up into the air, a roiling mass so potent of itself that it made my mind hurt. Now, just an arm's length away, I could feel a burning sensation, not of fire, exactly, but of the soul of fire, about to consume me.

Simultaneously, I felt a piercing pain in both my shoulders, a fierce tug, and I was plucked right out of the flood, and swept away. The moment I was, the surging forces beneath me instantly dissipated. In the flash of a moment, the basin was as empty as it had been when I first laid eyes on it.

Abruptly, I was dropped onto the floor. A giant eagle, its feathers charred and smoking, swooped down, and Páli appeared before me. All his hair was burnt away, and his body was splotched with burns.

Also, his eyes were blazing. Before I knew what was happening, he had thrown himself on me, sending me falling with a thud to the floor, and began punching me with all his strength, tears streaming down his face. “You *fucking* idiot,” he was shouting over and over, as he did so. “You *fucking, fucking* idiot!”

Before I had the wits to start defending myself, Alcaron and two attendants were pulling Páli off me and struggling to contain him. He managed to give me a good kick with his naked foot before they dragged him away. This must for hurt him even more than it did me, for he was limping on it, as he struggled with his captors. I tried to call to them, then to get into a sitting position, found myself too weak to do either, and so fell back with a sticky splash into a puddle of my own blood. I closed my eyes, and wept.

I INSISTED THAT PÁLI BE TENDED TO before anything was done for me, but Alcaron, who I now saw was still as white as a ghost, said that more than one skilled healer resided among them, and, besides, mine required no great skill to treat. Páli and I had both been carried back to our guest house. I was lying on the bed, while Páli sat on a stool, his face turned determinedly away from me, his naked body glistening with salves, his scorched hair being mopped away from his skull.

The healer who was attending me said, “With all deference to Alcaron, *Nithaial Galgaliel*, were you not at the height of your powers at the moment those talons seized hold of your shoulders, you might well have been crippled for life—if the treatment, which would have called for the greatest skill was successful.”

“I should have dug in a little harder,” Páli said, speaking to no one.

“Páli!” I said. “Come on! I had no idea that was going to happen... *ouch*.” The healer was removing the swollen leeches that clung to each of my puncture wounds.

“No, and you didn’t think to ask, either,” Páli retorted, “O Mighty Nithaial, master of all. If I hadn’t happened to have gone out looking for you...” His body shuddered, and he swore again, “Fucking, *fucking* idiot.”

Páli was furiously blocking all my efforts at mind touching, so I had to work out for myself that he was as horrified at how close he had come to losing me as he was furious

at me for putting our all plans at risk. He would have gone looking for Niccas all by himself, heading for certain death.

“I fear I can do little for the bruises all over your chest,” the healer said. I looked down. They were already turning a deep and sullen purple, the mark of Páli’s fists. I shook my head—the throbbing soreness of my body was the least of my concerns.

I could barely meet Alcaron’s eyes, realizing what my destruction would have meant for him, happening right before his eyes while he was serving as my guide. His mind *was* open to mine, however, and I could sense the devastation. I sent a steady flow of strength from my spirit to his. After a moment, his color began to return, and the horror left his eyes.

When he attempted to speak, I lifted my hand. “No, Alcaron, I want no apology from you. Instead, you greatly deserve one from me. Everything my companion has said and continues to think about me is true, worse than true.”

“I was about to say,” Alcaron replied, “that I was going to the altar of the Holy Mother Gesryma, and ask if we might, just this once, exchange you for another, more sensible *Nithaial*.”

The healer stopped what she was doing and looked at him, her mouth open in astonishment, only shutting it after he had then smiled.

“Wait, and I’ll come pray with you,” I rejoined. “You deserve no less.”

“And I’ll come with you, as well,” Páli said. “I think the Blessed One would find me *most* persuasive.” He glanced over at me and bared his teeth.

“Hmm,” Alcaron said. “Our ministrations done, I think we should give the *Nithaial Galgaliel* and his companion some time to recuperate together.

The gathering went out, the door was closed, and, after a bit of silence, Páli said morosely, “I may never be able to look into a reflecting glass again.”

In truth, he *was* a sight, his head as bald as an egg, smudged with black, his body glittering with ointment and was mottled with burns. Even the swatch of hair between his legs had been reduced to feathery ash.

I got up from my bed, crossed the floor, and sank down on the floor beside against the stool.

“You saved my life,” I said. “I almost wish you hadn’t. I’ve ruined everything.”

“You haven’t done *me* any favors,” Páli agreed. Then sensing my tears, put his hand gently on my head.

“I don’t think you’ve ruined anything, really, except a beautiful friendship. You can still find and rescue Niccas—in fact, you *have* to. I just won’t be able to be with you.”

I looked at him on horror. “You *can’t* stop loving me, Páli,” I cried out. “This is all too horrible, already!”

“No,” he sighed, “I can’t. But you can easily stop loving me. Look at me, Jessan! Every bit of my skin has been burnt. And, furthermore, my power is gone. I’m a charred

ruin on the outside and an empty cask within. In those few seconds, I lost *everything*.”

Páli now opened himself to me, and let me feel what he felt, which was the pain and anguish of a badly hurt boy. Of his shapeshifting powers, nothing remained at all.

“Come with me,” I mind spoke, and I brought us both back to what I had been like after I had taken the *mythral* from Orien’s hands—sucked dry, spiritually broken, damaged, it seemed, beyond repair.

Páli gasped. “But you are the *Nithaial Galgaliel*.”

“At that moment I was *nothing*,” I answered. “I know my powers are greater, but that injury was far more damaging than yours. You used up everything inside you, *everything*, to turn into that giant eagle. It will come back... I *promise*. If it doesn’t, I’ll fuck you until you are the most powerful wizard who ever was and ever will be—and the most handsome one, as well.”

Páli snorted. “If I let you,” he said.

I nodded. “If you let me. In the meantime, have you forgiven me enough to let me have a kiss?”

There was another silence, and in his hesitation, I felt even more how my foolishness had cost me.

“Come to me,” he said, at last. And, with a deep, inward sigh of gratitude and relief, that’s exactly what I did.



HEN, AT LAST, I threw open the door to let it be known that we were accepting visitors again, Alcaron immediately entered, followed by two assis-

tants carrying a huge shallow bowl of beaten silver, then a third bearing the stand upon which it was meant to rest.

“I have a premonition that we should do the scrying at once, *Nithaial Galgaliel*,” Alcaron said apologetically, “despite the injuries suffered by you and your companion.” He gave a quick, curious glance at Páli, who was floating in the air above the bed, sound asleep, his face so relaxed that his mouth was half open.

“Proceed, Alcaron,” I said. “I have cast a spell of sleep over him and raised him up to ease his pain, and promote the healing of his burns.” I didn’t add that this position also made it possible for us to suck each other, something that followed, as day follows night, just as tender, rueful kisses can quickly turn passionate. In any case, Alcaron could see this for himself, for, despite my careful licking, a glistening liquid thread oozed from his cock.

The High Steward sighed. “His witnessing what we are about to see was only necessary when he was to be your companion on this quest. But now, as you must see yourself, his body is too damaged...”

I held up my hand. “Páli has realized this for himself,” I replied, “which is why I thought it best that he *not* see what you plan to show me. He feels wretched enough as it is.”

Alcaron slowly nodded his head, his eyes meeting mine. “A good decision, I think,” he said, adding, with a gesture to the scrying mirror, “later, he and I will use this for

glimpses of your progress.”

The thought came to me that he might have already used this mirror himself to follow Niccas and me over the course of our adventures. But I decided to leave the thought unspoken for the moment, knowing I would find the answer a bit unsettling if, in fact, he had. The witnessing of triumphs is one thing, I thought, while having someone watch the results of bad decisions is quite another.

Already, the assistants had carefully arranged the mirror on its stand, then, on each side of it, had set a cushion on the floor. Now, at Alcaron’s command, two stepped up to us and bound our hair so that it would not fall into the mirror—something that could have disastrous consequences.

Then, with a gentle wave, he dismissed them all. When we were alone, he knelt on one of the cushions and I on the other. The surface of the mirror had been polished to the highest possible sheen, and it reflected our faces back to us with astonishing clarity.

“Some think it is safer—and so, wiser—to use a mirror of polished black stone,” Alcaron said, as he removed two phials from within his robe, then a silver spatula, and set them down near to him, “feeling that the clarity of our own reflections can be a distraction, perhaps even interact with the scrying in unexpected ways. But it is my belief that the the brighter the reflection, the clearer the scrying.”

He pulled the stopper from the larger of the two phials and let its contents fall drop by drop onto the mirror. “This

rare stuff is called *Aedfyrtas Prestoeras*,” he explained, “and requires the highest alchemical skills for its distillation. Its purposes are many, but in scrying it has but one—to locate you or your twin. And since *you* are here beside me...”

Amazingly, the few drops that Alcaron let fall immediately spread out tendrils across the mirror. These crossed each other again and again, until they had formed a web. He released two more drops, and the web became a coating, so thin as to be all but invisible, so fragile that the lightest of breaths could tear it apart. I did this once and thereafter held my breath when my face was turned to it.

Now Alcaron pulled open the stopper of the second, smaller phial. “Your own blood,” he said, holding it up, “gathered up while we were treating your wounds. Do I have your permission to use it?”

When I hesitated, he added, “I can certainly use my own. But yours would be far more... efficacious.”

I gestured with my head that he should use mine.

“Think of your twin as intensely as you can,” he directed, and, taking up the silver spatula in his other hand, delicately tilted this phial, releasing its contents one ruby drop at a time. As he did so, he spoke this rhyme:

Earth, fire, water, sky,
Open this portal to mine eye.
Let me far and deeply scry,
And let none I view myself espy.

The moment these struck the film of *Aedfyrtas Pre-*

stoeras, the mirror's reflection vanished. Everything was black, then the blackness began to pulse as if it were on fire, then it *was* fire, or showed it so clearly that it seemed as if the vessel had burst into flame.

Alcaron brought his head back ever so slightly, and our view shifted back, so that we could now see that the flames were now consuming a cart of some sort. And, just as that became clear, a body came tumbling out of it, naked and ashen colored. It rolled over, and I saw with astonishment, that its eyes had been replaced with two glittering jewels.

"Why is the mirror showing us this thing?" I asked, mind-touching Alcaron.

"Keep watching," he replied. "We mustn't miss anything." The body, which looked like one of the walking corpses I had battled at the outskirts of Wethrelad, dragged itself to the front of the cart, and, ignoring the flames, examined the body of a youth, which lay crumpled on the driver's seat. Convinced of its death, it left the boy where he lay, and set about freeing the two mules from the hitch. Then it fell on the traces and let the mules drag it along as they fled.

"Stop thinking of him as 'it'," Alcaron murmured in my mind. "He's far from dead. Look closer."

The High Steward tilted his head, bringing the body so close to our eyes that I could see the pores of its skin.

"It's... *he's* rubbed all over with ashes," I exclaimed. "But the death runes painted on his body..."

"Are merely a ruse," Alcaron answered, finishing my

sentence. “And, at first, I thought the gouged-out eyes were that as well. But those are no illusion. Look!”

And, sure enough, this youth—for once I was able to see past the disguise, I recognized that this was someone my own age—opened one of his palms, revealing a small leather sack. He held this up to each of his eyes, letting the stones fall into it, then pulled on the drawstring, and hung the bag around his neck.


As he did this, he cocked his head, turning it this way and that—as if, despite those gaping eye sockets, he was attempting to see. Almost at once, they pointed directly at Alcaron and me, and his face visibly tightened.

Alcaron swept the silver spatula across the mirror, breaking the spell, even as a bolt of force shattered the mirror into shards.

I stared at him, my mouth agape.

“His perceptions are astonishingly keen,” Alcaron said, in reply. “He sensed us watching him, and struck against us without even attempting to see who we were. I suspect he may have just beaten off an attack from the spirit world.”

Alcaron looked hard at me and I looked dumbly back at him. “You understand,” he said, finally, “who we were watching? Who that was?”

I was shaking my head in denial, even as I forced out the words. “O Blessed Mother,” I stammered, “that was Niccas? *Niccas*?” But I understood that it was, even before Alcaron nodded his head. 

Chapter 32



MY INNER POWERS had become immeasurably stronger the past several days, but none of them were of much help at keeping a mule trotting along at a rapid pace. Porro wasn't an especially stubborn mule, but neither was he any enthusiast for the adventures of the open road.

The blinders had their effect on him, to be sure, but so did the scent of clover or any other fragrant grass, and I discovered that a mule has this much in common with an herbalist—there's no plant that didn't interest it. The result was a constant battle of wills, and while I won each of these, every victory meant an increase in fatigue that promised that I might well lose the war.

Fortunately, this part of the road was lightly traveled, but it wasn't empty, and so I had to sometimes divide my time between keeping Porro ambling onwards and wiping the image of a corpse riding a mule from the minds of anyone who passed us by.

This was an easy enough task when directed at some simple soul like a cow herder or a tired pedlar whose mind was fixed on the next inn on the road, but I knew that it would be a very different matter if we encountered a mounted patrol, especially if they saw us before I sensed them, and had the sense to approach me from all sides at once.

Consequently, I was especially alert for the sound of approaching horses—especially rapidly approaching ones, and I had only been on the road for less than an hour when I heard the sound of galloping hooves. I had just enough time to turn Porro into the field that bordered the road and fall off him into the weeds, before the horses reached us.

Then, of course, I had to battle fiercely with Porro to get him to lift his head and look so that I could see what was passing us. It was not, as I had feared, a mounted patrol, but something that I had witnessed only in Lorithar, and then very rarely—a road-prince, which is to say, a nobleman's racing coach.

Possession of these is forbidden to any commoner, for reasons that had never been explained to me, except that they are so desirable, and so very, very fast. Skillfully crafted to be light but strong, and drawn by a team of four horses, they can fly along the road at a pace almost as fast as a man galloping on a horse.

My brother, Rosfyn, had a special passion for these road-princes and could explain as long as anyone would let him about their interior fixtures (luxurious), the bent metal

bars designed to absorb the shock when the wheels hit a rock or bounced in and out of a pothole, the windows made up of tiny squares of leaded glass that were all but impervious to breakage.

As required by the king's law, this one had the coat of arms of its owner emblazoned on its side—probably in gold, but, as Porro's eyes saw it, a sickly yellow. The horses were a handsome team of four, and you would think their movement effortless were their coats not so thoroughly lathered. It was a sight to make you catch your breath—and it made me give a sigh of relief, as well. Wherever they were going, whatever the passengers it carried, they had nothing to do with me.

Indeed, the coach shot past us, leaving a thick cloud of dust in its wake, and, a moment later, I was dragging myself back onto Porro, ignoring the crying pain of my joints, and urging him back to the road.

Despite my lack of worry, I had both blocked my own presence from the occupants of the coach and ever-so-gently touched their minds with mine. Or, I should say, *his* mind, for there was but one person inside, and I grasped just enough of him to know that he was a person possessing significant inner powers.

This alone made it highly unlikely that he was a nobleman himself—not because this was impossible, but because it would not be tolerated by the other nobility. Even Prince Poëstil had possessed none, as much as he no doubt

wished to do so. However, a servant of such high nobility possessing such powers seemed almost as unlikely, given that Maerdas's spies were everywhere. So, what could explain this?

I had only to ask the question to answer it. I slipped into the spirit world, traced the fast-vanishing node of power, and spoke to it.

"Ormaël?" I asked. "Could that be you?"

"Niccas!" he answered back. "Where are you? Did we ride right past you?" He swore a series of oaths. "You hid yourself from me, didn't you, damn your eyes."

He had the grace to be abashed by this curse, but only for the tiniest moment, which he covered by shouting at the coachman.

"I didn't know it was you," I answered apologetically, when I felt his attention return. "There's been some trouble on the road, Sepharan has been killed, and now caution is my *only* name."

"Hush, then," Ormaël said. "We'll be back with you before you can get that mule to cover half a furlong."

It was true, and not only because I turned Porro around to head in the direction from which they would come. It was only a matter of moments before the coach was thundering down the road at us, the coachman leaning against the brake bar, the wheels grinding to a halt right beside me.

In a flash, Ormaël was out of the coach, lifting me

off Porro, and jumping back up into it. He swung the door shut, latched it, wrapped his arm around me, and held me to him as the coach lurched forward.

He kissed the side of my head, and whispered, “I shall never let you out of my sight again, beloved. Ever.”

“**A**S YOU HAVE no doubt already guessed,” Ormaël said, “I am currently engaged in the service of Prince Nevoras, and it is he who has put this coach and its driver at our service.

“Tarrusor is awash with rumors, chief among them that your twin, the *Nithaial Galgaliel*, has taken up residence at Gostranar, and that you are about to join him there. There’s a sense in the air that, despite his new powers, The Unnameable One is about to fall, and if He does, the Amethyst Throne will topple with him.

“Prince Nevoras is already quietly negotiating for support to replace him, and helping you will only aid him in that—of course, unless we fail.”

Ormaël was, as best as he could, cleaning the chalk powder from my body with a wet cloth, and squeezing the dirty water into a commode that had been cleverly designed to fit over a small trapdoor built into the coach’s floor. Thus, his lordship could relieve himself in privacy, letting his turds fall on the road for the edification of the common folk.

As he scrubbed, I devoured a pastry called a half-moon, stuffed with apples soaked in honey and sweet cream, and baked to a dark gold. I was too hungry to refuse it, but I

had some trouble getting it down. This was the sort of treat that Sepharan would have adored—rich and filling, and when you were done with it, you could nibble on the bits of flaky crust that had fallen into your lap.

In my particular case, it was Ormaël who fed them to me, rather impatiently, too, since, now that he had cleaned me, he was unfolding the outfit of a young prince he wished me to don as soon as possible. It was highly unlikely that even a high ranking officer would have the nerve to command the coach to halt. But if one did, the coachman was skilled at driving horses, not lying, and it would be up to Ormaël to do the explaining—all the easier if the coach was actually conveying someone of noble blood.

“I’ve already disguised myself as a soothsayer and a corpse,” I muttered, “and I’ve been astonishingly successful, playing both—a mere prince will be nothing for me.”

“Prince Feldenas, to be exact,” Ormaël said, oblivious to my sarcasm. “Fortunately, you and he are close enough in age for all this to fit... more or less.”

I felt the soft leather of a princely boot being held against my foot, and heard my dresser sigh. “Can you use your magic to expand the size of these?” he asked. “Your limp is bad enough as it is.”

“Or perhaps I should reduce the size of my feet to something more delicately princely,” I retorted.

“Well, if that’s easier,” Ormaël replied, then caught the bitterness in my voice, and realized I wasn’t sharing his

excitement. “Really, Niccas,” he added, his voice more sad than scolding, “this is all being done for you.”

“No, it *isn't*, Ormaël, and you know that better than anyone,” I retorted angrily. “It’s being done to advance the political ambitions of some prince, who, for all I know, is a total shit, and no improvement on Temblar at all.

“I’d rather crawl on my hands and knees to Enfar-dast, rather than be taken there at a gallop in a road-prince, dressed in perfumed foppery, so that this man can own the boasting rights if we should somehow succeed.”

Ormaël sighed and fell back on the seat opposite me, letting both boots fall to the floor with a thud. “You forgot to say ‘stark naked,’” he said, after a moment.

“What?”

“Crawl stark naked on my hands and knees,” he explained, adding, “with my beloved companion, the warlock Ormaël, goading me along with a pointed stick.”

“Actually,” I said, hating him and loving him at that moment in equal measure, “I thought you’d be riding me.”

“Yes, I’d like that,” he agreed. “And I could still use the stick, sometimes to prod you on, sometimes to dangle a piece of pastry in front of your nose.”

There was a silence, and then Ormaël said, “I think you’ve had rather a trying morning, Your Highness. Might I suggest a long nap, using my lap as a pillow?”

I let out a long breath. “Yes,” I said. “Yes, you may”—and so we settled in together.

“Will there be a problem at the crossroads?” I murmured, as he tucked a traveling robe around my shoulders.

“No, no,” he replied, “not at all. That will come much further north, once we get close to Ernfordast. That’s where they’ll be waiting for us.”

FOR ROAD-PRINCES to fly along as they were meant to required the nobility to establish a string of post houses where teams of tired horses could be exchanged for fresh ones. These had thus been set up along the routes, large and small, that connected Tarrusor to the various castles where these aristocrats resided when the court was not in session, or when they tired of city life.

Needless to say, post houses cost a fortune to maintain, and so required the proximity of a great number of peers to exist at all. This is why similar establishments were not to be found along the roads that led out of Lorithar, even along the King’s High Road to Tarrusor—despite the pleadings of the noble families of my city for the king to provide the necessary funds to build them.

The distance between Tarrusor and Ernfordast was not nearly as long as what I had traveled already, and we reached the last of the post houses by the evening of the third day. These places also provided comfortable accommodations for traveling nobility and their servants (and no one else), so, on two nights straight, I slept on a feather bed in the arms of Ormaël.

On the second of these, we made love, exactly as we

had in the cart, except in more comfort and with a blanket of melancholy waiting to wrap itself around us once were done. This was exacerbated by the increasingly noisy cries and moans of someone getting thoroughly—and not altogether voluntarily—penetrated in the room next to ours.

“It is a common thing, I suppose,” I said sourly, looking up at the light cast off by the fire in our fireplace flickering restlessly across the ceiling, “for lordlings to fuck their servants in places like this.”

“Their servants, their companions, the pot boy, the serving wenches, our host, or, if all else fails, one of the horses,” Ormaël replied sleepily. “Elsewhere their lives are almost completely circumscribed by protocol, so they find what is called way-station coupling hard to resist.” He reached out and found my hand. “It’s not easy being a prince, you know.”

I smiled. “I’ll bet it isn’t,” The elaborate courtesies shown my princely self by the staff of these places had soon become cloying, and I hoped that this was no advance taste of the everyday life at Wisferon.

“How far are we now from Enfardast?” I asked, catching Ormaël just as he again was slipping off to sleep.

He sighed. This wasn’t the first time I had quizzed him on that subject today. “We’re little closer than the last time you asked,” he said. “With fresh post horses along the way, we could reach it by late tomorrow. But since this is the last of them, we’ll be lucky to get there the day after.”

He pointedly rolled onto his side with his back to me, muttered the threat of casting a sleeping spell over me, and, almost immediately, started snoring.

As for myself, I could barely close my eyes. The battle of my life was approaching, and soon. There was no way to tell if it would be tomorrow, and not the day after. I still had no clear idea of how to battle the ghoulish wraiths, certainly not many of them together.

As to whatever human forces awaiting us on the road—well, they had waited too long. Wand or no wand, I had access to all my powers now. What the wand offered besides storing power was the ability to direct and focus it, but in what was about to come finesse was unimportant.

No, the only hope that an army of men might cling to is knowing how hard it is for a *Nithaial* to take a life, *especially* if he deeply wants to. I had already discovered that this moral imperative was deeply ingrained in my character. In the end, though, it was for me to decide, and at this point, I was almost beyond caring.

An especially loud and rasping snore shook the bed, and I mind-touched Ormaël to see if he were awake. But, no, he wasn't. If a man can't sleep through his own snores, the saying goes, he makes himself an ill bed companion.

At home, I could remember only the dogs snoring. Matheas made little whimpering noises at times; Helias thrashed out; Sepharan, when he exhaled, produced a faint whistle. During our one night together, Iannas and I had

breathed as a single person, inhaling and exhaling in perfect rhythm. Was this the sign that you had met your ideal lover? With such thoughts, I whiled away the time until dawn.

I NOTICED THE CHANGE OF PACE in our travels the moment we started out. The road-prince now moved along at a smooth and easy pace, without the rattling and swaying and lurching I had grown accustomed to. Still, it passed anything we came upon. The lightness of the coach and the quality of the horses meant that even at this slower speed, it was faster than almost anything else on the road.

Toward the middle of the day, I sensed that we were approaching some magical device, and I asked Ormaël to slow the coach and tell me what it was. He actually had to stop the vehicle and search for it, a waystone buried in the grass. He brushed away the dirt and mold that covered it, and discovered the emblem of the Cronnex carved on its back, where none were likely to see it if they didn't know to look.

After staring at it for a time, Ormaël climbed back into the road-prince and took down a leather chart pipe from the rack over my head, opened it, and drew out the map that Prince Nevoras had given him when they had parted company.

"Why is that stone *here*?" he asked me and the map together. "Nevoras said we should know the turnoff when we came upon it, but not that we would encounter a waystone where there was *no* turnoff!"

"Look not at your map, warlock," I said, "but at your spellfinder."

There is no such device, of course, but Ormaël caught my meaning, and rapped me on the top of my head, demanding, “Insolent *Nith*, how long have you been sitting there letting me make a fool of myself?”

“Only for as long as it took you to ask the question!” I replied. “It made the answer obvious—a cloaking spell, and a very subtle one. Would you like the honor of breaking it?”

Ormaël mumbled a spell that released a twisting jerk of magic, like a key turning in a lock, and, immediately, the coachman gave out a cry.

“Look, road off to the left, sir!” he said, leaning down from his perch. “Can’t think how I missed it!”

“Well, take it before you lose sight of it again,” Ormaël snapped uncharitably, and the coach lurched forward.

This new road was narrower but not especially rough, and covered enough with leaves so that the coach stopped sending up billowing clouds of dust. This meant that we could open the coach windows and strap them down, letting in the various aromas of the outside world. Thus, I had no need to ask Ormaël to describe the landscape to me—I could smell it for myself. Forest. It was not dissimilar from that of the Forest Grymaeld, but thicker, stronger—the resinous aroma of spruce and pine.

I could also feel it, that sense of closeness when large trees crowd the edge of the road, their branches meeting overhead and filtering the sunlight into a permanent dusk. Now and then, I also picked up the sound of water hurrying

down the narrow banks of a small river that, like a frisky dog, would keep us company for a while, then slip away on an adventure of its own, only to return to us again a league or so down the road. I paid no attention to it at first, but the sound of it was tugging at something buried in my memory, and eventually pulled it free.

“Have you ever heard of the Tarn of Subtle Waters?” I asked Ormaël, who was lolling on the seat across from me, engrossed in his own thoughts.

“Hmm,” he said, thinking for a bit. “Yes, I have. In fact, if it exists at all, it must be somewhere very close to here. Were you thinking of stopping there to give the waters a try?”

I laughed. He asked this with just the sort of incredulous solicitousness one uses when addressing someone who has just lost their mind.

“No, but thank you for the thought,” I said. “It’s just that the herbalist, Alfrund, advised me to say that the tarn was my destination, if Sepharan and I were stopped along this road. He explained that the tarn’s proximity to Enfardast has long left the impression that to seek healing at the waters might attract unfavorable attention. So, over the years, it has been visited less and less, until its exact location has almost been forgotten.”

“That hasn’t stopped fake healers from selling bottles of water supposedly filled there,” Ormaël replied, “which has always made me think of the place as being as mythical

as the list of cures a dose of the stuff was supposed to effect.” He chuckled. “But I see the herbalist’s point—anyone who stops us will have heard of it, but have no better idea of its location than we do.”


I sensed him lean over and stick his head out the window. “Damn this murkiness!” he muttered when he drew it back in. “When night comes we won’t be able to see our hand in front of our face.”

He turned to me and asked, “What do you sense around us in the spirit world?”

“No danger,” I replied, after a bit. “This road seems to have a trace of magic woven into it, but I sense nothing else. And when they come, they won’t bother to hide themselves. They’ll want me to know.”

Ormaël reached over and took my hand. “A deep forest, a black night, a mysterious, winding road, dangerous enemies skulking everywhere—just the sort of bedtime tale to send me off to sleep.”

“Only if your aged granny is telling it to you,” I replied, “with you safely tucked under the covers.”

“Well, come lie in my arms,” Ormaël said, “and I’ll play your granny.” And so I did, but it turned out he had something else in mind, entirely. 

Chapter 33



“This is the problem we must overcome, *Nithaial Galgaliel*,” Alcaron said. He had summoned in his assistants to gather up the broken shards of the scrying mirror. Being silver, these could be melted down, worked back into the device’s original shape, and be all the more powerful for it. Then he had led me outside, and we now sat together in a patch of grass under the bright sun.

“The scrying mirror was destroyed before we could draw back and see where exactly the *Nithaial Elimiel* was, when all this was happening to him. And, even if we had, by the time you reached that spot, he would be long gone.”

The High Steward glanced at me to see if I was following not his words so much as the problem they conveyed.

“We know his goal is Ernfordast,” I said, answering his look, “but not how fast and by what means he will be able to get there.”

Alcaron nodded slowly. “Exactly,” he replied.

“Perhaps I could fly to him,” I said, not because I thought I could, but because it was that came to my mind.

Alcaron grunted. “I thought of that, too. But even if your powers would carry you that far without replenishment, you would still have to find him. And we should expect that he has used powerful magic to shield himself.”

“The scrying mirror found him without difficulty,” I argued. “Surely, my powers are equal to *it*.”

Alcaron smiled. “Of course they are. The mirror was using them to accomplish that.” He glanced at me again. “It was your blood, you’ll recall, that empowered it.”

I noticed that he said this matter-of-factly, not as someone conceding an argument.

“Obviously, I’ve failed to take something into account,” I said, “but I can’t think of what.”

“Remember how he was when we found him,” Alcaron replied. “Falling out of a burning cart, finding his companion brutally murdered, and, I truly believe, having just fought off some evil being—not Maerdas, I think, but something of near equal power.”

I looked at Alcaron in astonishment.

“So I do surmise,” he repeated. “Maerdas may soon be the least of your problems, if my auguries can be trusted. However, the point is that we found him during the brief time that his defenses were down. We shouldn’t wait until that happens again, because then we would find that we were too late—whatever we decided to do.”

I didn't bother telling the high steward that my own plan had been to carry Páli across the River Alsorel and for us to then buy two horses and ride posthaste to Enfardast, hoping to intercept him on the way. I now saw it for what it was—the work of two boys who thought that luck would rescue them from the sketchiest of schemes.

“What do you advise me to do, then?” I asked, hesitantly, for if Alcaron had no strategem of his own, this whole effort was doomed.

He sighed, and stared away into the distance. “I have an *inkling* of plan,” he answered at last. “But I have to tell you that I immediately see two *huge* problems with it. Firstly, I will need at least two days, maybe more, to learn enough to be able to effect it. Secondly,” and here he turned his head so that his eyes met mine and held them, “it may be the most dangerous thing you have yet attempted to do.”

“So be it,” I answered. “The song of Peldas and Eruan has never left my heart. I would rather perish than fail Niccas when he needs me most.”

THE TWO DAYS THAT FOLLOWED were as close as I ever want to come to torture. Every moment was filled with anguish, and every moment lasted an eternity. Only two things made this bearable. First, Páli improved almost visibly as the hours passed. By the end of the first day, the painful rawness of his burns had gone away, and his humor improved so much that I confided in him what was happening, why I was still cooling my heels in Gostranar.

“I don’t like that Alcaron hasn’t told you exactly what this plan of his is,” Páli said. “I’ll bet he’s making it up as he goes along.”

“Just like you and me, then,” I replied.

Páli stuck out his tongue at me. “At least my plan had a pigeon in it,” he retorted.

“Alcaron doesn’t need a pigeon to bring him scraps of paper,” I said. “He has a whole scriptorium filled with them.”

That was the second thing. The high steward allowed me to accompany him as he searched for the knowledge he needed to bring his plan about. On the second day, Páli was well enough to accompany me, and we walked to the scriptorium together.

Two attendants swung open the huge brass doors as we approached, ushering us inside. Unlike Páli, I had been in such a building before. But this one was very different from the towering edifice that Hezzakal had made into his palace. It was also round, but only a single story high, surrounded by stout marble columns set directly into the circular wall. These supported the shallow crystal dome that served as the scriptorium’s roof, filling its interior with light.

The interior was a single, windowless room, with shelves running from floor to ceiling around it. These were filled with all manner of scrolls, bound volumes, loose fascicles, even a scattering of graven tablets. These, however, as Alcaron had already explained to me, while they might contain information of interest, were not themselves objects of

virtue—by which he meant, vessels of power themselves.

These were stored in various containers set out on the floor, each a certain distance from the next, and most of them sealed with spells, some of which were of such great power that the chest or case was only vaguely visible—as if, even when you looked at it directly, you were observing it out of the corner of your eye.

I drew Páli over to what at first looked like the bust of some emperor of a forgotten time, set upon a pillar. But as we approached the thing, it opened its eyes, looking at us with intense curiosity. It operated with that slightly hesitant movement of a clockwork device, and it was just such, ingeniously constructed of an infinite number of tiny parts, that allowed its eyes to look this way and that, its mouth to open, and even form the shape of words.

Even before it spoke, it was an amazing thing to behold, with its hair and eyebrows spun of silver, its skin of gold, beaten until it seemed as soft as flesh, its tongue, which was in several pieces so that it could move freely, all coated with glistening red enamel.

“This is one of the most dangerous things in the scriptorium, and one of the most original, a true masterwork of evil-ity,” I told my companion. “No one who owned it could bear to destroy it, even though *it* was busily destroying them.”

Páli, however, was barely paying attention to me, being totally captivated by the device—exactly as I had been, when Alcaron had showed it to me. For the thing fixes you

with eyes that seem to look deeply inside you, then speaks to you in a low voice, the speech flowing and musical, the words perfectly articulated and conveying great import.

Finally, Páli tore his attention away, saying, “I can’t understand a word of what it says, although I desperately wish to do so.”

“Yes,” I said, “and you should thank the Blessed Gessyma that this is so. For its eyes seek inside you for what you treasure the most, and what you fear the most, and its voice persuades you to believe that the one is the other, slowly driving you into madness and despair.”

Páli looked at me, his eyes open wide. “But how can it do that if you can’t understand a word it’s saying?”

I smiled. “*That* is the flaw of the device. The wizard who made it didn’t think to give it the ability to master any other language than his own. So, it is condemned to whisper its poisonous calumnies in an ancient tongue that no one now understands.”

I took my lover’s hand to draw him away. “And this wasn’t for lack of trying. For centuries, its owners found interpreters to explain what it was saying, until the last of those died away as well. I imagine it was a dangerous sort of employment. Alcaron told me that Maerdas wasted many a day trying to teach it the common tongue.”

“All the while imagining what wonderful uses *he* could find for it,” Páli muttered. “Let’s hope he didn’t absorb any of the device’s mastery of elocution.”

I shot him a sideways glance. “I had never thought of that!” I said. “I wonder if Alcaron has. It may still be more dangerous than anyone thinks.”

“All I know is that all this magic is starting to give me the creeps,” Páli said. “And I’ll wager I haven’t seen anything, yet.”

At the center of this round room was a large round table, made of sturdy oak, but with a black, unbroken circle of jet-black stone set into it, a palm’s width from its edge. It was within this that anything containing magical power was to be examined, because any summoned or unexpected enchantment could be safely contained.

Here, Alcaron stood, examining a scroll, and so intently that he barely nodded when we came and stood beside him. As I had watched him do before, he was trying to force the runes written upon it to reveal themselves. At first, the scroll had been blank. Then a rune would appear in one place, then another rune in another place, then maybe two at once, but never so that they could be read, let alone made sense of. Now, they seemed to be all there, but when you tried to focus on them, they made your eyes ache so much that you couldn’t concentrate on them.

Alcaron had made enormous progress, considering that the scroll exhausted his powers in a very short time, and he would have to close it and rest for several hours before attempting to read it again.

I said to Páli, “The first part of the task is to be able to

read enough of the scroll to ensure that it is the one we want. If it is, the second task is have it reveal where it has hidden the map that accompanies it. And the third task is to read the scroll and decipher its meaning.”

“And where are we now?” Páli asked.

It was Alcaron who answered him. “Look,” he said. And, suddenly, the map appeared, not with a blaze of light or a puff of smoke, but simply lying limply on the table, as if it had been there all along.

I reached out and squeezed Alcaron’s shoulder. “You should have been born a wizard,” I said.

“As you will be the first to know, *Nithaial Galgaliel*, wizards are not born but made,” he replied, smiling faintly as he did so.

I had the grace to blush. Alcaron was far more likely to find himself drawn to my bed than Orien, but that was *not* what had been on my mind.

Páli, meanwhile, ignoring this little interchange, had staring at the map. “This, I imagine, is Wisferon,” he began, instinctively reaching out his hand to point to that spot on the scroll. Simultaneously, the quiet was shattered by a loud vibrating chord, and Alcaron seized Páli about the waist, swung him completely away from the table, and released him.

Páli stumbled, crying out in pain, then whirled around in a fury. But Alcaron regarded him calmly. “The burns you sustained rescuing the *Nithaial Galgaliel* were serious enough,” he said, “but your arm would have been burnt to a crisp if you

had reached into the enchanted circle.”

Páli looked from Alcaron to me. “But it was only a *scroll*,” he said. “Magical, yes, but even with my small powers, I could tell it wouldn’t do *that*.”

Alcaron sighed. “You don’t understand,” he said. “It isn’t the scroll that threatened you, but the *table*. Can you not sense *its* powers?”

Páli, keeping an eye as much on Alcaron as the table itself, tentatively touched its edge. “I can now,” he admitted. “But why would it...?”

“Because the table is under a rare spell cast by both *Nithaial* simultaneously,” Alcaron replied, “to protect Wisferon from any sort of invasive magic. If you or I were able to touch an object inside the circle of containment, it could use us as a gateway to do great damage—for example, liberate any or all of the enchanted objects in this room, by releasing them from the wards that now restrain them.”

The high steward waved his hand at the many cases set about the room. “Bear in mind that there are things here that even the *Nithaial* may not be able to control, at least not just one of them—things that ought to have been long ago destroyed, but weren’t. Usually, this was because it wasn’t readily apparent how that could be done. In other times, the thing was simply too powerful to risk the attempt.”

He paused to let this sink in.

“Why aren’t these items buried in some deep vault, then,” I asked, “far from any chance of accident?”

Alcaron regarded me thoughtfully. “Some *Nithaial* have thought that that would be best,” he replied. “But most have thought that what is hidden cannot be seen, and what cannot be seen can be approached with impunity by anyone clever enough to learn of its location.”

I considered this. “No solution is perfect, is it?”

Alcaron smiled. “With these things, no. Thus the rule: the inquisitor must *always* remain *entirely* outside the circle of containment; the item being interrogated must *always* be kept inside it as long as its forces have been activated.”

He turned to Páli. “I apologize for not apprising you of this when you approached the table,” he said. “But come, and let me show you how we deal with this.”

Páli came and stood beside him, and Alcaron instructed him to lift his hand and point his index finger at the map, thinking as he did so of what he wanted to draw our attention to. Páli did so, and a point of light fell on the map. Alcaron showed him how he could have this take any size or shape he wished, be it in lozenge form to emphasize a word or a passage of text or as a mere dot to pick out a point on a map.

Páli quickly set a dot upon one place on the map, and said again, “This, I imagine, is Wisferon. But the same symbol appears here, and here, and here—and none of these places are where I believe the homes of the spirits lie.”

“You’re correct,” Alcaron assented. “Sondaram, Wethrelad, Ernfardast, Faeÿstirran—none of them appear on this map, for they are of no concern to it.”

“Well, then,” Páli asked, moving his point of light to the symbol that was nearest to Wisferon, off to its east, “what is this place, then?”

Alcaron had no need to look. “*Fyrewourmhaem*,” he answered, “buried deep in The Forest Grymæld.”

Páli’s eyes met mine. “*Fyrewourmhaem*?” I repeated.

The high steward nodded. “There,” he said slowly, “dragons be.”

IT WAS NOT UNTIL THE THIRD DAY that Alcaron mastered the text and learned the secret commands that brought the *dagmast* stones to life and directed them to take the voyager where he wanted to go. Once he knew he had the power to do that, he finally put his plan before me.

He prefaced it by explaining that he had, in fact, used the scrying mirror to follow the progress of both Niccas and myself—not constantly, of course, for he hardly had enough power for that. But often enough to know that Niccas had already been brought to *Fyrewourmhaem* for reasons and by powers that Alcaron had been unable decipher.

What *was* clear was that a dragon then had taken Niccas from there to Faeýstirran. The plan was that I should follow in the footsteps of my twin, and persuade that dragon, or another, to take me to Ernfardast—a flight that could make in a single night.

If this venture failed in the first part, I could simply use the *dagmast* stones to return to Wisferon. If it failed in the second part, the dragon could bring me back here itself,

before returning to its home—if, in fact, that was where it wanted to go, what it wanted to do. In other words, I would have to strike some sort of deal with the dragon nest.

If he had not glimpsed Niccas being carried by a dragon not once but twice, Alcaron admitted, he would never have dared suggest the idea, for it had been the *Nithaial* who, together, had cast the enchantment over the dragons that had trapped them forever in their home.

In the Great Demon Wars, the dragons had been indifferent to the devastating human losses that that had allowed the demons to seize a large portion of the kingdom, including *Fyrewourmhaem* itself. In fact, the demons had built a great temple at that very place, and made it the residence of the Avatar of Ra’asiel, that god’s equivalent to the *Nithaial*. For, unlike humans, the demons worshipped the dragons and granted them the status of demiurges, equal to their own Avatar and, in power, directly beneath Ra’asiel himself.

Men, on the other hand, while they recognized the powers that the dragons possessed, had no trust in them, wove legends around those heroes who had (or supposedly had) slain them, and had become persuaded that the dragons had a secret alliance with the demons, and used their magic to aid them in their battles.

So, eventually, the *Nithaial* were persuaded to combine their powers to completely seal off *Fyrewourmhaem*, thus imprisoning the dragons and the Avatar both. Once this was done, so it turned out, the tide turned. It was the demon

forces who were defeated again and again, until they were driven out of the Kingdom and south of the Great Barrens.

Where, before, demons had cut off Faeÿstirran and Wethrelad, now humans denied demons access to their own Avatar. And, of course, dragons no longer devoured kine when they were hungry, sheep when they were peckish, and humans when they were in the mood for sport. Nor was there now any chance that they could use their magic and immeasurable cleverness to interfere in human affairs.

There was a long silence, once Alcaron had finished this explanation, while Páli and I digested this information. To be honest, I was deeply disappointed. Despite all the head steward's delvings and calculations, how different really was his plan from the one Páli and I had devised that in retrospect seemed a fragile web of boyish fantasies.

"So, Alcaron, if I understand you aright, your plan is that I transport myself into the presence of the Avatar of Ra'asiel and right in the middle of a nest of dragons, all of whom have every reason to hate me beyond measure, and somehow persuade them to grant me an enormous boon."

Alcaron sighed and spread out his hands, indicating surrender. "You have grasped it perfectly," he said. "It sounds like a fool's errand, but I can give you nothing better."

"Did your scrying give you any hint as to how long Niccas was in this place?"

He nodded. "For several days."

"Is it true, then, as rumors had it, that he took the

Avatar as a lover?”

Alcaron blushed and cast down his eyes. “It is so, *Nithaial Galgaliel*, and perhaps with more than the Avatar. But, I know only the fact, not the reasons for it.”

Páli sat right beside me, and I could sense his anger growing—not at Niccas for making love to a demon, but at Alcaron, for spying on the act—and, by extension, observing the antics of Páli and myself. I shot him a glance, warning him to keep his thoughts to himself. As Telo had taught me, a master might have titular power over his servants, but for these to serve best they must be also allowed powers that may well usurp their master’s. What Alcaron had done made me uneasy as well, but I could not say it was wrong.

I turned my attention back to him. “Well, high steward, you have given us all the facts, but to persuade me to follow your plan, I also need to know your suspicions.”


Alcaron nodded. “That is a fair request.” He thought for a moment, then continued. “Here is what we know. Niccas went to *Fyrewourmhaem* not by his own volition, but because he was drawn there by powers unknown. He left there riding a dragon and wearing a pendant given to him by the Avatar or, although it leaves the imagination gasping, Ra’asiel Himself.

“It would be reasonable to assume from this—without thinking anything badly of the *Nithaial Elimiel*—that the god believes it is time for the *Nithaial* to release their spell over the place, and provided him with these favors either in the hopes of persuading him... or for still larger reasons con-

cerning the struggles at hand.”

He glanced up at me. “As to the sex with demons, well, it has long been known that there is no accounting for acts of the *Nithaial*. But it can be seen as a momentary conciliation between the Holy Gesryma and the Puissant Ra’asiel.”

Alcaron reached over and gently touched my arm. “If men know of these doings, they will consider your twin a traitor, as corrupted, and with all the potential for evil that Maerdas possessed. And from this, they may lose faith in the *Nithaial*. If so, so must it be.

“But remember, you do not serve men but the Blessed Mother—and that is also true of the *Nithaial Elimiel*. We *must* believe that he has acted in Her behalf, even if he doesn’t understand this himself. And so, should you decide to go to *Fyrewourmhaem*, I shall give you something to bring with you that will further those ends.” Here he smiled thinly. “And make you even more unpopular with men than is your twin.” 

Chapter 34



No trouble found us that night, which made it seem all the more endless, since neither of us dared sleep and the restless hours spent listening to nothing left us both irritable and out of sorts in the morning.

Ormaël snarled out the window at the coachman to boil some water for our tea. We had already eaten all the bread and cheese we had procured the last night we had spent at an inn, and when the warlock unlatched the coach compartment that held the travel bread, we discovered that it—jostled about for three days now—had been reduced to a sack of crumbs. These we were forced to stir into our tea to make an odd sort of porridge—nourishing enough, but totally cheerless.

“So much,” Ormaël muttered, as he downed it, “for the life of a hero.”

The coachman, whom I suspected to have fared much better from what he had in his own cache, soon had

us on the road again, and we had not been traveling for long when we caught the smell of wood smoke.

“Campfires,” Ormaël muttered. “Here we go.” He leaned over and straightened my princely attire, brushing away as many crumbs as he could while he did so.

Almost at once, there was a command ordering the coach to halt. Ormaël stuck his head out the window and in a practiced haughty voice demanded, “Who dares stop a conveyance of His Right Royal Highness, Prince Nevoras?”

There was a momentary silence, and then a cold voice, at once far haughtier and equally familiar to me, answered, “His Imperial Highness, Crown Prince Poëstil. Step out of the coach and explain yourself, Sir.”

Ormaël gave a low groan, swung open the door, and stepped out. “I beg your pardon, Lord Prince, but I hardly expected to encounter one of such eminence so far from anywhere.”

Prince Poëstil snapped, “I care not what you did or did not expect—what business do *you* have here?”

“At the direct command of the Right Royal Prince, I am accompanying one his sons to the Tarn of Subtle Waters, which I have been told are to be reached by this road.”

Ormaël had tempered the hauteur in his voice with noticeable obsequiousness, a prince of servants addressing a prince of the realm. Thus he indicated that he knew his place, but expected that the prince still recognize that he was hardly some serf.

This had its effect. Prince Poëstil had no desire to needlessly antagonize a lord as powerful as Prince Nevoras, and his voice now had a touch of solicitousness.

“Ah,” he said. “I see. Which of Nevoras’s sons is it? And what is his complaint?”

“It is Prince Feldenas, Sire,” Ormaël replied. “His eyes were gouged out by an assailant, who had the effrontery to assault him while he was strolling in the Palace Gardens. The Right Royal Prince suspects an agent of the rebel who was once Prince Caelas.”

“By the holy feet of Gesryma!” Prince Poëstil swore. “I have received no news of this! Let me see the injury.”

The coach gave a sudden dip as the prince climbed up on the side step and swung himself into the coach. Without a by-your-leave, he flipped aside the cloth and stared at my face. Perhaps, in other circumstances, he would have recognized that I did not in the least resemble Prince Feldenas, but the gaping eye sockets were all that he truly saw.

He gasped, let the cloth fall back over my face, and, finally, acknowledged my presence. “This is a most grievous injury, Feldenas, and a maddeningly impious one. I’m sure no effort is being spared to track down the perpetrator.”

I realized suddenly that I had no idea as to how one prince addresses another, and so I made a strangled-sounding noise, as if my vocal chords had been torn out along with my eyes.

Prince Poëstil sank into the seat across from me.

“Terrible! Terrible!” he said. Then, speaking directly to Ormaël, he said. “Get in, sir, get in. I shall personally accompany you to the Tarn. Does your coachman know the way?”

“No, Sire,” Ormaël replied. “We only knew that it was somewhere along this road.”

“You were a clever fellow to get this far,” Prince Poëstil said. “Tell your man he will come to a fork directly ahead and that he is to turn left. If he should turn right, we shall *all* be in trouble—make no mistake.”

He gave an involuntary shudder that I barely needed to mind touch to feel, and it told me much. It wasn’t only the prince’s own men who were guarding the way.

The directions were given, the coach lurched forward, and after a moment, Prince Poëstil grunted with satisfaction. I heard a latch click, and, emboldened by his obliviousness to who I was, mind touched him enough to see through his own eyes what he had found. It was a hidden cabinet containing a bottle and two glasses, held safe with leather straps.

The prince removed the bottle, uncorked it, and sniffed. “Prince Nevoras treats himself well,” he remarked. “If I’m not mistaken, this will prove to be the distillation of one of Plaecenon’s finest.” He extracted both glasses, gave them to Ormaël to hold, and filled one almost to the brim and splashed a bit into the other.

He then took my hand and placed that glass in mine. “Here, my princely lad, take a sip of this,” he said. “Do you

as good as the healing waters, I'll wager." He then took the other glass for himself, giving the warlock not a thought.

Prince Poëstil tossed back the contents of his glass in one swallow, wheezed, wiped his mouth with his sleeve, and said, "Upon my word! Nevoras *does* treat himself well."

I took a sip from the glass that had been given to me. The fumes went straight up my nose, the liquid set my throat on fire, and I began to cough violently. Tears leaked out from my eye sockets and ran down my face.

Prince Poëstil laughed. "It will pass!" he said, slapping my knee. "I see," he said approvingly, as he poured himself another glass, "that the father doesn't share out this treasure with his brood."

I passed what was left in my own glass to Ormaël, saying, "I shall take no more. Down this if you like."

"Oh, no!" Prince Poëstil cried, intercepting it. "This divine liquid is *strictly* the province of kings!"

Almost simultaneously, there was the sound of a blow, then another directly after. The prince groaned after the first, and slumped down unconscious after the second. The bottle fell with a thump onto the floor of the coach, only to be instantly retrieved by Ormaël.

"None of us here is a king," he said, "and none of us ever *shall* be. So I say, share and share alike. What say you to that, Pustule?" Then there was a gurgling noise, as Ormaël upended the bottle and drank deeply.

"Shite!" he exclaimed. "Hold up an ember to light my

breath, and I'll be the equal of any dragon." Again, there was a gurgling noise, then the sound of an empty bottle smashing on the ground outside. "Kings be damned!" he snorted. "Now I *do* feel like a hero."

He turned to me. "What plan, my princely lad?"

I had already been considering this. "I think," I said, "we should pay a visit to the Tarn of Subtle Waters after all."

THE TARN, IT TURNED OUT, was but a short distance from the turnoff. The road-prince turned a bend and the coachman gave a shout and reined in the horses, halting them right at the water's edge. Ormaël helped me out of the coach, then went back and unceremoniously dragged out Prince Poëstil. Then he went to talk to the coachman, as, sitting on the ground beside the comatose body of His Majesty, I began to divest myself of my princely raiment.

It is a sign of my concentration on what was at hand that I barely gave a thought to this man, whom I hated beyond all others. Even when Ormaël struck him down, I felt no special glee, just relief to be rid of his unpleasantness.

"You see the situation," the warlock was saying. "Our need for you is over. The sooner you get away from here, the more likely you are to live. On the other hand, we don't want the alarm raised quite yet. What say you?"

The coachman grunted, then said slowly. "I'll tell the soldiers that His Majesty has decided to take the cure with you gentlemen, and would like horses brought around for all three of you at... midday? Would that suit you, sir? It

shouldn't be *too* long, or they'll get suspicious."

"Midday will be fine," Ormaël said. There was the sound of coins jingling, and the coachman said, "Much obliged. However, no amount of money could match the pleasure of seeing Pustule after he received a good thumping. Something to tell the grandchildren, that's for sure."

There was a crack of a whip. "It's a brave man as would dare hit a crown prince, and I salute you, sir." The coach began to creak and groan as the team of horses struggled to turn it about.

Ormaël came and sat beside me. "I hope you don't think I saved any of the rags I found you in," he said.

"I'll take a shirt of your own, then, or go naked," I said. "I don't mind the chill. May I use your eyes?"

"By all means," he said, looking about, so that I could see everything. The forest crowded around the tarn, which was smaller than a lake but much larger than a pond. The sun, blocked here by the trees, shone brightly on it, and it and the brisk breeze were dissipating a clump of mist that lingered at its very center.

As the mist faded, a building came into view, round, small—nothing more, really, than an open pavilion, supported by columns. A small boat floated beside it, and, as we watched, an elderly man came out of the Pavilion (out of nowhere, really) and stepped lightly down into it. At once, the boat turned its prow in our direction and, of its own accord, began sailing toward us over the water.

As it did, I opened the pouch that hung around my neck, and slipped the gemstones it held into my eye sockets. These took what I already saw through Ormaël's eyes and transformed it, combining as one my perception of the real and spirit worlds.

The pavilion, I now saw, was something far more than that: a temple; the boat that approached us was but a large, open-weave basket. This let the water flow in as it willed, but rather than sinking the basket, it illuminated its passenger with a nimbus of flickering light. He stood upright, as an easy balance; in his arms he carried a large pitcher made of fired but unglazed clay.

"Help me up," I said to Ormaël, and, with my arm over his shoulder, and his around my waist, we made our way to where the water lapped against the verge. As the boat came to the shore, I reached out and offered him my hand, although, given my state, he might just as well have offered his to me.

However, he smiled, took it, grasped it firmly, and stepped lightly out of his craft, which immediately sank out of sight. His powers were so different from my own that I couldn't easily tell if they were greater or lesser. But one thing was very clear—he was as direct a servant of the Blessed Gesryma as I was myself.

"*Nithaial Elimiel*, I greet you," he said. "I am Bred-dan, healer by grace of the Holy Gesryma; the Temple of the Subtle Waters, which you see behind me, is my home. I hope

in better times that you might visit me there.”

He reached out his other hand to Ormaël. “Greetings also to you, Ormaël, son of Sophaera, now a warlock, deemed renegade by the Daughters of the Moon. Do you also seek my blessing, or are you here simply as a friend?”

Ormaël dropped to his knees and kissed the healer’s hand. “Both,” he said in reply.

“Then I bless you doubly,” Breddan said, and, releasing both of us, dipped his hand into the vessel he carried, then placed it, palm down, on Ormaël’s head.

A ripple passed down the warlock’s body, wiping away the cares and bitterness that made his face hard and tight. He suddenly looked ten years younger, and I wondered if that could be his true age—so much closer to my own.

“Don’t make him *too* nice, healer,” I thought to myself. “I need his defiance, his truculence.”

Breddan must have sensed my thought, for he turned from Ormaël, gently touched my cheek, and held me, blind though I was, with his eyes, which were as watery blue as the tarn itself, and just as deep.

“I see that your doom is sorely wrapped around you, Niccas,” he said, “and it is something not in my power to cure—but I shall do what I can to alleviate it.”

He took up the clay pitcher with both hands, and tipped what remained inside it over my head. There was a roaring in my ears, as if I had stepped into a waterfall, and a great ease came into my heart. It held so many burning

points of pain, and yet peace came to them all. I felt breathless, almost sick—removing their poison left my body weak, and if Ormaël hadn't been holding me up, I would have fallen to the ground.

Breddan again touched my cheek. "You are very, very tired, *Nithaial Elimiel*," he said, "which is why you feel so weak. I am an old man, but I have some strength to share." I felt it flow into me, and rare stuff it was, far more potent than any distillation of Plaecenon's finest. It gave me the reserve to bear my pain unaided, and I freed myself from my companion's support, to stand on my own.

Breddan then handed the pitcher to Ormaël. "There are a few drops left inside," he said. "Go and sprinkle them on Prince Poëstil—he should be given the chance to meet his fate with courage and dignity."

The warlock stepped away, and as he did so, Breddan said softly, "The wraith ghouls have learned where you are, and are fast approaching. I must return to my temple, which will protect me from them. But I have two things to tell you before I go.

"Firstly, your enemy freed the wraith ghouls from the tombs that imprisoned them. It takes a huge amount of magic to destroy them but very little to entomb them again. Secondly, the only direct way from here to the Deep Dwelling is an ancient underground passageway."

He was interrupted by a series of oaths. Prince Poëstil had staggered to his feet and was struggling to draw his

dagger. Ormaël had simply turned his back on him and was coming back to us.

I turned my attention back to Breddan. “An underground passage!” I exclaimed. “Where do I find it?”

The healer shook his head. “Unfortunately, it no longer exists. But, when it *did* exist, one entered it over there,” and he pointed to a squat mound that was barely visible through the trees.

I seized Breddan’s hand and kissed it, then, as the warlock returned the pitcher, I told him to follow me, and set out as fast as I could across the verge. Prince Poëstil saw where we were heading and made to cut us off. Although he had not yet realized it, he was not alone.

“Do you know me now, Poëstil?” I called to him across the verge, my eye gems flashing. “Take one last look, then, and turn to face your doom. It has been a long time coming.”

Prince Poëstil, his face bright red with rage, gawked at me for the merest of moments before sensing what was behind him, and he whirled about, his dagger raised. The wraith ghoul that had been stalking him extended its snout, its mouth open, its multitude of teeth glistening, and simply bit off the prince’s face.

Then, before the body could fall, it fastened itself to the open wound and began to suck and chew, its whole body rippling with the effort, the snout vanishing down into the body through what was once its neck.

Even as I watched all this, agog with horror, Ormaël was hurrying me along, so that when he had my complete attention again, we were standing before the mound. I stood before it and lifted my hands.

“I have come to resurrect Ernfardest,” I said, “and I start with you. Out of the rubble and dirt that once you were, knit yourself together and take me to my home.”

“Behind us!” Ormaël cried, and I whirled around to find three wraith ghouls on our heels. I reached inside myself to seize hold of my full power, looked down at the earth beneath their feet, and cried, “Seize them! Crush them! Hold them fast forever!”

Instantly, the earth turned into viscous mud beneath the wraith ghouls and bubbled up around them, encasing then swallowing them before they could fly away. For a moment, one snout shoved itself free and gave forth a piercing shriek that collapsed into a gurgle, as the muck rose up around it and went rushing down the wraith ghoul’s gullet.

While this took place, I spotted three wraith ghouls skimming over the water in pursuit of Breddan. He raised his hands, and a scattering of waterspouts appeared around him, then swept toward the ghouls.


I was not to see what happened next, because Ormaël picked me up, threw me over his shoulder, and staggered down the steps into from what little I could see was a tunnel formed of rough-hewn stones—not all that different—in appearance—from the sewers of Shavagar-Yasí.

“They’ll come down right after us,” he shouted, “unless you block the entrance again.” How did he think I could accomplish this with my head upside down and my face pressing into his jerkin? Even using his eyes I could see nothing, because with every step he took the passageway grew darker—blackness ahead and wraith ghouls behind.

“In the name of the Goddess, stand me back on my feet!” I cried. Ormaël quickly saw the sense in this, and set me back down, and turned me so that I faced the way we had come. However, I needed my wits, not my eye gems nor Ormaël’s vision, to track the wraith ghouls—just as they had no need of vision to chase down us.

In fact, they were fast converging on the two of us—but they were doing so *over* our heads. Did they plan to dig down to us? To ask the question was to answer it—with every step Ormaël had taken, the distance from the surface had grown; we were too far down to be reached like that. No, their intent was to track us to the end of the tunnel and attack us when we emerged. I smiled. They knew nothing of Ernfar-dast, I realized, nor of the recent fate of their fellows.

Even so, I collapsed the entrance to the tunnel. The air immediately grew close, for at this point there was no exit at the other end. We stood in total darkness.

I took Ormaël’s hand. “Rest here with me for a moment,” I said, drawing deeply from my power, “while I go a-hunting.” 

Chapter 35



I HAD PREPARED MYSELF—as best I could—to face a demon lord, *more* than a demon lord, a demon *avatar*, with equanimity, but I had not expected the demon to arrive riding on the back of a tyger. I was watching him approach up the road that wound around the hill, the tyger moving at a smooth and rapid pace.

This reminded me far too much of the horrible battle at the barrow of King Azraham where I nearly perished, and I felt a powerful urge to step back among the still flickering *dagmast* stones and return to Gostranar. I wondered if this stumpy hill was also a barrow, and if so, what ancient king might be called to my rescue this time.

“If there is,” a hoarse voice muttered in my inner ear, “call him forth. I’d like to meet him, myself. These are sad times if a lord of battle among my people was defeated by the mere ghost of a human king.”

“Perhaps some day you’ll have the pleasure of saying that directly to Azraham, son of Mehadam, slayer of many

demons while alive, and still eager to kill more from beyond the grave,” I replied—cursing myself for not thinking that it might be my equal (or even superior) in the skills of mind touching.

The demon avatar made a snorting noise which I took to be an expression of amusement. “You and your twin are well matched in the art of diplomacy,” it said. “He had not yet learned to guard his mind when he was with me; now, it seems, he does nothing else.”

The tyger, a massive and frightening beast, appeared over the crest of the hill, halted, bared its fangs, and gave out a long throaty snarl that left me with no desire to hear its fabled roar. The avatar spoke a word of command, and the tyger turned its head away. The demon then quickly dismounted, and approached me without giving the beast another glance.

“They are always dangerous and bear me no more affection than they do you,” it said, “which is why it is such a pleasure to ride them.” The avatar then showed me its own teeth, which, while not as large as the tyger’s, were just as sharp and far more numerous.

“Perhaps I should say that that is exactly why it is such a pleasure to meet you,” I said. “I am the *Nithaial Galgaliel*, as you know; twin to the *Nithaial Elimiel*.”

The demon regarded me unblinkingly for a moment, and I realized that it was working out the meaning of what I had just said. As it did so, I did my best to push aside my fear

and loathing, so as to try to see the creature exactly as it was.

For one thing, it was taller than I, and for another, it was *massive*. Beneath its hide of smooth, green scales, all was muscle—and none of it covered with any sort of clothing, save for a thick belt, below which hung a tyger’s muzzle, with which it covered its sex. I couldn’t help a lingering glance there, given what I now knew about Niccas. But from what I could see, it hadn’t been the size of its member that had drawn him. But what?

The demon now held up a hand, shaped like a man’s but with shorter, stubbier fingers, the better to support its long, sharp, and wickedly curved nails. It said, “I am Teshnar’ad, Avatar of the All Powerful Ra’asiel. Let it be known to all the People of the Egg that I hereby grant you the sanctuary of the temple, and all that surrounds it.”

It lifted its head and must have issued a summoning, for the next moment another demon appeared over the crest of the hill. It also was riding a tyger, a magnificent animal striped in black and white. This demon, too, dismounted with great care, then came and stood behind the Avatar, where it regarded me with open curiosity.

I thanked Teshnar’ad, saying I had come in peace, and welcomed the chance to enter the temple and express my reverence to Lord Ra’asiel, who together with the Most Holy Gesryma, were the fount of all that had been, all that was, and all that would come to be.

This was no spontaneous outpouring; Alcaron and I

had argued out every word. I had balked especially at making any obeisance at all to Gesryma's opposite—just as I wouldn't expect his Avatar to fall on his knees before Her. But Alcaron had pointed out that Ra'asiel and Gesryma together made the Incomprehensible Whole, something so much greater than either that it was beyond even a *Nithaial's* power to apprehend.

"You are not swearing fealty," he had said, "but acknowledging truth, and you must do so wholeheartedly if you want the Avatar to set aside his natural suspicions of you."

If my speech had managed to accomplish this, Teshnar'ad gave no sign of it. As before, he stood motionless, while he teased the meaning from my words, looking at me intently as he did so.

Then he said, "My servant, Do'arma'ak, has brought a tyger so that you may ride to the temple with me. There, we shall refresh ourselves, and speak of"—and here he slightly narrowed his eyes—"what was, what is, and what will be."

HOW LONG AGO WAS IT that I first mounted a horse? A day so close I can almost reach out and touch it, and here I was descending a hill on the back of a tyger! Riding one is no easy task, because it seems to bring every muscle in its body into play as it lopes along, a series of smooth leaps, the rear legs swinging forward to make the next one, even as the forelegs are absorbing the impact of the one before.

Naturally, there was no saddle to cling to, no reins to hold, and I wasn't about to grab a fistful of its fur to hang on

to. So I leaned forward to brace myself on its shoulders, bent my legs back to cling on all the better, and, with what little attention I could spare, touched the animal's mind.

Teshnar'ad was already there, or at least he controlled a mental tether that kept the tygers under his control. Beyond that was... murk. When I had mind linked with Páli in his eagle shape, the focused clarity of the a bird of prey was almost painful to my mind. The tyger, however, was more suited for Niccas to understand—entering its mind I found myself surrounded by darkness and fire.

Even its awareness of me was not that of a horse and rider, but, say, a starving slave carrying a roast loin of beef on a platter: so close to its mouth that it couldn't help but slather, even as another force kept it back in a grip of steel. Between the two, the tyger's heart trembled with rage.

I thought the pleasure Teshnar'ad took from riding such a beast was something like my bouts of lovemaking with Prince Caelas, although, the Goddess knew, he would never rip me to pieces if the bond between us slipped. Even so, it *was* within his power. Sex with Teshnar'ad must have been much closer to riding a tyger...

Why was I thinking of this again!? I pulled my thoughts up shortly—just in time to see the great temple to Ra'asiel appear before us, a scowling, pitiless monstrosity, designed to inspire terror in those who worshipped here.

An long, steep flight of stone stairs led up to it, and after I sprang free of my tyger mount, Teshnar'ad gestured

to me to follow him up them. However, they proved very difficult to climb, so after several steps, I summoned my power and floated up, discreetly (or so I thought) remaining a short distance behind the demon Avatar.

When we reached the top and I was standing next to Teshnar'ad, he said irritably, "To fly when one has no wings is no way to approach a god. The stairs are there to awaken humility and an awareness of mortality."

"An excellent frame of mind to be in for those who come to worship," I replied. "I have come to negotiate with you, Avatar of Ra'asiel, which is a different thing."

"Negotiate!" Teshnar'ad barked. "I would say you came to beg."

"Let me pay honor to Ra'asiel," I replied, "and then let us talk. There will be no begging, I promise you."

Alcaron had suggested that I not play my coin at once, but try to get from the Avatar some sense of what he and Niccas had agreed to. But Teshnar'ad was suspicious of my visit, all the more so when he discovered that my twin and I had not even met.

"I met *my* twin and killed him the space of a single day, once I came of age," the demon muttered. "What has taken you so long?"

"We *Nithaial* go about things differently," I answered, more shocked than I let on. "Maerdas did what you did, and see where things stand now."

Teshnar'ad glared at me. "I meant to *meet* your twin,

not *kill* him!” he shouted. “I know all too well that your ways are different from ours.”

This sort of discussion promised to get us nowhere, and, furthermore, I could guess what the Avatar’s response would be if I gave any hint of Alcaron’s scrying. So, after a bit more toing and froing, I laid out our offer.

I could not by myself lift the spell that walled off this place from the outside world, as I assumed the Avatar already knew, or else Niccas would have done it. However, Alcaron had composed two spells: one that would compel the *dagmast* stones to take him, Teshnar’ad, to the other great demon temple, and another that would bring any dragon who wished it to the Holy Wood, from which place they could fly where they willed.

This offer must have pleased the Avatar. We were sitting on a stone bench in an alcove that looked onto the great circle that was the altar to Ra’asiel. Teshnar’ad immediately jumped to his feet and began pacing back and forth, saying nothing, just turning the offer over and over in his mind.

Finally, after much of this, he spoke. “*Nithaial Galgaliel*, you have learned much more than Niccas had when he came to me. He was but a fledgling, chased from his nest into the murky, dangerous waters of the swamp.”

The Avatar stopped pacing and sank back down onto the bench beside me. “Before he departed, Niccas and I had become like, like...” He shook his head impatiently. “I don’t know the word in your tongue, and there is no such in my

own. This—” and he took his hand in mine, held it tightly, then looked at me to see if I caught his meaning.

I nodded. “As if he had become part of yourself,” I said simply. I knew enough about demons to suspect that neither the word “brother” nor “lover” had any meaning to them.

Teshnar’ad considered this, then nodded slowly. “More to me than many parts of myself,” he replied in a softer tone. “But since he left here, he has made no attempt to reach me, and I think he has never once given me a thought.”

He sighed and looked away. “So, when you, *Nithaial Galgaliel*, suddenly appeared, I swore that nothing would let me be burnt like that again.”

My mouth dropped open. Fortunately, I had the sense to quickly shut it again. There had been no preparation from Alcaron for *this*.

“Soon after Niccas left here, he was captured by Maerdas, and terribly tortured,” I replied at last. “And since he escaped from there, he has had to shield his mind from enemies who are pursuing him to Ernfordast.”

I put my hand on Teshnar’ad’s shoulder.

“I am called Jessan, Avatar. And what I request in return for the offer I have just made you—is that you help me persuade a dragon to carry me to the Deep Dwelling, in the hopes of saving Niccas’s life.”

THE DRAGON, WHEN IT CAME, flew to us slowly, deliberately, circling the temple three times before it landed a short distance from Teshnar'ad and me. It stretched its neck back, swung it from one side to the other, and gave a little cough of blue flame. Then it came over to us, its claws clicking softly on the marble floor.

When it reached us, it said nothing, but reached out its head and regarded us both, slowly and carefully, out of its right eye. The left one had, I noticed, a glazed look, as if covered with translucent glass.

Apart from that flaw, I have to say that this dragon was, in anything, even more beautiful than the gem-wrought dragons at Gostranar. As cunningly crafted as they were, they remained simulacra, but this dragon was the creation of the gods themselves, who had bestowed on it an imperious splendor, not only in its looks but in the grace and power of its movements.

This was so even with this particular dragon, whose great age—easily a thousand years and more—caused it to move with careful deliberation. Time had also visibly limned the dragon with its presence. The mottled, deep red scales were brushed with a hint of whiteness that suggested frost, something especially visible in its face—around its eyes and along its lips.

Earlier, Teshnar'ad had alerted me that I was meeting the eldest of them all—the single greatest repository of all that the nest had learned and had experienced. It almost

had the powers of a god, and was as such that I should treat it.

The dragon spoke first to the Avatar in the demon tongue, or so I supposed, and then to me. “Hail to thee, *Nith-aial Galgaliel*, lord of air and water, doom bringer, slayer of the wizard Hezzakal and the necromancer Jaçazal, Blessed Mother Incarnate,” it croaked. “Thou mayst call me Dracon Gléawmód.”

“Hail to thee, Dracon Gléawmód,” I replied, falling to one knee, “holiest of all dragons, oldest and wisest of the Nest, itself older and wiser than the race of men or demons. Thou art most gracious to deign grant me audience.”

The dragon fixed me again with its one bright eye, saying, after a moment, “It is not by chance that I am the one chosen to meet you. May I show you something?”

“By all means, Dracon Gléawmód,” I said in surprise, half expecting it to produce a scroll or some other relic for my examination.

Instead, the dragon moved its head until it almost touched my own, then pressed its forked tongue against my forehead. What happened next shook me to my very core. Suddenly, I *was* a dragon, aloft, soaring through the night air. Urgency drove me even as fatigue dug its nails into my wing muscles; I was calling on my very last reserves to get hidden again in a retreating bank of clouds.

Beneath me, there was an explosion of blinding light, harsh and brilliant. I—Jessan and dragon at once—recog-

nized it as hellfire, for it was exactly the same as the light that blazed from the mast of the war galley that had come at Alfrund and me off the coast of Gedd.

Now the light was speckled all over with black dots that were shooting up into the night sky toward us, riding the fierce updraft caused by the heat. I became aware of my rider just as he cried out in a terrified voice.

“Skalgür!”

My rider, of course, was Niccas, but I had no time to reach for his presence—the attack had already begun. Skalgür are no match for a dragon, I was thinking, but then they’ve been never known to fly at night, either. One of the ungainly things—seeming even *more* ungainly than I remembered—swooped at me, and, mouth pursed, lips drawn back, I engulfed it with a blast of flame.

Astonishingly, almost immediately after bursting into flames, the thing *exploded*—as did the one flying beside it. A wall of flame swept over me, and, as well, into my still open mouth. After that, there were no more thoughts, only the most excruciating imaginable pain, followed swiftly by infinite blackness.

Now, merely Jessan again, I fell to both knees and buried my face in my hands.

Dracon Gléawmód waited for me to get control of myself, then said simply, “That was the doom of Dracon Wælfyra, bearing Niccas to Ernfardast. And now you wish another of us to make the attempt as well.”

I shook my head. “No, Dracon Gléawmód. What you say is true, and to my shame I didn’t know it. But you neglected to mention what I can offer you—something, it is said, that tastes all the better when eaten cold.”

The dragon slowly nodded its massive head. “Revenge,” it said, drawing out the word in low rumble. “But to bring down Gorzungâd,” it went on, speaking slowly, as if thinking out loud, “that would take nearly the whole nest.”

“Bring them all, then,” I replied. “They can use the *dagmast* stones to fly straight from the Holy Wood to Gorzungâd. As I understand, the two places are not all distant, one from the other.”

“IT IS CALLED A *DRACONYMBE*—or ‘dragonswarm’ in this new way of speaking you have,” Dracon Æledléoma explained, as we soared over the hill in the Holy Wood where the *dagmast* stones had been set. A constant flickering of light leaped from one to the other as dragon after dragon appeared as if from nowhere, wings already spread and digging deeply into the air, rising up to join the others who were already circling in the sky.

Dracon Æledléoma, of course, was the dragon who had volunteered to carry me, and, for the first few moments of our flight, Teshnar’ad. The Avatar refused to be left behind, and it was only in my direct company that he would be allowed to enter the precincts of Gostranar.

We were the first to pass through the link. Thus it was that, under my aegis and for a moment, the Demon Ava-

tar had stood in the Holy Wood, and the world did not come to an end. From here, another dragon would carry him on to Gorzungâd—for it was agreed that we would all go there first, to aid in the downfall of Maerdas.

Not to my surprise, both Páli and Alcaron were waiting for us there, and I spoke to Dracon Æledléoma, and went over to greet them.

“I doubt that Gostranar has ever beheld such a sight, *Nithaial Galgaliel*,” Alcaron cried out above the clamor. And surely he was right. The dragons were even more dazzling to the eye in flight, the sunlight glinting off their scales, the grace with which they flew about, in no perceived pattern but each in harmony with the next. It was a tapestry come to life.

I wrapped my arms around Páli and gave him a long kiss. “Even in these few hours, I missed you, beloved,” I said into his ear.

Páli being Páli, he gave me no such endearment in return, but, instead, shoved a bundle, and not a light one, either, into my arms.

“What’s this?” I asked, astonished.

“Three things,” he answered. “One, a rug to throw over your dragon’s back, so that you aren’t chafed raw by the time we reach Ernfardest.”

“We?” I began, but he spoke over whatever objections were forming on my lips.

“Second, a bag for you to carry my clothing, since as much as I can, I shall fly with the dragons. Third, this shirt,

for you to wear. It has a thick leather patch of deerhide sewn to one shoulder, where I can perch when I grow weary.”

I turned to Alcaron for support. “Tell him he is still too injured to accompany us,” I said. “He won’t listen to me.”

“Or to me, *Nithaial Galgaliel*,” the head steward replied, making a helpless gesture. “You have seen how rapidly he has healed these past few days. His powers have returned in the same measure. The same winds that you provide for the dragon swarm will carry him along as well. He need not exhaust himself.”

I turned back to Páli. “Well, at least ride with me on the back of Dracon Æledléoma,” I said. “Turn into an eagle right now, and before you can squawk, you’ll find you’ve become a dragon’s palate tickle.”

However, he was already undressing, and since Alcaron could hardly intervene, I would have to leap on him and wrestle him to the ground, and keep at it until I bested him or... What a bedraggled bird he was, too, looking to be in full moult. But up he went, until he was among the circling dragons, none of whom took any notice of him. So, my heart dropped back from my throat into my chest, and I turned to Dracon Æledléoma, who was summoning me.

“See there, *Nithaial Galgaliel*—Dracon Gléawmód has come, and will be the last,” he croaked. “Get quickly onto my back, for we shall be on our way.”

Dracon Gléawmód may have been the last dragon through the link, but the eldest now took the lead. The drag-

ons flew in chevrons, each with its own leader, and each slightly behind and slightly above the one before. In this way, those behind always had a clear view, not only of those dragons who preceded them, but all around as well.

At my suggestion, Dracon Gléawmód took us circling around Tarrusor, a sight that would stun the city without doubt, and, possibly, shake King Temblar's throne to its foundation. The populace would see which way the dragons flew, and none would doubt their destination.

Once we were clear of the city and heading south, I summoned up a strong wind, and the passage to Gorzulgâd was quickly accomplished. Furthermore, I sent a mass of clouds scudding on ahead of us, so that our arrival would take the fortress by surprise.

This is just what happened. As always, innumerable skalgür patrolled the sky overhead, but the cloud bank had forced them to fly beneath it. When, at my command, the clouds melted into nothing, the skalgür were caught with the *Draconymbe* above them.

They were slaughtered. The dragons fell on them like hawks upon sparrows, catching them in their claws and ripping them to shreds. Any skalgür that escaped the first onslaught were no better off, because they needed to get above the dragons to use their claws and stabbing beaks, and however high they flew, there was always a dragon above them. In any case, there were far more dragons than skalgür, and their part in the fight was soon over.

The dragon attack on Gorzungâd itself was equally simple. They simply few up to the fortress's walls, clung to them with their claws, and pushed their heads through the windows. First they ate anyone they could reach inside—for they were a thousand years hungry—then they set that room aflame with a blast of fire.

Maerdas's forces, designed to protect him from attacks by land, were helpless, save for the archers. But their arrows had no hope of piercing the dragons' scales, and the archers found themselves being devoured first, not out of anger but because they wore less armor, and so it was easier to get at their meat.

The noise was deafening. The dragons shrieked; their prey screamed; a great battle drum beat within the fortress to rally its defenders. By the time this fell silent, Gorzungâd was ablaze. Its walls may have been stone, but the interior contained much to feed the conflagration, and the fortress's flue shape intensified it. And, as the flames spread, the roar of the fire grew ever greater.

Once it became clear that death would be the fate of all who remained inside, the great doors that gave entry to Gorzungâd swung open, and a mob fled through them, trampling on each other in their haste to get down the winding road that led to the bottom of the mountain.

However, many in the fortress were cut off from any hope of escape this way, and chose to leap from the battlements or out of the broken windows, rather than be consumed

by the flames. Their screams and wailing added yet another note in the tumult, especially when they were caught in mid fall by swooping dragons, for these did not always bite the head away first, some preferring the liver; others, the hams.

In my imagination, I had expected a battle like those shown in the old illustrations, which showed dragons being hacked apart by swords or skewered by spears. This may have truly happened when there were many men with spears and but one dragon. Not, of course, that I expected that the dragons would be defeated; Dracon Gléawmód was too canny and too experienced. But this outright slaughter was almost unbearable.

Even so, I felt I had no right to turn away, and forced myself to watch the attack as it continued to unfold. As I did so, I spotted, of all things, a small boy crouching on a window ledge, paralyzed with terror. I shouted to Dracon Æledléoma to get to him.

“Why?” the dragon replied. “He would be but a mouthful, and there are so many better choices.” Of these, the dragon had already devoured its fair share, sometimes nearly (or completely) forgetting that I was clinging to its back as it flung itself down upon another.

“No,” I shouted. “Not to eat! To rescue!”

For a moment, there was no response. “Rescue,” apparently, was not a word in the dragon’s vocabulary.

“Ah,” it said—that word conveying an understanding along the lines of “Since you are unwilling to eat the flesh

of your own, you wish to have the fledgling as booty.”

The dragon soared down, swinging sharply up at the very last moment so that it was parallel to the tower. It seized the boy and swallowed him whole, even as it grasped the wall with its claws, shoved itself free and away, wheeled about in midair, and flew off.

Once these manoeuvres were complete and I dared to open my eyes again and sit back up (I had been clinging to its back with all the strength I had in my legs, my arms, and my magic), the dragon swung its head around, and, into my arms, vomited up the boy—whole and undamaged, if frightened out of its wits and coated with saliva.

His hair was light as flaxen cloth, and his clothing that of a little prince. “Hold on as best you can,” I said to him, wrapping my arms around him and gentling his terror with a touch of my mind, “I’m afraid the ride has just begun.”


There was a thunderous explosion. The tower’s massive roof, made entirely of oaken beams, all of them burning fiercely, had just gone crashing down into the tower’s interior. Immediately after came a series of wrenching sounds as it took with it all the floors beneath. Gorzungâd had fallen.

Certainly, the dragons thought so. They were now swarming over the road, plucking up survivors and eating them. I called out to Dracon Æledléoma, “This battle is won. If Maerdas had it in him to fight, he would have already done so. Let us find Teshnar’ad and start our journey north.”

The Avatar was not easy to find, but at last the dragon

spotted him, down on the road, trying to get the guards escaping from Gorzungâd to give him battle. When we settled on the road beside him, I found him in a foul mood. “I slay them, the dragons eat them,” he shouted at me. “When they return to *Fyrewourmhaem* chanting the splendor of their victory, they had better call it ‘The Great Feast That Was Gorzungâd,’ for surely this was no battle.”

Dracon Æledléoma spit out a sword that had been attached to the warrior he was eating, and retorted, “Only a demon would complain when a battle turned out to be a banquet. Now summon the one who was carrying you—the *Nithaial Galgaliel* is anxious that we get to Ernfardest.”

As Teshnar’ad sought his dragon, I called out to Páli. When he finally responded, I discovered he had already started north, all on his own. As his powers had increased, so had his ability to remain self-aware when he had shape-changed. Like Teshnar’ad, he was disgusted. “The death of Gorzungâd was an event for vultures, not eagles,” he told me bitterly. “I hope there will be more honor in what befalls us at the Deep Dwelling.” 

CODA

THE DEEP
DWELLING

Coda



“**H**OW SOON NOW until you can summon forth Ernfardest?” Ormaël’s voice came out of the darkness, startling me. I hadn’t exactly forgotten he was there, but my concentration was totally absorbed in my magicking, and I was growing weary. For every wraith ghoul I entombed, two others seemed to appear in its stead. Or else someone was digging them up as fast as I was burying them, something I almost couldn’t bear to think about.

Furthermore, I could sense that *something* was out there besides the wraith ghouls, but it was managing to conceal itself in a manner I hadn’t learned to counter—letting me sense it, but then disappearing the moment I moved to grasp it. I felt like a boy trying to kill a fly with a belt.

Instead of answering Ormaël, I lifted my hand, and produced a tiny globe of fire. “Lead me to the far end of the tunnel,” I said. “For some reason, I *can’t* summon Ernfardest. It knows I’m here, it’s quivering in the desire to come

back into being, but there's something between us, some power that's keeping it from happening."

"Surely not the wraith ghouls," Ormaël muttered as he gave me his arm. "That doesn't seem the sort of thing that would lie within their powers."

"No," I answered, but said no more. The wraith ghouls knew we were moving, and followed us, their number accumulating, now that I was no longer having the earth snatch them up. It might prove impossible for us to get to the surface, without the sanctuary of Ernfardast to take us in.

We walked some distance before warlock stopped dead in his tracks. "Here's a step up," he said, "and if you move the dirt away, I'm sure we'll find another and another. The steps are made of stone, and carefully hewn. I'd say that you were home."

One of my powers over earth was to sublimate it into vapor, which I could then send seeping through whatever was around it, and reconstitute it when it was well out of the way. Since this was an inherent power, it took little energy to effect, which was all to the good, since it turned out there were a great many of them. We climbed up and up, around and around, until at last we came to a ceiling of rubble, that I could not sublimate, and which I found almost impossible to hold back.

It was the remains of Ernfardast.

"Take me back down a few turns," I said to Ormaël. "Either I let all this fall on us or I blast it out of our way."

"I, too, vote for the latter," he said, and drew me back

down a bit.

“There will still be rubble falling down the stairs,” I said. “Press yourself tightly against the wall.”

It didn’t even occur to me that the rubble could fall and hit *me*, but then one isn’t the *Nithaial Elimiel* for nothing. I sent a burst of power up the stairwell, there was a loud rumble, a rush of fresh air down upon us, bringing with it a hail of stones, bounding past me in a noisy clatter.

“Now what?” Ormaël demanded, unwrapping his arms from around his head. “Are the wraith ghouls forbidden access to the *ruins* of Ernfordast?”

I agreed with the doubt in his voice. “It seems very unlikely,” I answered, “but they are staying back.”

Then an icily cruel but very familiar voice called down to us. “It’s safe to come out, *Nithaial Elimiel*. And bring along Sepharan if that’s who’s with you. I want to see whether life in the rough has suited him.”

Ormaël tugged inquisitively on my sleeve.

“Maerdas,” I whispered. “Or, if you prefer, ‘He Who Cannot Be Named.’”

“It doesn’t matter a fuck about that now, does it?” he whispered back. “He thinks I’m Sepharan?”

“He probably doesn’t much care,” I answered. “All his powers are focused on me, his words all meant to taunt me. Let’s find out what else is on his mind.”

We went back up the stairs, Ormaël guiding me as best he could from stumbling over the debris.

“The stairs end here,” he said in a moment. “Now there’s just a mound of rubble to traverse, and we’ll be out.”

I stopped on the last step. Speaking inwardly to Ernfardast, but allowing my companion to listen in, I commanded the Deep Dwelling to admit him without question, and let enter as well, anyone he wished to do so, for he spoke for me in all things.

I squeezed the arm that was guiding me. “Just in case, beloved, I actually manage to call it back.”

I again used Ormaël’s own vision for help in scrambling out of the darkness of the tunnel and up the side of the rubble pile, which was a good deal higher than I expected. We fought our way to the top of it and looked about.

A sheer cliff, running north to south, blocked off the view to the west entirely. To the east, the ground gradually sloped down to the Tarn of Subtle Waters, which could be seen sparkling in the sunlight a distance through the trees.

These, ageless seeming, thick of trunk and majestically outspread overhead, formed a large half circle that ringed the ruins of Ernfardast, and it was between two of the closest that Maerdas was standing.

He looked much more solid than the last time I saw him, as if the wasting of the spirit that had afflicted him had not only been arrested, but reversed. When Ormaël laid eyes on him, the warlock gasped aloud. And it was true, seen through his eyes, Maerdas looked more like me than

ever, the carapace of age made almost invisible.

However, now that he deigned to reveal himself to me within the spirit world, I could see that, as ever, appearances were deceiving. The corruption still ran all through him; the power that he drew from the pendant of Ra'asiel simply kept it at bay.

"Not Sepharan, after all," said Maerdas, casting a quick, incurious glance at Ormaël. "Another casualty of your little adventures, I suppose, like so many others. Ais Dysmassia must have a whole little province holding nothing but your castaways."

Maerdas's eyes flickered again toward my companion, and I instantly realized I had made a mistake allowing Ormaël to come up out of the tunnel. I turned and gave him a hard shove, causing him to lose his balance. With an oath, he slipped and fell, and went sliding back down the stairs.

The moment he was far down them enough, I had the rubble form a roof, sealing him inside, beyond the reach of the several wraith ghouls who had been creeping up behind us. Unlike Maerdas, they had no problem moving within the outlines of Ernfardast.

"Entombing him alive!" Maerdas said, mockingly. "A nice touch, Niccas. No wonder your friends love you so."

"You must have something to say to me," I said, turning back to him, "or you would have already ordered these revolting minions of yours to attack."

"All in good time," he said. "But first a little gloating

is in order. So *clever* of me, don't you think, to realize you couldn't bring Ernfardest back with me standing here. And, so, here you are, a handsbreadth from success, paralyzed—your eyes sacrificed for... nothing.”

He paused to look at me. “At your best, you never looked like much of a *Nithaial*, but now you resemble an itinerant foreseer.”

I smiled to myself. Maerdas would never know how much that description pleased me.

“Poor Niccas! All that suffering for nothing. And to make the potion bitterer still, you can't kill me either, as much as you'd like to, and even though you have acquired far enough power for the task.”

He looked at me intently. “You have figured *that* out, haven't you?”

I nodded. “Yes,” I said. In fact, I had slowly worked it all out after the death of Sepharan, during the long ride in the road-prince with Ormaël. “It has been my doom to suffer in order to make reparation for the evil you have done. If I kill you, I deny my own fate, and become you instead, thus forcing the next *Nithaial Elimiel* to start at the beginning of the same path.”

Maerdas smiled the smile that an executioner has the decency to hide beneath his black hood. “As the wise do say,” he replied, “the gods move in mysterious ways. And I, for one, bless them for it.

“Because, Niccas, if *I* kill *you*, the next *Nithaial Elim-*

iel will face exactly the same doom—except, five hundred years from now, *his* road will be all the longer, there being so much more by then for which to atone.”

Maerdas gave out a short, shrill, feverish laugh that chilled the blood, then looked at me in mock surprise. “You don’t laugh? Surely, Niccas, you see the humor in this, yourself? Aren’t you tempted just a little to kill me? Then you can order these revolting wraith ghouls back to... wherever they come from. And then, well...”

A flicker of shadow across his face broke his concentration. An eagle was circling in the sky above us, far overhead. Maerdas watched it suspiciously for a moment, then finished out his thought.

“I suppose there would be no resurrecting Ernfar-dast then. But Gorzungâd isn’t such a bad place, really. You just didn’t spend enough time there to learn to appreciate its charms.”

This last sentence was mere banter. Maerdas had had his fill of gloating, and the wraith ghouls were creeping up on us again.

I walked slowly over to where he stood, looking not at him but beyond him through the trees, absorbing the view, flinty as it was, filtered through my gem eyes, with unexpected hunger.

“We are an odd couple, you and I,” I said softly. “Not brothers, not father and son, but as close as either. When you were in your youth, did you also apprentice to an alche-

mist, as I did?”

My quiet tone, as much as the question, took him by surprise. “Yes,” he answered, “to one named Helvitias, the greatest alchemist that ever was—your Porphoras is but a journeyman in comparison. It was from Helvitias that I learned of the powers of *mythral*. But why do you ask?”

“I wonder if you remember being taught,” I went on, ignoring his question, “that, just as within the heart of the fiercest fire lies a kernel of utter darkness, within the heart of all that is stone burns the hottest of flames?”

I could feel Maerdas turning to look at me, puzzled and, now, a bit wary. “Of course,” he replied. “It is the essence of the alchemist’s art, the secret that makes possible all acts of transubstantiation.”

I took hold of his arm. “It’s true, you know, that belief. And it is about to bind us together—perhaps forever. That is my solution to the problem that fate has presented me, and that you have just laid out so neatly. Do you understand?”

He did—either because of what I said or from the tremors that now shook the ground beneath our feet. His voice shook with a terrible panic as he summoned the wraith ghouls to destroy me.

In fact, he called them to their own destruction. For he had barely spit out the command when the ground beneath us yawned open, and Maerdas and I fell together into a pit that opened—a long way down—onto the raging fire that

was the heart of the world.

We fell slowly at first, for Maerdas was using all the power he had to fight me and rise back up. I held on to his arm until we struck the side of the pit, only glancingly, but enough to fling us apart. No matter; by then we both knew that his magic had failed him.

Down and down we plunged, the air growing increasingly hotter. Even before we reached the flames, it had incinerated our clothing. The fire would consume but not kill us, for we were, both of us, the *Nithaial Elimiel*.

Whether we would escape the pain was a very different question. I was prepared for pain. Maerdas, I knew, was not. He had become little more than a living corpse clotted with squirming maggots of hate and fear. He would not die, but he would be destroyed, because of the pain. He knew this. Already, he was screaming.

His cries were answered by the wailing of the the wraith ghouls, which came plummeting after us, a cloud of them; the flames would soon destroy them, too.

And now I smiled. With Maerdas taken away, Ernfardast was answering my command. It was rising up, summoning the rubble back into the old shapes. In a moment a way would open up for Ormaël, and he would step within, with wonder in his eyes. There would be tears in them, too, I knew, for I wept, as well. It was just that mine vanished into little puffs of steam, even before they had the chance to be.

“**B**EHOLD,” DRACON ÆLEDLÉOMA CROAKED, “and I leaned over in time to see a crowd of soldiers running in all directions, a uniformed corpse lying in the center of their emptying circle. The boy, whom I still clutched in my arms, spoke his first sentence of the entire flight. Until now I had only managed to elicit his name, Niferas, and that in a whisper.

“I’m *sure* that’s Crown Prince Poëstil,” he said. “Did a dragon eat his head, too?”

His voice expressed neither regret nor shock, but simple curiosity, and I answered in the same fashion. “Well, obviously, not either of the two that have brought us here, and probably not any other. You and I have both learned today that dragons don’t stop with eating just the head.”

The boy thought about this. “Maybe, if one was already *really* full...”

“And so was just nibbling around the edges? Well, I suppose,” I said, a bit surprised at the casual way Niferas had put this. But just then Ernfordast suddenly appeared directly below us, and all talk stopped.

The two dragons approached it cautiously, thus allowing us to see it in all its strange splendor. Alcaron had told me that it was said to be a cave half transformed into a palace, and, even after seeing it, I can do little better.

Imagine the knife of one of the gods cutting a generous slice out of a steep hill, leaving a cliff the shape of an ell, far wider than it is deep. On the narrow side, a waterfall

tumbles down the cliff face, and divides an open plaza paved with granite blocks, by running through a channel cut down its center, this being crossed at intervals by three steeply arched bridges.

Besides the waterfall, the narrow side of the cliff has balconies carved out of it, doors that lead to them, and a generous scattering of windows. However, the eye is immediately drawn to the wide side of the ell.

There, a flight of stairs as wide as the plaza leads up to a long row of fluted columns, the capitals of which were set directly into the roof of a great cavern that vanishes into a great darkness beyond them. It is somewhere in there, I supposed, that the force that this place honored and gave house to would be found.

There was a flurry of wing beats behind my head, and Páli's talons sank into the leather padding on my shoulder. "Well, Windhover," I said, turning to him, "just catching up with us?" His fierce eagle eyes peered this way and that, ignoring me, and he mind spoke me no answer.

"Dracon Æledléoma," I said, turning back to the dragon, "The fact that you were granted entry to Wisferon should let you enter Ernfordast as well. But, out of courtesy to the House of Earth, let us land on that stretch of grass that borders the plaza, and let me escort you in."

"Thank you, *Nithaial Galgaliel*," the dragon croaked. "But now that we see that Ernfordast has risen, and the *Nithaial Elimiel* has succeeded in his quest, we shall leave your

party and return to the nest. I would sleep in my own hall tonight.”

The two dragons set down, and, the moment I was standing firmly on the ground, Niferas squirmed out of my arms and scurried off to a spot where he began searching intently in the grass. I threw down the pouch holding Páli’s clothing, to let him change back to himself and dress, while I went to speak to the dragons, exchanging courtesies and thanks and fare-thee-wells.

They flew up into the sky, catching the late afternoon light as they rose above the trees, which wrapped them one last time in all their glittering splendor. Then they sped away to the south and vanished from our eyes.

Almost immediately after, I heard a loud yelp, and turned to find Páli frogmarching Niferas in my direction.

“This little toy of Maerdas plucked something out of the grass and slipped it into his pocket,” Páli said, pushing the boy forward and releasing his arms.

“It’s *mine*,” Niferas shouted. “I dropped it when the dragons were landing.”

“He’s lying, Jessan,” Páli said. “It was already there. I saw it just after I set down on your sholder.”

“*You’re* the one who’s lying,” Niferas retorted. “If I didn’t drop it, how did I know exactly where it was? I don’t exactly have eagle eyes.”

To stop Páli from answering back, I told Niferas to show me what it was that he had picked up. Sullenly, he

slowly withdrew it from his pocket and passed it over to me. To all intents and purposes, it was a small gold coin, with unfamiliar letters incised around the face of some forgotten ruler, although I had the uncanny feeling I had seen his face somewhere before. The coin had some perceptible power sleeping in it, but what artifact of its age would not? It was certainly not enough to worry me, and too cloaked for the boy to make any mischief with it.

“It’s not mine,” I said to Páli. “Are you claiming it as yours?”

I had not said the words tauntingly, but Páli took them as if they were a slap in the face. He spun around and stalked away. I made to speak to him, but Niferas moved between us, his eyes pleading. I gave him the coin back, and, as I did, he gave me a radiant smile, and seized hold of my hand.

I took it, but my mind had already returned to the absence of Niccas. I was uneasy that he had yet to come out to greet us, and that I couldn’t sense even a trace of his presence. Surely he had no need to hide himself now that he had resurrected Ernfordast. Had he gone on to Gostranar, having no reason to know—or even hope—that we were so close on his heels.

I stepped within the confines of Ernfordast and granted access to the others. Then, together we crossed the plaza, looking about us as we did, and went over the center bridge. When Niccas had still not appeared, I shouted out his name.

I thought I heard an answer, but it was my own voice. “Niccass,” came the echo back, clear as bell, which made the silence that followed it only more uncanny.

Páli took my hand, and I could feel him fighting against himself to tell me something. If he had, much bad that happened afterwards might well have been averted. Nor was this his fault, but rather a shift in the direction of my fate.

For my shouts summoned a figure who came out of the darkness and appeared before us between two of the columns. It was a man dressed in black, with a shock of white hair and a face twisted by anguish and frightening anger.

He knew who I was, and cursed me with vehemence, his eyes flashing, ending this bitter flow of words by spitting out, “When we needed you, *Nithaial Galgaliel*, you did not come. Now you are too late, and the very sight of you repulses me. Go on your way, and leave me here in peace.”

Again Páli made to speak, but Niferas was tugging violently on my shirt. I knelt down beside him, and the boy whispered in my ear, “Jessan, he means to *destroy* you! I have the power to tell these things. You must kill him first. *Now*.”

He spoke with such urgency that it touched my heart. But, instead, I swept him up in my arms, saying, “No mortal can kill me now, Niferas. But let us do as he says and all go on to Gostranar. I am now certain Niccas is there.”

What I didn’t say was that this warlock, for so I recognized him to be, must have been brought into Ernfardast by Niccas, for how else could he be here? Obviously, he was

another of my twin's unseemly choice in lovers, who had become deranged by the pressures of the last few days. Niccas had left him here to calm himself while he went to Gostranar to find me.

I turned to Teshnar'ad. He was not looking at me but at this madman, and, impossible as it seemed, bowed his head to him. At this point, we had climbed halfway up the steps, and when the demon lowered his head, I saw a battlement set back from the edge at the top of the narrow cliff. I knew at once what it was, and seized the Avatar's arm. "From there," I said, pointing, "we can pass directly to Gostranar. Let us go at once."

The demon neither looked where I pointed nor turned toward me. "I was not asked to leave," Teshnar'ad said tersely, "and I think I shall stay here for a while. Unless, of course, *Nithaial Galgaliel*, you insist otherwise."

This answer was so unexpected that I was pushed closer to tears than to rage. In despair, I turned back to Páli. "Jessan," he said, "if you love me, stay here and let us talk to this man. He was Niccas's close companion. Why would he be so struck with grief if Niccas had just traveled on to Gostranar?"


I could think of several answers to that question, starting with the possibility that the warlock felt he had been abandoned. But what would be the point of saying this, with him in earshot? Again, Nisferon was the only one who made any sense.

“Let’s go, Jessan,” the boy whimpered. “They’ve all lost their minds. It’s scaring me.”

It was unnerving me, too. This was *not* the way the day was supposed to end. I was tired, furious, disappointed in Páli, and baffled by Teshnar’ad. Perhaps he meant to kill his rival, I thought, once he was rid of me. Well, that was something Niccas could sort out for himself.

“Very well,” I snapped at Páli, “you can use your own wings to carry you back to Gostranar, and, for all I care, carry the Avatar along on your back.”

Before he could reply, I hoisted up Niferas, and used my power to lift us swiftly up to the battlement. There, sure enough, I found a gateway all but identical to the one at Wethrelad, with a symbol for each of the other palaces.

“Well, Niccas,” I thought, as I stepped onto the glistening black surface, Niferas wrapped in my arms, “if you’re not waiting for me in Gostranar, I don’t *what* I’ll do.” 

end of book three