

NICCAS

BEING VOLUME TWO OF

THE CRONNEX



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NICCÁS AND GESRYMA



for Limeyre

Tengo miedo a perder la maravilla
de tus ojos de estatua, y el acento
que de noche me pone en la mejilla
la solitaria rosa de tu aliento.

—Federico García Lorca

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GLOSSARY

Note: although this glossary will help you reconnect names with characters and places you encountered earlier in the story and then forgot, reading it may also spoil certain turns of the plot. To avoid this, don't read it through until you've finished the entire second 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 protect and nurture them when they next return.



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

name is Iannas.

Anisor master herbalist, member of the Guardian Circle.

Arestea Koryphaios (head entity) of the Order of the Narrow Blade (which see).

Borleas twin of Nathaln, brother of Niccas.

Dortmas senior apprentice to Porphoras.

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

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

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

Ethrethn a Summoner (which see).

Fayrfallan a healer in the House of the Narrow Blade in Shavagar-Yasí.

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.

Grendar keeper of the safehouse.

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

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.

Lidaemas ffŷr Lissator eldest son of Lord Lissator.

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

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.

Nathaln twin of Borleas, foster brother of Niccas.

Nisn'zahsk (Dune Rider) one of a breed of large, two-legged saurian mounts ridden by demons and used, unmuzzled, to vicious effect in battles. This one bears Niccas to Shavagar-Yasí.

Orien mage, member of the Guardian Circle.

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

Paeddas foster father of Niccas.

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

Pelmar stable boy.

Plakkas an apprentice to Porphoras.

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

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

Rosfyn youngest of the three brothers.

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

Stalcas an important member of the Order of the Narrow

Blade, second only to Arestea. When Helias was first brought into the Order, Stalcas took a special interest in him, and eventually forced the boy to become his lover.


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

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

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

Wendastas an apprentice to Porphoras.

Wyhnnya a mare belonging to Niccas.



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 ravaging jaws, and can spray a nerve poison that renders humans incapable of defending themselves.

Wyhrm began as wolves that through fell arts were raised to the level of men during the Great Demon Wars. However, because no provision was made to keep them from breeding, they have evolved into a race of their

own. Although no friends of demons, they retain an implacable hatred of men.

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 Isles 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.

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.

Pharros the country to the southwest of the Kingdom.

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

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

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.

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 impo-

ratant legal status. The two participants are called *twerë* and the relationship itself to be the state of *twerën*.

PART ONE



ESCAPE &
CAPTURE

Chapter 1



SOME MADNESS HAS COME OVER ME this past month. A restlessness that, with all my discipline, I seem helpless to control. Too restless to study, too restless to be good company to anyone, and now, tossing in my narrow bed, too restless to sleep. Worse, not *wanting* to sleep. To sleep is to dream and, recently, my dreams have been strong and dire. I wake from them drenched in sweat, remembering nothing. Yet their traces linger in the bedclothes like a bad, unplaceable stench.

Then there is this darkness in my heart. It's as if a curse has been laid upon me. I've become short-tempered and needlessly suspicious. I snap at my brothers and have come to loathe their mindless, rumbustious ways. That's why I, Niccas, son of Paedaeas, one of the wealthiest merchants of Lorithar, find myself sleeping in a freezing garret room and not in my comfortable alcove in the sibling hall downstairs. Father came upon me shouting at Rosfyn, the youngest of us four, and he immediately ordered Hostiatas,

the head servant, to arrange a room for me up here in the servants' quarters, "until I found my way to being fit company again."

Rosfyn was quite stricken by this ruling; so, probably, was my father, who is a choleric but warm-hearted man. At first I raged against this exile, but I have come to see that it was as perceptive as it was just. How else could I have discovered that solitude can be so unsettlingly pleasant?

Abandoning any thought of sleep, I tossed aside the covers and slipped into my clothes. Naturally, no glass is wasted on a servant's window; the panes of this one are a double layer of paper. I unhooked the latch and swung it back, sticking my head out into the night. There was a smell of winter in the air, the burr of wood smoke edged with ice. But there was no wind at all. More than bearable. Besides introducing me to solitude, my garret room has inured me to the cold.

I latched the window, strapped on my dagger in its sheath, and slipped past the rooms where the servants lay deep in sleep, and descended the servant stairway, which drops in a series of narrow turns straight from the attic to the cellar. These I could navigate by feel, but once through the cellar door, I had to grope for the tinder box and strike up a fire, then take down a waiting lantern and light its wick. With this to show the way, I went to the storage barrels for some pippins, and then out the side door and down the passage to the stables.

The horses were asleep. But Whynnya knew my step

so well she had shaken herself awake by the time I reached her stall. She pushed her head against me when I came in, and nuzzled the apples from my fist. I slipped on her bridle, threw the saddle over her back and cinched it, and led her to the outside stable door.

There, wrapped in a blanket and reclining on an armful of hay, slept Pelmar, the stable boy, in his role as deterrent against horse thieves. A thin, wiry lad of eleven, I lifted him easily and set him on top of the hay bin, barely disturbing his sleep. He smelled of horses and of himself in equal portion, since in his world a washing meant at most a splash of cold water on his face. I smiled. How near still was the time when I would so have envied him, leading a boy's idea of the perfect life.

Outside, the night was bright, the moon almost full. I leapt onto Whynnya and gave her a light touch with my heels. I had no destination in mind. Restlessness was my guide—and, naturally, caution. Lorithar can be a dangerous place late at night. But some parts are more so than others. Foot-thieves lurk near the taverns and brothels and gaming houses of the Red Quarter. They are rare on Regent's Hill.

And I had no intention of heading down into the dark abyss of the city proper nor, for that matter, of trotting about on these safe and empty streets until I attracted the attention of the Night Watch, who, if they caught me, would give my father a good talking to. At the age of fifteen, my only reason for being out alone at this hour would be to get myself in trouble.

Lorithar is built on and around a large hill, with the castle of Lissator, Lord of the City and Prince of the Realm, at its very top. Below it are the great homes of the other nobles, and below those, the almost-as-great homes of the wealthy merchant families, to one of which I myself belong.

Below that is the Ring Wall, a remnant of the Demon Wars. It is a great stone embankment, flat on top, that encircles the hill like a fortress wall. There are only four passageways cut through it to allow access to the upper part of the hill. Then it was garrisoned with troops; now it keeps unwanted elements out of this part of the city and provides riders an unbroken loop where they can race their horses.

Access ramps are many, and Whynnya was already heading for the nearest one. This was our favorite ride. Once on the track she began to move in earnest, the city spread out below us like a raked bed of ashes in which a scattering of coals still burned. Beyond it, the river Alsorel wended its way from north to south, a ribbon of silver glittering in the moonlight.

Further still, only twenty or so leagues away, was Gorzungâd, where Our Neighbor resided. It was considered tempting the darker fates to look there, but, of course, I did—bad luck or no, one couldn't help it. All there was to see was nothing, an absolute blackness that could still be perceived even against the darkest night.

I urged Whynnya into a gallop, standing in the stirrups with my legs, and lifted myself up in the saddle, bend-

ing slightly forward even as I did. Her body felt as if it simply flowed beneath me; her hooves pounded in the quick four-beat rhythm against the crushed stone that paved the track. The wind bit fiercely at my cheeks and hands, but that only increased the thrill—the speed, the cold, the darkness, the emptiness of a place that from sunrise to sunset was always filled with riders, in bad weather as much as good, blizzards and thunderstorms excepted.

We were heading west and coming to the most deserted part of the Ring. Most of the route was lined with the gardens of the houses that bordered on it, or sometimes the very back of the house itself. But in this stretch, a sheer cliff rose up all the way to the outer castle wall. It had already loomed up ahead of me, and in a moment it was right beside me, blocking all the light from the moon.

Of course, a parapet ran along the further side to keep one from inadvertently plunging off the edge. Even so, I slowed Whynnya back to a walk. It would be foolhardy to rush pell-mell when neither of us could see the way. But, curiously, I found that I *could* see, more and more, as we rode into what should have been total darkness. The light wasn't silver like moonlight, but almost golden, pale, and shimmering.

Even stranger, I seemed to be riding into a wood. There were trees here and there along the route, but only on the side opposite to the escarpment, and certainly none like these, white as bone, graceful, and leafless, like letters of some ancient alphabet formed of living wood.

The track beneath Whynnya's hooves had also become quietly illuminated, as if the stones had been made transparent. The same pale golden light flickered through them. Because of this, it was a few moments before I realized that our way had diverged from the Ring, and that this path had taken us out into empty space, the city now lying directly below us.

How hard this is to describe. On the ground on either side of us lay scattered silver leaves that had fallen from the trees; beneath the leaves, however, there was *nothing*. And yet, if anything, it made the path, the trees, seem all the more real simply by defying the natural world. It was magic, I knew, and more than magic, more than anything.

Ahead of me a crossroads appeared and in the center of the crossroads stood a stone. As we came nearer, I saw that the stone was carved in the shape of a flower bud, and closer still, that it was not a carving at all, for I could see the softness of the closed petals.

When I saw this, I reined in Whynnya and dismounted, and approached on foot. It began to open and when it had done so fully, a figure, who had been sitting within it, knees up and arms around them, head bent down, rose to its feet. It was a woman, and of such beauty that all my breath was taken. Her clothing was made of light, not cloth; to look upon her too closely was to be blinded. I fell to my knees, my hands over my face.

SHE REACHED OUT A HAND and lightly caressed my hair. “*Niccas*,” she said, and gently lifted my head. I dropped my arms to my side, opened my eyes, and looked into hers. She calmed my terror but did not disperse it, for it was seemly to feel it, so much more than awe. In her eyes, I saw depths within depths; it took all my strength to keep from vanishing into them forever. As my vision drew back to take in her face, I realized she was regarding me with a love and a sorrow that singed my heart.

“*Niccas*,” she repeated, “*pass me your dagger*.”

Astonished, I drew it from my sheath and offered it to her, hilt first. She took the hilt with the tips of her fingers, as if the feel of it was displeasing to her, lifting it up and holding it in front of her. Then, she let go, and it floated in the air between us.

She spread out her hands on either side of it and I felt a great power pass between them. The dagger began to spin, slowly at first, then faster and faster, until it became a blur in a field of crackling light.

She moved her hands slightly and the spinning stopped. The dagger had become a narrow rod of silvery metal that cast off a pure and steady aura of the whitest imaginable light.

Again she moved her hands and again the rod began to spin, until it seemed to be made of nothing but light itself. The spinning slowed, and I saw that the rod had become a dagger again, although not the one it had been before.

“*Take it,*” she said. To do so, I had to rise to my feet, and when I did, realized my legs were shaking. Afraid that my hands would be, too, I reached out with both of them and closed both around the hilt. As I did, she reached out and put her own hands around mine.

I thought they would be cold as ice, since she herself was so pale. But when she touched me, I saw her as if a fog had lifted, and realized that she existed beyond color, and that all colors were in her. Likewise, her touch was neither warm nor cold, but gave a sensation that melded both together, like the sensation of floating in a cool river under a hot, bright sun.

I blush at such trivializing, but all words fade, all analogies fail, when attempting to describe her. What was strangest of all was the sense at that moment that all three of us—she, I, the dagger—were as one, in some place outside of life, or, perhaps, where life and death were one.

She moved her head, as if aware of some distant thing, and as she did, her hair flowed about her, and it seemed that the stars themselves glittered among its strands. Then she looked back at me, held my eyes again, and said, “*Niccas, your true name is the Nithaial Elimiel, and your twin’s name—for you have a twin—is the Nithaial Galgaliel. Together you are the Nithaial, my dearest and most important servants. In this cycle it is you who must bear the hardest task, which is why I have shown myself to you. Pain awaits you, I’m afraid, much pain—but in Galgaliel lies your comfort, if you will but seek it in him.*”

These words filled me with confusion and dread and, more than that, a thousand questions. But when I opened my mouth to speak, she softly shook her head and released my hands. “*No more,*” she said. “*You must leave now, while the way still holds firm.*” Then, after giving me one last loving look, turned and stepped into the flower. As the petals began to close around her, I could feel the power that made this place begin to wane. I hurried to Whynnya, who was nervously stamping her feet, and I was barely in the saddle before she bolted, rushing back through the grove of ivory trees, even as these faded and began to melt away.

In what seemed but a moment, we were back on the Ring, riding in the opposite direction whence we had come. Something caught my eye as we raced along, and I turned my head to the north. Gorzungâd, which before had been darkness itself, was ablaze with light, and dark shapes were flying in the air above it.

This only whetted my appetite to bring this night to an end. But I was too well trained to race Whynnya all the way back home. Once we left the Ring we proceeded at a slow trot, so that she had cooled down a bit before we reached the stable. Its door was still unbarred, and swung open to my touch. When I brought Whynnya inside, the lantern still burned softly in the corner where I had left it. All was well.

I rubbed Whynnya down with some sacking, gave her a long drink at the trough, and filled her feeding bin with


an armload of hay before leaving her for the night. Finally, I lifted Pelmar up again, blankets at all, and deposited him back against the door. If Droffar, the head groom, had found the boy sleeping where I had left him on the hay bin, he would have given him a sound beating, without even bothering to wake him first.

I found that I was too shaken by what had just happened to be able to face my garret bed, and so I slipped instead into the sibling hall. A fire smoldered in the great fireplace, the dogs, Mava and Pleva, sprawled on the hearth before it. They welcomed me with a few sleepy slaps of their tails as I stepped between them to warm myself.

The hall was long and narrow, with the sleeping alcoves set like large cabinets into the long walls. Each was long and deep enough to hold us comfortably, and high enough to easily sit up in. Each was curtained off to keep out drafts (and, as we grew older, prying eyes) and about an arm's length up off the floor, the space beneath being filled with drawers in which to keep our possessions, shirts, and smallclothes.

I used the pisspot in the corner, pulled off my boots and outerwear, and sank into the goose-feather mattress, nicely plumped up and awaiting my return. This bed was warmer, larger, and more comfortable than my garret one, but I had sought it out for the old, familiar sense of security. Indeed, I would rather have climbed into bed with one of my brothers, but it had been years since I'd done that last—

at our age, it was considered somewhat unmanly. But this night I could have well used the comfort of another's sleeping presence.

The thought flashed into my mind that I should have brought up Pelmar with me, and I managed a smile. *He* would have certainly been surprised when he woke up, and perhaps not even displeased. But my brothers would have ragged me forever about it, and rightly so. Instead, I pulled the blankets over my head, wrapped my arms tightly around a bolster, and fell immediately into deep and dreamless sleep. 

Chapter 2



I WOKE WITH A START AT THE CRACK OF DAWN. I had the disturbing impression that something had just touched me, but I was alone, and a peek out the curtain showed both dogs still asleep on the hearth, although the fire had long gone out. The pink gray light of another winter's morning was already creeping across the stone floor, and the very sight of it made me shiver, despite my heap of covers.

But I was now awake enough to realize where I was and why—and decided it would be wise to slip off to my garret before my brothers were roused for breakfast. They wouldn't mind my being here, but I was in no mood to answer questions—certainly not the sort that seeing my riding boots and winter cloak would prompt.

So, silently cursing when my feet hit the cold flags, I slipped into enough clothing to be decent, gathered up the rest, and left, taking with me Mava and Pleva, who were eager to get about their day. They headed down the servant stairs to where some food might be begged, and I went up

them to my garret room.

The servants were already stirring, and a scullery maid scampered down past me, rubbing her eyes. She was no worry, but I was just as glad not to meet Hostiatas, the house steward. He would have no compunction reporting my dawn arrival to my father, no doubt managing to imply that I must have spent the night in the arms of a lover. Had it been Borleas or Nathaln, father would have smiled, even though he would have scolded them—but if it had been me.... I sighed. I was so close to manhood I could *taste* it, and so far away that no one was yet making plans for my Coming of Age Day celebration.

Servant rooms have no heat, since there's no reason to encourage them to linger there, and no exception had been made for me. After I pulled on my house clothes, I wrapped myself up in a blanket as well, sat on my bed, and pulled the dagger from its sheath. I was by now more than half convinced—perhaps half *wanting* to be convinced—that last night was all a dream, despite waking up in my downstairs bed.

At a casual glance, the dagger seemed much the same, but I knew it was different the moment I touched it and felt the residue of the force that had flowed about me last night. It was also, I quickly realized, now wickedly sharp; I could push it through the horsehair mattress as easily as if it were soft butter, not the damnably hard and lumpy stuff it actually was.

And the metal of the blade... you had to focus hard

to see it, but it was the same mysterious silvery stuff that I saw last night, hidden beneath an illusion of tarnish. I was so enthralled with breaking the spell—you had to look *through* the blade, not at it, to see past it—that it took me some time



before I noticed the symbols, inlaid in gold, one on each side of the ricasso. I wasn't so ignorant as to not recognize them, the circle being the sign of earth and the circle with the cross the sign for fire. But that told me nothing.

In fact, for all I had been told, I still knew next to nothing. The woman in the vision had called me *Nithaial Elimiel*, but that phrase meant nothing to me. Was it a title, or was that really my *name*. Only great heroes had two names, like Farathnar Ironheart—but perhaps *Nithaial* was a title and *Elimiel* was a name?

I was a great reader—to the detriment of my formal studies, Syvenar, the family tutor, regularly scolded me. In the ballads and the histories, the chosen ones always knew, as soon as it was pronounced, the meaning of their doom. That I was to have one set on me came as a great relief; it explained the restlessness of the past few months, the sense of anticipating something about which I had no clue. But to be told I had a great task before and not to know what it was....

I heard a scrambling noise outside the door and saw to my astonishment that I had stabbed the mattress to death

many times over. I quickly shoved the dagger back into its sheath, even though I knew exactly who was about to enter—Naedas, the servant boy, with a basin of hot water for my morning wash.

If he was surprised to see me already up and dressed, he gave no sign. He glanced into my pisspot to see if it needed emptying (if the chamber pot did, I would have already stuck it out in the hall), and stepped backwards to the door. But instead of leaving, he just stood there, smiling his shy smile.

“All right,” I sighed. “Go ahead. Speak.” I had flung countless boots at Naedas until he learned never to speak to me first thing in the morning. But he was too good-hearted not to alert me anyway if I needed to know something before I went down.

“There will be no morning lessons, Master Niccas,” he said excitedly, “and do you know why?”

Since he already knew I didn’t, he had the good sense not to wait for an answer—but instead unlatched my window, letting in a blare of bright morning light and icy cold. Before I could throttle him, he pointed up into the sky and whispered, “Look, Master Niccas! Look!”

I heard their harsh shrieks even before my eyes could adjust to the light—skalgür, and not just one of them, but a whole pack, soaring and swooping above the hill. They were the largest of all flying things, fierce predators with beaks like spears. They could swoop down and impale a man, then fly off with him as he kicked and screamed, bear-

ing him back to their eyries on the side of Gorzungâd.

Even so, they didn't hunt in the streets of Lorithar. I had seen but one in my whole life, and that at a great distance. Something had greatly displeased Our Neighbor for him to have sent so many here, all but daring the archers in the palace towers to try to shoot them down.

I remembered the sight of Gorzungâd last night on my ride back, all lit up and with dark flying shapes swarming from it like bees from a hive. I shuddered and gestured to Naedas to close the window. Even as I did so, a shadow blocked out the light, a terrifying screech split our ears, and a pair of talons came so close to the window that one of the claws shredded its paper panes.

At the same time, I felt a black shadow pass across me, *through* me, and I flung myself down to get beyond its grasp, seizing hold of Naedas and bringing him down on top of me. He was so shocked by this that he practically leapt back up, directly into that same groping, seeking force, which swept fully through him, even as it only barely brushed against me.

Naedas turned as white as a ghost, his eyes rolled upward in their sockets, and he fainted, falling back on top of me. He was icy cold and I pulled the covers over us both and then wrapped him in my arms, all the while waiting for the thing to return.

It didn't. Apparently the last pass had convinced the skalgür that Naedas was not the person its master was looking for and had flown off. Sunlight shone through the shred-

ded panes and, after a bit, Naedas began to stir. He opened his eyes, realized he was in my arms, and gave a sigh of such happiness that I hadn't the heart to push him away. I knew from his longing glances that Naedas was quite in love with me. Lying like this in my arms....

In fact, I had to admit—if only to myself!—that it felt surprisingly good to me, too, and I even had to repress an impulse to stroke his head. House servants were cleaner and better kempt than those who worked in the stables, and Naedas had a pleasant smell of soap mingled with the soft musky scent of himself.

Why was I thinking about this? First Pelmar and now Naedas, who at least was about my own age—although with servants you really never knew. I pulled the covers off us both and said, not unkindly, “Up you get.”

We both scrambled to our feet. Naedas was a little woozy from what had happened, but still able, I noticed, to manage a slight erection. The sight of that made *me* dizzy, and I quickly shut my eyes. “Go,” I said. And when he didn't move, I repeated it again, “Naedas, *go*.” This time he fled, closing the door behind him. I opened my eyes again, went to the wash basin and its now tepid water, and splashed my face thoroughly.

A small silvered mirror hung on one wall, and I peered into it as I dried myself with the towel Naedas had left beside the basin. I could understand why timid Naedas had bestowed his calf love on me. My brothers were all mus-

cular, ruddy, and fiercely robust, with shaggy mops of hair in various shades of brownish red.

I, on the other hand, have *very* pale skin, a slender body, topaz-colored eyes, and long straight black hair. I am quiet; they are loud. I prefer my own company; they can't be separated from each other. Indeed, to send any of them up to the garret by themselves would be like pulling a puppy away from its litter and shutting him all by himself in a closet. The plaintive wails would reach the end of our street.

I sighed. A month ago I had nothing to think about; now I had far too much. I gathered my hair together and bound it behind my head with a silver hair brooch entwined with dragons, smoothed out the wrinkles in my shirt from where Naedas had lain on top of me, and headed down the stairs.

THE ONLY INTERESTING THING about my father is that he collects such objects of thaumaturgic virtue that come his way, mostly through agents scattered across the kingdom and in the country of Pharros to our southwest. (To the southeast, of course, are The Great Barrens, and beyond them Ngürknasg, the land of the demons. To trade with *them* was once punishable by death, although I've heard it whispered that of recent the law is little enforced.)

Through these agents, my father would learn what was in short supply in one part of the land and what was going cheap somewhere else. Usually, of course, the one didn't match up with the other, hence the large warehouses filled

with durable goods of all sorts, bought cheap and waiting for the moment when they can be sold dear: carpets from Teslar; peppercorns from the Isle of Andoram; *indikos* dye from Nelfrid; bags of salt from Gedd; never-rusting iron for swordmaking from the northern smelteries of Janharsan.

These are all clever men and very well paid, and so they keep a perpetual watch for things that either might turn an especially good profit or that might be of personal interest to my father. And so he has gathered together an enviable collection of madstones and runestones, talismans, amulets, enchanted gems, capture bottles, seeing mirrors, and the occasional volume of arcana.

My enchanted dagger would trump them all, since there was no question that it really *was* magical. Even so, there was one item in his collection that I now wished to consult, and checking to make sure he was at breakfast, I hurried down the hall, slipped inside his study, and closed the door behind me.

There was a fire already crackling in the hearth; the drapes had been pulled aside to let the sun shine through the single large window. In other words, the room had been prepared for his imminent arrival, a reminder that I risked a serious beating should he catch me here. I shook that thought away and went straight to his great writing table.

His treasures were kept locked away in cabinets specially built for that purpose. But he liked to keep one or another lying out to toy with, most often the one I hoped to find

there—a *telesma*, or questioning stone. This was a precious gem said to hold a spirit who could answer any question addressed to it, if you knew how to get its attention.

Syvenar once remarked to me that only a fool dabbled with the occult, for once the door was unlocked, how was one to keep out an unwelcome visitor? This comment came back to me as I spotted the *telesma* resting on a pile of documents, and made me smile. If my father ever *had* learned how to use the stone, it was *he* who would have been the unwelcome visitor—pestering that poor spirit from morning to night with boringly mercantile queries.

I quickly snatched it up and took it over to where two large upholstered chairs sat at an angle to each other on either side of the window. I chose the farthest of these, the one set in the corner, sat down on it, and regarded the stone. It was the size of a goose egg, smooth and so lustrous that it actually seemed to glow in the sunlight.

Now that I had already risked so much, I felt suddenly helpless and stupid, like a thief who has stolen an object he can't use and can't sell and that guarantees that his head will soon be resting on the block. I hadn't even seen my father attempt to use it, so I'd no idea of even the *wrong* way of querying it. But the seconds were flying by, so I locked the fingers of both hands together, thus making my palms into a nest for it, and I then lifted it up and pressed it against my forehead.

There was a moment's coldness as it first touched

my skin, but the moment that passed I became aware of the spirit within it, neither hostile nor welcoming, but attentive, awaiting my question.

“Do you know who I am?” I whispered.

“*You are the Nithaial Elimiel,*” it replied, “*known commonly as Niccas.*” Its voice, which, of course, I heard only in my head, was as empty of personality as the stone that contained it, but it spoke in the tone of absolute authority.

“And do I have a twin?” I asked.

“*Certainly. The Nithaial Galgaliel, known commonly as Jessan.*”

“How can that be?” I replied. “None of my brothers are my age.” As I said these words, I thought of Naedas. “Is my twin a *servant* in this house?”

“*No.*”

So many questions; so little time. As I tried to phrase the next one, however, I felt a warning brush my mind, and I asked, “Is my father approaching the study?”

“*Yes. He is coming down the hall and is about to open the door.*”

I had already sprung to my feet. I had chosen this chair because, if need be, I knew I could wedge myself in the corner between it and the wall. I had already pulled the curtain to hide any sight of me from the doorway, when my father came in, bringing someone with him.

“Let me have my steward draw the chairs over to the fire, my lord,” he said. “It’s turned bitter cold this morning.”

“That won’t be necessary, my dear Paedaeas,” replied an unfamiliar voice, “we’ll be warm enough here in the sun.” There was then the sound of them settling in. The chair now pressed hard against me.

“You said your business was most urgent,” my father said, “so I assume you wish to skip the usual pleasantries and get straight to the reason for your visit.”

“You’ve no doubt already guessed it,” said the strange voice, which by now I had guessed was that of Lord Lissator. He had never visited our house before, although my father had regular dealings with him as a city alderman.

“The boy should be brought here shortly,” father replied. “Although I can’t believe he’s the one you’re looking for. Niccas has been with us almost his entire life.”

“So you told me when you originally mentioned him,” Lord Lissator replied, “and I was inclined at the time to agree. But Our Neighbor was most specific. However, you have acted quite properly, and I assure you that no harm will come to you and your family if it turns out he is the one.”

My head was reeling. I was not my father’s son? The *telesma* must have considered that a question, for it answered, “*You have no human parents.*”

“How can that be?” I replied, almost forgetting myself and saying it aloud. And, immediately, as the voice began to answer, I told it, “Be quiet!” for my father was speaking again. The thought flashed through my mind as I did so that the spirit may never have been told to hold its tongue before.

“The skalgür!” father was saying. “This morning—the servants were talking about one which seemed to all but attack our house. But how....”

Lord Lissator must have made a gesture that silenced him. “Let’s just say He has his methods. Perhaps you’ve met His agent here? Ethrethn? You’ve certainly seen him.”

I assume my father nodded, for he uttered not a word.

“Enough said then,” Lord Lissator replied. “It was all I could do to prevent him from accompanying me.”

Both men then fell into silence. I, too, had seen this man, this *thing*, with its blood-red eyes and chalky face, wrapped in a black robe topped with a long pointed cowl. If it had been a man once, it was one no more.

There was a tap at the door, which then opened at my father’s summons. “Niccass is nowhere to be found, master, my lord.” It was Hostiass. “We have turned the house inside out. Nor is his horse missing, nor, so far as we can tell, any of his outside clothing. He must have somehow managed to run out into the street in his house clothes. Shall I send the servants out to search for him?”

“No,” Lord Lissator said, “since one of them must be aiding him.” His voice was no longer genial but cold and angry. “He wasn’t in the breakfast room with the rest of your family?” This last was obviously addressed to my father.

“He never appeared,” father said, “but things were a bit in an uproar this morning.” He must then have turned to Hostiass. “Who was the last servant to see him?”

“Naedas, master. I gather that he and master Niccas were watching the... the morning events out his window. Naedas said he was fully dressed when he came to wake him up and looked as if he had hardly slept. When Naedas left him, he was about to do his morning washing. And the damp towel was there by the basin.”

“I will go down and speak to my captain of the guards,” Lord Lissator said, springing from his chair as he did so. “Paedaeas, summon all your servants together. I want to question them myself.”

“Yes, my lord,” father replied. “Hostiatas, gather them all together in the grand dining room. I’ll join you and Lord Lissator there in a minute.”

“Immediately, master!” said Hostiatas, and left the room after Lord Lissator, closing the door behind him.

“All right, Niccas,” father said, “come out, *at once*.”

My astonishment must have been written across my face when I clambered to my feet, because father smiled grimly. “How long did you know I was here?” I asked, my voice weak.

“Almost from the moment I sat down,” he replied. “The *telesma* was missing, you were missing.... I’m not a fool, you know.” His voice softened as he said this and that very fact brought me to the verge of tears.

He saw this and immediately came to me, but not to embrace me but to seize me by the shoulders and give me a good shaking. “Niccass,” he said, “not only does your life

depend on how you handle yourself in the next few minutes, but so does my life, your mother's life, and the lives of your brothers. Do you understand this?"

I nodded dumbly and wiped my eyes with my sleeve. Father had already let go of me and gone to his writing desk. He sat at it, inked a pen, took a sheet of paper, scribbled something on it, stamped his seal on it, and blotted it carefully. As he did so, I could hear voices passing down the hall toward the dining room, and realized that the servants had begun to gather there.


Father folded the note carefully, got up, and handed it to me. "We don't even have time to say goodbye," he said. "Come here." And he led me to a far corner of the room, directly opposite to the windows, where an old oak cabinet stood against the wall. He seized the handle of one of its drawers, but instead of pulling on it, twisted it sharply. There was the sound of a click, and the cabinet swung away, revealing a hidden passage.

"This leads to the servant staircase," he said. "Hurry up to your room, put on your shabbiest cloak, and then go down to the stables and saddle Whynnya with the plainest gear we have. Ride as quickly as you dare to the Old Quarter and give this note to Grendar at the safehouse," he said. "He'll give you a pouch in exchange. Inside it, you'll find full instructions for what you must do next."

I started to speak but he shook his head. "Answers await you somewhere else," he said. "Just tell me one thing.

Did you get the *telesma* to answer you?"

I nodded dumbly. I forgot that I was still holding it in one hand.

He sighed. "There you go then," he said. "Lissator is right. Keep the thing and remember me by it." He bent forward and kissed me, then gently pushed me through and swung back the cabinet. I heard the latch snick shut as I fled down the dark passage to the stairs. 

Chapter 3



WHYNNYA AND I were on our way in a matter of minutes. I dared take nothing except my dagger and my purse, because to look at just one other thing would remind me of another, and I knew that I had put myself at great risk by coming here at all. In the space of a few moments, my garret room had been transformed from a haven of peace into a dangerous trap.

Lord Lissator went nowhere without the company of mounted palace guards, a squad of six plus their leader. At least four of these had been sent to find me and bring me back. But they were looking for a cloakless boy on foot, not a rider on horseback dusty from a long journey—or so I hoped that rubbing my cloak with a few fistfuls of stable dirt and hay would make me seem.

My major goal now was to get through one of the gates in the Ring Wall before one of the guards alerted the watch to be on the lookout for me. I reasoned the guard would head for the nearest one first, so I guided Whynnya

through the back alleys and quieter streets of the hill to the next gate over. As it was, I reached the incline leading down to it, just as a guard came riding hell-for-leather along the ring path. But he was too late; I made it through the gate and into the city before he was able to descend.

Still, the fact that they were so hot on my trail made me break into a complete sweat. And, as this turned icy cold inside my wraps, I became aware of how chilly the day actually was—much colder even than last night. The wind had brought with it a blast of frigid air from the north, and when it struck my face it seared my cheeks.

Every part of the city has its own life, its own stench and savor, but none so potent as here in the Old Quarter, where the sights were most various, the smells the strongest, the noises the loudest, the streets the most crowded. Even the alleyways teemed with people, coming and going, haggling, arguing, getting in the way of cursing packboys lugging loads larger than themselves.

The streets were jammed with waggons, driven by teamsters who cared little if their long whips struck an unlucky passerby. Indeed, those whips were often sent flailing backwards to discourage any street urchin who might be thinking of climbing on the back of their cart to snatch a sack of onions or a bale of wool.

The frigid weather lent its own touch to the scene, since all who could had bundled themselves up in layer upon layer of rags, bound to their arms, legs, feet, and torsos with

lengths of twine. Through a half-closed eye, they seemed like a race of walking dumplings, albeit grimy, misshapen, and wholly unappetizing—exactly identical, in other words, to the real one being peddled by street hawkers from workshop to workshop as a midday meal.

The other consequence of the cold was a series of bonfires, all illegal and made from scavenged wood, often ripped down from the side of a building, smashed into fragments, and set alight before the inhabitants of the place noticed the draft. Indeed, most of these houses were as cold inside as out, which is why so many with nothing to do and not a penny for a pint of ale stood about, rubbing their arms and gabbing to acquaintances or simply gawking at the passing scene.

By now both Whynnya and I were practiced in the tricks of getting through this place unscarred. The chief one of these was to use the wider alleys, thus avoiding the waggons, dangerous to a single horse and rider, while being careful as well not to accidentally turn into one of the darker, narrower ways. There, too, being on horseback was no protection, since thieves would jump on you out a window, snatch your purse, and be gone before you could pick yourself out of the mud.

The safehouse, as the name implied, was built like a small fortress, with stone walls, small barred windows, and a heavy wooden gate. I yanked the bell pull until I heard the bars being pushed aside, but instead of Grendar, an unfamiliar youth appeared at the gate. However, he appeared to

recognize me, for he ushered me into the yard and closed and barred the gate behind me.

“I was hoping for Borleas,” he said. “Which of the other of Paedaeas’s whelps are you?”

This was so insolent a statement that it momentarily left me speechless. True, Borleas was father’s usual choice for these trips, both because my brother was strong and fearless and because he particularly enjoyed them. But for this servant to speak his name so familiarly—and of the rest of us so saucily—was a provocative affront.

“Bring me to Grendar at once,” I snapped at him, “and as for my name, I am *Master* Niccas to you.”

“At once.... *Master* Niccas...,” the boy said, as he unlocked the door to the building itself and held it back to allow me to enter. He spoke both phrases slowly and thoughtfully, as though he were not quite sure what to make of them. This only served to irritate me further.

“You are as simpleminded as you are insolent,” I said haughtily as I passed by him, “if you found *any* of that unclear.” I’d been brought up to treat servants civilly, but this boy’s behavior was beyond the pale—or, at least, he had certainly succeeded in getting my goat. I wanted to throttle him.

The outside door opened onto a short hall. There were a few doorways on each side of it; at the far end was a locked iron door with a grated window. This door led to the storeroom where the valuables were kept. Grendar had an assistant who locked himself in there during the day and

passed out anything required through the grated window, which could be unfastened from within. That way, if thieves managed to break in, Grendar couldn't unlock the door even under threat of death, since it was impossible to do so from the outside once the assistant had locked himself within.

I had only been here a few times, but I knew the way to Grendar's cubbyhole of an office, which was through the first entrance on the right off the hall in which I now stood. I opened the door without knocking and went in. Grendar wasn't there, but a fire was burning in a small fireplace. I suddenly realized how *freezing* I was. I went straight to it and began thawing out my hands.

As I did so, the boy came up behind me and said softly in my ear, "Cold outside, young Master? No doubt that's why you let a stranger bring you inside *without first finding out who he is.*" To my astonishment, he then put his arm around my neck, and squeezed hard, choking me.

Immediately, I seized his arm with both hands, stamped on his foot, and, as he yelped in pain, bent sharply forward. He flew over my back and crashed onto the floor in front of me. He was lucky I had the foresight to turn as I did so, else he would have gone straight into the fire.

Before he had a chance to sit up, I whipped my dagger from its sheath and held the blade a mere finger's width from his throat. "Very well," I asked, "who are you?" And to show him that I wouldn't hesitate to cut his throat, I nicked his flesh with the dagger's point.

Blood began to trickle from the cut, but he smiled broadly. "You are an adept of throwfight," he said. "I'll remember that next time. As to your question, I'm Helias, bonds slave of Grendar." The dagger blade then caught his attention and he stared thoughtfully at it for a moment. "I'd kill for that blade," he said finally.

"No," I said. "You'd be killed trying to take it."

Helias brought one hand to his throat and gingerly wiped away some of the blood, regarded it on his fingers, then looked back up at me. "Well, you've certainly made that point." He wiped the blood onto his shirt. "Now that I've taught you your lesson, and you've taught me mine," he said, "do you think I could get up?"

Again, he made me furious. "I should have you beaten for your insolence," I stormed at him. "Teach *me* a lesson!"

"I assume that means yes," Helias said, and began to scramble up, forcing me to decide whether to stab him for real or to step back. I did the latter and prepared myself for an attack. But he turned his back to me and lifted up his shirt. His back was all hard muscle, but what he meant to show me was that it was crisscrossed with a mass of savage scars.

He dropped the shirt and turned back around. "Beatings haven't taught me much of anything so far," he said calmly. "But if you think this time it might be different..." He sketched an ironic bow.

HELIAS AND I were now standing face to face, barely an arm's length apart. He was about my height, but at once more muscular and more graceful. Really, in him, the two were one—he was like a tyger—or a panther, anyway—as lithe and as deadly. My anger had already faded away, although my unease had not. I simply didn't know what to make of him.

I sighed and put my dagger back in its sheath, keeping an eye on Helias as I did. He was clearly the most dangerous person I had ever met but, even so, I felt a strange pleasure being in his company. “Is *all* your conversation left hanging in the air?” I asked.

He smiled again. “You’ve at least *met* Grendar, haven’t you?”

I nodded. Grendar a cunning, sycophantic brute of a man, with tiny, squinty eyes set into a large, round head. He had both the ability and wisdom to keep meticulous records, which my father regularly scoured, afterwards admiringly pronouncing Grendar “a scoundrel’s scoundrel.” From this and the answering glint in Grendar’s eye, I learned that “meticulous” hasn’t quite the same meaning as “scrupulous.”

“Well,” Helias was saying, “I’ve had to train myself to not answer him at all, since, when he’s alone here with me, he’ll seize on any reply as an excuse for a flogging.”

“And does your method mean you receive fewer of them?” I asked.

“More,” he answered. Again, the quick and genuine

smile. “But this way, at least, I’ve landed the first blow. And since his only response is to beat me until he’s tired, he’s admitting that I’ve won.”

“But that’s *terrible*,” I said.

Helias shrugged. “I knew from the moment that he acquired me that I would kill him. Grendar thought he was purchasing me, when in fact he was buying his own death. This time with him was voluntary, for it served as my apprenticeship—killing Grendar gains me admission into the Order of the Narrow Blade, for which I’ve been destined all my life.”

“But that means you’ll spend your life killing people,” I said. “How could you desire that?”

He looked at me coolly. “Because it draws me,” he replied. “Not killing at random, of course. I’m not mad—not in that way, anyway. Nor does the Order allow killing so that others can make a profit. We are sworn to kill only those whose evilty justifies it and for whom no other remedy exists. At least at my hands, they’ll die cleanly.”

What Helias said was true—as every boy in Lorithar already knew. The Order of the Narrow Blade was very different from the Guild of Deathmongers. Unlike the latter, it didn’t accept contracts—it simply executed people it determined should be weeded from society, and expected (and received) generous donations from those that the deed had released from suffering.

Members of the Order had a thin-bladed dagger tat-

toed on their right cheek. This weapon was their preferred method of execution, the blade being inserted slowly into one ear until the tip emerged from the other. Legend had it that initiates did this face to face with their quarry, and that the image of the tattoo remained etched in their staring eyes long after death.

Initiates in the Order were also votaries of the House of Fire, and led lives of ascetic discipline. It was very rare to meet a member of the guild in the ordinary way of things—although, of course, Helias was, if what he said was true, now no more than an initiate.

“You have been regarding me with interest for some time,” he said, breaking the silence. “Did you come here on your father’s business...or, like your chosen brother Borleas, for that and to fuck?”

“You’ve slept with my *brother*?” I asked. My mouth gaped. The idea was almost past imagining.

Helias snorted. “Sleep, no. Fuck, yes. He can hardly keep his hands off me when he’s here, and Grendar charges him dearly for the privilege.”

“Grendar would have to pay *me* dearly,” I said hotly. This story was beyond belief.

Helias cocked his head to one side. “How much do you charge?” he said. “Grendar could probably afford it.”

I looked back at him. “Since I’m a virgin,” I said, shocking myself by the very words I was blurting out, “I come especially dear. A gold duggad, at least.”

Helias shook his head. "Taking virginity is a fool's pastime," he said. "All tears and ineptitude. Grendar would pay it for the pleasure of seeing your pain, but I won't." I suddenly realized where Borleas had taken Helias—right in this room, with Grendar watching. My stomach turned.

He cocked his head to one side. "What do you charge for a kiss? Surely you aren't a virgin there, too?"

This conversation was running too fast for me to catch up, with words coming out of me as if by their own volition. "Well," I replied, "with kisses it's a dozen a penny."

Helias reached into the side pocket of his smock, and pulled out a handful of oddments, sorted through them, and removed a halfpence. He handed it to me. "Six," he said, "since you come so cheap."

I took the coin, and Helias took me. The kisses I had imagined were a brushing of the lips, but he seized my head with both hands, pressed his mouth against mine, and began to invade me with his tongue, leaning me so far backwards as he did so, that I had to clutch at his back to keep from falling over, the fingers of one hand still clutching my coin.

By the third kiss, I was using my own tongue to grapple with his, but, even so, I was no match for him, for half of me was all but swooning. When the fourth kiss was finished, I realized that he had changed positions. One of his arms was now wrapped around my neck, the hand of the other was unfastening my braies. In a moment, I felt them sliding down my legs.

As the fifth kiss began, he lifted me and sat me on Grendar's desk. I felt the coldness of the wood against my bare skin as if from a far-off place. As the kiss continued, I could sense Helias groping for something, finding it, setting it beside me—a jar of ointment. He lathed some between my legs and more on himself.

Then he put my free hand onto his cock and said, "Guide me in."

I hardly knew how to do so, but somehow I did. I felt him pressing hard against me and felt myself opening, wider, wider, wider, wider still, to let him in. I understood in some primal way, outside of thought itself, that to resist at all would be to suffer great hurt. But surrender, I discovered, as it took me over, was more than physical. By letting him in I gave him everything...he possessed me entirely.

The sensation of him moving inside me was so powerful that my mouth hung slackly open, and cries came out of me unbidden and hardly heard. I recalled his word "ineptitude" and perceived that opening myself wholly to him was not yet enough of a surrender—that I still had further to go. I had to openly display how much I wanted what was happening, anticipate it, move with it, heighten it.

Helias's cool blue eyes were locked onto mine as he thrust into me and he knew what was happening inside my mind. Simultaneously, I felt an all-consuming shame and an overwhelming rush of erotic intensity. My body was like a leaf in a storm, shaking, quivering, finally breaking loose

and floating away, turning over and over. I spent without even realizing I was doing so, hardly feeling it dribble across my stomach, I was so totally the possession of Helias, so completely tuned to the rush of pleasure as he came, spurting and spurting inside me.

His eyes glazed over, he turned his face away from me, bracing himself with his arms to keep himself from falling forward on top of me. I so wanted him to do that, to take me in his arms and kiss and caress me, that my eyes flooded with tears. But he ignored them, me, bent down and picked up my fallen braies and used them to clean himself.

I watched him do so, stunned, humiliated; I wanted to wrap myself up in my winter cloak and sob. But I didn't; I took the braies back when he handed them to me and used them to clean myself as best I could, then stuffed them into a pocket. Now I had to choose between freezing my privates or staining my cloak on the ride back. But to do that, I had to complete my business here. Wordlessly, I passed Helias my father's note.

"Well," he said, "I can't open this. Only Grendar can. And where in the world is he?"

He gestured for me to follow him and took me out into the hall, then opened the door to another room—just enough for me to see what were clearly Grendar's legs lying prone on the floor. Helias closed the door again and led me back to the office.

"My initiation into the Guild will be held tomorrow,"

he said. “We of the Narrow Blade are not thieves, but Grendar was—and all that he stole is forfeit to us. Tonight members will transfer his stealings to the Guild’s own coffers. All the rest will remain untouched. You, of course, will say nothing to your father. Someone else will come and find the doors barred fast and no one to open them. So, they’ll have to be battered down—and that will bring the end to our story, both of Grendar and Paedaeas and you and me.”

I started to speak, but he lifted his hand to stop me. “It would be better to keep silent,” he said. “Your eyes have said it all, already. I’m cruel, Niccas, but I’m not evil. Don’t make me hurt you. You’ve been doing very well so far.”

I had no idea what he meant by that and he offered no explanation. Instead, he ripped open my father’s note, read it, and carelessly tossed it into the fire. “Come with me,” he said, “and I’ll show you a place that few have ever seen.”

He led me out of the office again, and down the hall, past the room where Grendar’s corpse was lying, and, taking a key from his neck, unlocked a massive, iron-bound door. We passed through this into the saferoom itself.

It was long and high and so narrow that two could not stand abreast in its sole aisle. Light came solely from glass cobbles buried in the ceiling, and the greenish tint they gave it plus the murkiness made the whole place seem deep underwater. As my eyes adjusted, I saw that the walls on both side of me were, in fact, made up of tiers of drawers, one on top of the other on top of the other, going all the way

to the ceiling. Each of these was about the width of an arm and a third as high. Separating each tier from the one above, was a narrow wooden ledge, about three fingers in width.

Helias launched himself up into the air, grasped one of the protruding ledges, swinging his feet up as he did. He pressed his toes against a lower ledge, and in this manner scampered up to a drawer about two dozen tiers high.

Then he let himself fall backwards so that his back rested against the opposite wall, pulled open the drawer, took out small cloth bag, clenched it in his teeth, shut the drawer, and shot back down.

Helias took the sack from his mouth and handed it to me. "The note from your father told Grendar to leave you alone in his office," he said, "so that you could examine its contents in privacy." He looked me in the eye. "As a bond-slave, I don't *have* a presence, so I think I'll come in with you instead of freezing to death out here."

He led me back to the office, out of habit locking the iron door behind him. "Take Grendar's stool," he said, squatting before the fire and feeding it with some of the logs that were heaped into a nearby copper tun.

I opened my mouth to speak, thought better of it, and, instead, broke the wax seal with father's mark stamped on it and undid the drawstrings. Inside was a folded paper and another, much smaller sack. I drew them both out, unfolded the paper, which proved a letter addressed to me. Suddenly feeling dizzy with fatigue, I leaned against the wall

and began to read.


Niccas, my son (for I shall always continue to think of you so), if you read these words things have happened far more quickly than we imagined—but at least the fact that you are reading them means that, Blessed Mother be thanked, you are still alive. ¶ As you have perhaps by now discovered, you are a claimed child, brought to us as a baby to keep safe by someone I have sworn not to reveal, even to you. Although I now earn my living as a merchant, I was once an initiate in the Order of Mages, and was chosen to return to the world of ordinary men in order to provide a haven for you, since a sign was given that the time was nigh for your appearance. ¶ As soon as you can, make your way to the house of the master alchemist Porphoras, who is expecting you. If all had gone as we had wished, you would have been his apprentice already, for he is far better able to guard you than we, now that you are coming of age. ¶ Niccas, whatever happens to us, know that we (your mother and I) freely chose this role, that we love you dearly, and that our lives are nothing compared to the chance of your survival and ultimate triumph.

Your father, **Paedaeas**

P.S. Burn this letter as soon as you have read

it. Don't let Grendar get his hands on it! I have enclosed a small sack of precious jewels (some more valuable than others). Hide these away carefully until you need them. It's always good to have something. P

These words sent my head reeling. I was so tired; so much had happened and I had hadn't had a moment to think about any of it. All I had found time for, I thought grimly, was to examine my dagger—just like a boy! I wouldn't survive much longer if I didn't do better than that.

As I lifted my eyes to look at Helias I realized that I had just felt a blast of cold air against my back. Someone had opened the door! I started to turn, reaching for my dagger as I did so. But I was too late. An arm that seemed made of iron sinews closed around my neck, lifting me up as it did so. I heard Helias shout something I couldn't make out, I felt a stinging sensation as something jabbed into my arm. The letter slipped from my fingers, the small sack of jewels fell with a clatter to the floor, my body crumpled and fell with it. I was already insensible by the time I hit the floor. 

Chapter 4



BLACKNESS. I was lying on a bed, wrapped in my winter cape. A coarse-textured blanket, thrown over that, pressed against my face. I was still freezing cold. My mind seemed clear enough but I felt too weak to move. I tried to lift my head and my skull exploded in pain.

What had my father written? “At least... you are still alive.” “Just barely, father, just barely,” I whispered, and sank back into unconsciousness.

When I came to for the second time, there was light in the room and, better, some warmth. A heap of coals smoldered in a large brazier, their fumes gathering in a dark cloud above me.

“There’s a vent in the wall near the ceiling to let them out,” a voice said. “We don’t intend to asphyxiate you.”

This time I knew better than to lift my head, but I turned it, slowly in the direction of the voice. There was a high-backed chair drawn up near to the bed, and in it sat a

figure dressed in black robes, with a cowl covering its head. The light cast by the brazier was far too dim to reveal any features of its hidden face, but bright enough to show that at least it had some.

“Are you... Our Neighbor?” I whispered.

The figure laughed mirthlessly. “No, *Nithaial*. If I were, you wouldn’t have had to ask.” A hand reached up and pulled back the cowl. To my surprise, it uncovered the head of a woman of some age, her white hair cut short and her visage stern and intelligent. “I am Arestea, *Koryphaios* of the Order of the Narrow Blade.”

“I don’t know that word,” I said.

“It doesn’t matter, *Nithaial*—if, indeed, you are he. May I look in your eyes?”

I nodded and slowly rose to a sitting position on the bed, my feet touching the floor. She bent forward, reached over her hand and lifted my chin with her fingers, just as the spirit had done the night before. But these eyes I met without fear, even though the gaze was strong.

Her face slowly took on a look of pure astonishment. “You have been in the presence of Gesryma, the Great Mother of Blessed Name!” she exclaimed. “She *touched* you.” She let go of my head, crossed her arms across her chest, bent down her head and closed her eyes for a full minute.

When she opened her eyes again, I saw that there was now a caution in them that tempered the awe. “Will you tell me of this meeting?”

Ours is not a religious family, and while I was raised to respect the Four Elementals and the Mother from whom they flowed, I attended the ceremonies and celebrations attached to their worship with a kind of dutiful blankness. I was sometimes moved by the melodious chanting of the names of the spokes of the Great Wheel and always fascinated by the dancers as they fell into the Sacred Trance and performed the Rituals—of Fire, Water, Air, and Earth.

Yet afterwards, back outside in the daylight, it fell away. Some part of me had surely known the spirit was the Mother of All, but the realization was simply too unsettling for me to face. Despite the transformation of the dagger, I still wanted to think of the whole experience as a dream.

Arestea was the first person I had told of the event, and I found, as I did so, that I could see it as clearly as if it were happening again—more clearly, because in memory you can't turn your head and look at things you didn't see clearly before. In fact, although I didn't realize it, I had fallen into a trance, and, when I was done, Arestea had to summon me out of it—which she did by speaking my common name and sharply clapping her hands.

I found that the immersion had refreshed and strengthened me; my body felt stronger and my mind was clearer. Arestea was sitting before me in a state of some agitation, although she hid it well. But I was discovering that I too could read things in the eyes of others.

“Perhaps it is my turn to ask some questions, *Kory-*

phaios Arestea,” I said to her respectfully. “Am I a prisoner here?”

“No, *Nithaial Elimiel*, you are not,” she replied, although with a hint of hesitation. “You were rendered unconscious because you stumbled across some secret business of the Order, and brought here because *Mystes* Helias saw your dagger. At first he thought it was an *emblemata*—a talisman of our Order...”

“He said he would kill me for it,” I interrupted, remembering.

She shook her head. “No, *Nithaial Elimiel*. What *Mystes* Helias said was ‘I would *kill for it*.’ What he meant was that such a thing could command him; when you cut him, he felt the power in the blade. What he didn’t understand was why *you*, a boy his age, with no connection to our Order, could be wielding such a powerful device.” She smiled, this time genuinely. “All of us seem to have had some surprises these last hours.”

As she spoke, I had taken the blanket from the bed and wrapped it around myself. Despite the brazier, I was still freezing. “With all due respect, *Koryphaios* Arestea,” I remarked, after considering what she had said, “this doesn’t appear to be one of your Order’s guest rooms, but a storage place, and a little used one at that.”

She sighed. “Alas, you are not merely our guest, *Nithaial Elimiel*. You are a fugitive and we are harboring you. The Unnameable One—Our Neighbor, as He is called

here in Lorithar—is searching for you with every power and person available to him, and He will not rest until you are captured. If He found you here, every member of this Order would be slaughtered, with no thought of the violation of tradition and the Higher Laws.”

I groaned and fell back on the bed. “Why is this *happening*,” I moaned.

Arestea looked startled. “You really don’t know, *Nith-aial Elimiel*?

“No.” I said, shortly. “And please stop calling me that, *Koryphaios* Arestea. My name is Niccas.”

“Yes,” she answered, “and my name is Arestea. The rest is beyond our say.”

She traced a sigil in the air with a finger, and immediately the door to the room opened. A cloaked and hooded figure entered and stood awaiting her command.

“Go to my sleeping room, Wyllaema, remove the heavy covers from my bed, and bring them here,” she ordered. Then, when we were alone again, she said to me, “At least you needn’t freeze here. And now that you’re awake, I’ll have a meal brought. After that, see if you can rest some more. Plans need to be formed and consultations made. Meanwhile, be easy of mind—you are as safe here as anywhere in the city.”

Those words jolted my memory. “And my horse, Whynnya? I left her tied outside the safe house....”

“Safe and warm, also,” she replied, rising. “She was brought to a stable that our Order secretly owns, and will be

cared for there until you leave us.” She bowed to me and left me alone with my thoughts.

I HADN'T GOTTEN VERY FAR INTO THEM, however, when the door opened and a cloaked and Arestea's attendant entered bearing an armload of blankets. They were thick and soft and held the faint scents of cypress and lavender. I was in the process of heaping them about me when the food arrived.

The attendant drew a stool over to the bed and set the tray down on it. I had only to look at its contents to realize how ravenously hungry I was. I hadn't eaten a thing since all this had begun, which was...well, at least a day and a night, maybe longer. “What day is this?” I asked the attendant, who was pulling on a chain to adjust the flue in the wall. There was a clanking noise, and then the cloud of smoke overhead began to dissipate.

When the answer came, I had already fallen to, dismembering and devouring a roast chicken and mopping up its juices with a chunk of coarse but delicious bread. A covered container that I thought would contain soup proved instead to hold a damp and heated towel—a pleasant and unexpected courtesy. I recovered it to keep it hot and drank deeply from the goblet of dark red wine, which was at once pungent and sweet and very alcoholic.

“It's the Eve of Byrnan,” said the attendant, who came and sat beside me on the bed. “A full day has passed since we last laid eyes on each other, and you've been insensible for

most of it, or so I'm told."

"Helias!" I gasped, half in pain, half in joy.

"The very same," he said, and pulled back his hood. "I'm not supposed to be here, but Wyllaema didn't know that, and was most grateful when I offered to bring down the tray." He looked down at its fast-disappearing contents. "Of course, if I'd known that you weren't going to share any of it..."

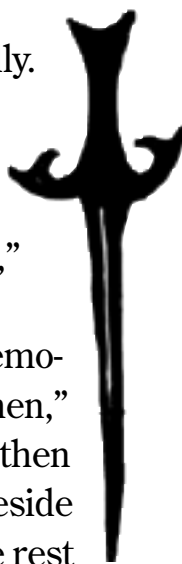
The same inscrutable insolence. I turned my head and looked at him, seeing for the first time the dagger tattooed on his cheek.

"So you passed your initiation," I said coldly. "Am I to be the first on your list?"

He smiled, the same open, frank smile as before. "No," he answered. To my astonishment, he reached out and caressed my hair. "No," he said again, even more softly.

His touch brought such an explosion of emotion in me that I jerked my head away. "Here, then," I said, shortly, and passed him the last leg joint, then tore the chunk of bread in half. He moved closer beside me, and we finished the food together, sharing the rest of the wine. When we had polished the platter clean, he took out the hot towel and gently wiped my face and hands with it before cleaning up himself.

He pulled off his boots. "Give me the side of the bed by the wall," he said coolly. "The tattoo still burns like fire and I don't dare press it against the covers, even covers as fine as



these.” When he pulled them up he caught the aroma and his eyes widened. “From the bed of the *Koryphaios* herself! You *do* rate, merchant whelp.”

We were lying side by side, facing each other, our bodies barely two finger’s span apart. His head was resting on one arm, the other lay on his side. I, on the other hand, lay with my arms crossed over my chest as if in prayer.

We lay like that together for a while in silence. Unlike either of the boys I had been close to so recently, Helias had a strong musky smell, the odor of someone who rarely bathed and almost as rarely changed his clothes. It was aggressive but not at all unpleasant, something you could imagine wrapping yourself in, like the pelt of a wild animal.

Helias caught my eye. “Are you *smelling* me?”

I found myself blushing. “Yes,” I whispered.

He lifted his head and regarded me, or what he could see of me in the dark. His was the face that caught the light of the fire. “That must be a noseful! You smell delicious, but not so much as you did yesterday, in Grendar’s office. Then, I could have eaten you up.”

“You had a nice way of showing it,” I said. “Do you treat all your lovers so?”

His face grew suddenly wary. “I have no lovers,” he replied. “We’re allowed none. And, to be honest with you—as I swear I always shall be—‘love’ is something I’ve never once felt in my life.” He reached his free hand over and held my head fast. “*Never*,” he repeated, with cold certainty, looking

me directly in the eyes. He then released me and let his own head fall back onto his supporting arm. “Just so you know.”

We lay there together in silence again. Helias was altogether too much for me; I couldn’t be close to him without getting hurt, and yet close to him I longed to be. I felt danger in his company, but not evil. His words cut, but the wounds they left didn’t fester, at least not yet.

“The other day,” I blurted out, “when you took me like that, it was Borleas you were thinking of, wasn’t it?”

He nodded. “When I heard that knock at the gate.... I meant to give him the fucking of his life.” He shook his head. “I hated him. And so when it turned out to be you.... The worst of it was that right away I was attracted to you”—he turned his head towards me— “*am* attracted to you. What a stupid mess.”

“I thought you didn’t feel love,” I said, shaken by these words, and worse, feeling my grip on my emotions loosening by the instant.

“Attraction isn’t love,” he answered. “And neither, if you want to know, is affection.” He turned his head so that he was looking up at the ceiling, or, rather, the dark that concealed it. “For what it’s worth, I do feel affection for you, which is also rather new to me.” He turned his head again to look at me, and added, “I like these covers. I’ve never in my life felt anything so soft, so fragrant, and”—he smiled—“so *clean*.”

I don’t know why that word melted the last of my resolve, but it did, completely. I leaned forward and kissed him.

His lips were firm, thin, even hard, and I realized that he willed them to be that way, unyielding even to this.

He responded by kissing me in return, just as he had the day before, aggressively, fiercely, as if he wished to ravish my mouth.

Immediately, I pulled my head away. “No! Not like that,” I said. “Why do you have to hurt me?”

He jerked away from me entirely, lying on his back again and looking up into the darkness. “If you want someone who kisses like a girl, go find one,” he replied sullenly. “I won’t stop you.”

“All right,” I said. I sat up in the bed. “Wyllaema!” I called, and again, “Wyllaema!”

The door opened and Wyllaema entered, rubbing her eyes with one hand and holding up a guttering candle with the other. I *thought* she might have been posted outside my door.

“You summoned me, *Nithaial Elimiel*?”

“Yes, Wyllaema,” I replied, thinking quickly. “I find I can’t go to sleep without a kiss good night. Would you mind giving me one?”

She looked puzzled, then pleased, and approached. Fortunately, the light from the candle cast shadows everywhere, and so she couldn’t see how unnaturally large was the pile of blankets beside me.

I thought she would simply bend over and lightly kiss me, but instead she sat at the edge of the bed, forcing me to shift my body hard against Helias’s, which grudgingly yield-

ed. It was quivering, I could feel, but I had no idea whether that was from laughter or fury.

Wyllaema pushed back her hood entirely. Like Ar-estea, she had closely cropped hair, but hers was golden, and her complexion bright. She was in fact very comely. She bent over, I lifted my head, and our lips met. There was nothing shy or gingerly about her kiss, either, although it was not as hard or brutal as Helias's had been. Even so, it plainly said that more awaited me from the same source.

I sighed, and let my head fall back onto my pillow. "Thank you, Wyllaema," I whispered. "That will give me the sweetest dreams."

Instead of rising, she slipped her hand under the covers and ran it lingeringly up my thigh. "Surely one kiss isn't enough?" she asked. "Perhaps you'd like another"—and she boldly put her hand directly onto my member, which was half stiff already—"here?"

Helias had now seized hold of my arm and was squeezing my arm so tightly that it hurt, convincing me I'd better put an end to all this.

"Wyllaema," I said, "please don't *torture* me." I reached down and seized her hand and drew it out of the covers "Don't you know that that is *forbidden* to the *Nithaial*?"

She shook her head, shock chasing the amorous expression off her face.

I moaned. "A kiss is dangerous enough. But *that*... touching me *there*.... No!" I reached over and gave her a firm

shove. “I blame myself for this, Wyllaema, but you had better leave *at once*.” As she leapt to her feet, a loud hissing sound came from under the covers, and there was a movement as if a giant snake was uncoiling itself.

Wyllaema fled so quickly she almost extinguished her candle. When she reached the door, I called out in a strained voice, “If you can, *bolt the door behind you*.”

She had barely time to slam the door behind her, before Helias had shoved the covers aside and leaped astride me, pinning my arms with his knees. He reached down and grabbed hold of my shoulders, then lifted up my head and gave it a shake.

“Bolt the door behind you!!” he hissed. “You are such a hopeless *idiot*.”

“I wasn’t thinking clearly,” I admitted. “I just wanted to....” Helias was suddenly lying on top of me, kissing me, not gently, exactly, but certainly seductively, and for such a long time that, when he let up, we both gasped a little for air.

He lifted his head up a very short distance from my own. “How does that match your kiss from that *wench*?” he asked.

“Now, all of a sudden, you want to know if you can kiss like a *girl*?” I asked, astonished. “Helias, are you *jealous*?”

He got up on his haunches. “Pull up your shirt,” he said. I raised my body from the bed a little and pulled at the cloth until it was bunched up around my chest. As I did so, he wiped one hand across the platter that still rested on the stool

by the bed and brought it back slick with congealed grease. He then reached down and smoothed this onto my cock.

“Have you ever fucked anyone before?” he asked.

“You know I haven’t,” I whispered.

“At least there’s that. I swore no one would ever fuck *me* again after I killed Grendar.” He guided me into him. “Can you feel that?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said, sweat breaking out on my forehead. “Yes, yes, yes.” The ring of muscle around his hole was like his lips, firm and taut, but it yielded to my cock without my even thrusting it upward, because he was easing it in himself, guiding it with his hand. When it was well inside, he took his hand away, and began moving up and down on me, clenching and unclenching his buttocks as he did. The sensation was like nothing I had ever felt before. I groaned.

“After I killed Grendar,” he repeated. “But when Wyl-laema was kissing you, I knew I wanted you in me so much that I could hardly control myself.”

He was moving rhythmically up and down as he spoke, and I caught sight of his cock, jutting out from the darkness of his groin. I realized that it had been inside me and I didn’t even know what it looked like. I lifted my head but I couldn’t even clearly see it now, just its outline, swollen, throbbing. I reached out to touch it, but he knocked my hand away.

“*Listen to me*, whelp of Paedaeas! Do you know what all that means?” He was glaring at me now, even as his rhythm had intensified and words came out of his mouth in gasps.

I shook my head. I wasn't even sure I knew what he was talking about. My eyes were glazing over, my balls felt, felt....


"It means I'm a *slut*," Helias gasped. "A common slut. It means I *want* to be fucked. I *want* to kiss like a girl. I *want* to be fucked like a girl. I'm a slut. A slut, a slut, a slut." The words were running together into a blur, I was coming, pumping into him in a frenzy, my body thrashing, my balls hurting, my mind barely conscious, only just enough to realize that he was now spurting, too, all over my chest, my shirt, my face.

A great exhaustion swept over me and I reached out to pull him to me. But he pushed my arms away, gave a cry of despair, and threw himself down on the bed beside me, rolling himself up in the blankets, turning his back to me, bursting into tears. I tried to touch him, but he shouted, "No!" even before my hand reached his shoulder, and I let it drop by my side. I opened my mouth, but there was nothing I could to say.

After a bit, I pulled off my shirt entirely, wiped myself with it, and dropped it on the floor. First my small pants, now my shirt, I thought. Tomorrow, I'll have nothing to wear but my leggings.

As I thought this, I realized that Helias now was having something like convulsions. His arms were wrapped tightly around his chest, his body was jerking violently, his eyes wide open and staring. Horrified, I seized hold of him

with all my strength, pressed my head against his, trying with every power I possessed me to calm him. I could actually feel the frenzy inside him, as if there were now no border between Helias and myself. I whispered his name over and over as I tried with all my will to calm him. In their fluttering intensity they felt just like a flock of terrified birds, and so I called to them in my mind, coaxing them back to their roosts, slowly lulling Helias to sleep.

Eventually, I realized I was freezing, and tugged free some of the covers, uncovering Helias, lying there unconscious as I did so. I wrapped us up together in a single cocoon, pressed my lips against his burning cheek and kissed him, and lay back, feeling sleep now washing over me. And so I let myself fall into it, sore in front and behind, exhilarated, entirely miserable, knowing not what to think of love and sex, except that they were both so different from what I had wanted them to be. 

Chapter 5



AGENTLE SHAKING OF MY SHOULDER awakened me the following morning. “Helias?” I murmured, but, when I opened my eyes, I saw a stranger’s face peering down at me. I slid my hand to the side of the bed where Helias had been sleeping, and it kept moving until it touched the wall. He was gone.

I sat up and rubbed my eyes. Two columns of sunlight flowed into the room from a pair of windows set high in the wall. These hardly filled the room with light, but at least they chased away the dark and struck a note of cheer. Furthermore, the brazier had been heaped with new charcoal, and it was now radiating enough heat for me to actually feel it on my nearest cheek.

The dinner tray from the night before had vanished. In its place was a steaming basin of water for my morning wash. The attendant dipped a cloth into the water, wrung it out, and passed it to me. I laid it across my face and closed my eyes. Not only was the wet cloth wonderfully hot but the

water itself had been imbued with a refreshing and invigorating scent. When the cloth cooled, I lifted it from my face, tossed the covers aside, and, standing naked except for my leggings, gave myself a good washing from my private parts on up.

I was, I discovered, still sore behind, although not nearly so much as the day before. Even so, I jumped a little when I pressed the hot towel between my buttocks. If the attendant noticed this, he gave no sign, being either too well trained or too familiar with the sight. When I was done, he deftly dried me down with a towel, and helped me into a long, comfortable robe.

Then he bowed and said, “Be well this day, *Nithaial Elimiel*. I shall now go get you something to break your fast and some clothing appropriate to your station.” He bowed again, bent down to pick up my stained and discarded shirt from the floor, retrieved the washbasin, and left the room.

I sat back down on the bed and stared blankly up at the sunlight. I still knew far too little to think clearly about my future and felt far too much pain and confusion to think much about what had happened to me in the last few days.

So, instead, I thought of my training in throwfighting: clearing the mind of distractions, finding the proper balance within to guide my body as it spun, dodged, grappled with my opponent. Meldenar, my trainer, could assume that inner balance so readily that it took two—sometimes three—of us to dislodge him from where he stood. I had progressed to

the level of the blue chevron, and still it took only a good shove from him to topple me over. Even so.... By the time the meal—sweet cakes and brewed and spiced leaf—and the clothing arrived, I was centered, calm, and alert.

After I ate and dressed—the clothing, unlike the bedding, was *not* from Arestea's wardrobe, the shirt but common fustian, dark brown in color, over which I wore the dark gray robe I had already been given—I was led to the Order's council chamber.

I had never seen the building that housed the Order of the Narrow Blade. Like all orders and guilds that hid their business from outsiders, it was hidden behind a high brick wall and protected by a guarded gate. Some, indeed, were tiny states all to themselves, granted such status by ancient mandate and beholden to none but the king himself. Even Lord Lissator could not enter without invitation, although I had never heard that such an invitation had been refused.

I was brought up a flight of narrow stairs to the main hall, and from there down a long corridor. Although the Order was said to be wealthy beyond imagining, there was no hint of that to be seen. The place was a warren, with corridors leading to still more corridors, spiral staircases tucked into alcoves, hallways that twisted their way out of sight, and all of them lined with shut doors and barely illuminated with the dull, flickering light of cressets.

As I was led through this maze, I passed at most five or six members of the order, all hooded, and most of whom

glanced aside as they passed us in the hall.

The council chamber, however, was well lit and decently heated, a large room with burnished wood-paneled walls, a thickly carpeted floor, and three high-standing candelabra, each holding dozens of candles, set about the room. The walls were lined with massive chairs, with carved wooden arms and cushioned seats. Some of these had been drawn to form a circle at the far side of the room, where Arestea sat on a small dais, a tapestry displaying the emblematic dagger of the order hanging directly behind her.

The attendant who had brought me announced in a quiet but carrying voice, “The boy, *Koryphaios* Arestea,” bowed, and closed the door behind me. Arestea made a beckoning gesture and I approached the circle of chairs, and bowed. There were five other people there, all with their hoods well covering their faces. There was something familiar about one of them—shape, posture—but I hadn’t time to work out what it was, for already Arestea was speaking.

“Niccas,” she said—to my surprise, for on an occasion like this I would have surely thought she would address me with the formal title she had insisted on in private—“you may sit there,” and she pointed to an empty chair.

When I settled in, she gestured at the others who sat around me. “We of this Order are governed by a council of five, but only one of us is revealed to the rest. I am that person, and it is why you have been allowed to see my face. The others will remain hidden to you, for your protection as well

as theirs. However, you should know that we are all equal here, and that my voice counts for no more than any of the others. Do you understand this?”

“Yes, *Koryphaios* Arestea,” I answered, shifting uncomfortably in my chair. I could already sense that something was, if not wrong, different. For one thing, none of the others had even turned their heads toward me, which seemed strange. It wasn’t every day that a *Nithaial* sat in their chambers.

“Very well,” Arestea said. “I tell you straight out that some of our council believes that you are not, in fact, the *Nithaial Elimiel*, but were instead chosen by Our Blessed Mother as a messenger. Why otherwise would she give the *Nithaial Elimiel* a dagger—the emblem of our Order. And why would it come into our possession within a span less than a single day after it had been given to you? Everything that happened to you from that moment seems to have served no other purpose.”

I thought of all that had happened that day. “I never asked to be the *Nithaial Elimiel* and if it turns out I’m not,” I said, “I’ll be filled with relief. But what you’re saying is just silly.”

“Silly, young Niccas?” said a silky voice. One of the other figures had turned toward me now, eyes glittering in the shadow cast by the hood. “Would you say it was sillier for a boy, enamored of his small if very important role, attempting to spin it out into something more? To even come

to believe that he was the *Nithaial Elimiel*?”

“*Koryphaios* Stalcas!” Arestea said, in a cautioning voice. She had heard as well as I the needling undertone that, had I not done my centering, would have driven me to a sharp and angry response.

Instead, I grew colder, instinctively preparing myself for a fight. As Stalcas raised a hand to silence Arestea, I responded, in an even tone,

“Do you think that I’m lying when I say that the Blessed Mother actually addressed me as the *Nithaial Elimiel*? And that I risked the possible devastation of my own family for a fantastical notion?”

Koryphaios Stalcas addressing me sat up straighter, and his glittering eyes regarded me shrewdly. As soon as he spoke again, I realized I had only whetted his appetite to savage me further.

“No, Niccas, lad,” he said in the same silky voice. “Perhaps my comment was too... subtly phrased. I meant merely to show you that other interpretations of the event are possible. After all, we know that you were sent to live in the attic among the servants because of your unruly behavior. That could suggest, you might agree, that concern for your family might not have been your first impulse, especially before such an enormous temptation.”

The image came to my mind of my father’s face as he kissed me goodbye, and I could think of no reply that didn’t consist of leaping across the short space between us

and pressing my dagger to my attacker's throat.

I was still struggling to get a grip on myself when Stalcas continued, "Well, it is of no matter whether you have deluded yourself or not. Because, Niccas, I know you are not the *Nithaial Elimiel*. And I know this because the true one is right here, sitting in this circle. He is the right age; he is an orphan; and, most importantly, it was he who saw, recognized, and claimed the dagger for the Order."

The ha'pence fell into the jug. The cloaked figure who had seemed vaguely familiar to me was.... "Helias." I said this more to myself than anyone else, but Stalcas heard it.

"Exactly," he said. "Behold the *true Nithaial Elimiel*." And he reached over and pulled the hood back, revealing Helias's face.

"Helias?" I said again, dumbfounded, this time speaking directly to him. He was looking straight ahead, his face pale, his body limp, as if he could barely stay in his seat. When I spoke his name the second time, his eyes moved briefly toward me and then away again. The glance, however, was utterly empty of expression, a twitch of the nerves reacting to the sound of his name.

My heart sank. "Why.... What...." I stammered. "That's impossible...."

Rather than answering, *Koryphaios* Stalcas clapped his hands. Two attendants entered, one of them bearing a strange device, three long metal rods forming a tripod at the base and supporting a cup at their top. They set this down

in the center of the circle, and I could now see that a spike rose up from the center of the cup, and a ball of some waxy, silvery stuff was affixed to its point.

The second attendant had lifted two of the three candelabra and removed them from the room, leaving just one. This, the first attendant carried to a corner of the room and left it there, bringing one of its candles back with him. We all now sat in semi-darkness, as the attendant handed Stalcas the burning candle.

He leaned forward and carefully ignited the silvery ball impaled on the spike. Rather than burst into flame it began to glow, at first softly and then with subtle intensity. It was never blindingly bright, but it illuminated all of us with luminescent light.

“Moonfire!” I murmured to myself. I had seen it before, but only at temple ceremonies, for it was supposedly a sacred substance.

Koryphaios Stalcas now gestured to Helias to rise. At first he did nothing, but as all eyes turned to him he slowly began to do so, like someone in a trance. Then Stalcas reached over and pulled up his right sleeve. A gasp of astonishment could be heard around the room, for an emblem glowed brightly on Helias’s arm.

Although I was able to only partially make it out, I felt a tingling inside, a flash of... unexpected recognition. I was like a child



who, having just learned his letters, sees a word before him and realizes with a shock that it is his name.

“Fellow *Koryphaies*,” Stalcas said triumphantly, “what you see is the mark of the Cronnex, the emblem of the *Nithaial*, which at first is only visible under moonlight. Turning to me, he continued, “Does young Niccas possess this mark?” He gestured at me. “Pull up your right sleeve.”

I knew then that I was defeated. Not that I believed even now that Helias was the true *Nithaial Elimiel*, but that Stalcas had always been at least one step ahead of me, perhaps even two or three. He was not the sort to ask me to pull up my sleeve if he didn’t already know what he — and everyone else in the room — would find there.

Even so, I used my other hand to hoist it up, defiantly revealing my bare arm. There was a murmur among the others when it became clear to them that I bore no mark at all. Then all heads turned back to Stalcas.

He gestured to the waiting attendant, who produced a black metal cap that covered and snuffed it out the moonfire. He then brought the single candelabrum back to where it had been before, so that our circle was no longer deep in shadow—if in much less light than before. Helias, unnoticed, had slumped back into his chair. Arestea was looking rather stricken, her glance now directed at the floor.

Stalcas now casually tossed back his hood, revealing his face, all hard angles, cheeks and chin covered with what looked like dark metal filings, and a cruel hawk’s beak of an

nose. We exchanged looks, for he knew that I realized quite well what this meant: that I was about to die.

“Fellow *Koryphaies*,” he said, “at this point, we have three choices regarding this boy: we can turn him over to Lord Lissator, which would be cruel and unconscionable, since we now know he is *not* the *Nithaial*; we could lock him away forever in some forgotten room in our cellar, which would be risky as well as cruel; or we can put him out of his misery and free ourselves of an awkward situation at the same time.”

Stalcas pulled a dagger out of a sheath attached to his waist. “Since he’s not a member of our Order, a simple majority among us is all that’s required to pass this sentence. So, let’s do so and be done with it.” He pointed the long, narrow blade at me. “I say death.”

The hooded figure closest to me cast back her hood and withdrew her dagger. She, too, pointed its blade at me and declared in a high, thin voice, “I, too, say death.” And so it went around the circle. The only ones who didn’t join in the sentence were Helias, who couldn’t, and Arestea, who still refused to meet my eyes.

Even though I was unarmed, I would have refused to meet my death without a struggle. But I had already attempted to launch myself across the circle at Stalcas after he pointed his dagger at me...and found myself bound by some unseen force to my chair. And as each *Koryphaios* added their vote, the bonds grew tighter, so that by the end of it, I was unable to even shift my body in my chair.

Stalcas made a gesture and the attendant materialized behind me and wrapped a length of thick, coarse cloth around my neck. It had a faint vile smell, and I realized to my disgust that its purpose was to keep my blood from staining the carpet.

“*Nithaial Elimiel*,” Stalcas now said directly to Helias, “this task is yours.” Then, when nothing happened, he jerked the boy to his feet, adding in a much harder tone: “Helias, I command you: *carry out the sentence*.”

The dagger he pulled from the sheath was, I immediately saw, not my own. That meant whatever game Stalcas was playing, he wasn’t *completely* sure that Helias was a *Nithaial*, or he wouldn’t dare keep the enchanted dagger to himself.

I closed my eyes. I simply couldn’t bear to watch Helias shuffling toward me. Unlike the others, who kept their daggers aimed directly at my head, he was either unable or unwilling to raise his up from where it pointed at the floor.

Instead, I concentrated on the forces that bound me to the chair. They were magic, and they must be directed by the daggers themselves. If I were truly the *Nithaial Elimiel*, I reasoned, I should be able to deal with that.

This time, instead of concentrating on the forces themselves, I concentrated on the arms holding the daggers, willing them to slowly, slowly rise, so they were no longer pointing at me, but somewhere over my head. And, as I did this, I felt the bonds begin to weaken.

I concentrated harder—so hard, in fact, that I wasn't aware that the door to the room had opened and someone had come in, until a voice thundered, "What in the name of fire and darkness is going on here!"

The bonds released me so quickly that I was catapulted out of my chair and directly into Helias, who collapsed limply onto the floor, his dagger falling out of his hand. I snatched it up, leapt to my feet, and, keeping my eyes on the others, cautiously stepped backwards until I was behind my chair.

My blood was so hot that it took a moment for my mind to clear. When it did, I saw that all the *Koryphaies* except Arestea and Stalcas had hastily pulled their hoods over their heads and were facing the newcomer, a large man with a bushy white beard clad in the multicolored robe of an alchemist. He must be, I thought abstractedly, the High Master Porphoras, and he looks *furious*.

"It is we who should be demanding answers to questions, not you," Stalcas angrily replied. "How did you gain admittance to these council chambers? And for that matter, who let you enter this building without our invitation?"

"As you well know, *Koryphaios* Stalcas," High Master Porphoras replied, "I am here by right as a member of the Guardian Circle and, especially, as the appointed protector of Niccas. Furthermore, I was summoned by *Koryphaios* Arestea to discuss his presence here in the House of the Order."

He paused and turned his head toward her. "I would

have hurried even faster if you had also informed me that I was to witness his execution. Have you all lost your minds?”

“I would ask you to watch your words, High Master Porphoras,” Stalcas answered. “We have determined to our satisfaction that it is Helias, here, a member of our Order, who is the true *Nithaial Elimiel*. And since he is one of our own, you are now the ‘protector’ of no one.”

Porphoras ignored him. “When did *he* start speaking for the Order, *Koryphaios* Arestea?”

Stalcas opened his mouth, but before he could respond, Arestea raised her hand and silenced him. To Porphoras, she said thinly, “*Koryphaios* Stalcas showed me earlier that *Mystes* Helias held within himself traces of the Force, and has now shown the council that he possesses the secret mark of the *Nithaial* as well. I summoned you before all this was made clear.”

Porphoras sighed. “Even if all this is so, I am still the guardian of Niccas, and I will not leave this room unless he is allowed to come with me.” He looked darkly at Stalcas. “Unless, of course, you plan to execute me as well, and thus place two stains on the name of your Order in one day.”

While this conversation was taking place, Helias had somehow managed to stagger to his feet. He now drew himself up and, in a voice so soft it could be barely heard, said, “If I am truly the *Nithaial Elimiel*, as you say, *Koryphaios* Stalcas, then I have the right to an opinion in this matter, too. And I say let Niccas go with him.”

Stalcas replied with a look of murderous rage. But the others of the council were muttering among themselves as well. Clearly they were not happy with the situation they—and the Order—were now in.

“I agree,” said one of them. “This is a better solution than any of the options you offered us, *Koryphaios* Stalcas. Let High Master Porphoras take the boy away from here, and as quickly as possible.”

“It is decided then,” said Arestea. For the first time since I had sat down in my chair, she looked directly at me. “Niccass, you may go.”

I shook my head. “No, *Koryphaios* Arestea, not until two matters are resolved. First, my horse....”


“Will be brought to you at the house of High Master Porphoras before sunset,” she replied gravely. “And the other?”

“If the dagger is not to be returned to me, at least let me have back the *telesma* and any other items taken from my person,” I said.

“The *telesma* belongs to the *Nithaial Elimiel*,” snapped *Koryphaios* Stalcas. “It stays with him.”

Following the example of Porphoras, I continued to address Arestea, not even glancing at Stalcas. “The *telesma* was given to me by my father as a farewell present,” I said to her. “If the *Nithaial Elimiel* has displayed mastery of it, I’ll gladly present it to him myself. But otherwise, I wish to have it back.”

Aretea looked at Stalcas inquiringly, and so, this time, did I. He was fighting hard to control himself and even so he was trembling, his anger was so great. He reached into the carry bag that hung from his belt and, after a bit of groping, retrieved the *telesma* and held it out to me.

“I understand, of course, why anything from your father would have special meaning to you, young Niccas,” Stalcas said, watching me intently to savor the impact of his words. “As I’m sure you’ve been informed, this very morning Lord Lissator ordered him disemboweled and then burned at the stake, along with your mother and your three brothers.” He shook his head. “I’m afraid your adventures have made you some very dangerous enemies.” 

PART TWO



HOUSE OF
EARTH AND
FIRE

Chapter 6



WHEN WE STEPPED out into narrow way ran past the Order's gates, the day was already well into the afternoon. The sun still lit the sky above us and the tops of buildings that were just that much higher than the rest. But Porphoras and I walked in gloom and bitter cold, my tears freezing on my cheeks before I had the presence of mind to wipe them away. My mind was blank with despair. But beneath it I could feel a sullen, rising sea of murderous rage.

Porphoras said nothing. He guided me—indeed, propelled me along at nearly a trot—with a firm grip on my shoulder. After several twists and turns, he brought me down a very dark and smelly alley, to a ramshackle door right beside a garbage midden that was obviously the source of all the stench. The alchemist knocked loudly, startling several rats who were greedily feeding beside us, and eventually there was the scraping of a latch, and the door pushed open just enough for a suspicious, pasty face to peer out.

“Let us in, you fool,” Porphorus snapped, “before the rats eat us alive.” The other grunted assent and let us into a scullery room, beyond which I could see a large and bustling tavern kitchen, with cooks busy at a large work table and two spit boys attending to large joints roasting over an open fire.

We stood there for a moment, warming ourselves, until Porphoras signaled to a server who had just entered. A flash of recognition crossed the man’s face, and he hurried over to us, and bowed low. “High Master Porphorus,” he said, “you honor us. I assume you wish a private room?”

“As usual, Trados,” the alchemist said, adding, as he gestured at all the bustle, “if you have any free.”

The server smiled. “For you, High Master, there is always one. Please follow me.”

He led us, to the swinging doors that opened onto the tavern’s public rooms, but up a flight of narrow stairs that opened onto a corridor lined with doors. All of these were closed, but Trados seemed to know which were occupied and which not, for he took a burning candle from one of the wall sconces, opened a door to a darkened room, and went inside. In a matter of moments, he had gotten it lit up and started a fire in the small hearth at its far side, and came back out into the hall to usher us in.

“Are you here for dinner, High Master?” Trados asked, once we settled into two comfortable chairs before a well-appointed table. Looking around, I saw that the room

also contained a narrow but well-upholstered divan. Suddenly, nausea closed my throat and I struggled to fight off an attack of sheer panic. So many bad things had happened to me so quickly that I was only barely able to convince myself that my life hadn't become a pure nightmare, that Porphoras wasn't intending to force himself on me as soon as the server had left.

I did this by forcing my eyes away from the couch and looking at his face, dispassionate, wise, and deeply troubled. He had said something to the server, who was already departing; I hadn't heard a single word that had passed between them.

Now, Porphoras regarded me, and his face assumed the expression of a kind-hearted shepherd confronted with a terrified lamb. "Niccas," he said, "you're in a state of shock. That's why I brought you here, to let it wear off a bit, then perhaps to give us a chance to talk."

I stared back at him. "Borleas, Nathaln, Rosfyn," I whispered, tears starting again to stream down my face. "Why *them*? Why *them*?"

"Give me your hand," he answered quietly, and when I tentatively extended it across the table, he took it in both of his. I noticed as he did so that the back of each was marked with scars and scalds, and the fingers stained with faded overlays of color, marks left by the practice of his art.

He said nothing but the grip of his hand did comfort me, and gradually my sobbing subsided and my brain began

to clear. There was a soft knock at the door and Trados entered, carrying a tray. He took a folding stand from where it lay against a wall, opened it, and set the tray down. There was a glazed clay crock on it, two glass goblets, and a small platter holding a loaf of bread and a substantial wedge of cheese.

Trados held the crock out to Porphoras, displaying the wax seal on its top. The alchemist nodded and Trados deftly broke it away and extracted the thick wooden plug. At once, a potent, fruity aroma filled the room, and it further intensified when the server poured some into each of the goblets and set them before us. He then placed the platter between us, produced a knife to slice the cheese, bowed, and left—accomplishing all of this without speaking a word, having, like the good server he was, sensed the atmosphere in the room the moment he had come in.

Porphoras picked up his goblet and sniffed it appreciatively. “From Belvestra,” he said, “and set away to age when I was but a boy. Many would opine that it’s too rich for one as young as you, but strong circumstances call for strong spirits. Take a sip and see if you don’t agree.”

Dully, I slipped my hand away from his and lifted up the goblet in front of me. When we reached the age of twelve, father allowed us a glass of wine mixed half with water at dinner, mild, sweet, fizzy stuff that emboldened our table conversation but hardly left us in a state where we reeled away from the table.

One sip of this wine—dark in color, thick as blood,

mouth-filling, so rich in flavor you hardly noticed that it wasn't even vaguely sweet—and I knew that I would never again think of that other stuff as wine at all. The first sip sent a calming warmth flowing down my gullet; a second sip sent that same warmth into my heart; the third brought it all the way to my brain.

There was no fourth sip—Porphoras, with a smile, gestured to me to set the goblet down. “Let that do its work first,” he said. “A little of any wine from Belvestra goes a long way until you're used to it, and this one most of all.”

I set the goblet back onto the table. The anguish was not dulled exactly, but softened, as if wrapped in a cloth to keep it rubbing against my ribs. But I couldn't get the question out of my mind. I reached out and again took hold of Porphoras's hand, which had not moved from where it was. I then looked him in the eye and asked, my voice barely able to keep from cracking, “But why, Master Porphoras. *Why?*”

He sighed. “It depends on which of them you're asking about. Lord Lissator had done it because he had no choice. The Unnameable One demanded it done for the same reason that Stalcas had told you about it the way he did—in the hope of destroying you. Finding and seizing hold of you has failed so far, so they chose another way to strike you down.

He paused for a moment to let that sink in, then, holding my eyes with his, added, “You can't undo what was done, but you *can* keep them from succeeding, which is the first step toward revenge. You *have* been wounded—how much

we won't know for some time—but, for what it's worth, they have used their most potent weapon against you, and here you are, drinking wine and talking with me."

I started to speak, but he shook his head. "Don't say it," he said. "It would have made no difference if they had caught you, except that they might have forced you to watch while they did it. At least you haven't given them the satisfaction of that...or any satisfaction, really, except what Stalcas got from telling you. And that, in the end, will prove little enough, I think."

I stared at Porphoras aghast. "How could they hate me so much?" I stammered. "I haven't done anything to them.... I never *meant* to do anything to them."

The alchemist grimly shook his head. "Grasping the answer to that question is going to take you months, even years—and you don't have even a day. Right now what you've got to do is simply accept that it's so. It's not an accident; it can't be rectified; and no one—least of all, you—is going to talk them out of it. You're best and only hope is to let me protect you as much as I can," he paused, glanced at me, and added quietly, "for as long as I can."

He nodded at the goblet. "Time for your next sip. And then try to eat some bread and cheese. I expect you're hungry enough. I know *I* am."

I almost gagged at even the thought of eating. But, wisely, Porphoras made no attempt to get me to. Instead, he simply began to eat himself, tearing off a chunk of the

bread, cutting himself a wedge of the cheese, and tearing into both with a passion, washing it down with deep swigs of the strong wine.

Perhaps it was the worry that if I finally did feel hungry, I'd find that all the food had already been eaten. But I tugged free a morsel of the bread and put it hesitantly into my mouth. It was still warm from the bake oven, tender and chewy, and my mouth was salivating the moment it touched my tongue. In a sort while, I was keeping pace with Porphoras and then even passed him, for in the end he wasn't half as hungry as I.

When I, too, had eaten my fill—or, rather, when there was nothing more to eat—I sank back in my chair. Suddenly I found that I was completely exhausted, and very, very sleepy. It was the wine, of course, but also the day, the night before with Helias, everything. I forced my eyes open and looked at Porphoras.

He smiled at me and pointed to the divan. "Sleep," he said. "I'll wake you in a few hours. This room is ours as long as we wish. We can't leave until dark, anyway, and you'll need your wits about you when we do. I'm quite happy to sit by the fire, sip the last of the wine, and think."

I didn't even protest. It took all I had to get to my feet and cross the short space to the couch. I simply fell on it, pulled my cloak up over my head, and slept.

When I woke again, I thought I had merely dozed off for a

few seconds, until I realized that someone else was in the room and I heard the clink of glass. I opened my sleepy eyes just in time to see Trados slip out the door. Porphoras sat before the fire, but an array of crocks and other things now rested on the table that when I had fallen asleep had held the remains of our supper. I sat up.

“Good,” Porphoras said. “Good that you slept well for some hours, and good that you’re now awake. Come sit with me at the table.” And, fitting motion to words, rose and brought his chair back to where it had been before.

“This,” he said, waving his hands over its contents, “has been gathered by Trados from all corners of the kitchen—to his complete puzzlement, I might add.” The alchemist chuckled. “He thinks I’m about some weird alchemical foolery, and he’s not so wrong.”

He looked at me and winked. “I’m about to transform you into an alchemist’s apprentice.”

And so it proved. Each of the little ramekins set before us held something—martelberry jam, harifleaf tea, the dregs of our finished bottle of Belvestra wine—added another deeply colored stain to my fingers, the back of my hand, even a few dabs on my forearm. And once we were done, he had me soak my hands in a basin of warm water and dry them with a towel. Then he began all over again.

Finally, he drew his chair back and I thought we were finished. My fingers were covered with stains, some faded, some fresh and violent. Not all that different—bar-

ring close examination—from those of Porphoras himself. “Now, Niccas, there’s one thing left to be done. I warn you it will hurt, but no more than absolutely necessary.”

He bent over, picked up the small pair of fire tongs that hung by the fireplace, and, after some rooting around, grasped a small blazing ember. He carefully lifted it from the fire, and turned to me.

“Give me your either of your hands,” he said, “and close your eyes.”

I did, extending the right one, and bracing myself for the pain. In a moment, I felt the pressure of the ember bearing down on my flesh, and a distinct warmth, but nothing that hurt.

“You can bear down harder than that,” I said. “It doesn’t even sting.”

“Open your eyes,” Porphoras said. When I did so, he added, “Look.” He blew on the coal, still pinioned by the tongs, until it blazed a fiery red. Then he pressed it firmly against the back of my hand. I winced, but while the surface of the coal made a momentary indentation in my flesh—showing how firmly Porphoras was pressing down—no burn appeared. This time, it did hurt, but no more than if he had pinched me instead.

Porphoras tossed the coal back into the fire, replaced the tongs, and turned back to me. “Well,” he said, “I’d like to see our friend Stalcas try *that* on his fake *Nithaial*.”

We looked at each other for a moment, while I pro-

cessed the meaning of what he had just said. And then the question simply burst out of me. “High Master Porphoras,” I said, my voice desperately pleading, “will you *please* tell me what the word means—and why everyone is suddenly addressing me by it?”

Porphoras sighed and looked down at the table. I started to speak again, but he held up his hand and silenced me. “You deserve to hear the answer, Niccas, but I’m not sure where to start. Tell me what you’ve already learned about yourself.”

And, again, I related the experiences of my midnight ride, the subsequent behavior of my dagger, and what had happened to me while I was held by the Order of the Narrow Blade. Porphoras listened to the first part as if spellbound. But asked me several questions during the recounting of the last day, pursuing each detail so relentlessly that I found myself, blushing furiously, recounting everything that had happened between Helias and myself.

“Well, well,” he said when I had finished. “You didn’t know it, but when you came inside Helias, you transformed him for a bit into something like a *Nithaial* himself.

I looked at him in astonishment. “When Arestea said Helias was discovered to have traces of the force....”

Porphoras nodded and smiled faintly. “Yes, it’s because you had, so to speak, injected them into him the night before. Stalcas will have a hard time demonstrating even that much of them to anyone tomorrow.”

“And the mark on his arm?” I asked, faintly.

“The *cronnex*? That was all a fake. And it shows that Stalcas never for a moment believed Helias was the Nithaial Elimiel—he was only interested in convincing Arestea that he was.”

He paused and looked down at the assortment on the table. “I’ll have to fake a burn with one of these. Fortunately, I had Trados bring me some of the head cook’s burn ointment. If I smear some of that on top of a trace of martelberry jam, and let them both dry....” He glanced at me. “Give me the arm you favor most.”

I held out my left one. He took it, nodding as he did so. “And what arm did Helias bare during this demonstration of Stalcas’s?” he asked.

I cast my mind back. “The right one,” I answered.

“You see?” Porphoras said. “He knew what Arestea and the others did not—that the *Nithaial* are always left-handed. If he had asked you to pull back your left sleeve,” and here Porphoras did it for me, shoving it up all the way past my elbow. Despite the fact that no moonlight shown into this room, the *cronnex* could still be seen, if very faintly, etched in the flesh of my arm.

We looked at each other again, then Porphoras turned to creating a fake burn on the back of my hand. And it was true, the martelberry jam, especially when it began to dry, had the same angry color as a bad burn.

“If Stalcas knew I was the true *Nithaial Elimiel*?” I


asked, what was the point of all that? Why would *he* want me dead? Is he an ally of The Unnameable One?”

“Now that is a *very* good question,” Porphoras answered, “and one that I’m struggling with myself. Did you notice any emblems engraved on this magical dagger of yours?”

“Yes,” I answered, “two. The ones for fire and earth.”

He nodded. “The symbol for earth is also the one for darkness,” he said, “for the purest form of earth admits no light and has no color. Fire and darkness are the emblems of the Order of the Narrow Blade and, not coincidentally, they are also those of the *Nithaial Elimiel*. It would be a very ill thing indeed if that order, which was created in your absence to do your work, was corrupted into the service of Him.”

I looked at Porphoras in astonishment.

“Yes,” he said, smiling bleakly. “The Order claims you—or at least the *Nithaial Elimiel*, whom they are presently saying is *not* you—as their patron deity.” 

Chapter 7



A HAND SEIZED MY SHOULDER and shook me roughly. “Wake up, you, and stand up.” Unthinking, still half asleep, I staggered to my feet. I was freezing. My limbs felt like ice, and my eyes were dazzled by the light of the lantern that had been thrust into my face.

“Could be him,” muttered another figure, invisible in the darkness. “What’s he clutching in his hand?”

“Who are you, boy?” the figure holding the lantern asked, harshly. “And what are you doing out this late at night, when the whole city’s under curfew?”

By now my sight had adapted enough to see that they were members of the Night Watch and cursed myself for not thinking that they would spot me, huddled in Porphoras’s doorway.

“My name is Jaemas,” I stammered out. “I’m an apprentice alchemist, come from the city of Plaecenon, bearing this message for High Master Porphoras.”

I lifted my hand to show the piece of parchment

there, sealed neatly with a round of blue sealing wax.”

“They wouldn’t let you in?” said the sneering voice of the other man. “Thought you had the pox?”

In fact, Porphoras had instructed for me to wait outside in the shadows for as long as I could bear the cold, so that we would not be seen as arriving together. By the time I approached the door, however, the door lamp had guttered out, and I had failed to see the bell pull.

“By the time I found the house, Master Warden,” I stammered, “the sun had gone down. I knew nothing of the curfew. You can see that the door has no knocker. I pounded on it with my fist”—and here I held up my other hand to show the bruises on it, for I had beaten on that door for what seemed like an hour, and called out until I was hoarse—“but no one came. So I wrapped my cloak around myself, sat down against it, and prepared to wait for morning.”

The member of the Night Watch holding the lantern lifted it up still higher, illuminating the end of a bell pull, dangling down from the far side of the door just above the height of my head.

“I didn’t see it,” I said weakly, my voice shaking, mostly out of anger at my own stupidity.

“Bring him in, Warden,” said the other. “Let the Guard straighten all this out.”

The man with the lantern lifted my hand up to the light. “You can see he has the markings of an alchemist, although, I grant you, not the stink. But Plaecenon is far way

for it to get blown out of his clothes.” He reached up and began pulling on the handle. “We’ll have a word with High Master Porphoras first. With luck, it may earn us a favor.”

In a distant part of the house we could hear the dull toll of the bell. After a bit, there was a shuffling on the other side of the door. The tiny spy window opened and an eye appeared behind the grill.

“What tidings are so ill they must break a poor man’s sleep?” grumbled a sleepy voice.

“The Night Watch must speak to your master,” answered the Warden in a much milder voice than the one he had directed at me.

The spy window closed and there was the grating sound of a bolt being turned. The door opened, and Porphoras himself stood in the doorway, wearing felt slippers and wrapped in a thick night robe. “To speak to *my* superior,” he said, “you’ll have to visit the House of Fire. But I assume that it’s I that you seek?”

“I beg your pardon, High Master,” said the warden. “I thought a servant would be the one to answer the peal.”

“I’m sure if any heard it, they just rolled over and pulled a pillow over their heads,” Porphoras said to appreciative laughter. Then he added, as he caught sight of me, “Who’s this?”

“Say his name’s Jaemas,” chimed in the other, “bringing you a message from Plaecenon.”

Porphoras leaned forward to look at me more closely.

“Power of Darkness, it’s *cold* out here!” He exclaimed. Then, to me, “Who was it who sent you, boy?”

“Master Bastiffor,” I replied, adding sadly, “who is fast failing and may now be dead.”

“Ah,” said Porphoras, “that *is* sad news. But you might as well come in.” And he opened the door wider to allow me to do so.

“Pardon, High Master,” said the Warden, “but there is the matter of the curfew.”

“Of course there is!” Porphoras answered. “Stand here but a moment.” And he turned and went into the house. He returned shortly with a purse, opened it, peered into it, and pulled out a silver droit. “Well, this cover it, do you think?”

“More than adequately, High Master,” said the warden, touching his helmet. “Aye, thankee, sir,” added the other. “Much obliged.”

“I’d ask you into the kitchen for some hot grog to send you on your way,” Porphoras said, as he ushered me inside. But I’m afraid that it’s as cold as the street, and just as empty.”

“We’ll make out fine, Sir,” said the warden, “and we thank you for the thought.” The two turned and went their way, even as Porphoras closed and rebolted the door.

“Are you all right?” he asked, taking the fake message out of my shivering hand.

When I nodded, he added, “Good. Let’s get you to bed. You can explain what happened tomorrow. Sleep as

long as you can—we'll find you some breakfast when you come down."

He then guided me through the dark hall to a place where a thick night candle flickered softly. He lit a stub of one from it, handed it to me, gave me directions and a squeeze on the shoulder, and we went our separate ways.

I climbed a flight of servant stairs up to the attic where the apprentices slept. The room that housed them took up half the attic. There was no worry about disturbing them, for their blankets were pulled up over their heads. Finding the pisspot was the hard part; harder still was using it with my fingers so cold, but my urgency was such that I found a way and prayed I hadn't made too much of a mess.

I was to share a bed with a boy named Matheas, visible only as a small lump on the furthest bed. I made my way to it, blew out my candle, took off my boots, added my cloak to the heap of blankets, and slid into bed fully clothed.

Matheas muttered but didn't wake up as I edged as close as I could to his warmth, bending my legs to match the curve of his own. I fought the temptation to slip my freezing hands right under his shirt, and smiled as I imagined his subsequent scream sending everyone in the room leaping out of their beds, him first of all.

Instead, I stuck them between my legs, pressed my face into his hair, and was soon warm enough to fall back into a deep and untroubled sleep.

IN THE EARLY MORNING, I was half-awakened by the bustle as the apprentices got up, washed themselves, and hurried downstairs for breakfast. Naturally, I was noticed and Matheas got some chaff about letting his lover stay all night. But no one tried to wake me, and I drifted back to sleep as soon as they were gone.

When I woke again it was near to noon, and, with a start, I hurried out of bed. A thin sheet of ice had formed on top of the water in the basin, which itself was none too clean. But I broke through and splashed myself with it, towed myself dry with the common cloth, a flour sack by the look of it.

As I did so, I thought of Naedas, and felt a stab in the heart. Might that he and the other servants not have suffered the same fate as.... I dared not complete the thought. After drawing up the covers as I saw the others had and, after neatly folding my cloak and tucking it under the bed, went down the stairs, trying to shake off the darkness that had crowded into my head.

I had no idea if apprentices were allowed in the main hall, and so when I reached the main floor, I chose the door at the other end of the landing. It opened onto a narrow corridor and, as I stood there indecisively, a servant came down it. She took notice of me, stopped, and said, "You must be the new apprentice! Come with me and I'll take you to my Mistress."

She took me back across the landing, into the main hall, where she paused before a door and softly knocked. A clear voice bade her to enter and she did so, curtsied, and

said, “Master Jaemas, Mistress Sophaera. I found him wandering in the servant hall.”

“In the daytime? These apprentices show no shame!” The voice, once the door was open, revealed a musical quality, as well as a touch of amusement. “Well, then, Tylla, show him in, and go to the kitchen and ask the cook to make an egg tart for his breakfast.”

And so I was ushered in, and Tylla left, properly leaving the door open behind her.

Given High Master Porphoras’s girth and resplendid white beard, I had expected his mate to be matronly and plump. But Sophaera was tall and slender, with raven-black hair that hung down to her waist in a braid, and a pale, smooth, and lovely face. She sat before a loom where she had been weaving an intricate fabric of many colors, and, indeed, a shuttle was still in her hand.

She set it aside as I approached her and bowed, and extended the same hand to me. I took it and kissed it, saying, “Greetings, fair Mistress. You do me great honor, allowing me shelter in your home.”

She took hold of my hand as I kissed hers, and replied as she rose from her seat, “For an apprentice, Jaemas, you are not only quite comely but very well mannered. I *shall* have to warn you about the servant hall.”

I blushed. “I was lost, gracious lady.”

She laughed. “That’s what they *all* say,” she said. “But you at least can claim the excuse legitimately.” Then

her expression became serious, and she added, “Let me look at you closely.”

Her expression was impassive but intense as she studied my face, her eyes a hazel color flecked with bits of green. She sighed, let go of my hand, and lightly touched my cheek. “I see more suffering in you than magic, *Nithaial Elimiel*, she said. But that is there, too.”

“If you know I am called that, Mistress Sophaera,” I replied, “you also know that I cause much more suffering than I can ever feel. And I’m afraid that...”

She lifted her fingers and pressed them against my lips. “Hush, now,” she said, softly. “Here you will be Jaemas, only—an apprentice, and a rather lowly one. Bury yourself into that role for the nonce and have no fears for Porphoras and myself. We have sufficient powers to protect ourselves, and you, too, for the moment. Can you not feel them?”

I looked at her in surprise. I could feel them. They were nothing like the those of the Lady in the Wood, but they were palpable, nonetheless, flowing about her, as real as the silken cloth of her long, flowing, deep blue dress.

She smiled, then shook her head, answering a question that had only then flickered into my mind. “Not to confront, no,” she said. “But to elude, yes, I do think so.”

We looked at each other, and I felt as much comfort as I would have, had she embraced me.

At this point, Tylla returned with a tray. On it was a hot egg tart and a steaming pot of tea.

“Excellent,” said Sophaera and, pointing to a side table, added, “just leave it there.”

The table was flanked with a chair on each side, and she gestured for me to take the one closest to the tray. “Eat,” she said. “And I’ll sit with you.”

The egg tart was perfectly made, a thin, brown skin wrapped around a still-soft interior, and a center of tangy molten cheese. I took up my spoon and began to eat, while Sophaera poured us both a cup of fragrant spiced tea.

“This is wonderful,” I mumbled at last, between bites.

“Enjoy it then,” she answered. “It’s not the usual apprentice fare. There, quantity comes before quality. If I dared try feed them both, Porphoras would grumble that I’m spoiling them.”

She smiled at me. “He told me also that as yet you know very little about your doom. Is that truly so?”

I nodded, my mouth full.

“And the Blessed Mother explained nothing to you when she showed herself to you?”

“Only that I was the *Nithaial Elimiel*, and that I had a twin. And that my life would be hard.” I replied, adding bitterly, “I wish she had also told me it would start being so the very next day.” My spoon paused over the half-eaten tart. My appetite had suddenly vanished.

Sophaera touched my hand. “Don’t stop eating. We need to build up your strength again. If you wish, we can

hold our conversation until you finish.”

“No,” I said, “I want to hear this.” And so I took up another mouthful, but it truly had lost much of its savor.

“Porphoras told me he hesitated telling you what he knew,” she continued, “and asked me to speak to you first. The problem is that answering isn’t as simple as it might seem. First of all, we know very little, because The Unnameable One has done all He could to destroy all knowledge of you, and all remembrance, too. That anything at all has survived after all these years is something of a miracle.”

“How many years is it, exactly?” I asked.

“Exactly?” She smiled. “Well, surprisingly, I can answer that: one thousand. A *Nithaial* lives for five hundred years, if he isn’t killed. When the last two appeared, The Unnameable One hunted them down and killed them, just as he is doing now. So the world had to wait another five hundred for you and your twin to appear. And, since then, he has grown only stronger. Although, perhaps, overconfident as well. And *we* have certainly gotten cleverer.”

I barely heard the last few sentences. I was staring at her with my mouth open, still full of the last spoonful of tart. I swallowed it and said, “I’m to live *five hundred years*?”

Sophaera nodded. “You and your twin both, if you survive through this one.”

I cast my eyes down and stared at my hands. “I’m not even human then,” I said at last.

“No,” she said, smiling again. “*More* than human. A

half immortal.”

I lifted my eyes and looked into hers. “But *why?*”

Sophaera held my eyes as she replied. “Suppose,” she said, “you were a human baby who had been brought up by a pack of wolves. And suppose one day you realized you weren’t a wolf at all but a human, and asked them to explain to you what a human was? What could they tell him? That we were furless, that we also ran in packs and howled sometimes (although not as musically), that we walked on two paws, that we constructed burrows rather than dug them, and that, most of all, we were the most hateful species on the face of the earth....” She shook her head. “Tell me, *Nithaial Elimiel*, how much help would any of those explanations be?”

“Most hateful species....” I stared at her in horror. “But, but I’m not....”

“Evil? No, you’re not,” Sophaera said sadly. “Once all the *Nithaial* were loved and honored above all else save the Great Mother herself. And it is your task—one of them—to make that so again.”

I nodded my head, thinking I understood. “But now,” I said, “The Unnameable One has poisoned our name to the point that everyone hates us.”

“No,” she said, “it’s worse than that. The Unnameable One is—or at least was—a *Nithaial* himself.”

I WAS SO STUNNED BY THIS REVELATION that I could barely take in what Sophaera told me about the *Nithaial*... about myself. That we were each the guardians of two

of the Homes of the Four Powers, I those for Fire and Earth, my twin for those of Water and Air. That when we were together, we brought harmony to all things. That we were the children of the Blessed Mother. That Her blessings passed through us to the world, and the sufferings of those in the world were felt by and passed on to Her by us.

How The Unnameable One had once been, like me, the *Nithaial Elimiel*, but that somehow he had been corrupted. That he had killed his twin and eaten his soul, thinking it would give him command of all The Four Powers, but that instead he lost access to them all.

That in his rage and disappointment, he had struck a foul bargain that allowed him to continue as before, corrupting and destroying, bending and then breaking the souls of men. That above all else, he had vowed that no *Nithaial* would be allowed to survive long enough to challenge his power.

I only began to pay full attention again when she said something curious that caught my interest and pulled me out of my own spinning thoughts—although it was merely an aside to something else she had been talking about. She and her Sisters had wondered and argued for decades why the *Nithaial* were boys and not girls. Or at least a boy *and* a girl. For did not Gesryma, Mother of Blessed Name, appear in the form of a woman herself? And were not women in body and soul, more perfectly formed, more whole than men?

I had already guessed that she, Sophaera, was a member of the higher order of Wise Women called the Se-

cret Sisters, who were like Mages in their power, although different in their ways and their magics. And she had said this more to herself than to me, for by then she knew my attention was flagging.

What was strange about this was that I knew the answer to her question at once and, without thought, spoke it.

“Lady Sophaera, we *Nithaial* are boys for the very reason we are not girls—we are imperfectly formed, and so restless of mind and body, ready to take on one task on this day and a completely other on the next, tire of lovers and look for new ones, grow weary of one landscape and long for an entirely different view. It is by our example that to show that...”—and here I faltered for a moment, as I groped in my mind for a way to express the thought— “that She answers her opposite, Ra’asiel, Lord of Chaos, who says that those who worship Her can never truly be free.”

It was Sophaera’s turn to have her mouth drop in astonishment, even as I blushed entirely. And once again we stared at each other, both without words to speak.

However, this time there was a knock on the door to break the spell, and we both turned our heads to see who the intruder was. It was a very attractive boy—if in a slightly girlish way—about my own age or a touch younger, burdened with an armload of parcels, some of which, even as he stood there began slipping to the floor.

“Mattheas!” said Sophaera, laughing, “you poor boy! Just set them down anywhere.” And to me she contin-


ued, “I dispatched your bedmate to visit a tailor to arrange for some shirts and smallwear to be made for you and to go here and there to purchase the other things you’ll need to live your life here.”

Even as she spoke these words, we both had risen, and Sophaera was helping Matheas order the parcels, finally receiving from him the purse from which he had paid for them. “And you got something for yourself?” she asked.

Matheas nodded and pointed to one of the bundles, the only one bound in bright red thread.

“Excellent,” she said. “Now do take... Jaemas back to the attic and show him what you got him and where to store it. Then come back down, for by then lunch will be ready and I’m sure you’re starving.”

We boys both bowed and I said to her, “Lady Sophaera, thank you for this.”

Our eyes met and I knew she understood what I meant, but all she said was, “The pleasure is mine, Jaemas. It’s such a shame you were robbed of everything on the road here from Plaecenon.” She smiled at me, and added, “But it is, I’ve heard, a very long and dangerous one.” 

Chapter 8



MATHEAS REACHED UNDER OUR BED and withdrew a small wooden trunk or kit box, the top of which was covered with a thick layer of dust. He brushed this off with his sleeve and opened it up. There was a neatly designed tray, fitted into the top, meant to hold small personal items as brushes, jewelry, playthings, and such. This lifted out to reveal the storage area for bulkier articles of clothing and whatever else you might care to store there.

“If I’ve forgotten anything, any of us will be happy to lend it to you,” Mattheas said, and I began to unwrap the parcels and stow their contents away. His tone was friendly enough, but no more. He seemed disappointed in me or worse. I had been nervous about having to make up some story about myself, but he seemed distinctly incurious about my supposed adventures on the road or anything else.

“I can’t imagine that you’ve missed anything at all, Matheas,” I said. “And your choices were all so perfect.”

He smiled a little at that. And, in truth, they were—

nothing lavish, of course, but often surprisingly nice, like the hairbrush with boar bristles set into tightly grained and polished saverwood, the soft cloth of the smallclothes, even a jar of burn ointment from the apothecary.

The apprentices here, I saw, wore leggings fastened to their braes under their shirts, presumably because legs ran as much risk here as burns, but also to indicate the status of their master. I pulled up my shirt to better see to the fastenings, and noticed out of the corner of my eye that Matheas was at least interested in glancing at my privates, when I pulled up my braes. Well, not stone all the way through, I thought.

“This kit box has been empty for a long time,” I said, as, at last, I slid it under the bed beside his own.

Matheas sighed. “Yes,” he said. “And I’ve been waiting long for it to be used.” He glanced at me. “Of course, I expected it to be taken by a boy of eleven or twelve, not someone my own age. Porphoras hasn’t taken a new apprentice for four years now, even after Lammas left us to become a journeyman.”

“Ah,” I said. “You weren’t expecting to share so much of your bed! At least I won’t jump up and down on it and pummel you with pillows.”

This time the smile was real. Matheas shook his head. “No, Jaemas, I don’t mind sharing my bed with you.” He glanced at me and said, “This morning when I woke up, I wondered how I could be so warm. Then I thought you must

be one of the other of us who couldn't stand the cold. When I turned around and saw you... I didn't know what to think." He blushed slightly and looked away, muttering so softly that I could hardly hear him, "Except that I was still dreaming."

Before I could think of anything to say to that, the clatter of footsteps and voices rose up to us, and Matheas leapt to his feet. "Midmeal!" he exclaimed. "Come!" And I followed him as best I could as he flew down the stairs.

Meals, I would learn, were arranged as so: at breakfast, the apprentices ate alone. At midmeal, they were joined by Porphoras, and at supper by both Porphoras and Soph-aera, unless they had dinner guests or were dining out.

Matheas and I arrived in the dining room just as a huge tureen of pea soup was being set on the table beside a basket of torn chunks of bread, some light and some dark. The seat to the left of Porphoras was empty, and when he saw us enter, he waved me over to take it, while Matheas sat down between to of the other apprentices.

"Well!" said the alchemist. "Here is Jaemas, awake at last." And now speaking directly to me, he went on, "I've told them all about why you're joining us, so you can save your breath for eating. You've met Matteas, our youngest, already—this is Dortmas, the senior apprentice; Wendastas, the most troublesome; Justan, the one most likely to set you afire; Plakkas, who is usually asleep under a table; and Mel-fyras, who is already sneaking some bread, even before the blessing. So, to get our fair share, we'd better join hands and

say it.” He extended his hands, as did we all, grasping hold of those on either side of us. When the circle was complete, we raised our heads while Porphoras intoned the short prayer: “Blessed Mother, all that lies before us is Your gift and our hearts and faces rise to thank You.”

Starting with Porphoras, the tureen was passed from hand to hand, and when the circle was complete, it started around the table again, for the bowls, large as they were, were quickly scraped clean. Porphoras passed it on without taking any the second time but, even so, when it reached me last, there was but a few spoonfuls left at the bottom. But I had just eaten my egg tart, and the bread basket proved almost inexhaustible, for there was actually a piece left when we rose from the table (snared and pocketed by Melfyras).

While we ate, the others had been quietly sizing me up, and I was glad I hadn’t faced any questions—although that time would be coming soon enough. I also noticed that my fingers, although not stained in hues identical to theirs, were close enough to escape casual comparison.

In any case, midmeal was quickly eaten and there was no lingering at the table. Porphoras told Dortmas to take me to the Probatorium and answer any questions I might have; he would join us there shortly. The others had their tasks already assigned and hurried off ahead of us to get back to work.

Dortmas was a burly fellow with a pleasant manner, quite willing to take me under his wing. His face was disfig-

ured with a red blotch that ran down the left side of his face from his forehead to his cheek. His left eye seemed undamaged, but it had no eyebrow or eyelashes.

“Someone neglected to thoroughly dry the retort before I poured in some essence of pyrophoric,” he explained, catching my glance. “I was completely aflame.” He laughed. “High Master Porphoras knocked me on the floor and the others were covering me with sand before I was even aware what had happened. Wicked burns all down that side of my body.” He shrugged. “But here I am to tell the tale.”

I was more shaken by Dortmas’s nonchalance in telling the story than by the tale itself. Was this sort of thing an everyday event? I knew better than to ask that question, of course, saying instead, “He seems like a good master.”

“Generous to a fault, Jaemas, and wiser than any,” Dortmas agreed, adding, “but he brooks no nonsense in the Probatorium. And he can be quite short if he has to explain something more than once. So be sharp, look sharp, and listen sharp—and do it his way, no matter what Master Bastifor taught you.”

We had gone into the main hall and turned toward the back of the house, where we came to an alcove. On the right side of this was a heavy wooden door affixed to the wall with thick wrought-iron hinges. Dortmas dragged it open and gestured me to go in ahead of him. “Used to take all the strength Matheas had to budge it,” he said with a chuckle, as he swung it shut again behind us.

At first I thought he was letting me into a room no larger than a closet, but once I stepped inside I saw it was, in fact, a short and narrow hall that opened onto the great work room itself. "Before my time, the door used to be set at the end of the hall, so you could go straight in," Dortmas explained. "Then an explosion blew it right off its hinges, straight down the hall, and through the front door. The next morning they found it—or the remains of it—in the middle of the street. The master had left something triturating overnight. The apprentice supposed to watch it fell asleep. Had to scrape *him* off the walls, or so I heard." He glanced at me.

"Be sharp, look sharp, and listen sharp—and do it his way," I said, and he nodded approvingly.

"Anyway," he concluded, "they built the new door at a right angle, and a thick wall where the door used to be. Haven't scared any horses since."

I had never before entered a Probatorium, although I knew it was the place where an alchemist performs the material aspect of his studies. Spread in great profusion before me now were the devices by which this is done and I gaped in wonder.

There were several furnaces, of different sizes and obviously meant for different purposes. There were countless retorts of blown glass, some large, some small, with their necks bent in various angles. They looked like a flock of herons—some preening themselves, some swallowing a fish, and others peering down at the table top, as if caught in

the act of hunting frogs.

The walls of the room rose almost up to the roof, and these, starting well above my head and made accessible by frighteningly long ladders, were lined with rows of shelves, some so high that they all but vanished in the sooty murk. On these, equipment was stored and supplies kept—in flasks, open-mouthed jars, sacks, and packages bound with twine and marked with symbols in large red letters.

Around the room, I saw the apprentices already back to work. Wendastas and Justan were turning the spars of a large press from which a dark green liquid was oozing; Plakkas was pounding some substance in a large mortar with a stone pestal. Matheas and Melfyras were attending Porphoras himself, Matheas holding a small bowl in readiness and Melfyras working a pair of leather bellows, while the alchemist himself groped for something with a pair of tongs inside a blazing furnace.

As I watched from a respectful distance, Porphoras extracted a crucible from the fire and set it carefully on the stone shelf directly in front of the furnace's maw. He took the bowl from Matheas and deftly emptied its contents into the crucible, setting off a shower of multicolored sparks that hissed and sizzled as they shot about the room.

Porphoras now gestured at me to come and join them. When I reached his side, I saw that the crucible held a molten mass that, as it cooled, was gaining plasticity. First, it pulled itself way from the sides of its container to attain a

shape that was almost perfectly spherical. Then, to my astonishment, it began to unfold, reaching out a glowing arm, then another, then lifting up a head. Legs and feet followed after, and it unsteadily rose up onto them. It was uncannily like the way the Lady in the Wood had appeared to me, but in miniature, almost, it seemed, in mockery.

The head began to turn awkwardly, shaking itself, and turning upwards. Two deeply glowing bits of fiery red opened in it, below these, a larger single orifice appeared. This homunculus turned to gaze at Porphoras, then at Mattheas, and, finally, at me.

The moment its fiery eyes met mine, its features became agitated. It reached out its arms imploringly and its mouth worked as if trying to say something. It didn't possess the power to speak, but, even so, I could feel its effort and, as if through some inner ear, made out the phrase it was mouthing: "*Erestinad pellesfas.*"

This effort exhausted it and it began to collapse, at first falling to its knees, and bending its head down over its body, then gradually hardening into a sort of statue of itself, its illuminating heat not so much fading as retreating inside it, deeper and deeper, until it vanished entirely.

Porphoras as much stunned as satisfied at the results of what he had done. He looked at me, then at what was now a black translucent statuette, and then at Mattheas, who was beside himself in astonishment and excitement. "Master," he said, "what was it? And what was it trying to say?"

“That was a fire imp,” he said, “much written about but very rarely seen. It is an embodiment of the spirit of fire.” By now we had been joined by everyone in the room, all of them staring at the statuette.

Porphoras glanced around at them all, then answered Matheas’s second question. “What it tried to say to you, Matheas, was, ‘Don’t touch me, I’m hot.’” The laughter from the other apprentices broke the mood of awe, perhaps even of fright, and the alchemist was able to wave them back to their tasks. To Matheas he said, “You and Melfyras put everything back in its place here, then prepare the sublimary. When I return, we shall prepare some essence of camphor.”

To me, he said, “Jaemas, I want to talk to you for a bit in the sanctorium.” He pointed to the frozen fire imp. “Touch it gingerly, but I think it has cooled enough to handle. If so, bring it with you.” And he turned and started across the room to a small door on its far side.

The imp was still quite warm, but I could carry it without difficulty, and hurried to catch up with him. As I did so, I could feel the curiosity of the others prickling against me, but for what reason I couldn’t guess.

The door required unlocking, and as Porphoras went about it, I let my eyes climb up the wall all the way to the roof. It was, in fact, a great dome, supported by six solid pillars that stood in a circle around the center of the room. The dome itself was coated with soot and who knew what else, but there was a large gold hexagon emblazoned

on it that glittered brightly, as if immune to filth. At its center was a large vent hole to let out smoke and vapor. At this moment though, because of the time of day, sunlight streamed through it, and when my eyes followed it down to where it hit the floor, I saw there was an identical gold hexagram emblazoned there. The light caused it to shine so brightly that it literally seemed to glow.

“If you’ve finished gawking, Jaemas,” Porphoras said tartly, “perhaps we could go inside.”

“Sorry, Master!” I said, flushing, and followed him into his study, and closing the door firmly to shut out the sound of the tittering that had followed me in.

UNLIKE THE PROBATORIAM, the alchemist’s sanctorium had windows, narrow but high, made of stained glass in hues of red, orange, and yellow, inlaid with symbols stained the darkest, most luminous blue. Like my father’s study, this one, too, was lined with shelves and cases, but here everything was in ragged disorder verging on chaos.

Such, too, was the state of his huge writing table, which spilled over with scrolls of every size and age, and was elsewhere heaped with leather-bound volumes, some stacked up, others lying open. A smaller, separate table was covered with miniature but obviously much used alchemical equipment, where Porphoras could carry out investigations of his own in complete secrecy.

He pushed some of the equipment aside. “Put the thing here,” he said, “and draw up that stool.”

I set the imp down. But before I could turn to get the stool, smoke burst out from beneath the figure, and had I not snatched it up again, it would have burnt its way right through the tabletop. I looked at Porphoras in amazement. But he merely sighed, took up an iron trivet, and set it over the smouldering wood. He then sank into his chair.

“Set it on that,” he said, “and let’s hope I don’t have molten iron dripping on the carpet in a moment.”

I brought over the stool and perched on it. “You *knew* that would happen,” I said, almost accusingly.

Porphoras nodded. “That it would burn through the table, no. But that it would burn the flesh off the hand of a mere mortal, yes. And so fast that it would be charring the bones of your hand before you had the wit to let go of it.”

He looked at me. “Don’t take offense, Niccas—as I shall call you in this room. I’ve never allowed *anyone* in this room before now, and it’s not easy for me to let even you in here, *Nithaial Elimiel*, let alone stay in here by yourself. But that’s what I plan to do, and all that did was reassure me that I’m not losing my wits in allowing it.”

When I said nothing to this, he went on, “Your task here is to put all this in some sort of order. But your purpose is to learn as much as you can as quickly as you can, and I’ll start you off with the right volumes as soon as we finish our talk. But anything in this room is at your disposal, as well as anything out in the Probatorium that you find you need.”

“Thank you, High Master Porphoras,” I stammered.

“Is this so that I can pass for a proper apprentice with the others?”

He waved a dismissive hand. “Oh, yes, that, too.” He said. “Although I suspect that your native wit would allow you to accomplish *that* much in a matter of days. But, mostly, it is because it is the best I have to offer that might help you learn about yourself. It isn’t only the Order of the Narrow Blade that claims you as their patron. We alchemists are bound by oath to serve the Forces of Fire and Earth, and you, Niccas, are their avatar.”

He reached behind him and took a small packet bound in cloth and handed it to me. “Here are the keys to this room, along with a gold chain with which to hang them around your neck. I need not have to tell you that you’re to let no one else even touch them.”

He shook his head. “I’m afraid that the moment they find out you possess them the others will be envious beyond belief, and I have no convincing story to explain it. You will need all the charm you possess to win them over, and it would be wise, if you did. Be humble, and especially act as if utterly baffled by all this. Better they should think I’ve grown soft in the head than begin to suspect anything else.”

I opened my mouth to protest but he gestured to me to close my mouth. “That is our *doom*, Niccas. I, for one, now that the keys are in your hand, am happy for it. And, soon enough, I think, you will be even happier.”

Strangely, I already knew that this was true. For the

first time since, since everything had happened, I felt my old self returning. I felt happy in this room. Already I was restraining an urge to leap up and begin exploring. But I had tact enough to realize that Porphoras was still a bit unsettled by what he had just done and there was no need to agitate him further.

In any case, a question still was gnawing at my curiosity. “The fire imp—surely there is a more respectful name for it—the words it spoke, did you interpret them truly?”

For the first time, Porphoras smiled. “*You* are now the imp,” he said. “You know I didn’t. It told you the spell that will summon it.

“These imps are minor elementals of fire, called in the old tongue, *sereryel*. Any will serve you once you call them up, which is why I did this one. Until you need it, though, you should leave it here, where it will be safe. It will hear you, wherever you speak. And, by the names of Fire and Darkness, don’t speak the spell unless you need to, and *never* in this room.”

Porphoras shuddered. “I don’t know for certain what will happen, but as likely as not it would set off an explosion that would level this building and rock the entire city.”

He raised his hands and touched two clear glass globes that were suspended over his desk. In a moment they both began to gently glow, the light intensifying until together they illuminated the table. “There,” he said. “Now take this seat. I’ve laid out the volumes you should tackle first in this

pile here. Don't be dismayed by them, as you may be at first. As you will see, Alchemy is, above all, a sublime philosophy. The tinkering about with these toys"—he indicated the equipment on the table—"comes a distant second."

And with those words he got up and went out, locking the door behind him.

I HARDLY NOTED THE PASSING TIME until night had fallen and the stained glass windows no longer glowed at all, but merely reflected back the dim light of the room. I had settled down with two of the volumes, moving from one to the other and back again every hour or so.

One of them detailed the use and purpose of the every piece of equipment in an alchemist's probatorium. The other, a much thicker and older volume, *AS ABOVE, SO BELOW: THE GREAT AND SMALL BOOKS OF THE SCROLL*, drew the novice into the depths of the philosophy itself.

These pages aren't the place to dwell on what I learned, and, even if they were, this would not be the time to do it, for when I finally pushed the books aside, my head was reeling with thoughts barely grasped, lessons I had only begun to learn. But at least I now knew how to distinguish between a furnace and an athanor, what an aludel and a curcurbit were—common knowledge to my reader, I am sure, but until then mere words to me.

As well, I could both define and assign the proper order of procedure to such processes as calcination, sublimation, solution, putrefaction, distillation, coagulation, and

tincturation, even if I still hadn't a clue as to how to actually perform any of them.

As I left the sanctorium and turned the keys in the three locks that kept others from entering it, I found I was not alone. Matheas, stripped to his braes, was cleaning the ashes and cinders out of the firebox of the largest of the athenors.

"Matheas!" I said. "What are you doing here so late?"

He stood up. His arms were coated with ash almost to his armpits, and sweat ran down his chest. "The stone of the ovens retain their heat for hours after they've been last used," he said, "so you have to wait to clean them. This is what I do every night, and sweep the floor besides."

I thought to myself that he must have been doing this for years, and my heart went out to him.

"Why doesn't Porphoras have a servant do this?"

He shrugged. "The master doesn't like servants in the Probatorium and, in any case, he thinks we should learn how to clean up after ourselves...and, of course, *him*."

"But shouldn't we all take turns?"

Matheas smiled wanly. "You could try suggesting it to the others. They'll tell you they have their own tasks, which they do, and that this... *shit* work, is the province of the youngest apprentice, which it is. It's just my bad luck that Porphoras hasn't taken on a new apprentice for *years*. No one knows why. And so when I heard you had arrived, I went to him immediately and *begged* him to free me of all this. But he said you were senior to me and, besides, he had

a special task for you that would take all your time.”

As Matheas blurted all this out, I could see he was close to tears. Mostly, though, he looked totally exhausted.

“Well,” I said, “I can at least help. If you show me where and how to steal some food once we’re done.”

“There’s some set out for you in the kitchen, and cook threatened to cut off our hands if we even looked at it,” Matheas replied. “And I can see that you’re as tired as I am. Go eat...I’ll get through this soon enough.”

“No,” I said. “I’ll take the broom and start sweeping up where you’ve already finished.” Although Matheas raked out the ashes into a metal pail, not a few landed on the stone floor as well. Sweeping it was obviously the next task to done.

Matheas looked dubious, then grateful, and pointed out the broom. He went back to raking out the fire box and I started sweeping.

I had, I must confess, never held a broom in my hands before, but I had seen sweeping done, and it looked easy enough to me. I started moving from end of the room to the other, and soon built up a rather large pile of ash and bits of charcoal.

Meanwhile, Matheas had finished and came over to where I was busy sweeping. He set the pail down with a clank and seized the broom from me.


“Go eat,” he said shortly. And when I stood there, astonished, he gave me a push. “Go on,” he said. “This is no

help. I heard that your previous master was a sick man before he died, but where was your pride to then allow his Probatorium turn into a pigsty?" He gestured at the floor around us.

"But..." I said, protesting. "I did sweep there!"

Matheas gave a snort of disgust. Using a series of rapid, short sweeps, he began clearing the floor of the thin layer of ash that, instead of sweeping up, my own method had been spreading all over it.

He looked back up at me. "And I have to *mop it* after this," he said. "Go take your helpfulness and eat your supper with it."

And to that I had no reply but to stalk off in a fit of high dudgeon. The slab of pork pie the cook had left for me made no difference to my mood, and Matheas and I slept that night with our backs to one another. 

Chapter 9



SO BEGAN MY LIFE in the House of Fire and Darkness, for such was the formal name given to the home of Porphoras, High Master Alchemist, and his wife Sophaera, Sister of the Daughters of the Moon. I went down with the others for the morning meal, spent the morning being instructed by Porphoras and, after midday meal, pocketed a chunk of bread and retired to his sanctorium for the rest of the day, emerging only when I was certain that Matheas had finished his chores.

My anger at him had cooled; I had seen from the start that he had a point. How was he to know that I had been brought up in a wealthy family where cleaning had always been done by others. Certainly, alchemists took on many an assistant for whom that was also true. But they were lads of eleven or twelve, who were taught soon enough what had they had missed before. But I couldn't explain this to Matheas, nor think of any reasonable excuse to give instead.

So, I said nothing, which is never the right choice.

And thus things continued until I woke one morning to a different sound. Instead of the rush and hurry, getting dressed, getting down the stairs for breakfast, I heard laughter and conversation.

I also realized, when I poked my head out of the covers, that it was much later in the morning than usual. The attic we shared wasn't exactly warm, but the sun was beating down on the roof and through the tiny windows, and so it was not exactly freezing cold.

I looked around. Wendastas and Justan were wrestling on one of the beds, totally naked; Dortmas was sitting on another, engrossed in mending a tear in his shirt; Plakkas was still a lump under his blankets. I rolled over and looked at Matheas, who was reading a romance.

"What's going on?" I asked sleepily. We were at least on speaking terms again.

He looked at me. "Freeday," he said, and returned to his story.

Freeday! Of course. The work-free holiday that marked the last day of every month. Even servants had their tasks relaxed on that day, although they did not have it off. As if to illustrate this thought, just then the door to our room burst open, and three of them appeared. One bore a large copper bath tub on his shoulders; the other two both carried steaming pails of hot water to start filling it.

A cheer went up, and the servants, smiling, dodged flying pillows as they retreated for more hot water. Dortmas,

seeing me watching, came over to explain.

“In the house of Bastefor,” he said, “I expect the senior apprentice had the privilege of being first in the bath. But since my burns can’t take the steaming water, I choose the cleanest among us to go first. I follow him, and then in proper order, Wendastas, Justan, Plakkas, Melfyras, and, finally, Matheas”—and here Dortmas gave him a friendly prod— “who is both the youngest and dirtiest.”

Matheas let out a snort, of disgust or amusement I couldn’t quite tell. “And so, Dortmas,” he said, “if I’m the dirtiest, who among us is the cleanest—and so honored to have their poor flesh scorched in your stead?”

“Why, your bedmate, Jaemas, of course, who hardly lifts a finger around here, except to eat and diddle himself.”

This sally got a laugh from the others, but it was not unkindly said, nor did the laughter have a mean edge. It told much, I knew, about the way Porphoras chose and then treated his apprentices, that this was so.

“Well,” joked Justan, “we know he’s not diddling Matheas, which is surely a waste, since the poor lad certainly needs a lover. Do you like boys, Jaemas, or girls?”

I blushed all over, and turned the question by asking, “And what do you prefer, Justan? Either would be terrified to take you on, once they saw the size of your organ.” More laughter, for while Justan was slight of build, he was amazingly well endowed.

“Well,” Justan said airily, “at this point, both. And

there's never enough of either. But answer us, for we all know each other's tastes."

I sighed. "Boys," I answered. "As you've already guessed."

The door flew open again, the servants entering with the second—and last round—of wash water, returning some of the thrown pillows with interest once they had emptied their pails. Then they slipped back out the door before my companions could organize a second volley.

"Well, then, Jaemas," said Justan, "let's see what *you* have to offer us boys."

My body froze under the covers. I had never revealed myself naked to anyone but my brothers, and certainly not to a room of near strangers, all of them boys my own age.

Dortmas prodded me. "Come on Jaemas, don't be modest. Otherwise poor Matheas will be bathing with ice flows."

So, fighting off a blush, I threw down the covers, pulled off my shirt, dropped my braes, and scurried as fast as I could to the tub and sat in the steaming water.

Even faster, I leaped out of it again, my body scalded a hot, bright red. The others were laughing so hard that Wendastas was literally rolling on the floor.

"Shit!" I cried. "Shit! That's fucking *hot*." More laughter and hooting.

"You set that up perfectly, Dortmas," I said between clenched teeth. "I get you back for it, I swear."

Dortmas clenched his fists and made punching motions. “I fear for my life,” he said, smiling. “Really, Jaemas, you made it so easy for me, I’m almost embarrassed. It was like taking candy from a toddler.

“Now, was that really your bath? Or do you want to try again...now that you’ve made sure none of us will envy *your* cock?” More laughter—for the hot water had made it shrink to the size of a turtle’s head, pulled into its shell.

“Oh, fuck it,” I said. I was already shivering. I turned back to the tub and put one foot in gingerly. I, the *Nithaial Elimiel*, who could hold a near-molten fire imp in my hand, should be able to handle a tub of hot water. And I could, but only barely. Water was not my element, it seemed, hot or cold. I let my feet and shins grow accustomed to the heat and then slowly, slowly, lowered myself in until I was finally sitting down. The room erupted with cheers.

“Thank you all very much,” I replied. “Is there no soap?” Of course, I had forgotten to bring my own.

To my surprise, Matheas slipped out of our bed and brought me his, and not only that, but stayed, bending down to scrub my back with a brush. For this, he received some teasing, but it turned out that every boy had his favorite, each doing the other’s back and washing each other’s hair.

When it was Matheas’s turn for the tub, the others had left or were hurriedly doing so, drying and dressing, than rushing down to breakfast. I had wrapped myself in a blanket to stay warm, but now I dropped it on the bed and went to the

tub, sitting down on the edge and putting my legs in the water on either side of him.

He bent forward and I soaped and scrubbed his back, rinsing it with a bowl that was set there for the purpose. Then he leaned back against me and I began to wash his hair, wetting and soaping my hands and then rubbing them together to make a froth with which I could do so. As I ran my fingers through his curly brown locks, I couldn't help let my eyes run down over his face—his eyes were shut, his mouth, smiling—to his well-formed chest—he had little hair there but perfect nipples, now both erect and begging to be sucked—down to the nest of hair and the cock it encircled, which was clearly beginning to stir.

I felt faint. It had been days since I had made love to Helias, and my body was crying for release. A half hour ago, Matheas and I were barely speaking, and now, now.... I began to reach for the bowl to rinse his hair.

“Wait,” Matheas said, his blue eyes opening and looking up at me. “Would you mind using a little of the drinking water? I'll scream from the cold, I expect, but it's the only way to get hair really rinsed clean.”

“Close your eyes, then,” I said, getting up from the edge of the tub. I said this less out of concern for him than to keep him from seeing how hard I was. I took the jug of drinking water from the small table on which it stood—the drinking bowl was already employed for body rinsing—and began to pour it slowly over his hair.

He did shriek, as promised, and used his hands to squeeze it out of his hair as fast as he could. But I could see it really was rinsing it clean.

When he was finished, I draped a drying cloth over his head and told him, “Now, quick, do the same to me. It’s a brilliant idea.”

I bent over the tub and soon I was shrieking as loud as Matheas, who was now giggling as he poured.

“Enough!” I gasped. “Quick, give me a cloth.” He took the one I had been using and passed it to me, and I began vigorously drying my hair, while he finished his. We found ourselves looking at each other as we did so, and I felt that faint feeling flood through me again.

I think we might have tumbled back onto the bed together, had not the door few open. The servants had returned to empty the wash water out the window and bring the tub back downstairs. So both of us, each blushing a little out of sudden shyness, tossed on our clothes and hurried down to see if any breakfast was left.

fORTUNATELY, so much porridge was put out on Freeday, along with milk and butter(!) that there was some still left for us. Because neither Porphoras or Sophaera were present, breakfast was the noisiest of our meals, and, on this day it was as close to raucous as this house would allow, full of jests, bursts of laughter, even snatches of song.

Although apprentices were not paid a wage—indeed, those whose parents could afford to do so paid a good sum

for the privilege of having Porphoras induct their child into the mysteries of the art—the alchemist gave each apprentice a fistful of spending money on their Freeday, and most of the talk was about how each would be spending it.

Few, it seemed, had any intention of saving it. Most of it would be spent on eating and drinking, first in each other's company and, later, with a favorite love girl, and later... Well, that's where all the boasting came in.

The problem for Matheas and myself was that Porphoras forbade apprentices who had not yet reached their coming of age to go to taverns. Not, of course, that we wouldn't be served, but because it would speak badly against Porphoras for allowing it—and, no doubt, he also sincerely believed it would do us no good. We were served beer with our supper and wine on the Holyday, but that was different, since we were never given enough to get anything but mildly drunk—enough to accustom us to drink's powers and to keep away the fevers that abstinence encouraged.

I expected that the once the others had left, I would return to my studies in Porphoras's sanctorium, since I was certain I would not be allowed out to wander in the street.

However, a servant came to summon me to the alchemist, whom I found in a nearby room, sorting out pennies and a some silver half-droits, and putting them into small cloth sachets, each bearing an apprentice's name. He smiled at me when I came in.

"Master Jaemas, greetings," he said. "Close the door,

will you? I feel the draft.”

I closed the door and came over to where he sat, returning his greeting. “You’re very generous, sir,” I added, inclining my head toward the sacks. For, indeed, he was.

He shrugged in a way that at once admitted and denied what I had said. “It’s been a bitter winter so far, and the lads haven’t had a chance for much fun.”

He looked up at me. “Nor you, either, Niccas. You’re probably wondering if I’m planning to let you loose this day.” I nodded, and he continued, “You must decide for yourself, of course, but as for my own mind.... Well, I mean to treat you like an apprentice and I want you to act as if you are one. And since I see no reason to punish you by keeping you in—and that’s a pretty severe punishment for an apprentice, worse by far than a thrashing—I’m going to let you out.”

My heart leaped. He must have seen this in my face, because he smiled, adding, “You now have some real stains on your hands to augment the fake ones, and I know you can talk alchemy enough to confound the innocent. I have no worries that you’ll be picked up, if you use even a modicum of care.

“So go and walk about a little and, if you don’t mind, take Matheas with you. Since I won’t allow him to tavern crawl, he’s a bit left out of it on these days. And two apprentices out on their Freeday will attract no one’s attention... except those of cutpurses and love girls.” He laughed and waved me on my way. “Those,” he said, “you and Matheas will just have to fight off, as best you can.”

So it was that less than an a half hour later, Math-eas and I found ourselves on the bustling streets of Lorithar, chewing grilled sausages from a stick and my pockets stuffed with dried pippins. We were making our way through the crowds to a side street where, one of Porphoras's servants had told me, was the stable where Whynnya was kept.

Porphoras had not exactly given me permission to visit her, and I had not exactly asked if I could. By chance, a servant asked me how she was doing, for it had been he who had brought her to the stable. I thought of her often and worried that she might not be properly treated, so I got the directions from him. I just wanted to see how she was myself.

The stable was a ramshackle building, more pushed together than anything else. But once Matheas and I were inside, I could see I'd no cause to worry, the place smelt like a well-kept stable should, of straw and oats and well-curried bodies, not rank manure and stale sweat.

A man came out of a small side room before I had a chance to find Whynnya and treated us suspiciously until I told him who I was and what horse I wanted to see. He then touched his forelock and became quite friendly—Porphoras must have paid him well. But he looked dubious when I asked to take her out for some exercise.

"The stable boys... Freeday, you know. And I daren't leave the front here. Most riders know to bring a servant with them on the holiday to saddle up their horse." He looked dubiously at Matheas as he said this, who probably returned

the look with interest. He'd told me as we walked that he'd never so much as patted a horse.

"If you have the tack handy, I'll get her ready myself," I answered. "I'm almost as handy at it as stable boy."

The stable master smiled. "I'm sure you are, master apprentice. Well, hold there a minute," and he vanished into the back room. A few minutes passed before he returned, laden with my familiar saddle and all the rest of it, which he parceled out between Matheas and me. "Half way down, then turn right," he said. She's in the last stall.

Indeed she was. I thought in this place she wouldn't recognize my step, but she did, pressing so hard against the gate of her stall that you could hear the wood groan. Her happiness in seeing me brought tears to my eyes, and I spent several minutes just hugging her and stuffing her with pippins.

Seeing this, Matheas worked up the nerve to pet her nose and feed her some dried pippins himself. But he drew the line at coming along for the ride, though I urged him to. Whynnya could hold us both, and it would be nice to have him clinging tightly to me. But no. So I left him sharing the heat from the stable master's stove, and Whynnya and I set out for a gallop.

The stable, naturally, had no exercise yard, let alone an indoor riding rink; horses were exercised at a nearby open track. I could hardly believe that by now almost a month had passed since I was last on Whynnya's back, but she responded as though I had never left it. That made me happy: the groom

who was exercising her was treating her with respect.

The track was far from empty, riders taking advantage of the holiday and the relatively fine day to take their horses out for a trot, or in some instances, a gallop. The slower horses kept to the outer part of the track, letting those who wished to race have the space near the inside rail to themselves. Some, of course, would gallop a bit, then ease the horse, shifting from one side of the track to the other as they did so. In short, there was a lot for the riders to keep their eyes on to without wasting any attention on me.

All this mayhem energized Whynnya, and I could tell she wanted to gallop. So I waited for a clear space to open and guided it into it, at the same time letting her have her head. In response, she simply flew down the track, her body stretched out, me clinging to her like a limpet.

We had swept past several riders whose horses were going full out and were catching up with a clump of them directly ahead of us, when I sensed a horse and rider break from the trotting horses on the outside track. In a matter of moments it was catching up with us. I could hear the slap of a crop over the drumming hooves as the horse came up beside us, a jet black stallion, his nostrils steaming, his eyes wide.

The rider himself had a flowing mane of black hair, thicker and glossier than my own, a haughty face with a dominating nose. He wore the heraldic colors of high nobility and his equipage had the sheen of laborious polishing, right down to the high gloss of his black riding boots.

We were now neck and neck, and he turned his head to look at me and I did the same. My heart quailed. The rider was a young man, maybe five or six years older than I. But his face bore the distinct traces of the visage of Lord Lissator. I was racing Lidaegas ffyr Lissator, the Lord's eldest son!

My prayer was that he was regarding Whynnya, not me, with such intense curiosity. I tugged on leash to slow her down, but now that she had a competitor worth her metal, she surged forward, slowly pulling ahead.

Frantically, I looked about for a way of escape. I saw a break in the riders on the slower side of the track coming up, and, when we reached it, saw, to my great luck, that was right where we had originally entered the track. Using my knees and some vigorous pulling of the reins, we flew across the other side of the track and burst out onto field that surrounded it, scattering some revellers, and earning some well-deserved curses as we did so.

The move caught the Noble Lidaegas by surprise and there was no turning around on that track; it would be several minutes before he could circle it again and come after me, if he was at all inclined to do so.

In the normal course of events, I would have brought Whynnya onto the slower side of the track for a bit of trotting after her gallop, to cool her down gradually, and I tried to do that on the emptier side streets on the way back to the stables. Matheas helped me rub her down vigorously when she was back in her stall, until she was dry and we both completely

smelled of horse. I apologized to Matheas about it, but he merely said that I owed him a good scrubbing when we next bathed, which caused us both to blush a little and look away.

Whynnya well set, we went out to walk a bit more among the crowds, tossing biscuits to the dancing bear, watching contestants attempt to climb a greased pole to win a goose, eating our fill of spiced nuts and crumble cakes, and generally spending our way through Porphoras's largesse.

By now, darkness was crowding in, and the huge pitch torches were being lit, flaring up and sending goutts of black sticky soot floating in the air. Matheas and I were at a booth, purchasing salt twists to stuff into our pockets for nibbling once we were back in our bed, when I saw a familiar face. The glance was met, the face turned white, the boy turned his back to me and fled.

I pushed some coins into Matheas's hand to pay for my share and told him to wait for me. Then I ran off in pursuit. He cut off to one side, and I took a chancy shortcut between two booths, leaping through a spider's web of stretched support ropes, and intercepted him.

As I seized my quarry's arm, I said his name.

"Naedas!"

He stopped and reluctantly turned to face me, then practically fainted when I embraced and kissed him. His clothing was tattered, he had a wan and hungry look, and his hands and cheeks were raw from the cold.

My heart sank. "Are you homeless, Naedas?" I

asked.

He looked down and nodded. "Worse," he said, so softly I could hardly hear him in the bustle about us.

"You escaped," I said, understanding his meaning. "They're looking for you, too."

"Master Niccas," he began, "if they're following me...."

"Hush, Naedas," I said, taking off my cloak as I did so and wrapping it around his shivering frame. "First of all, right now, my name is Jaemas." I looked him in the eyes. "Remember that. Jaemas."

Naedas nodded. "Jaemas," he mumbled.

"And, second of all, there's no master and no servant here, just you and me. Two fugitives. Agreed?"

He nodded. "Yes, Master, Niccas."

"Oh, Mother," I groaned. "Come with me." And with my arm around him, I took him to a sausage stand and bought him three, then dragged him to where Matheas was waiting.

"This is Naedas," I told him. "He was the servant who accompanied me on the trip from Plaecenon. When I was robbed of everything by the bandits, we were separated, and he's obviously been through some rough times since."


Both Matheas and Naedas stared at me in astonishment. Fortunately, Naedas had a mouthful of sausage. Matheas, at least, had heard the story of the bandits, since it was one I had to tell several times over in the attic, and he looked at Naedas with the respect and interest any boy feels

meeting someone his age who has had a certifiably exciting adventure. Naedas simply looked shyly down at the ground and took another bite of sausage.

We stood like that for a moment. Then I said, “Matheas, I’m tired and freezing. I’m going to go back home and talk to Porphoras about Naedas. Why don’t you stay here and spend the last of your coins and meet me there later?”

Matheas shook his head. “I’m tired, too, and have had all the fun I want. We’ll all go back together.

“Besides, Jaemas,” he added, looking at me, “I’m not sure you could find the way. And I know you’d freeze to death, even if you could. So you’re lucky I’m with you, and luckier still that there’s room for us both under my cloak, if we hold each other tightly.”

So it proved. And the walk back to the House of Porphoras turned out to be a very happy one, in many different ways. 

Chapter 10



WE DISCOVERED THAT Porphoras and Sophaera were not to be disturbed when we returned, so I surrendered Naedas to the housekeeper, asking her to find something for him to wear and clean him for presentation in the morning. She was a sympathetic woman, and if Naedas could only hold to the tale he now found himself a part of, he would find himself well treated, indeed.

Matheas and I had expected to have the attic room to ourselves, but we returned to find a glum Plakkas already there; his pocket had been picked before he had reached his third tavern, leaving him penniless. When he found we had brought back salt twists, there was no getting rid of him, or of Wendastas, either, when he entered shortly after, his face showing all the makings of a spectacular black eye.

The others slunk in much later, after the four of us already here had gone to bed. Matheas snuggled up against me, and I held him in my arms, enjoying the sweet sensa-

tions from his body as it softened, the muscles relaxing, as it slipped away into sleep. Its warmth, the gently rise and fall of his chest as he breathed, the little twitching that signaled the arrival of the first dreams, all this touched my heart and, to be honest, made for a stirring in my loins, as well.

Against this, however, came the realization that in all good conscience I couldn't take Matheas as a lover. In fact, part of me regretted feeling even as close to him as I now did. It was a simple fact of my life now: I brought horrible disaster to those I loved. The deaths of my brothers... even to think of it flooded my eyes with tears. And I couldn't *not* think of it, night after night after night. Holding tight to Matheas helped ease the pain, but it did nothing to stave it off.

Helias has been different. He had thrust himself on me; he was dangerous himself; I had no decision over his fate. My thoughts often returned to the scene in the council room, so much of which puzzled, even tormented me. I believed with all my heart that Helias would never for a moment have considered himself the *Nithaial Elimiel*. All that was the doing of Stalcas, who held some power over him—what, I didn't even want to try to imagine.

Helias was impossible as a lover, all sharp angles and violent turns, but, right now, I wanted no other. And Helias was gone. There was no way he could reach me here even if Stalcas—and of this I was as sure as if I had overheard it myself—forbidden him to even think of trying. Chances were, I would never see Helias again... at least until I came into my

powers and sought him out myself.

Finally, there was my twin. I also thought of him at night, when I lay sleepless as I was doing now. Strangely, I didn't think of him as my brother—the word “twin” was too human to convey what we were. He wasn't my replication, my mirror image, but my other half. Until he and I joined together, I wasn't even wholly myself. In a very different way from my yearnings for Helias, I longed for him. And it comforted me to think of him as far away from here, far further than me from the seeking presence of The Unnameable One.

“YOU REALIZE, of course, that you acted like a complete idiot. Worse. Like a *twelve-year-old*.” Porphoras said that, not as a question, but as an obvious conclusion that anyone would draw from the evidence set before him.

“Yes, High Master,” I answered in the same tone, albeit in a much humbler manner.

“You put at risk the lives of everyone in this house, and others besides, because”—and here he drew the words out slowly, very slowly— “*you missed your horse*.”

Tears welled in my eyes. “Yes, High Master.”

“What's worse is that you *knew* that if I thought it safe for you see her, I would have told you myself where she was stabled.” Before I could answer this, Porphoras added, “And don't say, ‘Yes, High Master.’ It only maddens me.”

“No, High Master.”

He sighed and leaned back in his chair. His fingers

were drumming on the table, a sign of his agitation. “And, on top of this, you dragged back here *another* fugitive, hoping I’d give him sanctuary, too. Is his life a fair swap for all of ours?”

I looked down at my feet. “No, High Master. But once he saw me.... If he had been caught afterwards....”

“Niccass! Look at me when you talk to me. And stop calling me High Master. If you’re the *Nithaial Elimiel*, it’s time—high time—you started acting like him. You’re supposed to be *pretending* to be a fifteen-year-old apprentice, not acting as though you *were* one.”

“You’re right... Porphoras.” I said, meeting his eyes. “Everything that you say is true. But I *am* fifteen, I *did* miss my horse, and I simply *couldn’t* abandon Naedas to wander starving in the street.

“Furthermore, I made sure that no one followed us back to here. I’ve discovered that I have a growing ability to sense the presence of others. I can’t read their minds, yet—and, to tell the truth, I hope, never—but their intentions, their interest in me I can feel.

“When I lie in bed at night I can sense others with similar powers seeking for me—all of them evil—and I’ve learned how to elude them without their knowing. No one was watching Naedas, with the hopes of catching me. He hasn’t told me yet what happened, but I think he escaped from them before they practiced any fell arts on him, for his mind is clear as water, just as it always has been.”

The alchemist perceptibly brightened as he heard

this, partly, I think, from what I said, but mostly because I was showing him I was made of more than I had been displaying recently.

“What of Lida eas ffyr Lissator, then,” he asked. “Did he recognize you?”

I thought about this, because the answer wasn’t a simple one. “No,” I said. “We’ve never met in any social function, although my father might have done so. The real question is whether he knows Whynnya.

“She was one of a string of horses my father had bought from the Lhennad, several of which passed into the possession of Lord Lissator. The High Lida eas was riding one of them himself. He surely recognized the breed.”

“And now he’ll want to learn who owns this magnificent specimen,” said Porphoras, following my thoughts.

Our eyes met again. “Chances are,” I said, “He already knows. If he was quick enough to recognize my apprentice garb, he’ll think it to be *you*.”

I dropped my head again, this time to hide the fact that my eyes were once more welling up with tears. “And if he comes here asking about Whynnya, I can see no other choice but for you to sell her to him. I give you my permission to do so.” And then, choking on the bitterness of the words as I said them, I added, “I see that this is my doom.”

My thought about Naedas was that Porphoras might take him on to clean the Probatorium and care for the equipment there. Porphoras was at first aston-

ished by the suggestion, rejecting it out of hand. But I felt he had gotten enough from me regarding Whynnya to eventually feel obliged to concede. So, I argued the point until he did. By then, he saw the justice in it, how hard it was for Matheas to be doing the worst of it, year after year, with no relief in sight.

As I suspected, the reason he had taken no apprentices for the past few years was because of the role he had expected to play in training the *Nithaial Elimiel*. I was supposed to be taken on as an apprentice at the age of eleven. But my father had refused to surrender me, arguing that it would be much easier for Lissator to make an informant of one of the other apprentices or of a servant in the alchemist's establishment, as opposed to the small staff that served us in our own home. About the consequences of that decision nothing need be said.

In any case, now when I came out of the alchemist's sanctorium late at night, it was Naedas, not Matheas, cleaning out the furnaces and sweeping the floor. He would be doing it very cheerfully, too, for it was all quite magical to him. He was, in short, infinitely grateful to me for making possible this new life.

Consequently, if I stayed at work too long, I would eventually hear a soft knock on the sanctorium door. When I opened it, Naedas would be standing there, holding my supper. I would come out and eat it in his company—often sharing a bite or two, for the amount was always generous—and

it was this way that I learned how he had escaped the fate of the others.

It was simply told. He had been the only one with the wit to see if Whynnya was in her stall, to figure out that I had fled, to deduce from this that I was in danger, and to decide on the strength of this, to try to find me and help me in any way he could. He wrapped himself in a horse blanket rather than to go back for a cloak and came running after me, or, rather, where he imagined I might have gone.

By the time he realized he had no hope of finding me, he was completely lost. He had a few pence in his pockets, so was able to feed himself, but he had nowhere to sleep, and had the good sense not to return to the house. That night, despite the blanket, he almost froze to death, and what followed afterward was so unpleasant that he refused to talk about it, nor did I wish to force him to.

Instead, I embraced him again, and told him that I had meant what I said about us being fellow fugitives, and that he was my friend besides. Gradually, he saw that I meant this and would address me as Niccas when we were alone together, and that was one of the very few things that made me feel good about myself in the days that followed.

As to Matheas, he was grateful to me as well—although perhaps not as much as Naedas, for it meant that he lost what Naedas gained—that time alone together in the Probatorium. He continued to make it clear to me that he was open to our making love, and I continued to pretend not

to see that offer. We took turns holding each other when we went to sleep, and he would wake and comfort me when I had nightmares, which was all too often.

It was after a terrible one, in which I witnessed, yet again, my brothers' horrible deaths, that Matheas finally saw the Cronnex. I awoke covered with sweat and, without thinking, pulled off my nightshirt, which was drenched with it. That night, the light of a full moon was shining through our attic windows and the emblem on my arm was glowing brightly, as if in answer.

Thinking quickly, I put my hand over Matheas's mouth and whispered to him that he should speak of what he saw to Porphoras, but absolutely no one else. I expect he did, for he seemed quite shaken for days afterwards, but neither he nor Porphoras said a word about it afterwards.

Whatever the alchemist told him, it didn't frighten him off me; on the contrary, at night he held me even tighter, as if to protect me from what I faced. His grip remained firm, even after he himself had fallen asleep, something that brought tears to my eyes, but also, sometimes, panic. His loyalty could do little to help me, I kept thinking, and everything to destroy him.

MEANWHILE, DAY AND NIGHT, I pursued my studies in alchemy, spending as many hours in the Probatorium as I did buried in the sanctorium's vast collection of texts. Porphoras had told me that in essence alchemy was a spiritual discipline, and I could see that for humans that

this was true. But for me, it was more like learning how to breathe. The material world, as solid as it seems to us, is but a poor reflection, a broken shadow of the spiritual realm, where everything is fluid and force and substance one.

In the material world, substance and force have become separated, fragmented, and are always perceived in partial ways; the alchemist strives to work from the bits and pieces to rediscover the whole. Sadly, for the him, the possibility of success remains always out of reach; what the alchemist lives for are those moments when they are vouchsafed a vision of the perfection they seek—a glimpse, so to speak, beyond the door. However, it was given to me to *step through that door*. And how to do that was what I was learning now.

The investigations that I performed during these studies were too numerous to recount here, but to tell of none would deprive the reader of any sense of what that period of time—a span of several months—was like. Even so, those with no interest in alchemical matters should skip past the following paragraphs, for they have no direct impact on the tale that follows after.

In this instance, Porphoras and I undertook to distill from an ordinary base metal a substance that, after the long reduction necessary to isolate its essence from its gross parts, is called variously the Mercury of the Philosophers, the Blesséd Water, or, sometimes, the Water of Paradise.

The ancients describe it as the key to the door I have just described, and say that to create this key requires not

only great skill but also purity of heart. And by that they meant not the innocent, unreflective innocence of youth but a soul slowly tempered until free of all base temptation—a state most alchemists reach, if at all, in very old age.

Porphoras, naturally, pointed out that I could claim to possess neither of those qualities; he barely did so, himself. That was true, but I also knew that it was time for me to have the key, and the ancients were not speaking of *Nithaial*.

In this instance, we needed the assistance of the other apprentices, for this is a complicated procedure and quickly becomes hazardous. Once the reduction reached a certain point, the substance in the retort (those familiar with alchemical investigations will already know which one, while the uninitiated are best protected from folly by being kept in the dark) began releasing its essence, first in a violent hissing, then in a rapid series of sharp, loud cracks, and finally by a violent explosion which shook the room.

This last filled the air with a penetrating, complex, but also sublime odor, which Melfyras described—quite poetically, but also correctly—as smelling like a dewy summer morning, mingled with the scent of budding flowers. But it also carried the aroma of the air when a soft rain starts to fall and when the wind blows down from the hills, carrying with it the woodsy freshness of young leaves.

It was an odd, even dizzying thing to experience within the thick walls of a building, for our noses told us clearly we were in one place while our eyes confirmed that were in

another. But more importantly, it was evidence that we were on the right track, and I had Matheas read the passage from the text I was following:

When this happy event takes place the whole house will be filled with a most wonderful sweet fragrance, and then will be the day of the nativity of this most blessed preparation.

Our task now was to capture this essence before it escaped but also without causing it to explode and destroy the vessel that held it. So I directed Dortmas and Wendastas to attach a coiled glass tube to the mouth of the retort. The coils were then immediately immersed in a water bath, heated to exactly the right temperature, which caused the gas to gradually condense into a clear golden liquid, which proved to be both very inflammable and extremely volatile—if the plug to the small retort that contained it was pierced even with a pin, the contents would vanish entirely.

Porphoras and I now further distilled this into a silvery white liquid which is the very master of all metals, and is called by some Philosophic Mercury and by others the Water Celestial. It is curious that the heat of the hand is enough to make it boil. Furthermore, if a finger is inserted into it, no wet is felt and the digit emerges completely dry.

While we had been busy at this, Dortmas and Wendastas had been preparing salts of gold by submitting a small portion of that metal to aqua regia, and then carefully washing the resulting salts over and over again with distilled wa-

ter to remove all traces of the menstruum itself.

Now at last, the salts being rendered pure, I ordered everyone from the room, because if even a trace of the aqua regia remained, an explosion would destroy everything in the room. Once alone, I allowed the essence to trickle, drop by drop over the salts of gold. There was a slight hissing sound and the contents of the retort began to radiate a gentle heat. But no explosion occurred, and salts of gold were transformed into a deep red liquid.

When this had been safely completed, I summoned the others to return. Porphoras and I began the final stage of our investigation, which was to combine this oil of gold with some of the reserved Water Celestial—for the two comprised the Essences of Sol the Father and Lune the Mother, the Male and Female Principles, the White and Red essences—sublimating them into a deep amber fluid of thickish consistency that was neither water nor oil.

This substance was my goal. When the last drop fell into the phial, I sealed it in with a glass stopper, and allowed the apprentices to pass it from hand to hand. For it caught and intensified any light that fell upon it to such an extent that the phial actually seemed to glow.

Among them, only Dortmas was learned enough to realize that what he held in his hand was something very few alchemists, for all they wrote about it, had actually seen—including his master—and he regarded me with as much wonder as the fluid itself. But he said nothing except to ask Por-

phoras what, in the old tongue, this marriage of the primal essences was called.

Porphoras, as if woken from a dream, answered that the ancient ones had considered it the alchemical representation of the mystical sign of union, and indicated it so, pointing to the symbol as it was engraved in the text I have already quoted from.



“It is called the Cronnex,” he said, “but alchemists, in order to indicate that it was the substance about which they were writing and not the spiritual entity it also represents, called it instead the *Aedfyrtas Prestoeras*, or Sublime Marriage, sometimes, wrongly called the Marriage of the Sublimities.

He turned and looked at me. “Why, Jaemas,” he asked me, “would that be wrong?”

Caught by surprise, my mouth dropped open, causing some snickering from the others. But I gathered my wits and replied, “Because, High Master, the word ‘sublimities’ suggests that there is still a ‘husband’ and a ‘wife.’ But in this marriage, the two have become one and, once joined can never be separated.”

Porphoras nodded gravely. “Good. This fluid could

be used to accomplish many things, but nothing can ever reconstitute it back to its separate parts, for it has become incorruptible.”

He took the phial from Justan, who had found a beam of sunlight to hold it in and was dazzling all our eyes with it, and handed it to me. “Secure this safely in my sanctorium,” he told me, and then announced more generally, “such a successful outcome of a difficult effort deserves a half holiday. Let’s consult with cook on how to celebrate it.”

There was a concerted rush for the door, and in a moment I was alone, except for Dortmas. He looked at me, shook his head, hesitated, and then said softly, “Today two astonishing things happened. With my own eyes, I have beheld *Aedfyrtas Prestoeras*, which no alchemist in living memory has seen. And, at the same time, I’ve discovered that these past several months I’ve been sharing a sleeping room with the *Nithaial Elimiel*.”

And before I could speak, let alone prevent him, he knelt before me and kissed my hand.

THAT EVENING, AFTER SUPPER, I let myself into the sanctorium, and let but a single lamp. I had cleared a space on the writing table and had put in the free space, a wide and perfectly round scrying mirror made of blackest onyx. Its surface was as perfectly flat as the most talented of jewel cutters could make it, with a slight rim around its edge.

I removed the stopper from the phial of *Aedfyrtas Prestoeras*, and very gently let four or five drops of the fluid

fall onto the mirror's surface. Immediately, these joined and spread, further and further, until the mirror was coated with it, right up to the rim. The film was so fine that no instrument could take its measurement. Even so it caught the light of the one lamp, refracting this across the mirror's surface in a swirling display of many colors, sent into motion by the slightest motion of my breath, a gesture of my hands.

I now picked up a small scalpel, dipped the blade in distilled spirits, and then gently pressed the point of the blade against my palm. To use a scrying mirror properly, a bit of bodily fluid must be incorporated into it, be that blood, saliva, semen, tears, or the fog of one's breath. Each has its own purpose, but the ritual is the same. When a small puddle of blood had accumulated in my palm, I turned my hand to let it fall onto the mirror's surface, muttering as I did the scrying spell—

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 the drops of blood struck the film of *Aedfyrtas Prestoeras*, the flowing colors vanished; the mirror turned completely black. And then, suddenly, the entire mirror emitted a column of light, of such intense blue that I was momentarily blinded, and, when my sight returned, my first impulse was to lower the rolled shade over the two

stained glass windows. For if anyone happened to be standing without, they would have witnessed an amazing paradox: darkness outside and yet a room filled to overflowing with sunlight.

No, more than sunlight. For what the mirror was showing me was something I had never before seen, the bright blue of a sunlit sea. And in the center of all that water was a tiny boat, with even tinier figures busy at work aboard it. Now, at my beckoning, the mirror drew them closer. I could see fish being pulled aboard; I saw a crabbed old man sitting at the tiller directing the work, and three boys doing it, each one as brown as a nut, and, save a breech clout, as naked as the day he was born.

One was a mere slip of a lad, one had strikingly blond hair and a body that rippled with muscles. It was hard to tear my eyes away from him, but it was the third that I sought. He had light brown hair with blond highlights from the sun, a well-knit body, and serious, azure eyes. It was my other half, my twin, the one who, if I could but embrace him, would make me whole.


Once I knew him, I had no eyes for anyone else, although I saw that his eyes kept drifting helplessly toward his blond companion...who, when their eyes met, gave him back a welcoming smile. This made me feel better, that he might have a lover—but how far away he was from *me*.

Across the Plains of the Lhennad, over the Western Mountains, and then, somewhere out on the alien sea.... Sud-

denly, a great sense of loneliness swept over me, my eyes welled up with tears, and before I could stop them, or let alone grasp what was happening, these began to fall from my eyes onto the surface of the mirror.

In an instant, the flood of light, the rich blue of the sea was gone. My eyes now gazed upon a figure, a man for certain, but one whose visage I found it hard to see. At one moment he seemed older than any man could be and yet remain alive; at another moment, he looked no older than me.

To my horror, I realized that he *was* me—no, no, but the resemblance was uncanny, the same face, the same long black hair, but the eyes were so cold, so dead. Even so, in death they lived. For they were turning toward me, seeking me, snapping the scrying spell that protected me, sharp now with recognition, amusement, triumph.

They sought to transfix me where I was, but I fought it, struggled against it, and in my struggles had the wit to swipe my hand across the mirror, breaking the film, wiping away the contact. A human hand would have been rendered to the bone by that contact with *Aedfyrtas Prestoeras*, and mine was seared with ugly burns. But it was several minutes before I even felt the pain. I had survived, if only barely, my first encounter with The Unnameable One. 

PART THREE



THE FOREST
GRYMAELD

Chapter 11



MY LADY SOPHAERA poured me a cup of steaming corfa-leaf tea and spun a lace of dripping honey over its steaming surface. Then she did the same for herself and bent down to inhale the fragrance. “It smells like the spring, don’t you think, Niccas?” she asked, looking up and smiling at me, for that moment looking just like a lovely young girl.

I smiled back and nodded. Spring had indeed come at last. The day had started with a light misting rain, but already there were hints that the sun was breaking through. The trees in the courtyard outside had passed from bud to blossom, and though the windows were closed against the damp, their own scent was subtly present in the room. I hadn’t any doubt that Sophaera had had them thrown open, misting rain or no, earlier in the day.

“Thank you for seeing me, My Lady,” I said, feeling my nerve slipping away even as the words left my mouth. Although she had invited me to treat her as an equal, I found

that all impossible to do, whereas with Porphoras, I tended to err in the opposite direction. My powers might be far greater than his, but I had to be reminded, usually in a subtle manner, that his understanding was far deeper than mine, and his experience was like an old and often consulted map, whereas mine was a schoolboy's slate, containing but a few laboriously traced lines.

She smiled at me, her eyes regarding me, as always, warmly but with a hint of worry, of sadness. "Things have not been going as smoothly as we had hoped, I know," she said. "You've no doubt come here to scold me. How is your poor hand?"

I look down at its carefully bandaged form, its extruding fingers hovering over the plate of spice cakes. "Almost healed, My Lady," I answered. "Thanks to Tylla's gentle care.

"But scold you?" The shock in my voice faded into embarrassment as I realized—only just then—that she was teasing me. "It is you who should do the scolding. I can scarcely take a step without stepping into a... a... a *mess*."

Now I *was* completely flushing. Having nothing better to do, I took a bite of my cake, which was delicious, if I could've but tasted it.

Sophaera laughed aloud, a lovely sound. "And you, a city boy, bred if not born." She looked at me, her expression one in which mirth mingled with compassion. "Would you like to hear the story of how your mother and I found you,

just after you were born?”

The question was so unexpected that it drove away all other thoughts, leaving my mind as silent as the room. Unable to speak, I could only nod my head.

“As you have by now realized,” Sophaera began, “I am one of what ordinary souls call the Secret Sisters, but which we ourselves name the Sisterhood of the Mystery, for we believe our powers come to us directly from the Blessed Mother herself.”

I nodded, for it was something I had simply known from the moment I first met her, a kind of recognition that happened at a place too deep for words.

“Your Mother, Miridal, saving be her memory, was one of us as well, and Gesryma, Mother of Blessed Name, came to us both in a dream. It was the same dream, although we dreamt in our separate beds. She directed us to go to the ruins of Faeÿstirran, home of the spirit of fire, to await your arrival, and then to bring you back safely to Lorithar.

“She chose us wisely,” Sophaera continued, “because, of course, Porphoras could advise us as to where to find those ruins, buried in the Great Barrens, and your father could arrange for us to get there, as members of a caravan sent to trade with the people of the south.

“Even so, it was very dangerous, for those people live nearby to the country of the demons, who coerce some of them into service and, some say, interbreed with them, horrid as that thought may be. So we arranged that I would

pose as the promised bride of an agent of your father's who lived in Muphastor, the capital city of these people, with your mother pretending to be my servant.

"There is an oasis close by to Faeÿstirran, and there I was to fall ill with what would seem like the blistering disease, which would cause the caravan to abandon us there. We were to find you and wait the next caravan from Muphastor. Our story would then be that we had been left there for your mother to give birth, it being my turn to be the servant. For it was to your mother that Gesryma, Most Blessed, gave the gift of milk with which to nurse you.

"We reached the oasis without trouble. Indeed, for the two of us, young but far from meek and mild, it was a great adventure, riding first on horses and then on *kamelos*, great ugly beasts men use to traverse the desert. It was only when Miridal spread the ointment on my face and arms and weeping blisters appeared that I began to grasp the seriousness of what we had undertaken.

"I understood the alarm that spread through the caravan, because I was frightened myself, fearing I was disfigured forever. We were immediately isolated from the others, our tent being moved to a site far from the others. From that point on, there was no chance that we could change our mind, for no one would even speak to us."

Sophaera poured us both some more tea, and sipped some before she continued. "I'll tell you something about women, Niccas. The presence of a woman makes a man

braver; the presence of a man makes a woman weaker. If I had granted your father's wish for guards to be left with us, it would have been harder for us, not easier. Alone, we became bold, even brave.

"What I had never thought in all our planning was that desert beasts used this oasis to slake their own thirst, and no doubt thought of us as the interlopers. As I lay beside Miridal in the dark, I heard jackals howling, and it occurred to me how vulnerable we were, two women alone and separate from the camp.

"So, I slipped from our tent and crept back to where the others slept, quietly stealing an armload and then another of the firewood that the caravan had brought to do its cooking and keep a watchfire going at night. By then my eyes had grown accustomed to the dark and I noticed when one of the men stealthily rose from his sleeping place and crept over to where the baggage had been heaped up together.

"Of course, there was someone keeping watch, but he sat close to the fire and so saw nothing. But I was further in the dark than the thief, for so I thought he was, and could follow his movements easily. He picked up a small bundle that had set apart from the other baggage and carried it behind a slight ridge, where he left it. He then returned to his sleeping spot, looked around, and, satisfied he had not been seen pulled his blanket over his head and went back to sleep, leaving me to figure out what this could mean.

"As I toyed over the possibilities, something that

had been nagging me in the back of my mind suddenly burst forth into full thought.

“I had then received only the very rudiments of my training, but I was already canny enough to pick up the presence of subtle movements in the Other. I realized that I had sensed something very quiet, very close to us, a sleeping presence, but a presence nonetheless.”

Sophaera nodded slowly as my eyes widened. “Yes, The Unnameable One had placed a watcher here, and not just any watcher, but a Summoner, who could instantly let him know if anyone came to Faeÿstirran, or if the ruins themselves showed any stirring of life.

“I doubted that he would come while the caravan was still here, but it was to depart at dawn. I woke Miridal and in whispers we planned what we must do.”

MY HAND REACHED for another spice cake and I realized that every one of them had vanished. Before Sophaera could notice my hovering, disappointed hand, I picked up the pot and poured us both some more tea.

“The caravan was awake before sunrise,” Sophaera continued, after sipping some, “and departed soon after its orange rim poked up on the eastern edge of the horizon. By the time its tinkling bells could no longer be heard, we had collapsed our tent and dragged it and our supplies further into the desert. I then left your mother to guard them and crept back to where I could watch the abandoned bundle.

“I assumed I would not have to watch long, for Sum-

moners are very susceptible to sunlight, and this one must have greatly suffered the time he spent waiting in this merciless place. Naturally, I risked being discovered myself, if he should happen to come by where I lay, but that was a risk I had to take. I knew that Faeÿstirran lay to the east of us, and I assumed his camp would be close by to it.

“And this was exactly how it was. The light still had edges of pink when he appeared, first stopping at the oasis to fill a large water jug, then coming to the ridge to claim his supplies. He walked in a stooped manner, leaning on a staff, and was dressed in a shabby robe the color of the desert, with a cowl drawn over his head.

However, when he reached the bundle he suddenly stood up straight, threw back the cowl, and stared intently in every direction, turning his head as he did. I lay down behind the slight dune that hid me, but even so to this day I have never been able to erase the image of that obscenely pale and hairless head, the blood-red eyes and gaping, drooling mouth, and, on the back of his skull, the disk of *mythrad* that presses against his brain and connects him to the Lord of Gorzungâd.

“Did he sense me? I was skilled at masking, even then, but perhaps not as much as I believed. If so, all he caught was a trace, and after all this time, well, I’m sure he was plagued with hints of things that were never there. In any case, he snuffled the air, then pulled the cowl over his head, hoisted up both his supplies and his water jug and slunk away across the desert to his hiding place.

“I dared not follow him far, for I had not yet learned how to travel in the desert without genuine risk of getting lost. Also, if he lay in wait for me.... It was a risk I could not run. So I arranged some stones to show which way he had gone and went to back to Miridal, who embraced me with relief. We put the tent back up and crept into its shade to wait out the heat of the day and consider what we must do next.

“That, we decided, was to locate the ruins of Fae-ÿstirran. Everyone in the caravan had heard of them, none had visited them. Everyone pointed east, it’s true, but one pointed to the left, the other to the right. Fortunately, Porphoras had given me a map and Paedaeas, your father, had taught me how to read the stars. So, together, over the next few days we worked out which direction to search for it. That was the easy part. The hard part was working out how to find our way back to the oasis.

“We solved this problem by tearing a brightly colored scarf into strips, and fastening these to small cairns of rock we built every thirty paces. This was slow work, but we women are patient. Once we had gone out a certain distance, one of us would stand still and the other cast about, heading off in different directions, searching for anything, a small rise to stand on, a crumbled pillar, anything that would help us in our search.

“In the end, we found the way by accident—a gust of wind came up and blew clear a small patch of road. And it was no ordinary way, but one paved with stone, with colored

tiles set along each side, to make it easier to follow.

“After all those centuries of disuse, it was covered entirely by sand. But once we started to follow it, we saw signs that others had passed this way not all that long ago—a discarded water bottle, a subtle carving incised in a large rock. Signs, we supposed, of pilgrims who had made their way here to worship among the ruins.

“What the Summoner had done with such.... Well, the very thought made my flesh crawl, and I pursued it no further. More importantly, in all our searching, we had failed to notice that the sky was darkening in the west. It was only when a second gust of wind, a larger, rougher brother of the one that had exposed the road, nearly knocked us off our feet that we realized a great sand storm was blowing in.

“We had to run directly toward it to get back to our camp. It swept towards us, a great rolling wave, high as a cliff, a glittering sandy gold at its crest and a dark, sullen, angry brown where it scoured across the desert floor.

“We barely made it back in time. The wind hit even as I was tying the last leather straps that fastened the tent’s opening shut—howling, screaming, plunging us into darkness. Fortunately, we had pitched the tent low to keep the Summoner from seeing it, thus making it easier for the wind to pass over it. Even so, one anchor peg was torn loose, and both Miridal and I had to throw ourselves down and seize and hold the flapping canvas before the entire tent was ripped off its moorings and sent flying off into the air.

Soon, though, the flap was held in place by the thick weight of the sand that piled up against the tent. Then our fears turned to the threat of being smothered—but against that there was nothing we could do. We put our backs against that side of the tent and wrapped scarves around our faces, for even inside our shelter the air was full of grit. Then we wrapped our arms around each other and waited. Prayed and waited.”

Sophaera stood up and crossed the room to the windows, undid a sash, and swung it out, letting in the sweet, sunny spring air. “I swear to you, Niccas,” she said, “some of that sand clings to my lungs still.” She turned, sat lightly on the window sill, and continued. “By nightfall, the storm had subsided. The wind still keened, the sand still scurried across the surface of the desert, but only in thin, blowing sheets.

“Miridal and I let go of each other, unbound our scarves, and finally dared to step out into the moonlight to shake some of the sand out of our clothing and blankets. It would take several baths to get it all out of our pores and our hair, and that would not happen for some time. But at least now we could sleep in something closer to comfort and, wrapping ourselves up, tried to do so.

Sophaera laughed. “Little did we know that our adventures for that day were far from over. For we had hardly fallen into slumber, when The Blessed Gesryma came to us again in a dream, and told us to shake off our sleep and go to immediately to Faeÿstirran. And when we crawled out of the

tent and stood there in the dark, rubbing our eyes, we found that the road was illuminated for us. The storm had swept it clean of sand and the colored tiles that lined each side now glowed in the dark.

“True, we had to wade through the sand to get to it, but when we did, our traveling was easy. We hurried along it, bearing swaddling clothes for the infant—for you, Niccas—and soon reached Faeÿstirran, for it lay quite close to the oasis.

“When we reached the ruins we saw a sight as rare as anything I might ever hope to see, for the place was alive with dancing flames. None of them were higher than my waist, but they swirled and leaped, constantly changing color and intensity—flicking dimly, then brightly, now a bright blue, a deep green, an eye-teasing, barely visible violet.

“And, in the center of all this, you lay, naked and tiny, kicking your legs and gurgling happily. The flames made way for us as we approached you, lying on an intricately wrought mosaic floor, the tiles of which seemed to match every color of every dancing flame, worked into the emblem of *Nithaial*.

“We fell on our knees before you and pressed our foreheads against the tiles, stricken with awe. But then you began to cry, like any baby, and Miridal leaped to her feet and took you up. She cupped you in one arm and offered you a breast. And, again like any baby, you found the nipple, fumbled with it, then got it firmly in your mouth and began to suck. Tears filled my eyes and I wrapped my arms around

Miridal, feeling her joy as well as my own.”

The sound of a voice came to us from down the corridor. It seemed familiar to me, somehow, but I couldn’t place it. Then we heard Porphoras speak, his voice receding as he did so. Someone had come to see him, most likely with the sort of need that only an alchemist could fulfill. That was how he earned his living, after all, supplying all manner of artisans and devisors with metals purged of all impurities, tinctorials, amalgams, rarefied salts.

“And the Summoner?” I asked.

Sophaera’s eyes met mine. “I hadn’t forgotten him,” she replied. “Not for one second. I scanned the Other constantly, watching for his presence. Only once did I catch the faintest trace of it, and then it seemed to come from some great distance.

“And I thought, well then, *that* was the purpose of the storm—to pick him up and blow him far, far away. And thus leave The Unnameable One in complete ignorance of all that had just taken place.”

She shrugged. “Certainly, we saw no trace of him again. Of the jackals, yes—they must have caught the scent of the baby. But they knew what fire was, and now we dared light one. And I was then already a fine archer, and I taught them what arrows were, too. After that they skulked around a bit, but left us alone.

“In a matter of weeks, a returning caravan arrived, who knew nothing of us. By then, my lesions had healed, our

story about the birth of the baby was accepted, our money was seen as good, and so we went with them back to the Kingdom and eventually to our homes.”

Sophaera sighed and left the sill, coming back to sit at the table with me. I reached over and took her hand.

“I claim you for my aunt, High Lady, and dearest of friends. This story you have told me is the most precious I shall ever hear, and I shall always hold it close to my heart.”

Tears filled our eyes and she leaned toward me and kissed me on the lips. “Miridal and I were *twerë*,” she said simply. “I can’t look at you and not feel close to her. I hope this is now true for you, too, looking at me. Our loss is different, but the same. Let this gift help assuage it.”

THERE WAS SOME SILENCE between us. After a while I said, more to myself than to Sophaera, “So Faeÿstirran is my home. Perhaps that’s where I should go next.”

“Well,” she said, “it is one of your homes. The one I think you will love the most is Gostranar, buried in the center of Wisferon, the Holy Wood. It is said to be an enchanted and wonderful place. But there is also the Deep Dwelling, Ern-fardast, in the dark north. Half your powers wait you there. Are you wondering where you should go next?”

I looked at her in surprise. “That’s why I came to see you,” I said. “To ask your advice. I feel that my time here is about to come to an end.”

Sophaera nodded. “I fear so, too, and so does Porphoras. He tells me you have learned much, and perhaps

even enough.” She paused, as if hesitating to tell me something, and shook her head. “Perhaps Porphoras should be telling you this, not me, but I’m going to do so anyway. All our plans have been stymied by the refusal of the Order of the Narrow Blade to return your wand of power. If you are forced to flee the city without it, you are doomed—no matter if you head north *or* south.”

“Is it that important, then?” I asked. “It didn’t seem so when I held it.”

“Once you assume your full powers,” Sophaera answered, “it wouldn’t matter at all. Or, more accurately, you would have already made them sorry indeed for this act of folly. But right now you are weak and you need its help. You can both draw power from it and use it to magnify such powers as are developing within you. Without it, you are just another boy, except one that The Unnameable One is using every bit of his power to seek out and destroy.”

I stood up and prepared to make my leave. “But if I *did* have it,” I said, “what I must do now is go the Southern Desert and find Faeÿstirran, then turn around and go the Northern Wilderness to....”

“Ernfardast,” Sophaera reminded me, and smiled wanly. “Yes, you face no easy task. But we are assembling a party to accompany you; Porphoras will tell you about that. He has meant to for some time. But negotiations with the Order of the Narrow Blade have been repeatedly set back by Stalcas, who seems to have ousted Arestea as *koryphaios*,

and seems to have convinced the others that they should keep the wand safely locked away.”

“It’s because The Blessed Gesryma gave it the shape of a dagger,” I said. “She did it so I could wear it unnoticed, but they have seized on that fact to claim it as an emblem of their order.”

“So it seems,” Sophaera said. “But that is Stalcas’s excuse, not his *reason*. And what that is we haven’t a hint.”

We barely had time to notice the steps approaching down the hall when Tylla, looking quite flustered, appeared doorway. But before she could speak, she was peremptorily pushed aside, and Lida eas ffyr Lissator strode into the room.

He sketched a bow to Sophaera. “Dear Lady,” he said, “please excuse this interruption. But I have need of this particular apprentice of yours.... Jaemas, your servant told me.”

“I don’t understand, High Lida eas,” Sophaera replied, “why you should have need of one of our apprentices.”

“Simple enough, Lady Sophaera,” Lida eas replied, “It’s not an apprentice, I require, but a horseman. I want him to ride the horse I just bought from your husband.”


“Any of our servants could bring the horse to the Castle,” she said, speaking coolly, but with no trace of rudeness. “And as promptly as you wish.”

“Ah, there it is,” Lida eas said. “I have no intention of bringing this horse to the castle, but to my hunting lodge at the edge of the Forest Grymaeld. It’s several leagues from here, and I’d like to get there before dark.

“So, Jaemas,’ he said, turning to me, “Get on your riding boots. I know you have some, because we’ve met on horseback before, have we not?”

“Yes, High Lidaetas,” I said.

“And we have some unfinished business between us, isn’t that also so?” The taunting note with this was said made it a challenge, not a question, and I simply nodded in reply. My mind was racing. I found myself excited more than anything by this unexpected turn of events. If Lidaetas ffyr Lissator was to own Whynnya, I was willing to seize this opportunity for one last ride.

“By your leave, High Lady,” I said, executing a real bow to Sophaera and, before she could speak, was already skirting the astonished Tylla and racing for the stairs. 

Chapter 12



THE CITY LORITHAR can be entered by four great gates. Those that face north and south open onto the Great Way, which connects the great cities of the Kingdom. These gates are always busy, as is the one that faces east, directly onto the river Alsorel and the docks which tend to the river traffic. Few, though, use the western gate, which opens onto quiet farmland and, beyond that, the Forest Grymaeld.

The forest once came up to the gate itself, but over the centuries it has been cut back, both for the timber and to make new farmland. It is now several leagues away, a dark green sea to those who look out to the west from the Ring Wall. (From the top of the castle, it is said, one can see all the way to the Wall of the World. If true, that is very far indeed.)

I had never in my life left the city through the west gate. In the company of Lidaeas ffyr Lissator, it was as if there were no impediment there at all. The guards, having seen his approach, had ordered the peasant carts to the side

of the road, and we cantered through to their stiff salutes, which Lida eas barely acknowledged.

He was on the same black stallion he had been riding at the track and using very much the same equipage, except that two boar lances were shoved into long leather sheaths within easy reach. Hunting boar was restricted to the nobility; to carry the hunting lance used to kill them was as much an emblem of power as the bright coat of arms emblazoned on his horse's breast collar.

That animal's name was Crusalas. It was a nervy beast with the habit of violently tossing its head and jumping to one side when something disturbed it. Lida eas handled the horse easily, even smiling slightly at the sudden leaps and nervous tossings, as if the animal's outbursts spoke to something inside himself.

Lida eas brought Crusalas right up beside me and said, "Porphoras told me that horse is yours, that you rode it here from Plaecenon. Why are you selling it?"

I glanced over at him. "This isn't Plaecenon," I replied. "Here, it costs money to keep a horse, and apprentices are given little of that and even less time for riding."

Lida eas snorted. "You're an idiot," he said. "If I had to choose between that horse and an apprenticeship, I know what I'd do." And he leaned over and struck Whynnya a sharp blow with his riding crop.

Already on edge by the nearness of Crusalas, Whynnya bolted, so suddenly that had my knees not been gripping

her, she might have left me sitting on empty air. Crusalas, also shocked by the sound of the crop, surged forward himself. Suddenly, both horses were tearing along at breakneck speed, sending travelers scattering for their lives.

This was not a carefully tended road. By the time we had gone barely a stone's throw from the city gates it had degenerated into little more than a track, rutted by cartwheels, alternating between stretches of mud and coarsely broken stone. Nor were there bridges. Streams, when we came to them, were crossed by fording them or, if narrow enough, by leaping from one bank to the other.

The mud was the worst. The sun had had no chance yet to dry things out from this morning's rain, and the two horses furiously churned through patches that rose over their fetlocks, splattering much all over Lidaegas and myself. I hoped Crusalas would lose his footing and throw his rider into it head first, but the beast, for all its jumpiness, slipped little more than Whynnya.

He was, again, keeping up with her easily on solid ground and, also again, having a hard time gaining on her. Whynnya's first leap had put us a length ahead, and we were keeping it. I leaned forwards and kept up a flow of encouraging words, my legs bent up, my body pressing against her.

The countryside flashed by, what little I could see of it. The forest lay directly ahead, a great wall of green. The good farm land ran north and south along the river; the part of Grymaeld that covered it had been cut down first. Now,

slowly, men were encroaching on it here, too, but they had not yet gotten far.

Lida eas was also urging his horse forward. I heard the slap of his crop and clenched my teeth. The thought of him using that on Whynnya made me feel sick. I risked a glance backwards and saw that Crusalas's eyes were bulging out of their sockets; his huge teeth bared.

He looked more like a demon than a horse, I thought, but, still... no, he wasn't gaining. I felt—and immediately stifled—a sense of triumph. I could do nothing more foolish than humiliate this lordling, but this was exactly why I had come. And, by the looks of the strain on Crusalas's face, I was also about to ruin his favorite horse.

The glance back lasted but a second—even that was a foolish risk. Not that Whynnya need my guidance. But turning my body made my perch on her more precarious, throwing off my balance and thus risking throwing her off hers. Because of that, I couldn't look back again to make out what I had caught in the corner of my eye. A flickering? No, something flapping—directly on the road behind Lida eas.

And not on the road but directly above it! A *skal-gür*.... Even as these words formed in my mind, a terrible shriek sounded just over our heads, terrifying the horses, and making my blood run cold. Although I didn't see this, it also caused Lida eas, out of pure instinct, to whip a boar's lance from its sheath and ram it with all his strength up into the belly of the beast as it passed directly above us.

What I did see was the skalgür suddenly turning cartwheels on the road ahead. Simultaneously, Crusalas stumbled and fell, tossing Lida eas onto the verge beside the road, while Whynnya skidded and reared. Just ahead of us, the skalgür, not lying on its back, was trying to rip the spear out of its body with its claws, its great head flailing from side to side, uttering a series of ear-splitting cries.

As soon as I could quiet Whynnya, I dismounted and tied her reins to a small tree. I turned to look behind me. Crusalas was struggling to get back to his feet, but Lida eas lay where he had been thrown. When I hurried over to him, he lifted his head. “Kill the skalgür,” he gasped, and he fell back unconscious.

At first, this made no sense. The thing was now no threat to us. But its shrieks, on the other hand, if those summoned others of its kind.... I swore softly. Lida eas, of course, wouldn’t have hesitated, he was used to killing large, dangerous things. Whereas I wasn’t sure whether I could even do it properly.

I looked over at Crusalas. He was back on his feet, limping slightly as he made his way toward Whynnya. I could see that the other boar lance had snapped in two when the horse had fallen—I would have to use Lida eas’s sword. I bent down and rolled his senseless body on its side, and drew his blade from its sheath.

It was, of course, a fine thing, decorated from point to shaft with delicate filigree, inlaid here and there with pre-

cious stones. A dandy's sword, not a warrior's, but deadly enough in its way. Lida eas had killed too many men in duels for there to be any doubt about that.

I returned to Whynnya and removed her saddle. She paid no attention to me. She had positioned herself so that she could see every move the skalgür made, and every time it flapped about she gave a skittish jump.

"Easy, lady, easy," I said. I pulled the saddle blanket from her back and bundled it up in one fist. I then pressed my face against her neck for a moment, lifted the sword, and stepped out between her and the beast on the road.

The skalgür stopped thrashing when it realized I was coming, lifting its head up so that it could watch me with one or the other of its dull red eyes. It had a leathery body that was either dark gray or brown, depending on how the light hit it, with every muscle and tendon stretched tightly just beneath its flesh.

The lance kept it from turning over so that it could get onto its feet. It would flop over enough for the shaft to hit the ground, and the pain would drive it back again. However, it was almost as dangerous on its back. Its spear-like beak was half again as long as my sword, and lined with needle-sharp teeth. It those caught hold of me....

I edged up one step at a time, my weight always balanced so that I could leap backwards the moment it made a thrust. I paused at just the point where I could sense its neck muscles tensing for my next step, letting the crumbled sad-

dle blanket dribble out of my fingers, until I was holding it by the edge. This quivered in the breeze, causing the skalgür to watch it as fixedly as it was watching me.

I leaned forward, not stepping, but flipping the blanket in its direction. It made a sudden stab at billowing cloth, piercing it right through. Immediately, I threw the blanket forward over its head and seized hold of its beak.

A skalgür can swoop down and fly off with a man in its talons, killing him at its leisure. But it depends on having the man dangling helplessly in the air. But now it was on the ground—I was heavier and I had the advantage of leverage. It couldn't dislodge me and, because of the blanket, it couldn't see me to grasp me with its talons.

How much of this it figured out before I lopped of its head, I'll never know. I swung the sword with all my might, sliced it cleanly through, and flung it, still cloaked by the horse blanket, across the road. There was one great spurt of blood from its severed head and that was that—the lance wound had already nearly bled it dry.

Even so, I had no intention of getting near its body. I lifted the whole thing up with the end of the lance and threw it to the other side of the road. The legs kicked jerkily when I did so, and the talons opened and closed, which less frightened me than made me sick. But worse by far was the stretch from the beast's stomach, as putrid a smell as ever befouled the sweet spring air.

I shuddered. In fact, I was now conscious enough

of myself to realize I was shaking all over, not from fear but from the aftermath of the kill. I went to Whynnya, took down my leather water flask, took a long drink, and splashed some more onto my face.

Crusalas was standing there, watching me, all fire gone from him, at least for the moment. I seized his reins and brought him to his master.

Lida eas had come to come to. He was holding himself in a half-sitting position, leaning back against his arms, his face white with pain. "My leg is broken," he said through clenched teeth, "in more than one place."

I stood over him with his own sword in my hand. Was he that blind to how much I hated him? How much I wanted to give his father a taste of the pain he had visited onto me? I lifted the blade until it was a finger's length from Lida eas's face.

He looked at it now and made a noise of disgust. "As foul in death as they are in life," he said. "So, you finished it off." He looked past the blade at me. "But *I* was the one who speared it."

I gave up. "Yes, High Lida eas," I replied. "Yours was the lance that brought it down and yours the sword that finished it."

He smiled thinly. "I shall put it exactly that way," he said. "Now shove that damned blade in the ground and go get my flask." I went to Crusalas and unstrapped it. His was silver, bound with polished leather strapping, and it con-

tained spirits, not water. He took it with one hand, drank half of its contents down, shuddered, shoved the flask back into my hand, and sat there for a moment, gasping for air.

“Take a swallow yourself,” he said, finally, sounding more like himself, “and go get me the other horse. I don’t trust Crusalas. You’ll have to manage him.”

I hadn’t thought of this. I had planned to ride Whynnya bareback the rest of the way, leaving the saddle in the bushes. Now I had to unsaddle Crusalas, and put all his trappings on Whynnya, a tedious and, it proved, difficult job, since I wasn’t familiar with the riding accoutrements of a high lord.

But, eventually, it was done. Then there was the task of getting Lida eas up onto her. I brought her over, gave him my hand, and pulled him up, so that he was standing on his good leg, with one hand on the pommel. Now he had to drag himself up high enough so could get the foot of his good leg over her and into a stirrup, a slow process that required all of his and my strength and all of Whynnya’s patience.

Lida eas cursed the whole time through clenched lips. By the time he was mounted he could barely sit there from the pain, his broken leg hanging limply down. I passed him up his flask and this time he drained it dry.

Finally, there was Crusalas. I grabbed him by the bit and pulled his head down so that we looked at each other eye to eye. Then, I let him know who I was. An understanding passed between us and I climbed up onto his back. He bore

me with easy dignity, something that Lidaegas also chose not to notice. Or simply didn't—by this time it was taking all his will to keep from fainting and falling to the ground. Whynya sensed this and stepped with infinite gentleness. And so, guided by the occasional word from Lidaegas, we made our way into the Forest Grymaeld.

ALTHOUGH THERE ARE LARGER FORESTS in the Kingdom, Grymaeld is all one should be, dark, dense, and dangerous, and few there are with the courage to probe its inner depths. But men have made their way into its fringes for centuries, and many paths lead some distance inside. Some are made by charcoal burners and others by lumber cutters, or by peasants to gather firewood, either for themselves or for selling in the city.

Others wander off the beaten track on businesses of their own. Swine herders bring their pigs to feed on the acorns and other nuts; trappers set their snares for fox, badger, and ferret; and hunters, some with bow, others with lance or spear, slay everything from squirrel to deer.

The only animal wholly forbidden to hunt is the great elk, which is reserved for royalty. The lesser nobility use packs of hounds to chase down and kill wolves, which is considered a great sport. But mostly they pursue wild boar, hunting them on horseback, then dismounting and spearing them on foot. They also keep lodges within the forest itself, usually staffed with a keeper and perhaps a few stout men to serve as game beaters when the noblemen are in residence

and to guard against looters when they are not.

Unlike a woods, which starts with a slow increase of shrubbery until it surrounds the traveler with a tangle of trees, the Forest Grymaeld begins with dramatic suddenness. As we approached it, the track, like a river traced back to its tributaries, suddenly splayed out in a dozen different directions into the great sea of trees.

At Lidaeas's direction, we followed one of them, riding out of sunlight and into shadow. It was like passing from the outdoors into great temple. Once inside, we found stretched out before us an endless succession of great trees, with trunks as thick as pillars and just as high, branches appearing only far above our heads, where they spread out to create a dense canopy of leaves. At this time of the year, these were yet small, delicate, and brightly green, and the afternoon sun shone brightly down on them, casting a shimmering glow about us.

We rode among the trunks through that play of flickering light and shadow. By this time, Lidaeas stopped speaking altogether and fell into a painful stupor, letting Crusalas show us the way, which kept diverged again and again, until I was totally lost.

Great forests are grimly silent. If the wind is blowing, there is the distant murmur of the leaves—but that serves more to frame the stillness than to break it, reminding you that you are far away from the world of sunlight and the rhythms of everyday life. Even the thud of the horses'

hooves was muffled by the thick layer of leaf mold that lay everywhere on the ground. By the time we came near the lodge, dusk was falling, and in the silence and the dark, its sudden appearance before us, almost at the moment we at its very door, made me feel not as though I had arrived somewhere but rather had fallen under a wizard's spell.

The ground floor was built of masoned stone and that above it of thick timbers, with a trim shingle roof on top of that. The windows below were no wider than arrow slits and filled with thick pebbled glass; the door was built of slabs of oak, held in place with massive bands of black cast iron, which also formed the hinges.

"What beast is *that* meant to keep out?" I thought to myself as we halted in front of it. The place was dark and silent, but a trickle of smoke floated from one of the several chimneys, so someone was surely at home. I swung off Crusalas's back and went to the door. A large bell hung beside it, and I swung the clapper rope three times.

The sound of the third peal was still ringing through the trees when the door swung open and a large man dressed in hunting leathers stepped out. He looked at me, then past me to his master, and turned pale.

He hurried over and fell on one knee. "High Lord Lida eas!" he said. "What befell...."

Lida eas interrupted him impatiently. "Tarsas, just get me off this animal, and gently. Where's Drastor? It will take the two of you."

Tarsas looked up at his master nervously. “He was attacked by some beast today, High Lord, and badly hurt. I was just tending to him.”

Lida eas swore. “Well, old Kaspan won’t be of any help, or the boy either.” He looked over at me. “You, help Tarsas get me down, then take the horses around back to the stables. Wait there until someone lets you in.”

He paused and looked at me, some life flashing back into his eyes. “And don’t even *think* of heading back to Lorithar. You may have won the race, but in winning it you’ve only shown how much you’ve lost. That horse is mine. You’ll go back tomorrow by foot, the moment I can spare someone to show you the way.”

I bridled at this; I was no horse thief. But I merely said, “Yes, High Lida eas,” and helped Tarsas get him off Whynnya and as far as the door. By then, Kaspan, an old man but not a weak one, appeared and took my place. I went and got the horses and brought them to the stable door.

I had to wait a long while before they opened. “Had to help Kaspan to set the leg,” Tarsas explained. “I left him to do the tucking in.” He led me and the horses into a small courtyard with a well in the center. The stables were on one side; the house sprawled around the other two.

Tarsas helped me remove the tack and get the horses fed and bedded. He was curt with me at first, but the fact that Crusalas behaved so docilely at my hands—letting me wipe him down and even stroke his nose—won him over.

“Fuck me alive, then fuck me dead,” he said, “but I never thought I’d see the like. With a total stranger, too. And did he really throw the High Lord? He’s been trying to do that since he was a colt, the bugger.” Tarsas and the horse eyed each other the like old combatants they were.

I told Tarsas about the skalgür.

He spat into the straw and muttered, “That’s our High Lord for you—goes and knocks on a demon’s door and thinks he won’t get dragged inside,” He looked at me and added, “Better bar the stable door, lad, and, while you’re at it, fix it fast with the stanchions there. It may be a stormy night.”

While I did that he hauled water out of the well, and we both brought buckets of it with us into the kitchen. It was a dark and smoky room, lit only by a couple of candles on the large central table and the fire burning in the hearth. A whole boar was spitted and set above it, being slowly turned by a system of weights and chains.

Tarsas went and basted it with a sopping rag tied to a stick, stuck a knife blade into the meat, looked at the juices that oozed from the cut, and grunted.

“I’ll go up and see what’s his High Lord’s pleasure,” he said to me. “If you would, take a bowl of water over to Drastor and see if you can get him to drink it. If you can manage Crusalas, you should be able to handle him.” He nodded his head at what I had taken to be a bundle of rags tossed in a corner near the fire, and went out the door.

When I brought the bowl over, Drastor groaned and

lifted his head. It took a moment for me to sort him out—a tangled mass of dirty hair that melded into an equally tangled mess of dirty beard. What was shocking about him was his face, which was a dark and blistery red, swollen up so much that you could barely see his eyes.

“A sight, ain’t I?” he whispered harshly. “Give me the drink.” He reached out his hands for the bowl, but they were shaking so badly I had to hold them myself, to guide it to his mouth. The moment I touched his flesh, I felt something disgusting and vile surge through me. It was all I could do to not drop the bowl and leap away from him.

Drastor must have noticed my response, but he ignored it, greedily drinking the bowl dry. His body shuddered all over as he passed it back.

“Be a good lad and get me another,” he said, in the same whisper. “I’m burning with the fire.”

I did as he asked, but this time he drank it down more slowly, and waved it away before all the water was gone. “Dunno if it helps,” he said. “I’m all dry inside but the water just seems to disappear.”

Drastor peered at me. “Can’t see you good, but you’re not his love boy, that’s for sure. Get a wet rag and wipe me face, will you? That might work better.” Even this much talk left him panting, and so he pointed slightly with one hand in the direction where I might find one.

I did, a whole heap of them, none cleaner than the next. I took one, put it in the wash basin, and poured cold

water on it. When it was soaked through, I wrung it out just a little, brought it over, knelt down, and mopped his face.

“Oh shit and fuck,” Drastor said, “that’s something. Let me have it.” I handed him the cloth and he wiped it around his neck and then reached under his shirt with it to mop his chest. As he did, the shirt rose up a little, revealing a blood-soaked bandage wrapped around his waist.

Drastor saw the look of shock on my face. “If I hadn’t turned just as it struck,” he gasped, “the thing would’ve gutted me there and then. But it got me bad enough. Claw raked me whole side.” He groaned.

“Can I do anything?” I asked.

He shook his head, saying, “Leave that to Kaspan. He has the healing touch.” Drastor held out the cloth. “You can take that back though.”

When I took it from him our hands touched again, and again I felt that surge of vileness.

“Felt it, didn’t you?” Drastor whispered. “Kaspan is lying to me. I’m fucking doomed. I knew it. Fucking doomed.”

“Hush, you idiot!” said a voice directly behind me, sending me practically leaping into the air.

It was Kaspan himself, silent as a ghost in his felt slippers. He was bent and withered, but with a spryness to him still. He felt Drastor’s forehead, opened one of his eyes and peered into it. When he turned, we exchanged glances, and I could see he was greatly perturbed.


But to me he said only, “It seems you’re wanted upstairs for dinner. Have you nothing cleaner with you?”

“I was meant to go back already,” I said. “I’m no invited guest.”

Kaspan smiled mirthlessly. “Aye, that’s clear enough,” he said. “The puzzle’s why he wants you up there, anyway. He’s already got his pleasure boy.” He sighed. “Still, it’s what he said. I’ll find you an old shirt of his, if you’ll go wash yourself. Tarsas will be here in a moment to carry up the tray.”

As I turned toward the wash basin, he caught my elbow. “His Lordship is too wrought up about his own hurt to ask about...,” and here he nodded toward Drastor, who had buried his head in his arms again. “Don’t say nothin’, if you please. He’d put the lad out of the place in a second, and I won’t have it. He’s too damaged to be any threat. We’ll watch him the night through, Tarsas and me.”

He lowered his voice still further. “He won’t be alive by morning, poor soul. The curse works fast and none survive it, one way or the other.” He shuddered and sketched the sign of the Goddess in the air.

His words were full of such ill omen that I wished I knew exactly what he was talking about, but I had no chance to ask. Tarsas came in, took up a carving knife, and went to the spitted boar, and Kaspan went to get me my clean shirt. I filled the basin with water and tried to wash away all of the day... as much as I could. 

Chapter 13



THE OLD SHIRT OF LIDAEAS'S was about as elegant a thing as I'd ever worn, made of the softest weave and decorated with lace. Ordinarily, I'd have felt thrilled to wear it, but in this instance it only increased my unease. In the hunting lodge, the ground floor was taken up with the main hall, the weaponry, a room for dressing and hanging game, storage rooms, and, of course, the kitchen.

Kaspan led me up a flight of stairs to a balcony that ran around the grand hall, lined with what I imagined were guest rooms and Lida eas's own living quarters, which were distinguished by a pair of elegantly carved double doors. The old servant knocked on these and, without waiting for an answer, led me in.

I found myself inside a quite large room, as handsomely arranged as anything in a palace, with great tapestries hanging from the wall and thick, ornate carpets on the floor. It was only when I looked up did I see any hint that this

room was part of a hunting lodge. The supporting beams were decorated with great racks of antlers and the sloping sides of the ceiling—really, the underside of the room—were covered with the stuffed heads of animals: bear, wolves, deer, and boar. At each end was hung the majestic head of an elk, representing a boon granted the family by the king himself.

Lidaegas reclined in long chair set near a roaring fire in a huge brick fireplace, a goblet of wine in his hand and the crock for refilling it near at hand. He had been washed and dressed in clean clothing and his leg, held rigid with splints strapped with bandages, was carefully laid out on several feather pillows.

Seated on a small stool at his side was a boy, who at first glance seemed to me barely twelve years of age, and dressed in nothing but a few gauzy pieces of colored silk. One was tied around his neck, another around his waist, and two others were wrapped like sleeves around his arms. The one around his waist fell over but hardly concealed his privates, for everything was clearly visible through the filmy cloth.

At the moment we came in he was leaning forward to slip a piece of cake or some other sweetmeat into Lidaegas's mouth, and so I couldn't see his face. But his body was smooth and well-formed and his movements graceful, supple, and openly shameless. I had never seen a love boy in the flesh, so to speak, before, and found the sight made me uneasy, at once distressed and, despite myself, aroused—all the more so because as he leaned forward to feed Lidaegas,

the lordling's hand idly, familiarly caressed the boy's bottom, fingers easily brushing aside the silken covering.

"Greetings, High Lida eas," I said—or croaked, it might be more honestly put, since my throat had so tightened up. He waved me over to a chair that had been set down near them. As I went over to sit into it, he finished his mouthful and washed it down with a mouthful of wine.

From my new vantage point, I could see that on the other side of him a small table had been put, and on it rested his unsheathed sword. I thought this odd, though I knew next to nothing of the ways of the nobility.

However, Lida eas, who had obviously drunk quite a bit of wine already, was quite gracious, albeit in a form that laced every word with a touch of mockery.

"Ah," he said, "Jaemas, is it not? The boy who saved my life, slew the skalgür, beat me in an open race, rode a horse bareback that no one before me has dared mount at all." He lifted his goblet to me, drank, and then said to his companion, "Boy, get Jaemas a goblet of his own, and fill it for him. Where's your good manners?"

To me, he said, "Excuse him. He was a gift, and selected, I believe, for other talents than his attention to the needs of guests." Lida eas smiled at his own jest and took another swallow of wine.

I heard these words, and nodded, but I hardly grasped them. When the boy turned toward me, I thought at once how much he resembled Helias, and then, to my aston-

ishment, my horror, I realized it was Helias. Helias with his body hair shaved away; Helias with his tattoo artfully covered over—whether by magic or makeup I couldn't immediately discern—but Helias all the same.

He kneeled to give me the goblet, his eyes cast down, but when I took it from him, he glanced up at me and smiled with only the slightest hint of provocation. As he rose, I caught the scent of something that stirred my blood—an aphrodisiac of some sort.

All love boys, girls, wear one to their assignments, or so I've heard, but not all of them are real, and this one was. It worked on me and, even more, it worked on Lidaegas, who had Helias sit on the stool and lie back against his chest. That way, his arm was free and his hand could wander at will up and down the boy's body, at one moment caressing his nipples, the next playing with his sex.

When he reached down there, Helias wiggled and spread his legs, allowing the hand free access to toy with what it wished. This was such a torment to me that I could hardly bear it, with Helias calmly watching me as it took place, and Lidaegas idly enjoying himself as he turned his attention to me.

I had already said to him that his praise of me was full of half truths—it was he who had brought down the skalgür, that no one had won the race, and that Crusalas had been gentled by the horrific fall, which had knocked all the wind, and all the spirit, out of the animal.

Lidaelas had lightly seized hold of the knob of Helias's cock, and was pulling the foreskin back and forth, causing the boy to squirm with pleasure. He reached his own hand to where Lidaelas's cock lay covered by his shirt, but it was batted playfully away.

"Not yet, you naughty boy," Lidaelas said. Then speaking to me, he continued, "But you did save my life, Jaemas, there's no denying that. If you hadn't killed the thing, it would have brought a flock of them, and they would have dined on me at their pleasure...."

A knock at the door. It swung open and Kaspan stepped in, followed by Tarsas, bearing a huge tray before him and an unopened crock of wine under each arm. Kaspan set a table between Lidaelas and myself, covered it with a clean cloth, and gestured to Tarsas to set down the tray. It contained a platter heaped with slices of roast wild boar, another with thick wedges of bread, and several crocks, some holding pungent pickled vegetables and others variously spiced mustards. Finally, he opened both the crocks of wine, setting these on the table as well.

"And now I dine at *my* pleasure instead," Lidaelas said. "It's a pity that skalgür isn't a delicacy, because there's no more perfect conclusion to a killing than eating the beast that meant to devour you. But I speared this boar all of... when, Kaspan?"

"Two weeks ago, Sire," the old man replied.

"Two weeks ago, and it has since been hanging in

the game room, aging to a perfection,” Lida eas concluded. “Much, much better than skalgür. So, honored Jaemas, please begin the feast.”

The appearance of all this food reminded me that I had had nothing to eat since the tiny spice cakes Lady Soph-aera had given me earlier in the day. I picked up a knife, stabbed a piece of boar, and, holding a piece of bread beneath my chin to catch the drippings, began to eat.

Helias sat right beside Lida eas and fed him with his fingers, first cutting each slice of meat into bite-size pieces. Occasionally, the lord would take up a bit of meat himself and hold it above Helias’s head, dropping it and letting the boy catch it in his mouth.

Or else he would draw his hand away and make Helias lean over him to get it—and then give the boy a sharp slap on his bottom and, laughing, eat the bit of meat himself. Then Helias would pretend to sulk, and Lida eas would ply him with teasing words and sips from his goblet of wine, and offers to sooth the sting with kisses.

Helias’s giggling coyness quickly took my appetite away. How could he be so shameless, so coy and giggling? It was strange. If he had really been twelve years old, my disgust would have been directed entirely at Lida eas. But because he was sixteen, at least half of it was directed at him. Part of me realized that he must be acting out this role on the behest of the Order of the Narrow Blade, but that didn’t make me any happier. Somehow, I suspected, Lida eas was

not the one here on their assassination list.

Indeed, this very thought was passing through my mind when Lida eas caught my eye. “Wondering why I invited you to join us, Honored Jaemas—apart, I mean, from having saved my life?”

My mouth, as it happened, as full of meat, so I could only nod my head. Lida eas tapped Helias on the leg and he immediately stopped plying the lord with food, lying back instead on the man’s chest and watching me idly.

Lida eas took a pull from his goblet, rolled the wine about in his mouth, then swallowed it. “I thought,” he said, “that you could finish a rhyme for me. The first two stanzas are stuck in my mind, but for the life of me I can’t remember the rest.” He leaned his head back and recited,

*This aye night, this aye night
Every night and all
Fire and fleet and candlelight,
The dragons claim their toll.*

*When thou from hence away art past,
Every nighte and alle,
To Forest Grymaeld thou com’st at last;
The dragons claim their toll.*

Dumbly, I shook my head. Not only had I never heard this rhyme before, but the words made no sense to me at all, save for the mention of the forest.

“Hmm,” Lida eas continued, “that’s very disappoint-

ing. You see, my old nurse, Malda, now smiling down at us from the Hallowed Halls, taught it to me. She came from Plaecenon, just as you do, and she told me all the children there learned that rhyme. But, apparently, not you.”

“If I did, I’ve forgotten it, High Lord,” I said, having at last found my tongue. “I wasn’t much for childish games.”

“Oh,” Lida eas said. “Of course, you weren’t. Whereas I...” here he paused and tousled Helias’s hair, “have *never* been able to give them up.” He smiled broadly at me. “Or the children, either, it seems.”

“I meant no offense, High Lord Lida eas,” I said hastily. “I was just explaining....”

Lida eas lifted his hand. “Of course you meant offence, Honored Jaemas. I’d have to be an idiot not to recognize contempt when I see it. And while I have my failings,” he lifted his goblet to me, “I am not that.”

He sighed. “But I can’t expect *everyone* I meet to love me. No, what bothers me is this. I overheard someone say to my father—that would be High Lord Lissator, Arm of the King, Protector of Lorithar, to you—in a highly secret conversation to which, alas, I was *not* invited but managed to overhear... ‘Now that his family is dead, he treasures his horse above all things. A magnificent animal, I hear. Find her, Highest of Lords, and you have found *him*.’”

Lida eas suddenly looked down at the tray of food. He gave Helias a shove. “Go ring for them to come and carry all this away. The fat is already congealing on everything—

it's disgusting. Let's hope they remember to bring us heated towels, or I'll be put in a very bad temper."

Helias got up and went to a bell pull, which he yanked on. He then lifted the table and tray both, and swung them both away from Lidaegas. If the lord noticed this impressive display of strength, he gave no sign. He was too much enjoying his triumph with me.

"So, I not only found the horse," he said, "I *bought* it. I not only found the everywhere-hunted, nowhere-to-be-found boy, I lured him *right here* to my hunting lodge, in the middle of the Forest Grymaeld. And right now I sit and eat supper with him, and find him very boring company, indeed. Whatever powers the Mother Goddess gave you, Niccas, social conversation obviously wasn't one of them."

He drank again from his goblet and snorted. "Nor was She very generous when it came to brains, either."

His goblet was empty. He held it up, looked into it, then, suddenly, viciously, smashed it against the fireplace.

"Where are those idiots? Ring for them again, boy, and this time don't stop ringing until they come."

"My problem..." he said, turning again to me. "Show the courtesy due me as your host, Niccas, and ask me, 'High Lord, what problem could *you* possibly have?'"

My thoughts were racing. Obviously, I could run from the room, but there would be no escaping Kaspan or Tarsas. And Helias had removed the platter with the meat knives well beyond my grasp. Meanwhile, as I sat there si-

lently, Lidaeas's face was darkening. Better to humor him while I tried to figure out which side Helias would choose.

My throat was now totally dry. I whispered, "High Lord, what problem could you possibly have?"

"There," he said. "I thought you'd never ask. But since you have, it's this: Should I turn you over to my father and become, for once, the light of his eye, the son he always wanted? Or should I negotiate directly with The Unnameable One myself, and see what special bounty might come my way for being so damnably clever...."

He turned to Helias and snapped, "You can stop pulling. Can't you hear them on the stairs?"

In fact, I had heard nothing, but a terrible premonition of dread crept over me. Suddenly the last words Kaspan had spoken to me came into my mind—"We'll watch him the night through, Tarsas and me." Not while they had been bringing up supper, they hadn't.


The door flew open with such a crash that the shock dislodged the nearest mounted elk head and sent it crashing to the floor. In the echoing silence that came after, five huge beasts stepped into the room, misshapen things with blood-matted snouts and glowing red eyes. They cast off a feral reek that filled the room.

Their bodies were covered with fur, their cocks rising up over their stomachs like cudgels sheathed in fur. They resembled nothing more than a horrifying miss-mating of men and wolves. They stepped with the mincing gait

of a dog walking on its hind legs. But these legs were thick with muscles, as were the upper limbs, which ended in rudimentary paw-shaped hands, from which protruded fierce, curving claws.

“*Wyhrrn*,” gasped Lida eas dumbfounded, groping with one hand for his sword. “*Wyhrrn*... how....” His eyes moved from them to me.

“There he is,” he said, his voice trembling, the hand that had been reaching for the blade now shakily point at me. “Take him. Take him. Tell the Lord of Gorzungâd... my reward....”

As a pack, the beasts, ignoring me, leaped upon Lida eas and disemboweled him, biting through his clothing as though it were mere tissue stuff, dragging his entrails out of his body, then devouring them, him, until there was nothing there at all but a ripped-apart corpse and gobs of bloody flesh. The beasts made no sound at all, save for that of bones cracking between strong teeth and the slobbering sound of a meal being bolted down all as fast as it could be swallowed. 

Chapter 14



WHILE I COULD ONLY GAPE in horror at the disembowelment of Lida eas, Helias had kept his wits about him. He leapt past the feasting wyhrn, seized hold of me in my chair, and half dragged, half carried me across the room and through the nearest doorway. He had already slammed the door and shot the bolt before the beasts realized what had happened.

A soft rush light flickered in a bowl, and by its light I realized that we were in Lida eas's sleeping room. Helias was struggling with all his strength to push a massive armoire in front of the door. I went to help him, and together we moved it in place, just as something huge smashed against the door and, when it failed to budge, again and again.

We could hear the wood was splintering—the wyhrn weren't trying to force the door open but instead were just battered it to pieces. Again, it was Helias who acted. He opened the bedroom casement and, standing on a chair, began squirming his way through it. He lifted his arms and

squeezed them tightly against his head and literally dove into it, twisted his body and scrabbled around outside with his hands to find some purchase to pull himself out.

He must have found something, because he started moving upwards. But then he stopped, remained motionless for a moment, then wriggled his body backwards until he could drop onto the floor.

He looked at me. "There's no time to get you out, too," he said simply. "So I decided we'd just die here together. I couldn't bear the idea of being on the roof listening to them devour you down here."

I was unable to speak so I went over and pushed him toward the window. "Go," I finally managed to get out. "Go!"

He shook his head. "Too late, now." And, indeed, the door was shattered, and the armoire was tottering forward.

"Too bad Kaspan didn't get a fire going in here," Helias said. "That's the only thing they fear."

The armoire fell forward, hit the bed, and tumbled over sideways. The first of the wyhrn leaped in over the rubble, looked around the room, and started toward me. Helias leaped at him, but the beast simply swatted him away with a blow that sent him flying across the room.

All I could see was its dark shape outlined by the light pouring in through the doorway. But it could see me clearly enough. Two things then happened at once.

In the most commanding voice I could manage,

which at the moment was little more than a croak, I said: “*Erestinad pellesfas.*” The second thing is that, from the top of the bed, Helias jumped onto the beast’s back and cut its throat with a knife.

The rest of the wyhrn began fighting among themselves, desperate to make it through the doorway, not to get at us, but to escape whatever was attacking them from the rear. There might have been no fire burning in this room, but there was certainly one blazing in the other. And from it came springing a host of fire imps. These, unlike the one I had seen in Porphoras’s crucible, were the size of young children—glowing figures of infernal heat, leaving smouldering traces of their feet on the carpets and, more importantly, scorching anything they touched.

Even hating the wyhrn as much as I did, I was shaken by their terror and the terrible stench of their flesh, first roasted and then burnt to ashes. The imps pursued them everywhere and struck at random, leaving an arm smouldering on the floor... sweeping the legs from another and then pursuing its frantic trunk as it dragged itself away... plunging an arm into the chest of another and ripping out its heart, letting it flame up and burn to a crisp in its hands.

Helias, brave enough to cut the throat of my attacker, hid behind me in face of these. But they made no move toward him. When they were done, they stood before me, their eyes, each of them a different glowing color—amethyst, jacinth, ruby, peridot—fixed upon me, as if awaiting

my next command. I lifted my hand in a gesture of dismissal; they bowed gravely, then scampered back to the fireplace, leaping into the fire and vanishing among the flames.

I turned and embraced Helias and he me. Both our bodies were trembling. I was full of such feeling for him and yet I couldn't speak—not here, not now. I just hugged him tightly for awhile, then let go and said, "The horses!"

While all this had been going on, the sound of their screams and the thud of their hooves kicking against the sides of their stalls had been rising up through the open casement.

We went into the other room and Helias took up Li-daeas's sword. "You should stay here," he said. "There's only one sword."

"I must go to the horses," I answered. "And I don't think we'll find anything downstairs excepts the remains of Kaspan, Tarsas, and Drastor."

"Drastor?" Helias echoed, looking at me as though I were a moon calf. He pointed to one of the wyhrn. Enough of him was left for me to see the oozing wound still visible in his side. I rushed back to the open casement, stuck my head out, and vomited up all my supper down the side of the lodge.

Then we went down the stairs. The main door was closed fast and bolted—nothing had entered this way. So, cautiously, we crossed the hall and entered the kitchen. Kaspan and Tarsas lay there on the floor, quite dead, their rib cages ripped open, their vital organs devoured, while the

roast boar sat untouched on the carving block.

Beyond all this, the door to the stable yard stood wide open.

“Here,” Helias said, thrusting the sword into my hand. He picked up a torch and thrust it in the fire. The pitch that coated its far end immediately burst into flames. Holding this ahead of us, we went out into the stable yard.

The light was immediately reflected in the eyes of several wolves, who were trying to bring down the horses. One of them had, in fact, managed to leap over a stall gate, only to find itself trampled to death by Crusalas. The others were intent on a subtler plan—frightening the horses into kicking down the stall walls so that they could be rushed all at once.

With a shout, Helias rushed at the first one and shoved the torch at it, managing to singe its fur. The wolf gave a yelp of fear and fled out the stable door into the forest. The head wolf turned and faced us snarling, his teeth bared. I restrained Helias by seizing his arm, then showed the wolf who I was and what fate had befallen the wyhrrn who commanded him.

The wolf turned his eyes from me, made a low growling sound, and, suddenly, he and the other wolves vanished into the dark. Helias went and closed and barred the outside stable doors, while I went and calmed the horses. There were three there all told, one for the servant who accompanied Lidaegas when he hunted. I stroked Whynnya until she stopped

shivering, speaking calming words to the others, until even Crusalas calmed down enough for me to right his feed bin and pour him fresh water.

Meanwhile, Helias had disappeared. When I finally went to look for him, I found him with a jug of water, soaking smoldering bits of rug and cloth so that there would be no house fire later in the night.

Helias went back to the kitchen for a fresh water jug and to cut more boar meat and bread crusts for our breakfast. No sense facing the gory mess in the kitchen again until we had to.

Meanwhile, I found a guest room with a made bed, got a fire going, and, finally, found Helias some clothing—all he had been dressed in during all this was the tattered remnants of the colored scarfs tied around his arms and his waste.

Neither of us felt much like sleeping, so, after closing the door and wedging a table against it, just in case, we pulled a bench up in front of the fire and sat there next to each other. Merely feeling his body beside me comforted me greatly, and I knew that in other circumstances I would be right now happy beyond belief. As it was, I couldn't help reaching out and touching him now and then.

Helias produced a small sack he had brought with him, and from a hidden pocket produced a tiny vial. He emptied it into the palm of his hand and rubbed the side of his face with it and the dagger immediately reappeared.

He smiled at me. “Magic.” Then he added, “Now watch this.” He produced another vial, this one three times the size of the first, and began rubbing its contents on his skin, starting with his crotch and his armpits. At once, hair began to grow, luxuriously in those places and more softly elsewhere, producing even a soft fuzz on his cheeks and chin.

Embarrassingly, watching this hair appear had given me a fierce erection, which was jutting up beneath my shirt.

“Good,” Helias said. He bent down, lifted my shirt, and before I could respond, took hold of my cock with his fingers, gently caressing its knob with thumb, worrying its tiny mouth. I groaned. The guilt I felt at doing this so soon after watching so much slaughter and pain was melting away.

Helias raised his head and we kissed, not gently but fiercely, hotly, his tongue taking command of my mouth, even as his fingers were splayed though my hair, hold my head as he pressed his mouth against me.

Finally he broke away and stood up, bringing me up with him as he did. “I want you to fuck every trace of Lidaegas out of me,” he said. “I’m already well greased—love boys always are—and for once I’m grateful for that fact. Come.” And he led me to the bed.

This was the first time I was able to examine Helias’s body with leisure and it was the first time he was in a mood to let me do so. I was in no hurry to enter him—I wanted to explore every curve of muscle, every ridge of bone. One

hand ran down the hard ripples of his spine while the other traced the soft outline of his eyebrows. I closed my eyes and savored the pleasure of opening them again and looking into the depths of his hazel eyes.

Eventually, as I knew he would, Helias tired of this play of simple erotic affection, and, pushing me onto my back, climbed astride me. He took hold of my cock and guided it to the right place between his buttocks. I closed my eyes to better feel him opening for me, that moment of delicious tightness as I entered, the heat that engulfed my knob once it was inside him.

The last time I had barely moved—it was he who had moved up and down on me. But this time, perhaps because his services as a love boy were too much with him, he simply lowered himself on my shaft, looked me in the eyes, and said, “fuck me.”

Tentatively at first, I thrust gently into him, but the sensation was so strong that my lust threw aside my caution and I began to push into him harder and harder still, up until I could feel his balls hit my groin, then pulling out until my knob started squeezing out past his clenching hole.

He moved gently, using muscles I didn't even know existed to enhance my pleasure, driving me further. Our eyes were locked; I felt he could read everything I felt within them, the riotous flood of thoughts and feelings, and that he did so with a cool sense of control, enjoying the power he was exercising over me.

I wanted to break through that, make him surrender, too, break his pose as the cool observer and make him as powerless to this force as I. But I was already in the hands of my desire, barely able to think, thrusting into him, feeling my balls ache, then hurt, then explode. I was coming, spurt-
ing inside him, filling him, my eyes glazed over, panting furiously, my loins thrusting no longer but jerking frantically, quivering, then falling still.

He fell forward onto me and I took him into my arms, feeling as I did his own body convulse as he came between us, his cock thrusting into the slippery space it had just made. As this happened, I could feel that things were not over for him, that something had seized hold of him. And I remembered with alarm the convulsions that had shaken him the last time we had fucked, just at this point.

This time though, instead of wrapping his arms around himself, he grabbed hold of me, pulled me against him. And I could feel it through his skin, this force, and I turned all my will to control it. Astonishingly, at the same time, I could feel Helias *welcoming* it. Instead of fighting it, he was fighting himself to stop resisting it, to let it take over him, to do what I hadn't been able to—shake away that grip he kept over himself.

He shook like a leaf in a storm, his body convulsed, but not wildly, just deeply. Holding him was like riding a horse, the reins tossed free, moving in accord with the powerful rhythms of its own body. I clung to him and let it engulf

us both together, like an orgasm that reached for something beyond the sex that had caused it to happen, an orgasm that shot us both into another world.

When we tumbled out of it at last, covered with sweat, exhausted, Helias was laughing and crying at the same time, tears streaming down his cheeks. He pushed away from me and lay on his back.

“Oh, *fuck*, Niccas,” he said. “I get it now.”

I started to speak, but he shook his head. “No, no,” he said. “Let me be with myself.” He pulled up his legs, wrapped his arms around them, then rolled onto his side, his back to me. I was hurt, then afraid, but I did nothing, just lay there beside him. I had felt so good. Then there was *that*. And now there was—I just didn’t *know*.

After a good while, an hour at least, Helias straightened out, and turned toward me. He saw the tears that had been trickling quietly from my eyes, and reached a hand out and tenderly wiped them away.

“Silly boy,” he said. He leant over and kissed my cheek. “You don’t understand what’s happened, do you, *Nith-aial Elimiel*?”

“I don’t understand *anything*,” I said.

I felt the mattress quiver. Helias was laughing. “Well,” he said, “it’s a good thing one of us does. Niccas, *look at me*.”

Surprised, I turned and did so, and could see that something about him had changed. I couldn’t quite put my

finger on it at first, until I realized that something had gone rather than that something had appeared. The fragility I had sensed beneath the veneer of toughness had been taken and turned into something supple and strong.

Helias smiled. “I’m turning into a wizard, Niccas. That’s why Stalcas thought *I* was the *Nithaial Elimiel*! Because the first time you fucked me, the process was initiated. I knew something had happened, but I couldn’t figure out what. And, of course, I knew I wasn’t a *Nithaial*. But I also knew it started when you had first entered me. So... I just started figuring it out. And now I’m sure.”

“I thought all the wizards were gone,” I said, still finding it hard to absorb all this.

Helias sat up in the bed, cross legged, facing me. “You mean The Unnameable One tracked them all down and destroyed them,” he replied. “Well, now He has a new one to start hunting for. And good luck to Him, says I.”

He reached over and poked me. “Stop looking so glum, Niccas. Now we’re in this mess together.”

I looked at him half in hope, half full of suspicion. “Truly?” I asked. “It seems each time we make love, you disappear—only to show up again, in unexpected and... and....”

“Totally suspicious circumstances.” Helias completed the sentence for me, but in a tone that was more amused than regretful. “Well, up to now, I’ve known a lot more about what was going on than you. After all, I was an agent of Stal-

cas, and he was in the center of it all.”

He reached over and took my hand. “Niccas, what I’m about to tell you breaks my oath to the Order, and I do so willingly. I knew I would so when Stalcas put me forward as the *Nithaial Elimiel*, when both he and I *knew* that it was really you. I was taught that our Order had been created to help keep the Balance that the *Nithaial* had once maintained, but over the centuries the hope that you might return was lost. Then certain among the Koryphaios began to believe that we had *replaced* you, so when you actually appeared....”

He shrugged. “Stalcas argued that the dagger you bore was meant for it and that your only purpose was to bring it to us as a sign from the Blessed Mother of our new status.”

Helias looked at me shrewdly. “It’s not really even a dagger—it’s your wand of power, isn’t it?”

I nodded.

He looked thoughtfully into the fire. “We’ll have to get it back for you, that’s all,” he said. “I think I can do that.

“Anyway,” he went on, “when I refused to kill you and Porphoras arrived unexpectedly and took you away, Stalcas was furious beyond belief.”

Helias smiled thinly. “But, at the same time, he had declared me as the *Nithaial Elimiel* before the leaders of the Order, so he couldn’t punish me for what I’d done—at least not right away.”

“Did he ever believe you were the *Nithaial Elimiel*?” I asked.

Helias shook his head. “Not really. There was some sense of magic about me that puzzled *him*, I think, and perhaps gave him the idea. What he really wanted was the dagger. And by proclaiming me the *Nithaial Elimiel*, he knew he could convince the Order to keep it. Later, once you were safely destroyed... what *I* was or wasn’t wouldn’t matter. The real challenge was getting rid of you without letting Porphoras know who was responsible.”

“That’s why he kept stalling the plans to get me out of the city,” I said.

Again, Helias nodded, adding “That’s also why he made sure Lida eas overheard the conversation about your horse. He knew Lida eas would fall for the bait. If Lord Lisator captured you, he’d hand you over to The Unnameable One. Stal cas didn’t want that to happen—he wanted you dead. But if Lida eas got hold of you... well,” and here again Helias smiled his bitter smile, “Stal cas had no compunction about killing you both.

“So, knowing Lida eas’s tastes, Stal cas transformed me into a love boy and gave me to him as a present.” Helias’s eyes grew hard as stone. “Of course, we of the Order assume whatever shape our task demands, but Stal cas knew what a punishment that would be for me, especially since its only purpose was to get you killed.

“All the while, he never doubted his control over me, and had you not fucked me that night, he would have had no worry. By then, he had so thoroughly confused my loyalty to

him with that to the Order....”


Helias looked away. “The Order rescued me from the gutter and gave me a sense of pride in myself. I was fiercely loyal, totally obedient and unquestioning. Stalcas used that to his own purpose, at the same time giving me his special attention, letting me into his confidences, even his bed.”

Helias shuddered. “I was so betrayed.”

I put my arm around him, but he shrugged it off. “Not now, Niccas. I don’t feel worthy of being touched.”

He looked at me. “I don’t want to hurt you,” he said, “but my feelings for you would not have overcome my loyalty to Stalcas. By then, I no longer trusted any emotion. But the magic you put inside me was different. It was as if you planted the seed, but I was both the soil and the gardener. I nurtured it, I hid it from harm, and as it grew it fed me and gave me strength. The strength to serve as love boy to Lidaeas without killing myself, the strength to come back to you when the wyhrrn attacked, and now the strength to break my vows to the Order and to imagine escaping the hold of Stalcas.”

He took hold of my arm. “I know you gave me this, Niccas. But I’m glad that these things have come from something inside me, something that is now my own, and not from Stalcas, the Order, or even from you.”

I put my hand on his where he held my arm and pressed it firmly. “So am I,” I said. “Now, let’s get some sleep. I have a feeling tomorrow is going to be another very long day.” 

Chapter 15



WE SPENT THE NIGHT in each other's arms, sometimes sleeping sometimes lying drowsily awake. Occasionally, one or the other of us would get out of bed to feed the fire, not so much for warmth as to ward off the dark. What had happened earlier had crept back into our thoughts.

The house had only to make the slightest creak for both of us to snap awake. But creaks were all that they were, and we would settle back against each other and start dozing again. But the moment dawn arrived we were both more than glad to cast the covers aside.

"This is what will happen," Helias said, after he had splashed his face with cold water and rubbed away the last hint of love boy from his features. "I'll ride into the city at once, so I can be out of the forest before Stalcas arrives to claim you from Lida eas. Since he'll be here, it will be easier for me to enter the house of the Order and steal back your wand. Meanwhile, you will ride a bit into the forest and wait

for me to return. By then, Stalcas will have seen what has happened, assumed that you either eaten or taken by the wyhrn, and returned to the city... probably immediately, in fear of his life. When I get back here I'll ring the bell, you come back to the lodge, we'll spend the night together, and head off to wherever you decide tomorrow."

"Can you ride a horse?" I asked. Although I could easily imagine Helias pulling himself out of windows and climbing up and down drainpipes, I couldn't quite imagine him on a horse.

Helias shrugged. "There's nothing to it," he said. "I've done it once. Of course, I won't take Crusalas but Abla, Kaspan's beast. If an old man could manage her, I can."

I kept the thought that that old man had been riding horses all his life to myself—at least until I looked the horse over. I had hardly glanced it the night before.

"All right," I said. "That makes sense. But how will you know when it is safe to come back?"

"There's a tavern for farmers and teamsters just before the city gate," he said. "I'll wait there until I see them come through."

"And what if you don't get out of the city before the gates close?" I asked. "I don't like the idea of waiting out in the forest alone all night for you."

"We of the Order are not constrained by anything as feeble as a city gate," Helias said. "By hook or by crook, I'll be back here before dark. If my plans fail, we'll think out

what to do instead.

“Now,” he went on, seeing my mouth opening again. “No more talking. I should leave at once. Come help me saddle my horse. That’s something I don’t have a clue about.”

The forest was still deep in the shadows of early morning when I saw him off. Abla was a sweet mare and wouldn’t let Helias fall off her, if she could help it. I stroked her nose and explained the urgency of our business. She was used to other riders besides him, so, guiltily, I kept from her the fate of her master.

Helias rode away, the reins in one hand, a big slab of bread in the other, as if he had been born to ride. That was all very well until a snake crossed their path, I thought, but I had no better plan. If I rode with him we’d have a flock of skalgür swooping above us as soon as we left the protection of the forest.

Even so, I was in no hurry to carry out my assigned part. I didn’t like the idea of cowering in some dell from Stalcas and his crew and I very much liked the thought of confronting him and showing him for once and for all who was the true *Nithaial Elimiel*. I might not have my wand yet, but I had the spell to summon the fire imps. That would be more than enough to deal with the likes of him.

The bodies in the kitchen were already swarming with huge black flies—as we discovered when we went through it to the stables—but they had not found their way to those in Lida eas’s living quarters, since Helias had

closed the casement the night before. Nor, since the night had been cool enough, had they really begun to reek. All in all, it seemed the best place to confront Stalcas when he arrived. So I righted his chair, built a small but sturdy fire in the fireplace, and went down to the main door to await their arrival.

As Helias had predicted, it took them some time to arrive. The sun was already beginning to shine down directly on the lodge when I heard the muffled cllop of the hooves of several horses approaching—in fact, almost upon me, because the trees smothered so much sound.

I left the door open—enough to cause them to feel alarm—and went up the stairs, entering Lidaeas's chambers, and closing the door behind me. I sat in the chair, assumed what I hoped was a casual posture, and awaited Stalcas.

At first, I heard shouts of alarm and the drawing of blades when the riders encountered the carnage in the kitchen. The steps coming up the stairs were soft and cautious, but these were members of the Order of the Narrow Dagger, not ones to be easily cowed. I felt a nervous tremor pass through me, but I shoved it aside.

The door swung open. Two men with hard faces and drawn swords sprang in, dressed all in gray cloth bound with leather belting. They stood, legs slightly bent, each surveying their side of the room. They took it all in, the dead wyhrn, the wreckage of the furniture, what scraps remained of Lidaeas, and last of all, me, without a change of expression.

One of them gestured slightly with one hand, and Stalcas stepped through the door.

When he saw me, he smiled and sheathed his sword. “Niccas!” he said. “Once again I see you bring the worst sorts of misfortune in your trail. Is that the foot of the High Lidaegas I see, lying by itself in the corner?” He took a step inside. “Indeed it is.”

He looked about. “And where are the remains of his little love boy, may I ask? Or did they devour him entire? He probably wasn’t wearing any boots when they found *him*.”

“Enough, Stalcas,” I said, rising from my chair and crossing my arms. “Do you understand why I’m alive and all these around us are dead and torn to bits?”

Stalcas smiled. “Because you were waiting for me. Clever of you to know I was coming. Even Lidaegas thought he would be meeting an agent of... Our Neighbor. Perhaps he dreamed that it would be The Unnameable One Himself, delivering His thanks personally.”

Chuckling, he looked about him again. Something was clearly bothering him. “Well, Niccas,” he said at last, “I confess *I am* perplexed. Only He would have sent the wyhrn, and He certainly wouldn’t have sent them for you. So what did the High Lidaegas do to deserve this?”

“He speared a skalgür,” I said. “The wyhrn killed him, and I killed them. Just as I’m going to kill you.”

Stalcas raised his eyebrows. “Well!” he said. “Still suffering delusions of grandeur, are we? No, Niccas, I don’t

think you're going to harm me at all."

In response, I started to speak the fire imp spell. But the first syllables were hardly passed my lips when Stalcas made a gesture with his hand. And, suddenly, my tongue went numb. I could still speak, but all I could do was make incoherent noises, like a halfwit.

Stalcas snickered. "Such a pathetic effort, O Great *Nithaial Elimiel*. It almost pains me." He turned to the two men. "Bind him and gag him," he said. "If The Unnameable One knows the boy is here, He's already sent a force to retrieve him. We must be well away before they arrive."

"Why not kill him right here, *Koryphaios* Stalcas?" asked one of them. "It would be much safer than trying to bring him back to the city."

"No," Stalcas said. "That would be too kind. And, besides, I have some questions for him. There are still things I don't understand. When we get to the edge of the forest, I'll cast a spell on him that will keep the skalgür from recognizing him. We'll have no trouble getting him back.

"Now do as I say. I want to examine Lidaeas's hidden room." As the men seized me and trussed me up, he went to the wall on the opposite side from the bedroom. He scanned it carefully, then said a word of command. An audible click could be heard, and a door swung open to a secret room.

Stalcas stepped inside and looked about. "Rich pickings, indeed," he said, with an appreciative tone. "Send some from our Order tomorrow to clean it out. Meanwhile," he con-

tinued, taking a scroll from a shelf and unrolling it enough to see what it was, “I think I’ll just take this.”

“Shall I go saddle his horse?” one of the men asked. The spark of hope that leaped out was immediately extinguished, however, when Stalcas shook his head. “No,” he said, casting a look at me, “don’t toy with the poor boy by giving him false hopes. Take him on your horse with you, Craedas, and make sure if he dies, *you* die with him.”

WE HAD BARELY RIDDEN out of sight of the hunting lodge when, even in my despair, I began to realize that something wasn’t right. Despite the sunlight overhead, a mist was rising up around us, obscuring our way.

It ebbed and flowed, as if clouds were passing through the forest, and was sometimes so thick that one of the riders had to dismount to be able to see the very track.

Finally, we came to a place where our way joined another. Craedas reined in his horse, and looked from left to right.

“What is it?” snapped Stalcas. “You’ve been this way a dozen times with me.”

“I’m sorry, *Koryphaios* Stalcas,” Craedas replied. “I... recognize no landmarks. I’m not sure which way to turn.”

“That way, idiot,” Stalcas said impatiently, pointing, and on we rode. However, at every junction the same thing happened, and even Stalcas grew confused.

Things came to a head when the other of Stalcas’s men

reined in his horse and dismounted to examine some fresh horse dung lying on the road. He leapt from his own horse to examine the tracks, looked pensive, shook his head, and finally said to Stalcas, “Those are our tracks, *Koryphaios*.”

“Prasinor, why are you wasting our time?” Stalcas said. “Of course they’re our tracks! We came this same way barely an hour ago.”

Prasinor shook his head. “If so, *Koryphaios*, we were traveling the same way then as we are now. But the dung is still warm to the touch. I fear we’re riding in a circle.”

“By the Mother,” Stalcas swore. “The Unnameable One has sent this cursed fog to confuse our minds. Craedas, cut the boy loose and free his gag.”

As Craedas did so, he moved his horse until he was right beside me. “Here,” he said, “look at this.” And he passed me the scroll that he had taken from Lidaegas’s treasure room.

“It’s a map of the forest,” Stalcas said, “and it has some magic to it—what, I don’t know. See if it will tell you where we are, or at least in what direction we must travel to find its edge.”

All this while, Craedas had kept one cautionary arm wrapped around me, and I had only started unrolling the scroll when I felt it tighten. A horse was approaching us.

In a moment, a rider came in view. He wore the gray cloth and leather of a member of the Order, and his hood was pulled over his head, hiding his features.

“You have wandered off your course, travelers,” said a voice.

“I am Stalcas, *koryphaios* of our Order,” Stalcas replied, “and I demand your assistance. Reveal yourself.”

“I shall,” the stranger replied. “But first, I have come to tell you, Stalcas, that you are *koryphaios* no longer.” He withdrew a dagger from its sheathe and held it in the air. As he did so, it flashed a blinding silver light, and Stalcas cried out. “In the name of the Order of the Narrow Blade, I declare thee, Stalcas, expelled. All and any power you have been given in our name is hereby and forever withdrawn. You are now but a worm in our eyes and we cast you out.”

The rider lowered the dagger and cast back his hood, revealing a very grim and commanding Helias.

“*You!*” exclaimed Stalcas. “You dare use the Voice of Command on *me*?”

Helias ignored him. He shook the reins of his horse, rode up on the other side of Craedas, reversed the dagger, and proffered the hilt to me. “I believe this is yours, *Nith-aial Elimiel*,” he said. “I return it with the apologies of our Order. We are now,” and here he glanced meaningfully at Craedas, who had already been loosening his hold on me, “totally yours to command.”

“I thank you, Helias,” I answered formally, although my impulse was to throw my arms around him in happiness and relief.

As Helias unbuckled the belt that held the sheath

and passed it over, he said to Craedas, “We have no time to lose. Unmount Stalcas. We shall leave him to the tender mercies of the demon lord hurrying through the forest behind me....”

Even as he spoke these words, Stalcas slammed his heels into the flanks of his horse. It sprang forward and, before Craedas or Prasinor react, it was racing away down the track. Almost as suddenly, I heard a sharp twang and an arrow was sticking from Stalcas’s back. He gave a cry and fell to the ground.

“Go retrieve the horse, Craedas,” Helias ordered. And to me he said, “I forgot to introduce my traveling companion. Nassazia, reveal yourself.”

Out behind a tree stepped one of the elite order of Guardians of the Forest, a young woman, clad in all green and brown, her black hair cropped short and almost hidden under a hunter’s cap. She carried a long bow and had a quiver of arrows strapped to her back. Before coming to us, she went to Stalcas, withdrew her arrow from his twitching body, and wiped it clean with a handful of leaves.

She approached us as she returned it to the quiver, and bowed low to me. “Greetings, *Nithaial Elimiel*,” she said calmly. Her pale face was both lovely and familiar, especially the hazel eyes flecked with green.

“Greetings, Nassazia,” I replied, “daughter, I venture to say, of the Lady Sophaera.”

She smiled and inclined her head. Before she could

speak, however, Helias spoke first.

“Truly,” he said, “we have no time. *Nithaial Elimiel*, you are to have Stalcas’s mount. See if you can’t guide us back to the lodge. I’d like to get fresh horses there and possibly some food and water. Then we must lose ourselves deep in the forest.”

I was surprised at Helias’s directive, but mounted Stalcas’s horse. Then I remembered the scroll. Again I unrolled this time completely and examined it closely. All the forest was there and through it was indicated a maze of tracks, although few indeed toward its center. Right now, however, I focused my attention on where I believed our party to be, and, to my amazement, I saw our route demarcate itself in a glowing red line, spreading from where we were to the location of the lodge.

I pointed the way, which was actually in the way we were already heading. Nassazia leaped lightly onto the back of Helias’s horse, and we began hesitantly making our way back to the lodge.

I glanced at the riders beside me, and felt a twinge of jealousy. Nassazia rode behind Helias easily, and needed only a hand wrapped lightly around his waist to keep her balance. Clearly, she could ride well enough—why couldn’t *I* be the rider to keep Helias company? The thought of us on the same horse together only further stirred the pain.

Helias caught my glance, although what he read in it he didn’t say.

“There’s much to tell you,” he said in a low voice, “but not now. But obviously I did stop at the house of Porphoras for a moment. It was there that we received news of the approaching forces of The Unnameable One, and Nassazia and I rode back here together as fast as the wind.”

He leaned forward and stroke the ears of his horse, which, I suddenly realized, wasn’t the mare of Kaspan’s he had left on, but a larger and more powerful animal.

“Yes,” he said. “Arestea pressed it on me, and a good thing, too, for it had to carry the two of us.”

“You should give it a rest then,” I replied, “Let Nassazia have it and come ride with me.”

Helias looked at me in surprise, then smiled. “Hmm,” he said. “I think it would be simpler if she just jumped up with me.” And, despite my dark look, beckoned for her to do so.

As she mounted behind him, his face suddenly turned a paler shade. He rose up in his stirrups and looked about, then turned to me, asking, “Did you feel *that*?”

“Yes,” I said, “and it’s getting stronger.” It was that same sense of something groping for me, that eerie feeling that a deer must feel when wolves are on the hunt, a sixth sense that humans almost only feel in dreams.


“I felt it often in Lorithar,” I said, “only never so persistent... nor so strong.”

“That’s because they know better where we are,” Helias said. “Can it be warded off?”

“Don’t confront it.” Again, to my surprise, it was Nas-

sazia who spoke. “In this instance, that only tells them what they want to know. Evade it. Turn your thoughts into the same fog that swirls around us, so it can’t get any grasp on us. Then, eventually, it should pass on.”

Easier said than done! But I had some practice in it from Lorithar, and Helias had the mental discipline to do it once he was told. The groping continued a bit, going and then coming back, casting about, neither sure it had found anything but sensing that something was there. Then, as suddenly as it appeared, it was gone.

Even so, none of us spoke for sometime afterwards. It was Helias who broke the silence. “Whatever happens,” he said, “I pray to the Goddess Mother that we aren’t captured by *that*.” 

PART FOUR



TESHNAR'AD

Chapter 16



OUR TIME AT THE LODGE WAS SHORT. Helias left Craedas on watch in the front. If our pursuers appeared, he was to ring the bell as loudly as he could, then ride for his life, with us right behind him. The rest of us went to the back and into the stable yard. While Helias directed the packing of such provisions as could be hastily gathered and the strapping on of leather water flasks, I saddled Crusalas and Whynnya, and turned Norra into a packhorse. We were ready to leave again before a leaf, spinning down from one of the high forest trees, could have made it to the ground.

This was just as well, for the presence of our pursuers was pressing down hard on us. The lodge must have already been sensed, because the groping was about us continually, and gathering in strength. But I realized that Helias was right—for us to flee into the forest without food or water was at least as dangerous as having our enemy close upon our heels. It was a fine edge, though, and with every

moment our danger became more palpable.

At last Helias, after consulting with Nassazia, vanished into the house, emerging with a bundle of cloth under his arm and a small flask in his hand.

“Niccas,” he said, “remove your shirt and give it to Prasinor, then drench yourself with this.” This turned out to be the contents of the flask, which was a flowery body scent once belonging to Lidaeias.

“Prasinor,” he continued, after I had undressed, “fasten that shirt to my mount. I’ll be taking a fresh horse. Then go fetch Craedas.”

Helias tossed me my old shirt which had been lying in the kitchen all the while. It smelled not a little of the carrion that had been festering in that room all day.

“I see your strategy now,” I said. “The two stinks will fight it out while I ride like a demon to keep them out of my nostrils.”

Helias smiled at me. “How well you read my thoughts, *Nithaial*,” he said. “Mostly, though, it will leave our trackers a very confusing and muddled trail.”

Prasinor reappeared with Craedas, and Helias pointed to one of the hunting trails that started at the lodge and wended their way off into the forest in different directions. “You two take my horse and follow this trail, which will eventually lead you out of the forest to the west. If you make it, head back to the city and inform *Koryphaios* Arestea of all that has happened. Go now, and ride with luck.”

Nassazia passed the reins of the horse to Prasinor who took them, saluted us, and said, "Blessing upon you all." Then they were gone.

Even before they had started, Helias had gone over to Crusalas and seized hold of his reins.

"Oh, no, you don't!" I said. "You take Whynnya."

"Ride your own horse," Helias said. "I have no fear of this one." And he deftly leapt into the saddle. Crusalas snorted and danced a little, but made no other protest.

Helias smiled at me. "With wizardry comes many talents," he said. "Now, hurry, mount up! We must be off."

Nassazia was riding Stalcas's horse, whose name none of us knew. While all this had been taking place, she had been busy removing all its tack, and now sprang onto it bareback, as I leapt up onto Whynnya.

Even as my feet found the stirrups, a dog, the size and shape of a bear, came bursting around the side of the lodge, saliva foaming out of its mouth, and leapt at Helias's horse. At the same instant, Nassazia buried an arrow in the dog's skull. Even so, its momentum was such that it struck Crusalas's flank, even as it died, and the blow sent the horse bolting down one of the trails.

I seized hold of the reins of the pack horse and urged Whynnya to chase after Crusalas, letting Nassazia follow behind. Almost immediately, I heard the twang of a bow as another arrow was let fly, then another, and risked a glance behind me. It was just long enough to take in Nassazia sitting

astride her horse backwards, her legs clenched to its flanks, her hand reaching back to her quiver for another arrow. Her body was so attuned to the movement of her horse that the two seemed as one. Then Whynnya leapt over a tangle of roots and the jolt made me concentrate, chastened, on my own riding. And I thought I knew something about horsemanship!

Meanwhile, Helias was struggling to overcome Crusalas's panic before the horse managed to destroy himself, since these forest paths were treacherous for the unwary. He managed it gradually, which revealed itself not only in a slowing of pace but in the horse's increasingly attentive posture, alert now to where it was stepping.

When Crusalas seemed back under control, I let go of the reins of the pack horse and brought Whynnya up beside Helias. He and I exchanged glances. Far from being flustered, he looked at once grim and supremely happy at this engagement of all his mind, all his body, all his senses—a born king who finally has his scepter firmly in hand.

“Are we on the right trail?” I asked him.

He laughed shortly. “Ask Crusalas,” he said. “But, no, we aren’t on the trail Nassazia meant us to take. We’ll stop and confer about it when we find a good place do so.” He looked at me and shrugged. “We certainly can’t go back.”

There was no arguing that. I hadn’t heard an arrow loosed since the time I had looked back last. I turned now to find Nassazia now facing forward. She gave me a grin,

making a gesture with her hand as she did so, using the sign language of hunters and trackers.

“I think Nassazia is telling me that nothing’s breathing down our heels,” I said to Helias.

“They will be soon enough,” he replied, “once they sort things out—unless they know where this trail goes and can arrange to have us met at its other end.”

The trail now narrowed again and I had to fall back, this foreboding thought echoing in my mind, even as the forest itself became increasingly forbidding. It was no longer a palace of many columns but a rugged fortress composed of gnarled trees thick as buttresses and broken walls of shattered stone.

On foot, it might have been possible to leave the trail, but not on horseback. The ground between the trees was a tangle of roots and rocks, vines hung down from the branches, and worst of all, the eye could see barely a stone’s throw in any direction. The traveler who took a few steps away from the trail to relieve himself might never find his way back to it again, if he did not first fix his return firmly in his mind.

This was bad enough, but the trail itself grew fainter and harder to discern as we moved along, making itself known less by a clearly beaten way as by subtle hints that took an increasingly practiced eye to discern. Nassazia had squeezed past us to lead our party once it became clear that we were not being hotly pursued. But even she had to pause,

dismount, and cast about for the fractionally wider opening between two trees, a narrow track almost impossible to see that had been hacked into the stone leading up the side of a steeply sloping rock face.

It was clear that we were climbing higher and higher, but never in a way that brought us a vista or a break in the trees. Wherever we went, they crowded right beside us, elbowing us as we passed, sucking up the air we were trying to breathe. What was left of it for us seemed closed and stale, old as centuries and drained thin of life. Our lungs moved it in and out but strained to find any nurture from it, and we became dizzy and increasingly listless.

By now our horses were so exhausted that we led them on foot, all of us stumbling on the rough ground. I was now third in line and only had an occasional glimpse of Helias, let alone Nassazia, but when I did see her, I could see that she was worried and confused.

However, another league further on, the path became unmistakable, because it followed what seemed the bottom of an increasingly deepening ravine. At the moment it was nearly dry, a mere trickle of water running down its center. But it was obvious that in times of rain it could quickly fill, because its floor was covered with a thick layer of broken pebbles and sand. Trees pressed along its sides above our heads, and sent naked roots down along both sides, where they splayed like vines against the rock.

As a route, this seemed definitely unpromising, even

dangerous, and it raised the disconcerting question as to whether we might now have completely lost our way. Sure enough, we had not traveled for much longer when we came to its end before a sheer cliff face. It wasn't all that high, about the same height as our city walls. But it would be impossible to climb, even if we were willing to abandon our horses here.

Where the ravine met the cliff, a large half circle had been hollowed out of the stone, probably by the force of water falling down from above. At this moment, a thin cascade of water came sheeting down from above, gathering into a small pool and then flowing out the way we had just come. We dismounted and let the horses drink from this, while I unstrapped the water skin for ourselves. Helias unplugged it and splashed some onto his face. He passed it to Nassazia, who did the same and returned it to me, saying, "If only we could breathe this as well."

"Where do you think we are?" I asked, after I, too, had washed the dust from my face and eyes.

"I've never been on this trail or in this part of the forest," she answered. "And worse, I have no idea in what direction we've been traveling. This path winds back and forth, the sun is invisible, and either the usual signs are confusing, or the way is so twisted that they can offer no help."

I looked at Helias. "I've had no sense of pursuit," I said, "but this past hour or so I've been aware of an increasing hostility toward us. But it has no focal point and so I can't

tell from where it comes.”

Helias nodded. “Yes. That’s because it comes from this place, the forest Grymaeld itself. But why? We mean no harm.”

“Ah,” said Nassazia. “But the harm, I think, has already been done.” She looked at me. “*Nithaial Elimiel*, did you use fire magic within the forest?”

“No, of course not,” I replied. Then, catching Helias’s look, added, “But that wasn’t in the forest! It was inside the lodge, and, anyway, I had to do it to save our lives.”

“Tell that to the trees,” Nassazia said. “Grymaeld can sense the power of fire in you but not the power of earth. It senses no balance in you and so, in its own way, thinks of you as evil, dangerous, unwelcome.”

“What should I do?” I asked. “I don’t know anything about earth magic! What would it entail?”

Nassazia laughed shortly. “Don’t ask me, *Nithaial*! All that alchemy you’ve studied and you don’t know the answer to your own question? Take away fire from your art and what do you have left?”

“Only darkness,” I retorted.

She shook her head. “Darkness is absence of light, not the absence of fire,” she replied. “The answer you seek lies in the solidity of things. Look for it in the heart of these trees around you, deep in these rocks, and Grymaeld might like you better.”

“I see there is as much of your father in you as your

mother,” I replied, stung and knowing I had no notion of what she was talking about.

Before she could reply, Helias said, “We don’t have time for Niccas to start poking around in the hearts of trees, Nassazia. Dark will be upon us soon and we need to find a place to camp. Take out that scroll that we took from Stalcas, and let’s see if *it* can’t tell us where we are.”

I had forgotten about the scroll. I went and retrieved it from where I had stuck it in my saddlebags. The last time I had unrolled it, the vellum had been covered with a maze of paths that had seemed tossed across the entire forest. But this time it was blank except for a single winding thin red line that traveled to the center of the map and stopped.

As my eyes followed the line from the edge, I felt as though I could see again every twist and turn we had made, as if it were somehow impressed into the stuff of the vellum and released by my passing gaze. And when I came to the center I suddenly saw us standing there, and gasped.

“We’re right here,” I said, my finger touching the spot. “It seems we’ve reached our destination, or at least the end of this path. Although why it would lead us here....”

Helias, who was standing at one side of me, pointed to what seemed a blank part of the scroll. “What’s that?” he asked. “It looks like writing, but I can’t quite make it out.”

“I don’t see anything,” I answered. “What are you talking about?”

“I see it, too. It’s right here, *Nithaial*,” Nassazia said.

and touched the place with her finger. She immediately gave a cry of pain and jerked her finger away. “Oh,” she said, blowing on her hand as if it were on fire, “I’m so *stupid*.”

I might not be able to see the writing, but I could see that her finger was on fire, burning with an invisible flame. “Nassazia,” I cried, “give me your hand.” Hesitantly, she held it out. I took it and slipped the hurt finger into my mouth. I could feel the burning heat as I closed my lips around it, not that of real fire but something of an alchemical nature, tintured with magic.

No matter. My tongue drew it from her flesh and I formed it into a ball in my mouth. When it was wholly out, I spat it onto the ground. The spittle sizzled away and it lay glowing there like a burning coal. Helias kicked it into the pond with the tip of his boot, which extinguished it for good.

I looked at Nassazia. “More fire magic,” I said. “This isn’t Forest Grymaeld’s best day. What was all that about?”

She smiled wanly. “There is invisible writing on the scroll,” she said. “Protected by a burning spell. To reveal the writing, you have to rub it with your finger—and suffer the consequences if you don’t know the counter spell.”

“Ah,” Helias said. “That explains why Stalcas was cursing so furiously when he and Lidaeas were studying it together. Stalcas hadn’t enough magic to counter the spell and kept getting burnt.” He looked at me. “Lidaeas showed it to him the night Stalcas brought me to the lodge.”

“Still,” I answered, “I don’t understand why I can’t

see its presence when both of you can.”

“You just have to train your eye,” Nassazia said. “Look at the scroll carefully, now that you know the writing’s there. Don’t stare, that makes it harder to see. Just let your eye float over the vellum, as if you were a bird of prey soaring over a field, watching for mice.”

I did as she directed and, sure enough, I could see a kind of blurring where something was keeping me from seeing. It was very faint, but once I perceived it and knew what it was, I saw how easily someone with the right training would pick it up.

Once I saw it, the hiding spell itself was a simple thing to break. I slowly rubbed my finger over the hidden writing, revealing it all, line by line. I also now understood the genius of such magic, because anyone who persevered, regardless of the pain, would only manage to burn up the scroll as well. Indeed, the part where Stalcas had touched his own fingers showed scorch marks that made the lettering almost impossible to read. But I recognized what was written there at once.

*This ae night, this ae nighte
Any nighte and alle
Fire and sleet and candlelight,
The dragons claim their toll.*

*When thou from hence away art past,
Any nighte and alle,*

*To Forest Grymaeld thou com'st at last;
The dragons claim their toll.*

“My old nurse, Malda, my ass,” I muttered, pointing the verses out to Helias. “These are the very lines quoted to me by Lidaeas last night. He and Stalcas wanted to learn if I knew this verse and if they could get me to reveal the next two stanzas—

*If ever thou touched Mother's hand,
Every nighte and alle,
Clasp it now from where thou stand;
The dragons claim their toll.*

*At Wyldmast Druim thou mayst then pass,
Every nighte and alle,
In Fyrewourmhaem thy fate be cast;
The dragons claim their toll.*

—which, of course, I couldn't. And now that I've read this, I don't know much more.” I turned to Nassazia. “What do you make of it?”

“Only this,” she replied. “If this map is to be trusted, we've reached the foot of Wyldmast Druim, at the very heart of Forest Grymaeld. That's remarkable for two reasons. First, in the ordinary course of things, it would have taken us several days of hard travel to cover that distance. But somehow we've managed to do it in just a few hours. That must explain why we seem to have lost our pursuers.

“The other thing is that only a handful of people in all the kingdom have ever *seen* Wyldmast Druim, and they are all of my order. And not one of us Guardians has ever been this close to it, for the forest simply will not allow it.”

She glanced up at me. “I was wrong about the fire magic. That wasn’t why the forest has been so hostile to us. Some force greater than Grymaeld is bending this place to its will. And the trees don’t like it one bit.”

“The Unnameable One?” I asked.


She shook her head. “I would be amazed if He had such powers still. Besides, if He did, He would have had the forest entrap us and hold us captive.”

She paused for a bit, considering. “Gesryma, the Mother of Blessed Name, certainly, would have that power but I can’t believe this is Her doing. It’s all much too devious. You, *Nithaial Elimiel*, might be able to do this with the assist of your twin, but not now, not as you are. So, who is it then?”

She was shaking her head helplessly when Helias seized hold of us both and hissed, “*Wyhrrn!*”

I was just starting to sense them, too. They were making their way toward us up the ravine.

“How many?” I whispered, my heart sinking.

“Two score or so, I think,” he replied. “Maybe more. The Unnameable One has found us here and these were the only forces close by that He could summon. And I’ll tell you this—He no longer has any intention of taking us alive.” 

Chapter 17



WHILE WE HAD BEEN CONSULTING THE SCROLL, the light had been softly fading into evening. It was already quite dark in the ravine and in a short time we would be unable to see our attackers until they were right on us.

“We need to start a fire,” I said.

“No time, nothing to burn,” replied Helias. “Who thought we’d find ourselves trapped in the one part of the forest with no firewood!”

Nassazia was stringing her bow.

“How many arrows?” I asked.

She shrugged. “Enough—if I could take down a wyhrrn with every shot.” She glanced at me. “But I can’t. As you’ll see, they’re not easy to kill. And they’re very smart. When they get close enough, they’ll rush us.”

Already the horses were shifting about uneasily. Crusalas, especially, was tossing his head about, his nostrils flared, his eyes bulging out. Helias went to soothe him and

began stroking his nose.

His touch calmed the horse, and he was just turning to come back, when the silence about us was broken by an eerie wail that made our blood run cold. The wyhrn were howling. Their ululating cry swirled about us, as if coming from nowhere and everywhere. It was too intimate to be a battle cry—rather than striking against us, it caressed us with penetrating icy fingers that made the hair on my body stand on end.

But as much as it frightened us, its effect on the horses was that of pure terror. Crusalas suddenly reared up, striking Helias with a hoof and sending him flying against the cliff wall. Before I could get my wits together, he had bolted past us down the ravine, the horse Nassazia had been riding right on his heels.

Whynnya was rearing and neighing; I seized her reins and that of the pack horse and used all my powers to calm them. Even as I did so, we heard the runaway horses encountering the wyhrn—an explosion of snarls, high-pitched screams, and then the ripping sounds of the animals being ripped apart into gobbets of flesh even before they fell to the ground.

I went to where Helias lay crumpled on the ground. He was unconscious but, so far as I could tell, still alive. Helplessly, I dragged him so his back was propped against the cliff—whatever good that would do him—and hurried back to Nassazia at the mouth of the opening.

“I still can’t see anything,” she whispered, but we could both hear the sounds of the wyhrn gorging themselves and snarling at each other as they did so.

She held the bow with the bowstring taut, an arrow notched and ready, staring into the creeping darkness. I reached for my dagger, but when I pulled it from its sheath, it had assumed its true shape as a wand of power.

A dagger would be nothing against the wyhrn, I knew, but I had merely the faintest notion of what to do with the wand. Nevertheless, I held it up, and once I did so, the tip began to give off a hot, flame-like light.

“No fire!” hissed Nassazia.

“No fire,” I agreed, as if I knew how to produce any. Even so, the light was reflected back to us from several sets of eyes, and Nassazia began methodically shooting arrows between them with a motion so fluid there seemed to be no pause between when she set one free and pulled another from her quiver.

The eyes disappeared. We could hear snarling, low at first, then louder, as more and more of the wyhrn joined in, the rippling, tearing noise of rising rage.

“They’re working themselves up to charge us,” Nassazia whispered. “They’ll be very fast when they come. I won’t be able to stop them all unless we can think of some way to slow them.”

We looked at each other. “Send down the other horses?” I asked. “I don’t think I could. I’d rather die with Whyn-

nya than watch her ripped to pieces in front of me.”

Nassazia shook her head. “No,” she said. “It may well make things worse rather than better, but I think you should summon up your fire demons. *Right now.*”

The wyhrrn were rushing up the ravine toward us, their fangs gleaming, their snouts shiny and matted with the blood of the two horses. I pointed my wand at them, and willed its tip to burst into flame. But before I could utter the words of the spell, I felt a great surge of power pulse through the trees that lined both sides of the ravine. It coursed down from their trunks into their roots, energizing them, causing them to rip free from the filaments that bound them to the rock face.

They reached out into the open space and twisted around each other, grasping hold of roots that were thrusting out from the opposite side. A wyhrrn would leap over one, only to be struck in the chest by another. It would dodge under that and be tripped by still another that had tangled around its rear legs. Before it could get up, roots would weave around it, pinning it to the ground.

The wyhrrn fought like trapped demons, snapping through the roots with their powerful jaws and slashing them apart with their claws. Their cries and howls echoed up and down the ravine, along with the whip-crack snap of the roots themselves, as they were ripped apart. But while a wyhrrn was fighting with a root that was suddenly wrapped around its neck, it found others pinning its legs, clutching at its chest.

By now, the wyhrrn had forgotten about us. Their attempts to break through the snakelike tangle of thrashing roots were merely in hopes of saving their lives. One of them did make it to the other side and stood facing us, its face contorted into a rictus of hate and pain.

Nassazia was about to send an arrow into it when I stayed her shot. A writhing, blood-covered root had emerged from its throat. The beast reached its paws up to seize hold of it, but the root had already bifurcated into two tendrils, which immediately pushed their way up into both nostrils. The wyhrrn clawed at it desperately, even as the light went out of its eyes.

The one beside it was not quite that lucky. A thick root had forced its way into its side and we could see it pulsating through the animal's fur as it splayed out and hear the wrenching snap as it broke each of its ribs before plunging into its heart and puncturing its lungs. The wyhrrn's head was thrown back, its jaws gaping wide in agony, but it could draw no breath to scream. As we watched in horror, it shrank into a withered corpse before our eyes, all life drained from its body.

"The Guardians of the Gate," Nassazia said in a shaky voice. "I've heard rumors of them, but who would believe...." She lowered her bow. "That's just what would have happened to us, *Nithaial*, if you had not been with us. They weren't protecting *us*, but preventing the wyhrrn from reaching *it*."

We glanced at each other and then, as one, turned to look at the cliff face behind us. It was as before, blank, dark, a trickle of water running down it into the pool below. During the time that the wyhrrn had attacked, the sun had set and night had come. High above our heads a field of stars was glittering, and the moon, almost full, was edging into view over the edge of the cliff.

As soon as I laid eyes on it, I felt a part of my arm begin to tingle, then almost burn. I pulled up my sleeve and found the mark of the Cronnex was glowing with a fierce intensity. The sensation passed down my arm, into my hand, and through my fingers into the wand.

Where before the tip had been glowing a fiery red, now the entire wand began to shimmer, as if lit from within by delicate-colored, many-hued flames. As it did so, a bit of the rhyme that had been written on the scroll came to my mind:

*If ever thou touched Mother's hand,
Every nighte and alle,
Clasp it now from where thou stand;
The dragons claim their toll.*

*At Wyldmast Druim thou mayst then pass,
Every nighte and alle,
In Fyrewourmhaem thy fate be cast;
The dragons claim their toll.*

“I understand now,” I said to Nassazia. “Help me get

Helias draped over Whynnya's back."

This was not an easy thing, but Whynnya had calmed down enough to stand steadily, and at last we got Helias over her, lying as limp as a pair of saddle bags. I had Nassazia bring the pack horse over until we were both as far from the cliff face as we could get in that narrow space.

I lifted my wand. To touch it was, as the rhyme said, to touch the hand of the Blessed Gesryma, an extension of which it was. The delicate light that glowed within it now flowed from it and played over the rock before us. As it did so, the shape of the stone changed before our eyes. Hideous carved faces emerged, their faces distorted in all manner of leers, howls, screams, and groans.

These heads were poking through a mass of restraining chains, also sculpted into the stone, so that it all looked eerily like the remains of the wyhrn in the thicket behind us. I hoped the likeness was only accidental, because if such things really lurked within, I was about to set them free.

For now the outlines of the gate were clear. It was not a giant thing, only, say, twice as high as us, and set into a massive wall. It had large black iron hinges on both sides, and the two halves of it were edged with more iron where they met in the middle. The fire from the wand played over the gate until I could feel it grudgingly come to life. I could now command it to open.

Great misgivings filled my heart. I turned to Nassazia, only to find her standing there with her eyes shut, her

face stricken with terror. The wyhrn had been a known enemy to her and her skill as an archer provided her with a way to fight and even defeat them. She also had powers as a witch, but nothing that had prepared her for this. I had brought her to the edge of the abyss.

But what choice did I have? We could not go back. No one would come to rescue us. We could only sit here and quietly, slowly starve to death. If I knew it was a choice between that and loosing all hell onto the world, I might have chosen that course. But I didn't know that—although, as any who could look into my heart would see, I feared it.

Still, there it was. I saw no choice. I lifted the wand higher and silently commanded the gates to open. Metal screeched loudly against stone, hinges groaned, the ground beneath our feet shook. The air that rushed out to meet us was warm, humid, and thick with the perfume of night flowers. And, so far away as to be almost inaudible, came the haunting tones of a flute.

THUS DID WE ENTER this forbidden place, enclosed and guarded by a complex net of magic wards that had stood unbroken for a thousand years. Those spells, I was all but certain, were not meant to keep us from entering. After all, here we were, and getting in hadn't proved all that difficult.

No, they were there to prevent whatever was waiting for us inside from ever leaving. That mean that getting out ourselves might prove much, much more difficult... and for

all sorts of reasons that I couldn't bring myself to think about, at least not until I had to. Even so, I shuddered when the great gates slammed shut with a thunderous boom the moment we were inside.

We found ourselves on a straight way paved with large white stones upon which strange runes and arcane signs were carved. On either side of us grew masses of fragrant flowering vines, clinging to high-sided walls that rose up and vanished in the darkness. The flowers were large as small plates and gave off a faint fluorescent light, which showed them to be tinted in the faintest shades of purple and blue. Their scent was almost cloying in its richness, a rich and velvety odor that drew a swarm of moths as large as small birds, which swooped and fluttered among them.

However, as my eyes grew more accustomed to the dim light they cast, I saw that what we were passing by was not a wall but a series of dark shapes of towering height. The space between them was also crowded with these vines, but still, you could make out that there *was* space there, where one of them ended and another began.

This faint light also revealed that the surface of these things was covered with the same sort of carvings that had decorated the gate. The vines all but smothered them over, even as the glowing flowers illuminated them—the grinning faces, snarling, sneering, gaping, extending lewdly jutting tongues, but here also talon-like claws as well, some grasping as if to seize us, others clenched into fists or mak-

ing obscene and hostile gestures.

All carved out of stone, to be sure, but the glow-light of the flowers made the eyes and fangs of the faces shimmer with malignancy. When a moth, resting in the mouth of one suddenly started fluttering its wings, I jumped back against Whynnya and almost cried out. The thought occurred to me that it might be wiser for me to let her shoulder her way through the vines, and for me to walk on the other side of her in the center of the avenue.

Nassazia had come to the same conclusion, and so we found ourselves walking side by side between the two horses, looking up at these hulking stone monoliths. From what little we could see, it was clear that they weren't buildings—they lacked anything that resembled doors or windows. Nor did any have flights of stairs leading up to some higher level.

Indeed, as far as I could tell, most had no corners at all. More than anything, they resembled rows of mottled black teeth, none shaped just like the other, but all rounded at the edges, and, peculiarly, slightly expanding in size as they rose.

“What do you make of these things?” I whispered to Nassazia. “Are we in a giant cemetery? Do you think they're all tombs?”

“I pray to the Mother of Blessed Name that they're *not*,” she whispered back. “Haven't you noticed that they all have *mouths*?”

When I stared at her, she pointed upwards, higher than I had been looking, and I saw what she meant. A casual glance might mistake the pitch black openings for shadows, but not if you regarded them carefully. No, each of these things had a huge gaping maw that tilted slightly upwards toward the starry sky.

The last lines of the rhyme came back to me, and I recited the lines, their meaning becoming clear to me.

*In Fyrewourmhaem thy fate be cast;
The dragons claim their toll.*

Nassazia nodded. “Yes, *Nithaial*,” she said softly, “these are the eyries of dragons and this place is a dragon hive, lovingly built by demons to house the most powerful and wisest of their kind. Can you sense them?”

All this time, of course, we had been moving along the avenue. Whynnya’s reins were draped over her neck, since I could keep contact with her through my mind. I was holding my wand of power in one hand; the other was pressed lightly against Helias’s limp body, before holding a leg, now gently grasping his shoulder.

What attention I could spare from making sense of our surroundings and keeping alert for any hint of danger was directed at him. I had already halted us once to lave his face with a moistened cloth and search for any hint of returning consciousness. There had been none. Even so, the warmth of his body against my fingers was all that kept me

moving forward in this frightening and incomprehensible place. I had to find some safe place where we could rest and Nassazia and I could tend to him as best as we were able.

I didn't answer Nassazia's question, because I was distracted by our approach to what seemed a large pool of white. When we reached it, however, it proved to be a large square, where our own avenue intersected with another. The space was large enough so that when we entered it we stood fully in the moonlight, out of both the shadows and the dizzying odor of the flowers.

We also stepped into silence. The hum and flutter of the moths, which seemed so loud in the compressed space between the looming hulks of the dragon eyries, was here barely audible. We paused for a moment to fill our lungs with the fresher air, and as we did so, my mind cleared, and I then did sense their presence, the way that mist might lift and reveal to your astonishment that you stood before a great and bottomless abyss.

Words are so helpless when they try to express the inner space from whence they spring. They are formed there but they depend on our outward senses to give them descriptive force. What does "blue" mean to a blind man? What will you imagine if I tell you that to intrude into a dragon's slumber is like insinuating yourself into the living, pulsating viscera of a great beast... except that the viscera are actually restless coils of dreams, thoughts, phantoms of perception, without shape or end? They contained colors my eyes could

not see, sounds my ears could not hear, images my brain could not decipher.

After but a moment of this I gasped and fell to my knees, my hands clutching my head. My brain felt wrung out, exhausted, and at once terrified and amazed.

*“That is a dangerous place to go without a guide, Nith-
aial Elimiel,”* said a voice, cold, amused, redolent of power. I leapt to my feet and looked around, before realizing that the voice, too, had been in my head.

Even as I realized this, Nassazia took my arm. “Listen,” she said.


I did. The flute—the one we had heard when we first came through the gates—was playing again, and this time the sound came from somewhere very close by.

The music was haunting rather than beautiful and the notes seemed edged with sharp points, where, I realized, they rose or fell where my hearing was incapable of following. But Whynnya’s ears had pricked up, her nostrils were quivering, and she began to stamp her feet, edging backwards from the dark opening where our avenue continued onwards to the center of this place.

Something approached. First came the rustle of something large passing through the vines. Then a huge face emerged before us from the shadows. It belonged to an animal that I had never seen, only read about. The catlike visage, the broad black stripes, the terrifying size: this was surely a tyger. The beast stopped once its head was fully vis-

ible in the moonlight. It narrowed its golden eyes, bared its fangs, and uttered a deep and ominous snarl.

“*Tchak!*” said a voice. “*Mashna lezd.*”

A sinuous figure slipped from the back of the tyger and stood beside it, wrapping an arm around its neck. “Welcome to my home, Nithaial,” he said, speaking directly into my mind, just as he had before. “*I am Teshnar’ad, Avatar of the Father, Ra’asiel. I have been awaiting your arrival for many hundreds of years.*” 

Chapter 18



HELIAS LAY IN MY ARMS, softly groaning, his eyelids fluttering. A large, black bruise covered half his forehead and during the time it had taken us to get here, it had swollen to the size of a pippin. The skin had been torn where Crusalas's hoof had struck, and this was still oozing blood. His hair was matted with it. Nassazia had just brought me a hot damp cloth from a pot of water heating over a small fire, and I was doing my best to clean it away.

"I have a small assortment of medicaments in my pack," she said as she took the bloody cloth from me and handed me another, clean one. "When I get Norra unpacked, I'll make up an ointment for the wound and, as well, a compress for the bruise."

"Give me something to lean Helias against," I said, "and I'll help you."

"No," she said. "You stay there and hold him. He needs you and I don't."

Our eyes met. She sighed, then shook her head. "No,

Nithaial, I mean only that I can use the effort of unloading Norra to tire my body and silence my mind.”

Nassazia squatted down beside me and touched my arm. “I don’t blame you for any of this—if I did, I’d also have to blame myself. Allowing us to take a path in the forest I had never travelled....” She frowned and added, “All the carefully laid plans of those who meant to help you have been wiped away as if they never were, and yet here we are—still alive. How can that be?”

She stood up and turned toward the horses. “There is only one possible answer to that question,” she said over her shoulder, answering her own question. “This is our doom.”

The three of us were now in a spacious underground burrow. This was more or less round, decoratively walled with stone, with a domed ceiling. A small fire hole opened at its very top. Small glow stones were set into the walls at regular intervals, casting a soft, dim light.

On one side of this room a shallow cave or den was set into the wall, its floor raised up the length of a forearm. It was spread with dried sweet grass and was, I supposed, for sleeping. Elsewhere, water flowed from the mouth of a demon’s face into a stone basin, which drained out of a hole set near its rim, so it was always full of fresh water.

On the far side of the room was a narrow niche. From its floor protruded another carved grotesque face, this one with a long tongue that curved out of its mouth and pressed against its forehead. This was so clearly a handle that I had

gone over and tugged on it. The face was made of glazed ceramic, not stone, revealing an opening over a pit. From the slight stench that emerged, I realized that this was a void hole, and thankfully squatted down and relieved myself.

Teshnar'ad had led us to the center of *Fyrewourm-haem*—as the rhyme names it—where we came upon a great temple. This, in turn, was surrounded by a large open space, where a network of paved walks weaved their way around any number of stone domes. One of these proved to be the roof of where we were to stay, entered by a door set into the ground that opened onto a steeply sloping stone ramp.

Getting the horses down this was no easy trick, but I had no intention of leaving them outside in the company of the tyger. Once we were all in the burrow, Teshnar'ad effortlessly lifted Helias from where he was draped on Whynnya, laid him on the ground, and squatted down beside him.

Then Teshnar'ad began to delicately flick his long forked tongue over Helias's face. He did this for a moment, then stood up and regarded me. "*Your wizard recovers, Nith-aial. Tomorrow, you shall teach me your language, or learn mine, since mind casting is tiring and unsubtle. Now it is time for you to rest.*" Saying that, he extended his right arm, the palm of his clawed hand facing me.

I stared at it for a moment, then, prompted by either intuition or a touch of mental guidance from him, I raised my own arm and lightly pressed my palm against his.

I thought it would be cold but, on the contrary, it

was almost hot. The touch lasted for the merest of moments, but during it something passed between us, a sensation that I find it almost impossible to describe. Our powers touched through our flesh, and mine stirred and flared up with such intensity that my body cast out a nimbus of blue flame.

Then Teshnar'ad was gone and the sensation vanished. I examined my palm, as if thinking it would be marked by the encounter, but it was as before. I then looked up at Nassazia and found her staring at me, a look of shock on her face. I turned my eyes away from her and knelt down before Helias. "Let's get some water boiling," I said, "and see what we can do to treat him."

I WAS TOO TIRED to lift Helias into the sleeping cave and so I gathered some of the dried sweet grass that covered it and made a mound of it on the floor. Then we placed Helias on it and I sat down beside him, holding a blanket I meant to use to cover us both.

Nassazia took another blanket and began to make a bed for herself in the sleeping den. As she did so, I asked her softly, "Nassazia, what did you make of Teshnar'ad?"

She looked over from where she knelt. "What *can* I think, *Nithaial*? We have now put ourselves under the power of a demon—no, worse, a demon demigod. He can destroy us with a mere snap of his fingers. But first, I think, he means to toy with us a bit, or at least with you. When I looked into his eyes, which I did for a mere blink, I saw my own death looking back at me. Now tell me, *Nithaial*, what did you see

when *you* looked into his eyes?”

I thought about the question as I spread the blanket out over Helias. We had looked at each other when our palms had touched and I had seen many things: cruelty, calculation, hostility. But other things as well, things I couldn't comprehend... feelings I couldn't comprehend.

I sighed. “I'm not sure, Nassazia, but it wasn't that. I couldn't see what he wanted. But why are you so sure he wants to destroy us?”

“Because he is a demon and we are human,” she said shortly. “We kill them and they kill us, always and forever. When you were a boy, did you ever hear a single story that told of anything else?”

I shook my head.

“Exactly,” she said. “So it isn't a matter of whether he will kill us all, but when. And since it seems to not be now, I'm going to get some sleep—without dreams, if the blessed Ges...” Nassazia gave a sudden cry of pain.

“What is it?” I asked.

Her face had turned scarlet. When she spoke, her voice was shaking with rage. “That *thing* won't let me say the name of our Lord,” she stammered. “Ges...” Again she screamed with pain, and this time fell back unconscious onto the floor of the sleeping den.

I leapt up from where I sat and went to her. As I did, the voice of Teshnar'ad spoke in my head and stopped me dead in my tracks. “*She cannot say that name within the pre-*

cincts of the temple. Tell her if she tries to do so again, the bas-narazk will eat her heart.” And, for an instant, he showed me an image of them, crawling down the pillars of the temple, black and hairy, with long limbs, claspings feet, and squat, round bodies, and a head that was all mouth, and a mouth that was all pointed teeth.

My whole body shuddered, and I wrapped my arms around myself and stood motionless for a moment, summoning back what strength I had. Then I took one of the cloths we had used to clean Helias, dipped it in fresh cold water, brought it to Nassazia, and began to bathe her face.

Lying there unconscious, her face lost all its toughness and her youth revealed itself, and for the first time her presence touched my heart. “*Nithaial*” was all she would call me, because I could now never be “Niccas” to her. In this, she was the first person this close to me for whom that was true. To her I meant nothing but the promise of terror and the threat of failure, for reasons she didn’t understand.

“Neither do I, Nassazia, neither do I,” I murmured as I pressed the cool cloth to her forehead. And after a few moments, her eyes fluttered, then opened.

“That’s better,” I said, smiling at her. “I can’t have you both lying here dead to the world.” She opened her mouth but I put her hand over it. “Nassazia,” I said, “don’t try again to speak the name of Blessed Mother Gesryma here or you will die. And I need you and don’t want you to die. So, if you need to hear the name, ask me and I will say

it for you. Gesryma of Blessed Name. Gesryma of Blessed Name. Gesryma of Blessed Name.”

I spoke the words softly, undefiantly, for Nassazia’s sake only. Even so, I felt a great silence suddenly pool around us, as if a terrible force was about to strike. I said in my mind, “I am the *Nithaial Elimiel*, the right hand of Gesryma of the Blessed Name. I serve Her in this place as I serve Her everywhere. Let your minions do with that what they will.”

“You are braver than I thought.” This time the voice inside me was softer, more thoughtful. *“Good. We have much to learn about each other. And, also, you are right. It is your presence here that is the blasphemy, and I am the one who brought you. So let your punishment be on me.”*

There was a crash of thunder so loud that it shook a stone loose from the ceiling. It fell to the floor with a thud. I looked to see where it had fallen, then, reassured, bent down and kissed Nassazia on the forehead.

She reached out and took both my hands. “Thank you,” she whispered, her eyes glistening.

I squeezed them. “Sleep, now,” I said. “Let your dreams be on me.” And I helped her roll up in her blanket, crawled out of the sleeping den, and went back to lie with Helias on the floor.

I gently worked my arm under his head, and, lying on my side, put my other arm over his chest, and pressed my face against his damp hair. “Come back to me, loved one,” I breathed into his ear, “I’m so lost here without you.”

Helias, though, didn't respond, and after a while I rolled onto my back. I wanted to think a little, mostly about Teshnar'ad, to puzzle out what he looked like, because so much of what I recalled was little more than a blur. Only his head came back to me, a thick triangular wedge, his eyes set in its sides, his wide mouth open just enough to reveal its multiple rows of fiercely carnivorous teeth.

MORNING.... MORNING? Matheas was gently shaking me. I grunted in protest, holding tightly to my comforting blanket of sleep. Now a cold hand began working up my naked side under my shirt. I shivered, but deliciously. I shifted backwards, pressing myself against the warm body behind me. The cool hand reached a nipple, and a finger and a thumb began to milk it. I shivered again. But Matheas had never, never.... Couldn't be Matheas. There was a slobbering sound: a horse was drinking water. I smelt stone, dried grass....

"Helias!" I whispered, and rolled over and took him in my arms. "Helias." Our lips met, our mouths locked, one tongue nestling against the other like two nursing puppies. My fingers traced down the small of his back, caressed the delicious roundness of his buttocks.

Then I remembered his injury, Nassazia, and I pulled back a little. I opened my eyes, found his. "We shouldn't..." I started to say, but he smiled and put his fingers to my lips. "She's asleep," he said softly, smiling. "I'm a wizard now, remember. I think she'd find it awkward, having sex with you."

My eyes widened in surprise. “Helias!” I said.

“What?” he asked. “She’s our companion. She’d be hurt if we left her out.”

“But she’s a *woman*,” I said. “I can’t believe you’re *saying* this!”

“Niccass!” Helias said teasingly. “Girls aren’t so bad. They can be very soft in the nicest places. And, after all, they do have a quim.”

I could feel myself blushing. That was a word I treated very gingerly. “All I want is *you*,” I whispered back furiously. “I know what women have.”

“And does that make you nervous, mighty *Nithaial*?” There was an edge now to Helias’s teasing that was getting hurtful, and tears began to edge into my eyes. Not noticing, he went on. “What if Nassazia were a boy—would you be so possessive of me, then?”

I let go of him and fell onto my back. “Why are you doing this to me?” I asked, tears now running down my cheek. “Do you know what it’s been like, thinking you might die at any moment—or at least never regain consciousness? Even if Nassazia was the most gorgeous boy in the whole world, all I would want right now is *you*.”

There was silence for a moment, then Helias said, tentatively, “Niccass?” He reached down and took my hand. “Niccass, I’m sorry. At first, I was just teasing you. It excited me, like it always does. But then something happened....”

“You *know* I’ve never slept with a girl,” I said shortly.

“In fact, you’re the only *boy* I’ve ever slept with. I think you know that, too.”

“Mmm, I do know,” Helias said. “That’s the problem.” He felt me turn away and held onto my arm. “Don’t,” he said. “And don’t be angry. In the Order, loving relationships were forbidden us; even friendship was dangerous. But sex was encouraged. It bonded us all together. I’ve slept with girls and boys and boys and girls together.

“Then Stalcas... took me for his own. That wasn’t right, but he was so powerful that everyone chose just not to notice. At first I was flattered, enchanted even, that he had noticed *me*. It didn’t occur to me until just this minute that he might have sensed something in me that he wanted somehow to get hold of... whatever it is that has let me become a wizard.”

He poked me. “Of course, this may happen to everyone you fuck. If so, we will soon be a kingdom of wizards!”

I smiled and stroked his hand. “No,” I said. “I’ll be content making *you* into a wizard, over and over.”

“Anyway,” Helias went on, “Stalcas had very particular tastes. He liked to tie me down, strap me with a belt, and then fuck me. He loved to torture me with that belt. He would strike me so that the tip of it struck my asshole and made me flinch. He would move silently, so I never knew when or where it would hit. And all the while, of course, he was getting harder and harder, and then, suddenly, he would enter me.

“After Stalcas, servicing Grendar, your brother Bor-

leas, seemed like nothing, with them, I could at least savor my hatred. Stalcas would have sensed such feelings instantly. They would have meant torture or worse.”

Helias was silent for a moment. “But then *you* came along,” he said, “and I got really confused.”

“I could say the same thing,” I whispered, “from the moment I first saw you in Grendar’s courtyard, the fiercest houseboy as ever there was.”

Helias smiled but shook his head. “You were confused only because I was such a mess. I shied away from love like a nervous horse. I still do. And I kick, too.”

His body suddenly went rigid. “Crusalas!” he cried, tightening his grip on my arm. “He’s dead, isn’t he? How....”

“I’ll tell you about that later,” I said, interrupting him. “Please, not now.”

We lay there looking into each other’s face. Then he nodded, and something softened in his face. He grinned at me. “Okay,” he said. “Enough kicking.”

“So,” I said thoughtfully, “you still desire girls?”

He nodded. “As well as you.”

I drew a finger down his chest and over his belly. “And if they’re soft in the nicest places, aren’t I *hard* in the nicest places?”

He giggled. “Yes,” he admitted.

“Which we know,” I continued, “also excites you....” I felt the fleshy triangle of his groin, stroked the silken softness of his nest of hair.

“True,” he replied. “And there is something very nice in having someone all to myself, and not always, always sharing.”

By now our hands had found each other’s sex. His cock was so hard and thick, his balls so soft and tight. I could feel the blood moving into my head, making me slightly dizzy. Our kisses had become like short, passionate wrestling matches, mouths grappling, pulling, twisting apart.

Helias groaned and pulled away. “Oh, my head.” He put up a hand and felt the bruise, and swore. “Fuck! I hope this doesn’t hatch,” he said. Then, as I pulled my hand away, added, “No! don’t stop. We just have to be gentle. Why don’t we do ‘boys’ turn to feed the baby?”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“What a sheltered life you’ve led!” he answered. “Alchemist apprentices must be a bloodless lot. Get up on your knees and I’ll show you.”

I did so, and Helias turned me around and guided me over him. I was getting more and more confused, then startled, then amazed. He touched the tip of my cock with his tongue, delicately prodding its opening, then licking over the knob. The sensation sent my heart fluttering, but it was nothing to what I felt when he took my cock in his mouth.

It was so amazingly exciting that I groaned out loud, then blushed before I remembered that Nassazia was under a spell of sleep. I think I would have fainted if she had been right there beside us. Something was brushing against my

chin. Helias's cock... suddenly the halfpence hit the table.

I had never kissed it before, let alone taken it in my mouth. A revelation of previously unrevealed desire spread through me, inflamed by what was happening to my own cock. It was too late to do so now, but the image of nuzzling his foreskin, gently coaxing his knob from out of it made me weak with lust. I could feel the possibilities of sex opening in my imagination like a field full of flowers.

Helias had taken my cock into his mouth, moving his head gently back and forth, nibbling it gently with his teeth, massaging it with his tongue. I did the same to his, mirroring him so that what he did to me melded into what I was doing to him, savoring the moments when we seemed to become as one.

His hands lightly clasped my hips and he began to slowly guide my cock down into his throat, then up again for more sucking, then down again. His own cock was so thick I was half afraid it might choke me. Even so, I eased it down, then brought it back up, then eased it back down again.

I thought to move my throat as if attempting to swallow it and the shiver that raced through his body when I did made me bolder, breathing when I brought it up, then letting it slip so deep down my throat that my nose pressed into the hair at the base of his cock, pungent with his musky smell.

Now we were fucking each other's mouth, hips thrusting in unison. I tried to concentrate, had to concentrate to keep breathing, but the thick haze of naked lust was


falling across my mind, smothering thought, holding only to the awareness of a huge wave rushing towards us, lifting us up, shaking our bodies, releasing... releasing....

Helias came so suddenly, so forcefully, in such quantity, that I almost gagged, remembering just in time to swallow, swallow, but not before it had filled my mouth, coated his cock, even shot partway up into my nostrils.

Even as all this was happening, I was coming myself, my balls pumping, shuddering, waves of sensation crashing and breaking. I kept sucking his cock, feeling it shrink, feeling the blood engorged thickness of my own cock evaporating into thin air.

I slumped down onto his body, burying my face between his legs, then lay there, unmoving, until, after a while, I felt his hand pulling at me. Reluctantly, I dragged myself onto my hands and knees, turned myself around, fell sprawling into his arms. And there we lay, cheek to cheek, feeling the flow of each other's breath.

Consciousness slowly returned. I started to laugh. "‘Boy’s turn to feed the baby.’ That’s *disgusting!*”

“Mmm,” Helias said. “I guess it is.” He sighed happily. “Maybe that’s why girls just can’t resist the idea.” 

Chapter 19



THE TEMPLE WHERE TESHNAR'AD RESIDED stood on top of a steep-sided stone base that grew increasingly narrow as you approached its top. It was smooth sided except for the steep flight of crumbling and dangerously narrow steps, and up these I was now climbing, occasionally on all fours, as the morning sun rose higher and higher into a stunningly azure morning sky.

I was alone. Helias and, to a lesser extent, Nassazia had both wanted to accompany me, but I had refused them both. To bring companions into the temple, I knew, would have displeased Teshnar'ad and perhaps further offended the Dark Lord, Ra'asiel. No, whatever all this was about, it was something I had to confront alone.

Up and up I went. Sweat was already trickling down my body and I was getting shorter and shorter of breath. Despite myself, I was also getting angry. To appear before Teshnar'ad panting and damp with sweat was humiliating—and it was just for that purpose, I was sure, that these endless steps existed.

Not the greatest hero in the world could go bounding up them and arrive fresh, alert, and cogent at their top.

The image stole into my mind of a procession of slaves bearing trays heaped with tribute, getting almost to the top of the flight, then fainting, falling, and rolling down the stairs, jewels and golden ornaments and other such treasures bounding down ahead of them.

I was just smiling grimly at the image, when Teshnar'ad spoke in my mind. "*Human slaves are filthy things, Nithaial. Their feet would never be allowed to sully these steps. Their purpose would be merely to serve as fodder for those who would be allowed to climb them.*"

I stopped climbing and paused a moment to catch my breath, steadying myself by leaning forward on my hands. As I did so, I made the mistake of looking down between my legs, and the feeling of vertigo that rushed into my head almost sent me toppling down them myself.

I closed my eyes, breathed in deeply several times, then said, aloud, even though my voice would hardly carry to the top of the stairs, "Greetings, Teshnar'ad. Do your people not think it discourteous to inhabit the minds of others without revealing themselves?"

"*You yourself entered the Dragon Mind without revealing yourself, Nithaial. We—you and I—are above all rules save those of our Gods. Even so, you would have to fight long and hard to enter my mind without permission. Why do you not similarly guard your thoughts? You leave all your doors open to the wind.*"

I had no answer to this, so I continued climbing. The top of the stairs was closer than I thought, since the steep angle of the climb threw off my perception. Suddenly, there was no longer stone directly in front of me but Teshnar'ad's supple, clawed feet. I shifted to one side of them, crawled onto the platform, and shakily got onto my feet, moving as I did a good arm's length from the edge.

Then I looked at Teshnar'ad. He had not turned to face me but stood where he had been. Nor, it seemed, had he been watching my painful climb up the stairs. His hands were placed against his hips, his face was lifted into the sun, his jaws open, his eyes shut, his breath gently but audibly panting.

"Satiating ourselves in the warmth of the sun is a legacy from the Old Ones, Nithaial," he said in my mind. *"Share it with me for a moment. It calms the mind."*

I turned to the east and the flood of light, but not before I took in a good long look at him. The first thing anyone would notice about Teshnar'ad was how massive he was. He stood about a head taller than most men and his body was all rippling muscle—all the more conspicuous because he wore no clothing at all. His waist was enclosed by a wide, heavy leather belt. From this, in the front, hung a tyger's muzzle, sewn into a pocket to hold his sex. Nothing covered his tail, which was short and thick and jutted haughtily into the air.

His skin had a smooth sheen to it, the scales a dark shade of green and the integument surrounding them a rich shade of brown. It was easy to imagine him vanishing before

your eyes in a mass of vegetation—or, more likely, suddenly appearing directly in front of you a split second before he cut your throat.

Around his neck hung a gold chain from which a pendant dangled, flashing in the sun. On it a sigil unfamiliar to me glowed from within an emerald as large as a boy's fist. He also wore elaborately worked wrist and ankle bands of the same metal, studded with precious stones. He wore no other weapon save a small dagger in a sheath.

All this time, of course, one part of my mind was aware that Teshnar'ad was—at least, if he chose to do so—following my thoughts. So, after cataloging my impressions, I did my best to think of nothing at all. Here, on the temple platform, we stood above the dragon hives, shouldering up through the greenery. Now, in the daytime, I could see that they were constructed of marble, or some other slightly translucent stone, most of them black, but some green, and others a pinkish ivory.

The decorations carved into their sides came only as far as their domed tops. However the gaping openings from which the dragons came and went were lined with ceramic tile. These gave off the illusion of being lips—the gaping maws of a school of sleek-headed sea creatures rising up out of a shimmering green sea.

I shuddered slightly and lifted my eyes. Beyond these hives stood the wall that surrounded *Fyrewourmhaem*, and beyond that was... magic, visible. At first it appeared as

a low-lying mist. But as you watched it you could see that, in fact, rather than being a monotonous misty gray, it had all the colors of the rainbow, if delicate in tint, and that it slowly flowed, twisting as it did so into itself and out again, as if it were endlessly weaving a braid. Or—I immediately thought—as if two serpents had wrapped themselves around each other, their bodies brushing against each other as they moved, an image that I found unsettlingly arousing.

This was magic as I had never seen it, no, had never *imagined* it—magic as a force of nature rather than as a moment’s shape-shifting of the real. It took my breath away. Who, I wondered, could have had the power to bring something like this into being—something that, as best I could understand, had lasted a thousand years.

“You *did*, Nithaial Elimiel,” said Teshnar’ad, breaking into my thoughts. “*You and your twin, the Nithaial Galgaliel, in one of your past incarnations. You wove the spell that imprisoned me and the dre’aganzd—the Wise Ones—here.*”

I looked at him. He was still facing the sun, but his eyes were opening. The eyelid dropped slowly down, then, eerily, a second, nearly transparent lid swept across as well, finally revealing a large mottled green eye with a black vertical slit in its center.

This eye gazed at me for a bit, then Teshnar’ad added, “*It is a terrible thing, this curse, and what it sought to solve, it only made worse. Far, far worse.*”

He laid a hand on my shoulder and drew me with

him away from the edge of the platform. *“But come with me and let us learn each other’s way of speaking. Whatever you may think, I dislike being inside your mind.”* Teshnar’ad led me into the temple.

JUST AS THEY HAD in the vision of the basnarazk the night before, several pillars rose from the floor of the temple up to a domed roof high above our heads. These, in the manner of almost everything in this place, were decorated with carvings, this time of the flowers Teshnar’ad had just mentioned, the leaves green, the flowers the same faint, almost transparent purplish blue.

This time, however, no carved faces leered from among the tendrils. Instead, the surface of the pillars was what at first appeared to be a mottled carmine. When I looked closer, I saw in fact that these were scales, and the base of each pillar was an elaborately carved dragon’s claw, the long nails cast from solid gold.

“I must make obeisance to Ra’asiel, Nithaial, to inure Him to your presence. Stand here, say nothing, do nothing, until I make a gesture to you.”

Although I obeyed him, what he said made no sense, since the interior of the temple was entirely empty. Not only were there none of the appurtenances of the temples to Gesryma, the Mother of Blessed Name—altar slab, mourners’ bench, nave—but there was nothing else either, just a highly polished black marble floor.

However, as Teshnar’ad crossed it, I saw that there

was a ring of silver inset into the stone, with a diameter the length of three men. Inside this circle and also inset into the floor, were sigils limned in gold, which began to glow fiercely as Teshnar'ad approached. When he reached the silver circle, he stopped, drew out the knife he wore at his side, and slowly and deliberately cut a slit down his forearm, from which blood immediately began to flow. He took the knife in his other hand and cut an identical slit in the other arm, bent down and slid the knife away from him across the floor.

He then stepped inside the circle and walked around its entire circumference, chanting in his tongue and swinging his arms as he did, so that the blood was sprinkled everywhere onto the floor. There the droplets were transformed into a scarlet mist which gradually began to thicken and rise.

As it did so, it revealed the outlines of an invisible figure standing in the midst of it, the feet, the legs... the mist of blood wrapped itself around it like a translucent cloak. Then, suddenly, the mist began to flow into the figure as if inhaled through every pore—and Ra'asiel revealed Himself. And immediately Teshnar'ad prostrated himself upon the floor.

In the imaginings of the worshippers of Gesryma, Ra'asiel resembles a demon, or worse. I was sure that He showed himself to Teshnar'ad in such a fashion, but He was well aware of my presence, and in my eyes He took on a human form, except with skin that had the color and sheen of scoured iron and hair and eyebrows seemed spun of silver thread. Ra'asiel's eyes were a dark and luminous green.

He made a gesture for me to approach. I hadn't forgotten Teshnar'ad's injunction to "say nothing, do nothing," but how does one refuse a God? I stepped slowly toward Ra'asiel until I came to the silver circle embedded into the floor. And there I stopped.

All this time I had cast my eyes down. Any human looking Ra'asiel in the eye would find their brain wiped clean, and out of no more evil intent than the sun has when it blinds those who stare at it too long. I didn't think that would happen to me but neither had I any desire to merge myself with him in that way. Whatever powers I acquired by doing so would eat away my soul.

So I just stood there, clinging to the spar of my own powers as I was swept into the sea of His *karísmata*. That, really, was what it was all about—Ra'asiel showing me who He was. He took me to the top of a towering pinnacle that rose up in the middle of a molten ocean of fire, under a yellow sky lit by a sullen purple sun. I held out my hand and the sea parted; I raised it and solid land lifted itself out of the fire—except that this land was made of crystal, and refracted the colors of the sea, sky, and sun into dazzling points of light.

It was my destiny to have control over earth and fire, but here I commanded them, made them my playthings, in a place where nothing restricted my powers or their perfection. Ra'asiel was showing me what it was truly like to be a god, because this spoke to the part of me that was immortal, shorn of all that was human. Love, pity, pain, death: these not only

had no place in this world but were almost unimaginable. I felt the heat of burning ocean sear them into cinders and the wind that howled around the mountain blow them away.

Then it was over. Ra'asiel withdrew. His presence ebbed swiftly out of mind, my body, the temple itself. I felt dizzy and slightly sick. Teshnar'ad was still prostrate on the floor, and when he started to get up, I could see he was weak from the loss of blood.

"Let us go to my living quarters, Nithaial," he said, glancing at me. "Ra'asiel would have honored you greatly had He merely acknowledged your presence. But you interested Him, and consequently He entered you and touched your being. Among my people, you are therefore considered blessed."

"And among my people I am therefore considered damned," I thought, but said nothing. Teshnar'ad led me beyond the ring of silver to a narrow opening in the floor. This proved to be a flight of stairs, and Teshnar'ad and I descended down them into the bowels of the temple.

IT WAS CLEAR from the passages and stairs that the lower part of the temple had several levels and many rooms; the one into which Teshnar'ad brought me was dim and cool, lit from the light that filtered through narrow slits of green glass set into the exterior stone walls.

In order, I think, to take tails into account, the objects that I took to be chairs were actually used in reverse: you sat with your chest pressing against the back, which was curved accordingly to accommodate this, and the arm rests

correspondingly extended behind it.

Teshnar'ad barked a command, and an attendant appeared—young, male, and in appearance much like him, except obviously much younger. Unlike Teshnar'ad, he had designs painted around his neck and others on his chest. He knelt down and dressed the wounds on Teshnar'ad's arms, then left, returning almost instantly with two bowls, one of which he set before its master and the other before me. He then made an obeisance and withdrew.

“Drink,” said Teshnar'ad. *“May your death bring you honor.”*

“And yours renown,” I replied politely, hoping I was somewhat on target. The liquid that Teshnar'ad was greedily drinking was murky and had the sour smell of rotting vegetation, like something scooped from a swamp. Nervously, I took a sip. It wasn't bad—like a soup made of fermented pot greens. As I was thinking this, I saw something swimming in it. A tadpole. And then another. And another. I put the bowl back on its little table.

When I looked up, I found Teshnar'ad regarding me sardonically. *“You People of the Womb like your water clear, I now remember,”* he said.

“People of the Womb?” I asked.

“It is what we call you. We ourselves are the People of the Egg. The children of Gesryma and the children of the Almighty Ra'asiel. If you wish to understand why we are unlike you in so many ways, you would do well to think on this.”

Teshnar'ad drained his bowl and set it down. *"It's just as well that I didn't have a haunch of cow brought in, although I need to replenish my blood. Let us get this matter of language done with, and then perhaps you should go."*

He rose smoothly out of his recliner and came over to me. I clambered out of my own and stood facing him.

"Place your hands here," he said, gesturing to the tender skin just below his jaws, where his neck met his head. I did so, the heel of each palm pressing flatly against it and the fingers curving around his neck. His skin was surprisingly soft and smooth as the finest leather, and very, very warm.

He lifted up his arms and reached over to me, not taking me around the neck but pressing his claws up against the tender place just behind the jaw. When his own palms touched my flesh, the connection opened between us, our minds touched, explored, mingled; I could feel the flow of his mind into me and my mind into him.

The difference was that Teshnar'ad knew what he was doing and I didn't; I was like a virgin being initiated into sex by someone at once practiced in the art and totally without any interest in me. Even so, a door was opened to a room I hardly knew existed. I would come here again, I vowed, with someone close to me.

Teshnar'ad withdrew, let go of me, stepped back, opened his jaws and hissed, *"Thrrrrr—nowweeek'an tolc."*

My first thought was that, despite all this, I was no better at comprehending his tongue now as I had been

before. I was about to say so when it dawned on me that Teshnar'ad had been speaking *my* language!

I tried to make my mind wrap itself around demon-speak to answer him in kind. As I struggled to do so, Teshnar'ad, who had been holding his head with both claws as if in great pain, suddenly grabbed his drinking bowl from where it rested and heaved the contents of his stomach into it. The spasms were so strong that he continued to retch even after everything had come up.

He stood there, sides heaving, for several minutes before turning to me. "*The language of men is disgusting!*" he mindspoke to me. Then he shook his head. "*No, not the language. The innermost being from which it springs... soft, squishy, clinging... it revolts me!*"

By this time, however, my mind had fit itself to the tongue that Teshnar'ad himself spoke, a language of hard surfaces, sharp edges, and, above all, unremitting force. It was ideal for challenging, commanding, feinting and thrusting; there also was, I had to admit, a capacity for reflection, but nowhere a hint of any awareness of affection, tenderness, or even compromise.

"Yours is a tongue of knives and clubs," I answered, speaking in his language—astonished to hear the harsh sounds forcing their way out of my throat. "What value can the hard have without the...." and I groped for the Demonic word for "soft." What I found were equivalents to "pulpy," "rotten," "squelchy," "spongy," "silky," and "submissive."

None was especially promising. “Submissive?” I said.

Teshnar’ad snapped out a command, which I now understood to be “Attend!” and the attendant again instantly appeared. The Avatar thrust the bowl of vomit in his hands with a gesture of disgust and dismissed him.

“You speak our tongue well, but you sound like a girl,” he said. “Use more force when you speak! Every word is a weapon! That is something we learn early on. Told just like that.” He smiled a peculiarly chilling smile.

“We know nothing of what you call “love,” and so of course we have no words for it. The People of the Egg do not rear their young. When they mate for life, the bond is one of mutual possession. We call it Two Who Act as One. At it’s heart it is the knowledge that he or she who lies beside you will not attack.”

The attendant returned bearing a deep bowl and a cloth. Teshnar’ad stuck his snout into the bowl and shook his head, washing himself clean. He then withdrew it, dripping water, and allowed the attendant to mop and dry him.

As this happened, he continued, “To recognize this in someone and have it acknowledged in return is something of great importance in our lives.” His eyes met those of the attendant, and then looked at me. “To us, the important distinction is not between hard and squelchy, but between dangerous and safe.”

Chapter 20



WHYNNYA SNORTED AND SHOOK HER HEAD as Helias and I emerged from the shadow of the trees and onto the grassy top of Wyldmast Druim. Helias had found the way up on one of the days when I was closeted with Teshnar'ad, after I had received permission for Helias and Nassazia to take the horses out for exercise and to feed on the rich spring grass.

Helias was riding Norra. Nassazia wasn't with us. She had put together a target and announced her intention to spend the morning honing her archery skills. Although we hadn't talked about it, I knew that she was extremely disturbed to be here, especially without any means of escape.

Furthermore, despite my expression of allegiance to Gesryma, the Mother of Blessed Name our first night here, she became increasingly distrusting of me with each day I spent with Teshnar'ad. This was so much so that I hid from her the fact that I had been in the presence of Ra'asiel.

Helias, however, I did tell. In fact, Ra'asiel was the

subject we had been talking about when we came over the crest. “I can’t believe you actually *saw* Him,” Helias was saying. “Did He try to tempt you to switch sides?”

We dismounted and set the horses free to graze, their reins tossed over their neck.

I shook my head. “No, what He wanted to do was to remind me of my immortal origins.” I glanced at Helias and added, “In the space of a few seconds he opened vistas to me that were previously beyond my ability to imagine. Why he chose to do that is unclear to me.”

“Well, in a way, He *was* torturing you,” Helias said, “showing you what you had lost, becoming half human.”

“Immortality was taken from me,” I replied without rancor. “That makes me much more than *half* human.”

Wyldmast Druim, once the heart of the Forest Grymaeld, was itself a place of great power, and the magic that imprisoned Teshnar’ad here drew on it constantly to maintain itself. I could feel the ebb and flow of it beneath my feet, as if I were walking on the head of some giant sleeping beast.

Looking down, I saw, half buried in the grass, part of a pattern of *dagmast* stones, used by wizards in the olden days to capture and direct this magic. I was about to point these out to Helias when I was suddenly struck behind the knees and sent toppling into the grass. Before I could leap back to my feet, Helias was on top of me, pinning my arms.

“Unhand me, wizard,” I said, struggling furiously, “or I’ll... I’ll...”

“Call Nassazia and ask her to rescue you?” Helias suggested, squeezing his knees into my side.

We looked at each other. I tried to swing up my legs and wrap them around him, but he intuited this ploy and instantly spread his own legs to pin mine down.

“Nassazia! Nassazia!” he cried in a falsetto voice.

“Stop it!” I said. “I’d rather surrender.”

Helias smirked. “Well, then, do you? Or do I have to get rough?”

I thrashed around a bit but, truly, Helias had me pinned. “Very well,” I said. “I surrender. Now what?”

“You must allow me to do to you what I will,” Helias answered ominously. “Lie here and don’t move.”

I lay there. He went over to Norra and came back with a fistful of wooden stakes and leather straps. When I saw these I was so surprised that I started to sit up.

“Oh, no!” Helias said. “Get back down on the ground.”

“Where did *those* come from?” I asked.

“The straps are from our baggage,” he replied. “The stakes I carved while you were jawing with Teshnar’ad.”

“You *planned* this?” I asked.

Helias smirked at me. “I am resourceful and infinitely devious,” he replied. “Now spread out your arms.”

Using a stone to pound in the stakes, he soon had me spread-eagled and strapped down so I couldn’t move.”

He stood up and surveyed his work. “Now,” he said, “you are completely at my mercy.” He lifted a foot and used

it to push up my shirt, exposing my small clothes.

“Tsk, tsk,” he said. “We don’t need these.” He unfastened their ties, pulled them off me, and tossed them aside.

“Helias!” I said, shocked by the sudden exposure.

“Call Nassazia to come rescue you whenever you want,” he replied. “Otherwise, I’m treating you as I wish.” He reached out the same foot and drew his toes across my cock, which immediately stiffened. He then placed his toes under it and began casually, lightly to flip it up. After he had done this several times, I began to groan.

“Niccass, you little slut!” he said. “I could make you come like this, couldn’t I?”

“Yes,” I answered. “Yes.”

“But, of course, I’m not going to.” He lifted his shirt up over his head and pulled it off. He was wearing nothing underneath and he was already very erect.

He squatted down over me, took his cock in one hand, and began to rub it against my face. “Lift your head up,” he said. When I did, he ordered, “Open your mouth.” He pushed his cock into it and, as I sucked on it, he began thrusting it in and out, grinding his butt against my chest as he did.

Then he reached back, seized my sex, and began pulling at it in the same rhythm as his strokes. This soon pushed me to my limit. My body was trembling all over and my eyes losing their focus.

“No, no, naughty boy,” Helias said, suddenly pulling out of my mouth. “It’s time for *your* cock to do some work.”

He reached over and picked up his shirt. “But I’m not going to give you the pleasure of watching.” He wrapped the shirt into a band and fastened it around my eyes, then pulled it tight.

“There we are,” he said. “I’ll be right back. And don’t you dare peek!”

He got up and went off for a moment, I supposed to lubricate himself. Then I heard him return and felt him squatting over my groin, the hand guiding my cock in. The mouth of his ass was amazingly open, letting me in with barely any resistance at all. This showed how excited Helias was, which in turn drove my own lust to a frenzy, especially because he was so incredibly moist and hot inside. His ass had *never* gripped my cock like this.

I began to thrust hard each time he came down on me. The sensations were so strong that my body was tingling all over.

“Feels good, doesn’t it?” Helias whispered.

“So good,” I gasped.

“You like it, don’t you, little pleasure boy?”

“Yes, yes, yes.” I was getting close to coming. Helias was, too, because he began emitting sharp cries, in a high-pitched voice.

It was... It was... It was too late. My body convulsed, my balls pumping so hard that they felt as though they were being squeezed. I thrust and thrust and thrust, until I was awash with exhaustion, and fell back against the ground. Only then did I feel the burn marks on my arms and legs

where the straps had dug into me as I came.

“*Now* you can look,” Helias said, and flipped his shirt off my face. Above me, head bent forward, squatted Nassazia, entirely naked, her breasts just a few inches from my face.

All feeling drained from my body, my soul. That was the experience of betrayal: every feeling that nurtured and gave your spirit life being flushed away, leaving nothing behind but cold.

My teeth literally chattered as Helias pulled Nassazia off me, got her down on her knees, and, as I helplessly watched, too weak to turn away, entered her from the rear. Reaching down around her, he seized hold of her nipples, and he simultaneously milked and pumped her until the two of them came, collapsing into each other’s arms, kissing and laughing and, all the while, mocking me.

After awhile, Helias rolled away from her, got up on his knees and came over to me. “Shall I untie you now, *Nith-aial Elimiel*?” he asked, smirking.

I took a deep breath, summoned all the strength inside me, leaned forward and spit into his face.

Helias swore, leaped to his feet, and mopped my spittle off his face with his shirt. “So, that’s how you want it, you little shit? Well, good, you can just stay here then and air your cunt until you figure out how to free yourself.”

He called to Nassazia and in a moment I heard them ride off together. I didn’t know if he rode Whynnya; my eyes were full of tears. And once they were gone I began to cry,

inconsolably, in great racking sobs that shook my body. Helias was the only lover I had ever had and I still didn't have a clue as to why he had treated me this way.

Well, of course I had a clue. It had been staring me in the face all along. His feelings had started to change toward me when he had come back from the city with Nassazia. And she had wanted what he had gotten from me: power. And he had agreed to help her. There had probably been no spell of sleep cast on Nassazia—he had hoped to get me to admit I'd enjoy having sex with her. And when I had been horrified, well, he came up with this plan. What was it he had said? "Infinitely devious."

By now the tears had ebbed, but my head throbbed with excruciating pain and I was keeping my eyes closed against the brilliance of the sun. When a shadow fell over them, I kept them shut. Helias could cut me loose and go away—I had no desire to talk to him or even see him. But the shadow stayed motionless and, eventually, I cracked my eyelids and peeked out. It was Teshnar'ad's attendant and, possibly, his lover. I opened one eye and looked at him.

"Am I disturbing you, *Nithaial*?" he said.

I imagined him looking down at me, each of my limbs tied to a stake, my shirt pulled up, and my cock glistening with the juices of recent sex. His question was the height of tact.

"What is your name?" I asked in return.

"I am called Do'arma'ak, Honored One."

"Do'arma'ak, grant me your service and free me

from these bonds and then guide me to a place where I might wash myself clean.”

He untied me and led me down the side of the hill to a small spring, from which clear cold water bubbled out from between two rocks. I took off my shirt, squatted down and splashed water first on my face and then onto my crotch. Finally, I drank down a good deal. I was very thirsty.

I stood up, fastened my small clothes, and slid back into my shirt. I looked at Do’arma’ak and opened my mouth, but no word came out. The demon language had no expressions for thanking someone.

“This place was most appropriate,” I said at last.

Do’arma’ak inclined his head. “I find the ways of your people most strange,” he said. “Sometime you would explain this to me?”

We were climbing back up to the top of Wyldmast Druim, since the way down was on its other side. I looked over at him. He moved with a lithe economy of movement, so smoothly that, with the aid of the muted earth tones of his scales, his passing would be almost impossible to see. There was nothing in the least soft about him, but whereas Teshnar’ad radiated danger, Do’arma’ak had a quality of....

“Submission,” I said. “Among my people, sometimes the stronger finds pleasure in submitting to the weaker. Does this not happen among your own? The sun being taken by the moon?”

Do’arma’ak’s eyes widened. “That is most, *most* in-

comprehensible. The submissive one takes *meaning* from the dominating one. What you suggest would be seen as an insult to the Father, Ra'asiel. Except that none of us would dare imagine such a thing. It is too... too...." He furrowed his brow and cast his head from side to side, as if to shake the recalcitrant term loose from his brain.

"Our term for what you mean is 'perverse,'" I said.

"Perhaps I will learn this word," Do'arma'ak said. "Pairv'errss.' It is useful to explain so many of your ways."

True enough, I thought, true enough. "Do'arma'ak," I asked, "did Teshnar'ad send you to get me?"

"No, Honored One," he replied. "Had he wished that, he would have touched your mind. I climb up to the top of this hill, now and then, to smell the distant air and remember my home."

"How did you come here, then?" I queried him. "I thought this place was sealed by magic."

Do'arma'ak shoved his snout suddenly forward and snapped his jaws, startling me until I realized it was his way of expressing a negative.

"Sealed for the Avatar and the mighty Wise Ones, most of all. And to prevent *your* people from entering to cause mischief, that too. But the Avatar can summon servants and other things by making sacrifice to the Father, Ra'asiel. It was in this way that I was called."

"A...." I had been going to say "a lonely life," but it turned out there was no demon word for "lonely." "Are there

others of your people here?" I asked, instead.

Do'arma'ak looked puzzled, then grasped the import of the question. "None of my caste." Then realizing this did not serve as an answer, ventured hesitantly on. "Unlike your people, we see no value in...", again the furrowing of the brow, "males of the same rank seeking to share space with each other. Unless, of course, they are fighting together. Even then there are problems."

He paused, considering. "Of course, no one is ever of *exactly* the same rank. But sorting it out..." He snapped his jaws again. "It's very difficult."

Just then we heard the sound of horses' hooves; Helias and Nassazia were returning.

"Come," I said to Do'arma'ak, "I do not wish to meet my companions. Hide with me." Together we went back to the place where he had taken me down to the spring, and crouched down out of sight. If they came looking for me, they would find me, but I hoped they would decide I had simply freed myself and left Wyldmast Druim. I couldn't trust myself yet in the presence of Helias, let alone Nassazia—who had now become, I realized, a very dangerous enemy.

I heard Helias's voice. "He's not here! Look—the straps are cut. Somehow he managed to free himself."

"Too bad. I was looking forward to filling him with arrows." This, Nassazia.

"Nassi!" Helias exclaimed. "We couldn't do that. It would be sacrilege!"

“You couldn’t. I could,” Nassazia said coldly. “Easily. If the Blessed Gesryma then chose to punish me for it, so be it. But no time for that now. You have his wand of power?”

“Yes,” Helias said. “I stole it when I tied him up. That’s why I’m amazed he managed to cut the straps. He’s a lot slyer than I thought. Here, take it.”

“No!” Nassazia exclaimed. “I don’t want to even touch it. Keep it yourself. The important thing is that we’ve taken it from him.”

“Let’s do this,” Helias said, his voice anxious. “If Teshnar’ad sees us up here...”

“Demons feel the sting of arrows, too,” Nassazia said scornfully. “But you’re right. We might as well find out if this works.”

“*Find out* if it works!” Helias exclaimed. “I thought you knew....”

“Oh, shut up, fancy boy!” Nassazia snapped. “How *could* I know? Bring the horses over here and stand by me.”

There was the sound of the horses moving, then silence. I glanced at Do’arma’ak and our eyes met. We both thought of his earlier statement: *to prevent your people from entering to cause mischief*.

Then I heard Nassazia’s voice speaking urgently and rhythmically. The powers within Wyldmast Druim, before moving in a steady-flowing current, now became agitated, choppy, with bits of energy spinning off. I could sense these bits flying up, swirling around Nassazia, Helias, and

the horses, first like a shower of sparks, then moving so fast that they melded into long strands, and these spun together to form a net.

Do'arma'ak and I scrambled over the lip just in time to see the last few seconds, the power Nassazia had summoned shaping itself into a whirling funnel that reached high up into the sky, a cyclone formed of pulsating light. There was a crackling sound and... there was nothing there. The hill was empty again.

Except, no, there was sound of something metal hitting the ground. Do'arma'ak and I went over to the place where the *dagmast* stones were buried and we found my wand of power lying there. I picked it up and turned it over in my hands. It was surprisingly hot. Either Helias had dropped it or the powers had not let him take it with him.

"I think, Honored One," Do'arma'ak said, "that we should go tell of this to the Avatar Teshnar'ad."

“So, *Nithaial*,” Teshnar'ad said, after hearing our account, “what you have done is create for yourself two powerful enemies and then let them escape your grasp.” He was speaking my language. While it still disgusted him, he had come to relish some of the verbal ploys it offered, such as the utterance sarcastic.

“Great Avatar, what would it have accomplished to stop them?” I replied. “And how could I have, with Nassazia waiting for the chance to fill me—and you, for that matter—with her arrows.”

“Ah, yes,” Teshnar’ad said. “Demons feel the sting of arrows, too.” He snarled, took out the knife he wore from its sheath, examined it, and then with an incredibly rapid movement of his wrist, flipped it directly at me.

I was taken so much by surprise that instead of trying to leap aside, I remained frozen where I stood. Even so, the knife came to a stop several fingers’ distance from my chest, hung suspended in the air for a second, then dropped to the floor. As it did so, I became aware of something inside me relaxing slightly, returning to its normal watchfulness.

“Pick it up!” Teshnar’ad said. I did so. The blade was made of a dark gray metal; the handle was flat and thick, obviously shaped for a very different hand.

“Now,” Teshnar’ad said, “throw it back at me.”

“I haven’t the skill,” I answered, surprised.

“Then we shall teach it to you, Do’arma’ak and I,” he said. “Even so, I’m close enough to be stuck with *that* knife, thrown even by you.”

I could tell that Do’arma’ak was agitated by the direction of the conversation—throwing a dagger at the Avatar!—but Teshnar’ad gestured at him to be still.

I examined the knife again. Like a true throwing knife, it was sharpened to a wicked edge on both sides of the point. I took the handle lightly in my hand, lifted my arm up and whipped the knife directly at him.

Teshnar’ad plucked it out of the air and, in a single fluid motion, flung it back at me. This time, I was better pre-

pared. I slipped out of its path and, as it flew past me, seized it by the handle. To anyone watching me, my motions would have been a blur, but to me everything was as if etched in crystal. When I reached out to take the knife, my eyes absorbed every bit of the fine engraving on the blade.

I spun around and again sent the blade flying across the room, but this time my aim was off and it went far to one side of Teshnar'ad. This, however, didn't faze him. He made a flying leap, at least twice the height and distance that any man could manage, and snatched it down. I heard Do'arma'ak gasp, so this must have been an impressive retrieve, even among demons.

Teshnar'ad landed with his legs crouched, his eyes fixed on me. They were glittering. "Enough," he said. "You have the power, it just lacks some training. When you return to your home, you should disembowel your teachers."

"My training was staying alive and avoiding being captured by The One Who Cannot Be Named," I replied. "That's kept me and my teachers very busy."

"Another dangerous enemy," agreed Teshnar'ad. "I know his name, but it's true—I prefer not to say it." He examined the knife, passing its edge vertically before one eye, then returned it to its sheath.

"You were too...," he groped through for the word, "*tender*, I suppose, to mind touch your minions, when you had the chance?"

It had never occurred to me to do so. But I decided

to say, instead, “Again, I may have the power but I haven’t learned the way. But you, I suppose, did?”

Teshnar’ad lowered his snout to his chest, signifying assent. “A little. Two dirty little holes. But the wizard, your sex mate, had things of yours he was reluctant to return to you, especially since you never demanded them.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. I couldn’t think of what they could be.

“One was a magical thing, what you call a *telesma*. The other was a small bag of precious stones.”

I was thunderstruck. The sack of jewels was a parting gift from my father—as was, of course, the asking stone, but that, I had thought, was safely tucked into my traveling bag. The jewels had been taken from me the same day my father had given them to me, and I had forgotten about them entirely. “Helias!” I thought. “What is wrong with you?”

“The wizard discovered that he could make the stone talk,” Teshnar’ad continued. “That is how he and the witch found the portal. But she already knew how to use it.”

He looked at me. “She just needed more power. You gave her much, much more power. Do you know how much she hates you?”

I looked away from him. “I know she does hate me,” I replied. “But I’m not at all sure why.”

“Ah.” Teshnarad showed his teeth. Perhaps it was a smile. “She is certain Ra’asiel has assumed powers over you of which you are not yet aware. She thinks this is just what

happened to Maer...,” he made a spitting gesture, then said, “The One Who Cannot Be Named. And that Ra’asiel is now grooming you to replace Him.”

I gasped. “That can’t be true.”

“Of course it can,” Teshnar’ad replied shortly. “But if it *is* so, that has not been revealed to me.”

“In any case,” he went on, “when they met, they recognized the power each possessed, and soon found that they could play with it in each other. It greatly heightened the pleasure of their rutting, which they did many times when you were here in discussion with me.”

“Why didn’t you tell me any of this?” I demanded. “I could have....”


As I tried to think what I could have done—persuaded Nassazia I hadn’t become a minion of Ra’asiel, told Helias he could keep the jewels, and similar nonsense—Do’arma’ak murmured something into Teshnar’ad’s ear.

Teshnar’ad held up his hand. “No, *Nithaial*, the only solution would have been to have offered them both up in sacrifice to Ra’asiel—a fitting end for the witch, especially. It was already too late for anything else. And you, even knowing what you know now, are not strong enough to order that.”

He snapped his jaws dismissively. “Do’arma’ak reminds me of my duties. Come to see me in the morning, and we shall discuss together the reason I have brought you here, and what might follow from it, one way or the other.”

I sighed. “Very well. But I have one last question.

You seem to know all about the portal activated by the *dag-mast* stones. Do you know where it took them?”

Teshnar’ad smiled, revealing row upon row of pointed teeth. “Oh, yes,” he said. “They have gone from the frying pan straight into the fire.” 

PART FIVE



DRACON

WÆLFYRA

Chapter 21



I RETURNED TO OUR LIVING PLACE, which had been left in total disorder. Nassazia and Helias had emptied my saddlebags, and strewn their contents about the floor, after taking what they wanted—most conspicuously, the enchanted map.

One of them, Helias I suppose, had left me some travel bread and jerked meat, even a crock of brandy. My sleeping bundle remained where I had left it that morning. I gathered together my clothing into a little heap, ate some food, and crawled into my blankets. But I was far from being able to fall asleep.

“Helias, Helias,” I thought, “what *happened* between us?” Besotted with Nassazia or no, what he had done to me was an act of furious rage. Everything I felt toward him now, had passed from him to me: hurt, jealousy, a feeling of betrayed trust. Could he have explained it to me if I had the wit to ask? Could I have figured it out if I *had* mind-touched him? I felt so helpless. All I wanted was to love him and be loved

by him. Why did everything have to be so *complicated*?

My mind wandered back to Matheas, and I felt a pang of longing. *He* was uncomplicated, and uncomplicatedly loving. And yet I had wanted Helias and Helias only. And, despite myself, I *still* wanted him. How could this be?

Even as I asked the question, I felt a sudden flash of insight. The simple love of someone like Matheas was torture to me after the terrible destruction of my family. It reminded me too much of what I had lost, and how guilty I still was for being the cause of it. To love Helias, I had to thrust my arms into a briar patch—the pain, the blood, made the love possible. But Helias was gone. Could I bear another relationship like that one? Did I even want to?

These thoughts led only into sadness so I turned my mind to Teshnar'ad. I had never had any trouble figuring out what he wanted from me: He and the dragons were imprisoned at Wyldmast Druim by the power of the *Nithaial*, and he wanted this *Nithaial* to lift that power. However, that brought on two further questions: How could I manage this without gaining my full powers? And why would I do it at all, since presumably the *Nithaial* who came before me and had woven the spell had excellent reasons for doing so?

It was this second question, especially, that I had been mulling over during the time I had been here, now almost five days. Most of the time that I had spent with Teshnar'ad, despite Nassazia's suspicions, was passed struggling with each other's language. It was one thing to have a foreign

tongue pushed into your brain, another to feel even halfway at home with it. And the language of the demons was full of trap doors, dead ends, and areas that were simply impenetrable, at least at first.

There was also the matter of nomenclature. The demons did not call themselves “demons.” They called themselves “the people.” Teshnar’ad, in learning our language, had a pitiless perspective on what we humans thought of his people, just as I, mastering his tongue, discovered that humans were given a word derived from “white grub,” which had overtones of not only slightly revolting softness but also, from a slightly different perspective, a kind of tastiness. As a people, we disgusted them, but as a light meal, we did sometimes pass muster.

As a break from our linguistic wrestling, Teshnar’ad wanted to engage in the physical kind, much in the spirit of the knife throwing exchange we had just had. This was very frustrating to him because it’s how one of his kind gets to know someone else, and consequently he felt as if he were blindfolded in dealing with me.

However, Teshnar’ad had a mouthful of razor-sharp teeth and claws to match, and he knew that in the usual sort of scuffle, he would reduce me to shredded meat in a matter of minutes. Not that he and Do’arma’ak didn’t bloody each other—I watched the two of them have a little tussle one afternoon that left them both with bleeding wounds.

Even so, at the end of the fight, Teshnar’ad simply

mounted Do'arma'ak and vigorously took him, their blood mingling together as he did so. Do'arma'ak's tail, which was usually muscularly rigid, immediately went limp and folded backwards, allowing Teshnar'ad easy access to his asshole, and there was something so erotic about this that I became extremely hard myself. If Teshnar'ad had invited me to share.... Well, it would have made for a very different meeting with Do'arma'ak on Wyldmast Druim! The notion aroused me enough to lift me out of my state of despond and allow me finally to slip away into sleep.

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, I had as meager a breakfast as I had had a supper the night before, and made my way up the steps to the temple. By now I was able to do this with some agility and without any pausings to catch my breath. Even so, I was panting by the I reached the summit.

I had expected to find Teshnar'ad there, as usual, soaking up the sun, but I stood there alone. I stepped past the columns into the temple proper and found him and Do'arma'ak squatting near each other, both holding what at first glance seemed to be javelins.

When he saw me, Teshnar'ad jumped up. "*Nithaial!*" he said. "These things are for slaves and idiots!" I realized at once what was going on. As part of his instruction in throw-fighting, Meldenaar, my trainer, had also taught my brothers and me the techniques of dueling with staves, to quicken our wits and improve our balance. I had suggested this to Teshnar'ad as a way that we might fight each other.

He had snorted and replied he had never heard of such things and, in any case, certainly had none in his armory. I had thought that was that, but now it seemed he had realized how easy it would be to improvise.

I went to Do'arma'ak. "Permit me," I said, gesturing to the staff, which was indeed the shaft of a javelin. He passed it up to me. I flipped it quickly about. It was really a pole, not a staff, and had neither the necessary heft nor strength. It would almost be like dueling with broom handles..., although from the evidence, I doubted that Teshnar'ad knew what a broom was.

I turned to him, holding the staff with both hands toward its middle. "Attack," I said.

Teshnar'ad approached, wielding the staff like a club. He swung it at me and I both deflected it and rapped him on the head, showing him the deficiency of this approach.

He came at me again, this time thrusting it at me like a sword. I dodged past it, and, holding my staff in the middle, struck him quickly with both ends, then jumped away.

Interestingly, instead of getting angry, Teshnar'ad seemed to glow with a kind of grim satisfaction. I was forcing him to attend and he was doing so with an almost awesome intensity. This time he lifted the staff over his head and swung it down at me, but as he did, he pulled it back to pass under my parry, then shoved it quickly at my chest.

"Naughty, naughty," I said, side-stepping it and giving him a blow on his side.

This time, though, the staff barely made contact; he was already slipping away as it landed.

So the duelling went, with Teshnar'ad getting better and better and with me at first finding it harder and harder to land a blow and then finding it harder and harder to avoid them. My training had never reached the point where I had to fight against someone who was going all out to beat me into a pulp, and Teshnar'ad gave no quarter. I had already taken two blows that left livid welts on my body, one across my left ribs and one on my hip.

However, there was a way of dealing with this, too. I tempted Teshnar'ad into swinging his staff again, and when he did, instead of parrying it, I checked it with a swing of my own. The two smacked together with a loud crack, and half of his staff went flying across the temple floor. My fingers still vibrating with pain, I lowered my staff and stood there, panting.

Teshnar'ad looked at the broken half that remained in his hands disgustedly, and tossed it after the other. Then he looked at me. "You cheated," he said.

"My people call it strategy," I replied.

Teshnar'ad emitted a snuffling noise, which to my astonishment I realized was laughter. "I beat you," he said. "First you beat me but then I... 'turned the tables?'"

"You certainly were about to," I answered. Then, seeing from his furrowed brow that the phrase 'turning the tables' was still puzzling him, I explained, "It comes from a kind of wagering. Do your people gamble?"

More brow furrowing. Then Teshnar'ad said, "Playing with chance is the prerogative of the High Father, Ra'asiel. Our lives are affected by it enough without bringing it upon ourselves. Our vices, for the most part, are not yours."

He reached out and took my hand. "*Nithaial*, that was well fought, strategy or no. Let us go now and talk about what our future holds."

TESHNAR'AD BROUGHT ME down to his living quarters. But rather than halting there, we descended down to another level and another and another, until we came to the lowest one of all. This was a huge circular room, walled, roofed, and paved with dark gray, coarse-surfaced stone, and illuminated faintly by glow stones.

At first I took it for a kind of amphitheater, since from where we stood in the back, a series of tiers dropped gently, level by level, down to a circular center. But as my eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, I could tell I was wrong. The center was, in fact, a large pool, shallow around the edges but growing progressively deeper toward its center. And the tiers were dotted all over with shallow cavities, each a few fingers' width from the next, and all of them a uniform size and depth, of a size that would comfortably hold a small melon. Finally, despite the fact that we had gone so deep into the bowels of the temple, the room was hot and humid.

"A steam bath?" I asked Teshnar'ad.

He was silent for a moment, either figuring out what a steam bath was, or working out what this place might be

called in my language. “A hatching place,” he eventually answered. “Let me explain something to you. Unlike the worship of Gesryma, the worship of the Father of All, Ra’asiel, does not consecrate the four elements. Instead, we deify the forces of creation and destruction, both of them symbolized by the egg, which, although it is perfect of shape, must be broken into pieces for life to continue.

“Because of this, our holiest of temples are two, not four. One of them dedicated to the worship of creation, the other to destruction. This one is Temple of Creation, of *kashmadni’ikma*, “revealing the egg’s truth.” In days long past, females would bring their eggs here and place them under the guardianship of the temple, rather than bury them in sand and leave them to their fate.”

Teshnar’ad pointed to the small cavities. “The egg would be carefully inserted into one of those and left in safety and quiet. When the younglings hatched, they would make their way down to the pool, where they would feed and grow, until it was time for them to stand on two legs, leave the water, and discover the road to their destiny.

“So it was, over a hundred years ago, I rose out of a pool at a minor temple in our country, and, sniffing for prey, cautiously approached the light. The door had been opened for me and my first tutor was waiting, hidden from my sight.” Teshnar’ad glanced at me. “I bit him,” he said.

He gestured at the stairs, and we went back up to his living quarters and settled into his odd chairs. “It is not easy,

raising one of our young for a purpose,” he continued. “My egg was emblazoned with a sign,” he touched the gold sigil that hung around his neck, “so the priests knew who I was. But *I* didn’t, not for many years.”

“Nor did I,” I murmured.

Our eyes met, then he continued. “Unlike you, though, *Nithaial Elimiel*, my training was constant, and soon to the death. At nine years I was able to take anyone half again my age; at twelve I could kill anyone.

At the same time, I was allowed no access to females until my tastes had hardened in the other direction.” At this I glanced covertly at Do’arma’ak who looked—I swear it—demurely away, then thought of something he had to do elsewhere in the temple.

“However, I am getting ahead of myself,” Teshnar’ad said. “Perhaps I should have shown you the hatchery later on. Speaking in your language is hard enough. *Thinking* in it is torture. I shall follow our own way of telling a tale and start at the beginning and move quickly to the end.”

He lifted his head and barked a command. In a moment there was an answering one from below.

“We need something to drink,” Teshnar’ad said, “this time with nothing living swimming in it.” He made that snuffling noise again, then composed himself, and began.

“At a time so far ago that the years are too numerous to count, Almighty Ra’asiel was in the ascendancy in this world, and our people ruled with the power that your people

have today. Our kingdom extended up through the valley that lies beside the great mountains that you call The Wall of the World, to this part of the Forest Grymaeld. Because we do not till the ground, we make no distinction between country and city. We simply built wherever we felt there was a need for awe. We do not build cities, we build....”

Teshnar’ad clenched his teeth together thoughtfully, and looked down. “Your language has no good word for what we build. What does this mean—‘relic?’”

“It means,” I said slowly, thinking as I did so, “either something sacred that has been carefully preserved or a building that is almost a ruin and so has no practical purpose except to please the eye.”

Teshnar’ad grunted. “Many of our buildings are relics in both those meanings from the time they are built. They are sacred without being temples and are to please the eye without being old and falling down.”

Seeing my puzzled look, he snapped, “Never mind! The important thing is that the Great Wheel turned, and, alas, it was Gesryma’s turn to rule. Your people became strong and went into battle with us, defeating us again and again, forcing us back to the south.

“This place, though, you could not take, despite your wizards, because the magic of the *drea’gand*—the Great Ones—was too much for them. So you *Nithaial* cast an enchantment about it, cleverly using the power residing in Wyldmast Druim, which we had foolishly ignored, prefer-

ring our own powers. But it was old magic, very, very old, and even the *drea'gand* were helpless against it.

“Naturally, the High Father, Ra'asiel, could dispel that magic with a gesture of His hand, but He, too, must submit to the turning of the Great Wheel. Even so, He tempered the harshness of our fate. The *drea'gand* were too much confined in this space, and they fell to attacking each other. So He called forth the flowers you saw when you first arrived. The perfume from these keeps them in a deep sleep and their minds at peace.”

Do'arma'ak entered and set beside each of us a drinking vessel. This time these held warm milk, taken from Teshnar'ad's herd of cattle, which I still had not seen. I neglected to mention this before, but these vessels were shaped like pitchers, with a pour spout—except that this was long enough to be called a beak or a snout. I had thought this a perverse decoration when I first saw it. but now I paid more attention as Teshnar'ad drank. He tilted his head upwards, opened his jaws, and used the beak to direct the liquid straight down his gullet. Demons lacked both the temperament and facial shape to make sipping possible.

I took a drink myself. The milk was rich and creamy and made me realize how hungry I was. I sucked more milk greedily directly from the spout. Then catching Do'arma'ak's knowing glance, I had to blush. We were even.

I set the jug down and said to Teshnar'ad, “I understand why this upsets you. But I don't see why you should

call it a great wrong. Wouldn't your people have imprisoned me in the same way, had they the chance?"

Teshnar'ad made an annoyed snapping motion with his jaws, as if catching a fly. "*Of course*," he said. "We demons, as you like to call us, make bad decisions, too." He leaned forward, and regarded me intently. "Listen, *Nithaial*, as your witch rightly said, 'We kill you and you kill us, always and forever.' That is the doom of our kind.

"But what this spell did was bring an evil into things that was never there before. And although it has affected my people first, it is now spreading among your people, too."

Teshnar'ad became so agitated by what he was saying that he sprang out of his seat and began pacing back and forth across the floor. I twisted myself around and actually sat on the edge of mine, so I could follow him as he went.

"What you do not yet know," he continued, "is that, as with the *Nithaial*, there are also two of us who are to become the Avatar." He stopped pacing and looked at me. "But, unlike you, when we come of age, we battle each other to the death. It is the one who wins that becomes the Avatar.

"When I became of age, I was brought from the temple to the circle of *dagmast* stones that are there. I was saluted, the priest cast the spell, and, suddenly, I found myself standing on Wyldmast Druim. My brother and opponent, Me'iddorkasz, knew I was coming. He was there to greet me and to bring me to this temple in honor. There we fought until I killed him and offered his body to Ra'asiel, who made


me Avatar.”

“Only to find yourself imprisoned here for the rest of your life,” I said, suddenly understanding the implications of what he was telling me.

“Destiny and Sacred Law commanded that I come and battle my twin,” Teshnar’ad assented, “since he could not come and battle me. Thus the *Nithaial* not only cleverly entrapped us for all eternity but have arranged it so that we go willingly into the trap, despite knowing the consequences.”

He stopped pacing again, and this time we looked long into each other’s eyes.

“I don’t have the power to free you,” I said at last.

“Not yet, no,” Teshnar’ad agreed. “And if The Unnameable One has his way, you never will. What I mean to offer you—and it is why I have brought you here—is the reason why you and your twin, the *Nithaial Galgaliel*, *must try to do so.*” 

Chapter 22



LATER THAT EVENING, Teshnar'ad accompanied me down the steps of the temple and even into my burrow, where he glanced around and snorted disapprovingly of my messy sleeping arrangements. "Now that the witch has fled," he said, "you should move your nest to the... the *kesh'na'at*. The cave of sleep. It is aligned so that your sleep can unfold properly."

"Perhaps," I answered. In truth, I had no intention of moving until every trace of Helias's presence in our shared bedclothes had utterly faded into oblivion.

Teshnar'ad gave me a scathing glance. As usual, he had been reading my thoughts, and, as usual, he didn't think very much of them.

"If Do'arma'ak did to me what your wizard did to you, I would hunt him down and kill him," he said. "For much *less* than that."

"I think my people are more complicated than yours," I replied. "I have no desire to kill Helias. I just want to know

why he acted the way he did. If I tracked him down, it would be to ask him.”

Teshnar’ad blew out of his nostrils. “I told you why. I was in his mind.”

I nodded. “Yes, and you were in *my* mind just a moment ago and you didn’t know what to make of what you found there.”

Teshnar’ad looked stung. “Is what I said wrong?” he demanded.

“If Do’arma’ak betrayed you and you tracked him down, would *nothing* inside you regret killing him?”

Teshnar’ad looked at me silently for a long moment. Then he said, “Your people are more skilled than mine in the act of sex. Especially we know nothing of this, this mouth fucking.”

“So,” I said, “you were in my mind when Helias and I had sex?”

Teshnar’ad nodded. “Did you avert your eyes,” he asked, “when you came upon me servicing Do’arma’ak?” When I didn’t answer, he continued. “Exactly. Like you, I was curious. There are aspects of what you and your wizard did that would never occur to us. What you call a caress, for instance. I wondered, would I feel such a thing? Would I find it pleasurable?”

He sighed, then squatted down in front of me. “Let me examine your parts,” he said.

“What!?” I replied, astonished. “Aren’t they just like

yours?”

“I think not,” he answered. “Let me see.”

I lifted up my shirt and drew it over my head, then undid the ties of my braes and let them drop. Teshnar’ad reached with both clawed hands and began to examine me, gently hefting my balls and peering intently at my cock.

“It’s so small,” he said.

It was my turn to be stung. I reached down and stroked it a few times until it began to stiffen.

“Ah,” he said, watching intently. “Now, I understand. Not entirely unlike mine.”

He flicked his tongue quickly, delicately around the knob of my cock, then realized it was just long enough to wrap around the shaft. He did that, tugging it, me, toward his mouth with its razor-sharp fangs. However, instead of pulling my cock between them, he rubbed it against them, something that excited me intensely. I groaned.

Teshnar’ad released my cock, the opening of which had begun to ooze a little, lifted his head, and asked, “And your people really swallow what comes out? Feed your young with it?”

“That was what we call a joke,” I said. I groped about in his language looking for some equivalent, and found nothing. “No,” I said, “we don’t feed our young that way. But, yes, we do swallow it. Well, sometimes.”

Teshnar’ad regarded my throbbing cock dubiously, then shrugged and grasped it with his tongue again. This

time he was rougher, shaking it back and forth, pulling his tongue up over the knob and squeezing, then flicking it all over with the forked tip. The sensations were so intense that I had begun to utter noises that were part groans, part gasps, and doing so faster and faster... until I exploded, my balls pumping spurt after spurt between Teshnar'ad's jaws.

"Blessings on me," I said—remembering just in time not to mention the Blessed Mother's name—and falling down onto my bedding.

As I lay there, savoring the moment's bliss, Teshnar'ad had gone over to the fountain and was making gargling noises.

"Are you all right?" I called to him.

"I think so," he answered. "It's just that it's—your people have a phrase for it—" he chased it down, "an acquired taste. Perhaps I shall acquire it."

I realized that I was lying on my bed totally naked and that Teshnar'ad, who went around totally naked anyway, probably found nothing unusual about this.

"All right, now it's my turn," I said.

Teshnar'ad turned and looked at me, puzzled. "You have nothing to wash out of your mouth," he said.

"Don't be coy," I answered. "I showed you mine, now you show me yours."

"Ahhh," he said. "Yes. Fair enough." And he came back across the room. As I got up on my knees, he removed the belt that he wore around his waist and dropped it down

beside my shirt. With it went the pouch of tyger fur that covered his privates.

Except that removing the pouch had uncovered nothing. No cock, no balls. Instead, there was a bulge, a mound... with a slit running down the middle. My heart rose into my throat. Was Teshnar'ad a... *female*?

“Don’t be an idiot,” he said. “Touch it.”

Tentatively, I reached out a hand and slid it over the surface of the mound. Although the skin there, too, was made of scales, it was very soft and smooth. I reached down underneath it, between his legs, and drew my fingers back up. As I did so, his own hands clutched my shoulders. I could feel him quivering. He was experiencing a caress, just where he would feel it the most.

I licked the tip of a finger and then slid it up and down over the slit in his mound. I was wondering if I should start working my way inside, when the slit began to open. Or rather it was *forced* apart. Teshnar'ad's cock had begun to work its way out. I stared at it in astonishment.

It had the bright pink color of an internal organ, something never meant to be exposed to the outside. It was slippery with a mucus-like lubricant, and it was as large as any man's. What made it clearly different, however, was that his cock had a second knob. There was a big one at the tip of the shaft and then another, slightly smaller, further down.

There was nothing hesitant in the way it emerged from its hiding place; it was rigid, confident, and right in my face.

But I didn't want to suck it. Instead, I wanted, with an overpowering desire that made me shiver, to take it up my ass.

I stood up and—stepping backwards and drawing Teshnar'ad with me—brought us both to the edge of the *kesh'na'at*, the sleeping cave, which was just high enough off the ground for my purpose. I lay back on it, lifted up my legs, looked Teshnar'ad in the eye, and said, “Fuck me.”

In response, he reached down, seized hold of my thighs, and at once lifting me and holding me firm, began at once to penetrate me. His cock was thicker and larger than Helias's, which was up until then the only cock I had known. The head of this one stretched me so wide that I thought I would pass out. But then it was in and I could feel the heat of his shaft as it made its way up into me.

Then the second knob began working its way in, my eyes widening involuntarily as he broached me yet again, then began to thrust into me, strongly, deeply, pulling me toward him at the end of each stroke, so that our nether parts slammed together.

Teshnar'ad grunted each time that happened, and these were getting closer and closer together as his rhythm speeded up. I was feeling... what? Getting fucked is so much more complicated than fucking: the heat of his cock, the dizzy-making feelings created by those two knobs pushing up then pulling back deep inside me, the strange, intoxicating feeling of joyous fear at being so much in the power of someone else, and floating around it all, the nimbus of pain, real

pain, at being violated by something so large as Teshnar'ad's cock. To all this there was the heightened excitement of watching myself being fucked, because I was propped up against the bedding Nassazia had had to leave behind, and looking down I could just make out a stretch of his shaft, now blood red, when Teshnar'ad drew it back.

Then came a shove that was so brutal it made me cry out. This time, though, he held me tightly against him, and began to quiver violently, his whole body shaking. He was coming, and so copiously that I could feel the liquid bulging inside me. His kind must release five times the amount that we humans do.

He withdrew and let go of my legs. These, I saw, showed streaks of blood where his claws had punctured my skin. As I struggled to sit up, I could feel his discharge oozing out of me and puddling on the ledge. I wasn't yet able to close myself.

Teshnar'ad reached out a hand and touched my cheek. "I will bring an ointment," he said. "I think that you are not used to such mating."

"Not from someone of your species," I admitted. "But practice makes perfect."

Teshnar'ad regarded me soberly. "If Do'arma'ak were to learn what I just felt, he would weep. And he does not weep easily."

LATER. TESHNAR'AD HAD LEFT. I'd dragged myself from the sleeping nest to my own bedding, where I lay in a stupor. I understood now what Helias had gone through when I had emptied myself inside him.

Teshnar'ad's seed was filling my body with queasy pain and twisting my brain into knots. One moment I would find myself falling from a great height; in the next I would be lying, choking, in blistering sand. They were illusions, dreams, but I had no power to resist them while they happened.

This was all painful but, really, nothing; what mattered was knowing that these were manifestations of a deeper change that was effecting my very essence. What kind of a *Nithaial* would I become, now that I had taken a demon lover—and not just any demon, but the Avatar of Ra'asiel?

There was no point in abusing myself for this; I hadn't done it merely out of lust. Always, on this journey, the way had remained inscrutable; I had sought for the right trail with all the powers within me. The turns I had taken had all felt right but, even so, the results often confounded me, even stabbed me in the heart. Only in time would I know for certain what I had done that was right or that was wrong.

Meanwhile, there was the offer from Teshnar'ad to digest. Essentially, his argument was this—when the *Nithaial* had trapped him here, they had committed a foolish act that had thrown the Wheel off-kilter, for men and demons both. For men, because one of the *Nithaial* who had woven

the spell had killed his twin and become The Unnameable One. Because men worshipped him for removing the threat of the demons, they failed to understand that this had been prompted by a desire for unchecked power. With impunity, he had tracked down all the wizards and killed them, and suborned almost all who practiced the lesser magics.

Furthermore, without the powers of the *Nithaial* constantly at work to coax balance into the ways of men, corruption had slowly but persistently spread from high to low, until few who wielded power could distinguish between what was right from what was momentarily self-serving.

For demonkind, the changes had been equally disturbing. Without the Avatar to guide them, their worship of Ra'asiel had taken a dangerous turn. Necromancers had dug deep into the forbidden lore which had been meant only to be studied by the dragons, and they were on the verge of freeing the darkest of forces—forces that they would soon discover they could not control—but that could easily control *them*.

These same necromancers were already hatching demons who were twice the normal size of their kind and who possessed uncanny powers. And in their dark catacombs they were also raising all measure of fearsome beast, not only of the egg but also of the womb, that lusted for the blood of men.

When The Unnameable One learned of these things, He moved swiftly to turn them to His purpose, and offered

one of these necromancers, Jaçazal, domain over what humans call the Valley of Death in return for a pact between them. He hoped that by doing this He could learn and then master these dark powers Himself, although to what extent He has succeeded is not known—although Jaçazal has grown quite powerful, and now blocks access to Wethrelad, the home of the spirit of air.

All this Teshnar’ad told me, and ended by saying, “Some of this I can set right; some of it you and your twin can set right; some of it has grown beyond our powers to correct it. But we can do nothing until you set me free. It will take all three of us to destroy The Unnameable One.”

“How can I do anything?” I asked, “when I am trapped here? The moment I step beyond the gates, I fall directly into His hands, and I have gained none of my powers.”

“You have more power than you know,” Teshnar’ad said. “Still, what you say is true. But I can arrange for you to gain all your powers without passing through the gates or, for that matter, departing through the portal on Wyldmast Druim. This, I shall effect at once—the moment you say that we are joined in alliance.”

“If we manage to overthrow The Unnameable One,” I replied thoughtfully, “the world may will fall into chaos, the great war between your people and mine rejoined. If so, you and I will no longer be allies but bitter enemies.”

“Yes,” Teshnar’ad said. “That is true. Once the Great Wheel is free to turn again, it may be the Great Fa-

ther, Ra'asiel, who is in the ascendant. If so, your kind may curse your name until it is finally forgotten. Many think being slowly poisoned while they lead their ordinary lives is a better way to be than to face the sword and the torch."

We were both standing, having come up from Teshnar'ad's quarters inside the temple to walk under the columns in the sweet night air.

"What if I say no?" I asked. "What will you do then?"

He shrugged. "You're not a prisoner. You may stay here as my guest and we will both grow more adept at staff fighting. Or you can leave here and take your chances in the forest. You have managed to avoid His forces so far. Perhaps you will succeed at doing so again."

We walked some more in silence, the world of night spread out below us; the field of stars spread in glittering profusion over our heads. I noticed that they had gotten blurry, and realized my eyes were full of tears.

I stopped and wiped them away. "I don't believe that you are evil, Teshnar'ad, however hostile your people may be to mine," I said, haltingly. "But The Unnameable One is evil, and the world becomes an increasingly terrible place for both our peoples because of him."

I looked him in the eyes. "This is my doom, and it is a hard one, but I accept it. I join in alliance with you to overthrow The Unnameable One, whatever may come after."

Teshnar'ad seized my arm. "So I swear, also," he said. "Now I must consult with the Wise Ones and tomorrow

make a blood sacrifice to Ra'asiel and ask for his blessing. But now, come. I shall accompany you back to your nest."

And so he did.

THE GLOW STONES FLARED UP and I woke with a start, to find Do'arma'ak kneeling beside me. "The Avatar sent me with this, Honored One," he said, "with orders to treat you."

The truth was that though my head had settled, I was still in more than a little pain down below. But I was nervous about letting Do'arma'ak treat me there.

"I can do it myself," I said.

He shook his head. "I must follow my orders."

I sighed. "Are we enemies, Do'arma'ak?"

He looked surprised. "Why would we be that, *Nith-aial Elimiel*? In this place you are an honored guest."

"Because of *this*," I answered, spreading my legs.

He looked puzzled, then snapped his jaws. "The Avatar does as he wishes. None of us would even think of refusing him. *You* could deny him, it is true, but that would be most discourteous."

"And if I should desire you?" I asked, only half teasing.

Do'arma'ak looked at me speculatively. "If the Avatar gave permission, I would be most honored," he replied. "But he would not give it, I think. He wants you too much for himself."

As we were talking, Do'arma'ak had brought up my

legs so that they were folded over my chest and was gently examining me. Suddenly I felt a warm, wet cloth pressing into the cleft and I almost jumped out of my skin.

“Be easy, Honored One,” he said. “I am very careful and very skilled.”

“Do’arma’ak, could you call me Niccas instead of Honored One?” I asked. “It’s the name those who share my space call me and I wish you to do so, too.” Naturally, I spoke to him in his own tongue, which has no word for “friend” or even, really, “companion.”

Do’arma’ak looked puzzled, thought for a moment, then nodded, clearly thinking that if the Honored One wished to be called by another name, so it would be. “*Neeca’as*,” he said, making it a demon name. As he spoke it, I realized with a start that it meant “glow stone” in their language. Well, that seemed all right.

He was patting me dry now with a soft cloth. “There is a slight tear, *Neeca’as*,” he said. “Two, maybe three stitches. But you must hold yourself very still, or I cannot do it. Your skin is so much softer than ours.”

He rolled up the cloth and passed it to me. “Here, bite hard on this. Scream if you wish. Just don’t move.”

“Wait,” I said. “Hand me that first,” and I pointed to the crock of brandy amongst the supplies that Helias had left behind. When Do’arma’ak passed it to me, I broke off the seal and took one long sip, then another, feeling it burn its way down toward my stomach.

“All right,” I said, setting it down beside me, then biting into the cloth. A few seconds later I uttered a slightly muffled shriek as what felt like a red hot poker jabbed into me, again, and again, and again. I screamed, my body was covered with sweat, but at least I didn’t move—in large part because Do’arma’ak held me in a grip of steel.

Then it was over. I felt the soothing sting of an anesthetizing ointment being rubbed around and into my asshole. As the numbing began to spread, Do’arma’ak released me. “All went quite well,” he said, “at least that would be so if you were one of us. I have never treated your kind before, however, so I can promise nothing.”

“Your mastery earns you great praise,” I gasped, groping through the thicket of his language for some way to thank him. I would have to ask Teshnar’ad for some help with this, since the problem kept coming up.

Meanwhile, Do’arma’ak was gathering up the components of his medical kit.

“If it should suit you, don’t leave me yet,” I said to him. “Stay and talk a short while.”

“Very well,” Do’arma’ak replied, squatting back down beside me. “The Avatar will not mind if I remain with you a bit longer. He is preparing to speak to the Wise Ones.”

“Good,” I said, and lifted up the crock of brandy. I took another sip and offered it to him. This is a drink of my people that you might find pleasing.”

Do’arma’ak sniffed at the open top and his eyes

bulged wide. "Is this not poison?" he asked.

"Yes," I answered. "But it is a poison my people relish above most things. Drinking it is like drinking fire, but it causes no burns, but rather soothes the pain of the heart."

He placed his thumb over the mouth of the crock, bent his head back, opened his jaws, and let some brandy dribble down his throat.

He coughed violently, swallowed, and lowered his head. He looked at me, then set the crock on the floor. "I think I had better not drink this... fire water," he said. "It has effects that are too puzzling."

"You will get accustomed to it," I said, picking up the crock and taking another swig from it.

Do'arma'ak watched me do so, his eyes following the crock's descent back to the floor. He picked it up, lifted his head again, opened his jaws, and, this time, simply poured the brandy down his gullet.

"Do'arma'ak!" I cried, alarmed, reach up and snatching the crock from him as it began to slip out of his hand. He shook his head violently, made a loud, long gargling noise, then heaved a great sigh.

"I have never heard that phrase, 'soothes the pain of the heart,' he said. "But I find it speaks to me. Tell me, *Neeca'as*, do you find our language deficient?"

"In matters of the heart?" I asked. When Do'arma'ak nodded, I answered, "Yes, very much so. But Teshnar'ad explained to me that this was the difference between those

hatched from an egg and those birthed from the womb.”

Do’arma’ak sighed. “Perhaps,” he said. “But there is more to be said than that. Our world is more complex than our ancestors ever imagined, but our language is guarded against all change. There are certain things... if they can’t be fitted into the old molds, they simply cannot be said.”

He looked at me. “I am certain *your* language has words that bring them to life,” he added. “But the Avatar has forbidden me to learn it, even though *he* has done so.”

Do’arma’ak lifted the crock and let still more brandy splash down his throat. Again, he shook his head so hard his teeth rattled.

“Hwah!” he said. Then he reached over and touched my leg. “I have no one to talk to here but him,” he said hesitantly, “and he is many, many years older than I. You and I are closer in age. We could ask each other questions, without causing offence.”

Our eyes met. “Ask me such a question, *Neeca’as*.”

There was one, actually, that I longed to ask. “Very well,” I said, after taking another sip of the brandy. “You see how it is with the males of my people, that our sex hangs down between our legs—whereas with your people, it is kept hidden away until needed.”

Do’arma’ak nodded.

“So,” I continued, “why do you wear a pouch to conceal it, when there is nothing there to conceal?”

He closed his eyes for a moment, then opened

them and reached down and lifted up his pouch, showing his mound. “You are mistaken, *Neeca’as*. Examine the place carefully.” And he spread his legs to allow me to do so.

I rolled onto my side, moving carefully because of my stitches, and looked. As with Teshnar’ad, Do’arma’ak’s mound was smooth and soft. With a line running down it vertically. Impulsively, I reached over with my free hand and lightly stroked it. As I did so, I saw something I had been too wrapped up to notice with Teshnar’ad—a thin line of almost radiant scarlet appeared on the lips of his slit.

As I stared at it, I understood the answer to my question; for demonkind, the slit itself was the object of erotic interest as much as the hidden cock. I did find it very exciting, myself, and I dragged myself toward him enough so that I could run my tongue up and down the length of it, slipping the tip of my tongue between the scarlet lips.

As I did so, they began to spread apart, revealing the same rich pink interior, the head of his cock. This time, there was no question of my being penetrated, so I could devote myself to licking and sucking.

I began to lap his knob, then sucking it as it came out. Like Teshnar’ad’s, it was coated with a viscous fluid, which had a sweet, slightly vegetative taste and a sticky texture—“Demon honey,” I thought to myself, and giggled.

Do’arma’ak’s cock was not as large or as long as Teshnar’ad’s and I got stiff thinking about taking it up myself. It would certainly be a novelty for him—I was sure that


he was entirely on the receiving end in *that* relationship. The image of Teshnar'ad servicing us both, one after the other, popped into my mind and I got even more erect.

Meanwhile, I had gently lifted Do'arma'ak's cock up and, lowering my mouth to his gaping slit, began exploring inside it with my tongue, searching for his balls. There they were, two swollen sacs at the base of his cock, not hanging loose like mine, but certainly capable of being licked.

The effect of this on Do'arma'ak was intense. His head began thrashing back and forth, his legs began quivering, and I barely had time to take his cock back in my mouth before he began to come... and come... and come, so much that I couldn't swallow it all and it spilled out of my mouth and dripped onto my chest.

As I was trying to deal with this, Do'arma'ak's body suddenly went rigid, then limp. He keeled over backwards onto the floor and passed out—leaving me with a mouthful of his spending and, despite its workout with Teshnar'ad's tongue, a helplessly stiff rod.

Demon spend proved milkier than the human sort, with a noticeable fishy taste that almost made me gag. I swallowed, then rinsed out my mouth with some brandy. I noticed that the crock was almost empty—Do'arma'ak was going to have the mother of hangovers when he came to.

I shrugged, eased myself down on my back again, and closed a fist around my aching cock. 

Chapter 23



I WOKE TWICE IN THE NIGHT. The first time it was to the sound of the same flute Nassazia and I had heard when we first passed through the gates and entered this place. As before, what I heard was musical without being music. There was no tune to it, no melody, and yet it somehow bewitched the ears and made the hair stand up on the back of your neck. The last time I had heard this flute, I was aware that some of its notes were outside the range of the human ear, but tonight I heard every one.

The sound also roused Do'arma'ak, who struggled to his feet.

"What is it?" I asked.

"My Lord, the Avatar Teshnar'ad," he answered. "He is communing with the Wise Ones. Just as, on the night you arrived here, he explained to them who you were, now he seeks their advice on how best to help you depart."

"So, you understand the music?" I asked, but Do'arma'ak was already on his way out. I heard his angry

hissing when he slipped on the stairs, and a cold draft soon let me know that he had failed to shut the door. But I was too caught up in the sound of the flute to think that this might be dangerous—or, really, to think at all. And it was not long before I fell back into a deep sleep.

The next time I woke it was because a thunderstorm was passing over. The flash from a bolt of lightning penetrated my closed eyelids; the roll of thunder that followed shook me wide awake. I scrambled up to close the door, but by the time I reached it, the sheets of falling water gave me another idea. I rooted around in the luggage for a piece of soap, tucked it into my armpit, and scrambled down the stone steps on my hands and knees.

Once I was on firm ground, I took the soap and began to wash. The rain came from the south and was soothingly warm, dissolving the sticky residue that was everywhere from my hair down to the back of my legs. Now that I was actually cleaning myself I realized I felt unclean, driven by forces inside myself I couldn't control and didn't understand. Except, of course, I did understand it. It was my despair at losing Helias. His betrayal, too, had opened a chasm of pain in my heart, but to lose him. It was so unbearable.

The lightning continued to light the sky and thunder to make the earth shudder beneath my feet. Now that I had climbed out of my burrow I could see that it was striking Wyldmast Druim again and again. The power beneath the hill, I thought, was hungrily feeding on it.

I descended the slippery steps as carefully as I had climbed them, closed the door to the pouring rain and any prowling beasts, dried myself with the least smelly of the blankets, and eased myself back onto my pile of straw. I arranged my shirt over me as best I could and plunged directly back into the world of dreams.

PORPHORAS HAD SLIPPED A SMALL SHEET of beaten gold into a retort and then had covered it with water of mercury. But when he brought this to a gentle boil, the gold refused to dissolve. The alchemist shook his head, and said, “Impure. Impure. Impure.” Then he turned away from the retort and looked at me, his eyes full of sadness.

He opened his mouth again, but this time he began to chant my name, over and over—“*Nithaial! Nithaial! Nithaial!*”—the voice drilling into my skull without mercy.

The layers of dream fell away, and I recognized the voice as Teshnar’ad’s, and reached out my hand, as if expecting to find him lying beside me. But no, he was mind speaking. “*I hear you. I hear you.*” I answered, petulantly, wanting more sleep, refusing to open my eyes.

“*Come.*” Teshnar’ad’s voice was adamant. “*You have poisoned my acolyte so you must take his place. Hurry. And don’t waste time putting on your wrappings.*”

When I arrived panting at the top of the temple steps, I found Teshnar’ad waiting for me. He hurried me down to his private quarters and led me to a stone bench, on which were laid out brushes and pots of paint. Then, kneeling before me,

he began to decorate my chest with quick, sure strokes of the brush, with designs in red and black. More were added to my arms and those that appeared on Do'arma'ak's thick neck were painted onto my cheeks.

"These are a sign that you are in my service and must be obeyed in all things ordered in Ra'asiel's name," Teshnar'ad said. "If we were among my people, it would make you very powerful indeed." He shrugged, a gesture that implied what would be the case instead if we *were* among his people. "Here, it serves simply to honor the ritual."

"You said Do'arma'ak is poisoned," I said. "Is he...?"

"Dead?" Teshnar'ad answered. "No. Although perhaps he wishes he were. Whatever you offered him"—he looked at me sternly—"don't do it again."

I started to speak, but he waved it away, standing up and placing his hands on either side of my head. "Now, I shall teach you your part," he said. He closed his eyes, and I could feel the current pass between us, so quickly that I barely had time to perceive it. He then handed me a spear, and we went back up into the temple.

Teshnar'ad led me to a place where a large brass ring was embedded in the floor. "When I gesture to you," he said, "recite the chant and pull on this with all your strength. Then watch and be alert. There is no way to rehearse your entire role—you must open yourself to it and become it. Do you understand?"

"No," I answered.

Teshnar'ad snorted. "You understand. Let us both center ourselves. Then we will begin."

The second eyelid closed over his eyes, a translucent shield that made him appear blind. Catching myself staring, I closed my own eyes and quickened the energy within me while, at the same time, focusing my mind. When I opened my eyes again, I found that Teshnar'ad had slipped away and was now standing within the ring of gold at the center of the temple. He prostrated himself three times, then assumed a crouching position and gestured to me. In response, I chanted the following.

Homage to thee, O Ra'asiel, Lord of eternity,
King of the Gods, whose names are manifold,
whose forms are hallowed, whose spirit resides
hidden in the temples, thus making them Holy.
Thou art the Lord to whom praises are ascribed
in the Chronicles of Ka'agasni'it. Thou art the
Prince of the Turbid Waters, Ruler Supreme of
the Harshest Day; Lord Governor of the Deep-
est Night. May we be guided by Thy hand
as long as times endure. For with that hand
Thou hast made this earth out of fire and dark-
ness, called forth the waters, and set the wind
to blow. Without Thee, how could plants have
sprung forth, or all the cattle, and all the feath-
ered fowl, and all the fish, and all the creeping
things, and all the wild animals therof?

That said, I bent down, seized hold of the ring, and pulled on it, at first gingerly, then as hard as I could.

Nothing happened.

I looked at Teshnar'ad, but he remained motionless, facing away. I laid the spear by my side, grasped the ring with both hands, planted my feet on either side of it, gathered up every ounce of strength I possessed, and heaved.

There was a moment of struggle and then something snapped free. There was a great rumbling noise, the screech of stone dragged against stone, and an opening appeared in the temple floor, revealing a ramp. And almost as soon as the ramp appeared, a great tyger came climbing up it. The beast stopped when it reached the top, its massive head looking to the left, then to the right, then directly at Teshnar'ad.

He, in turn, spun around to face the tyger. He stood in a crouching position, holding his dagger. Then he stepped backwards and rapped the floor with his blade. This drew the tyger out of the opening.

The moment its rear paws cleared the ramp, the same heavy sound of gears began, but this time the trap-door was forced back into place, until there was nothing to be seen again but floor.

I knew nothing about tygers, but I could see that this one was magnificent. Despite its great size, it moved with sinuous grace, muscles rippling beneath its luxurious pelt. It had been softly snarling as it followed Teshnar'ad's progress; now that he stopped, it lifted its head and roared. The

sound rolled around the temple like a thunderclap, leaving echoes that reeked with menace.

Then it leapt, moving so fast its shape was blur of black and gold. But Teshnar'ad was quicker. The tyger's claws clicked on the empty stone floor where they had expected to encounter a body. The beast spun itself around even as it skidded across the floor and launched itself at Teshnar'ad again.

This time, he actually rolled under the beast while it was still in mid-leap, moving so fast that he became a blur. Suddenly, I realized something. All my time here, I had never seen Teshnar'ad "perform" any magic—lift a wand and mutter a spell. Somehow, instead, it was just part of him, as when he caused us to learn each other's language.

Right now, he was using his magic to give a sharper edge to his martial skills. With those alone, he couldn't hope to defeat the tyger; with magic he at least had a chance. Magic would keep him out of the tyger's reach, to be sure. But he meant to kill it with a dagger. It was this risk to himself that gave the sacrifice meaning. And given what he was facing, this sacrifice must be *very* important, indeed.

While these thoughts had spun through my brain, the tyger had again come to a stop. It had tried to check its leap when Teshnar'ad had rolled under it and, in consequence, had lost its footing when it landed and rolled over on its back. Instantly, it was back on its feet.

This time it stood still, stared balefully at Teshnar'ad, then lifted its head and roared. Now, the sound was full of

rage as well as menace. It was deafening and it lifted my heart up into my throat. My hands were so sweaty that I had to hold the spear with both of them. I was fighting off the realization of *why* I might be holding it, but the realization came to me in full force now. If the tyger killed Teshnar'ad, it was up to *me* to kill the tyger.

Now, instead of leaping, the tyger began to stalk Teshnar'ad. It closed in on him, snapping at him with its fangs, swiping at him with its claws, watching the dagger warily as it did so. Each time it made a lunge, he would evade it, always moving to the left as well as backwards, so that he would not be cornered against a pillar or, just as bad, the temple edge.

When they approached me, I stepped back behind a pillar, out of the tyger's direct line of vision, wondering if, instead, I should make a noise or prod it with my spear, to distract it and give Teshnar'ad an opening. But he had said nothing about that. Was I supposed to intuit it?

The thought made me shudder. The tyger Teshnar'ad had been riding when we first met had been enormous, but this one was bigger still; its shoulders were as high as my chest. And, when it was close, its rank feral smell was suffocating. Prod this tyger with a spear? After it killed and ate me, it would use the thing as a toothpick.

Now they were past me; Teshnar'ad was luring the tyger back to the center of the temple. I was facing the animal's hindquarters, watching the enormous head lunge to

the left and then the right.

I slipped to the other side of the pillar to see Teshnar'ad better. Now he had led the tyger back almost to the center of the sacrificial ring.

The tyger made a lunge; Teshnar'ad leapt back, landed on the balls of his feet, sprang forward, and stabbed the animal directly in its nose. Blood sprayed over Teshnar'ad; the tyger lifted its head and roared in pain. As it did so, Teshnar'ad sprang forward and slit its throat.

Before he could jump back out of the way, the tyger swiped its paw at him and hit him, slashing his chest severely and knocking him across the floor. Then it went after him, blood gushing out of the cut on its throat. It took a step, then another, then toppled over, struggled to get up, and died.

I was already rushing across the floor to Teshnar'ad. His eyes were closed; his hands were spread across his wounds, trying to hold them shut. When I fell to my knees beside him, he said without opening his eyes, "Get Do'arma'ak's kit. It's by the stairs."

I got it, brought it back, figured out the trick of opening it, dug around cautiously inside it until I found the hooked needle and black thread Do'arma'ak had used on me. I slipped the thread through the needle's eye, knelt down again... and suddenly realized the enormity of what I was supposed to do.

The tyger's paw had slashed across Teshnar'ad's chest, the first of the gashes just below where his nipples

would have been, if demons possessed nipples. The triangular shape of the claws had left gaps revealing shockingly pink torn muscle behind that shuddered each time he breathed.

“The vial... the purple vial,” Teshnar’ad murmured. “Mushroom spawn... Scatter its contents... on... on...”

“I understand,” I said. I searched through Do’arma’ak’s kit, opened it, and, as delicately as I could, sprinkled some of the powder it contained over his wounds. As soon as it touched his flesh, the powdered spawn came to life, casting out delicate filaments, knitting up the torn muscle in a chaotic but tightly woven net.

“Now sew.” As he said this, Teshnar’ad lifted an arm, shaking from the effort, and set it on my leg. He clutched me so hard his own claws drew blood. But he was making contact with me, our spirits were merging, and I felt a great sense of relief. He was going to guide the stitching.

I emptied my mind to him and my fingers began moving of their own accord, sewing up each of the gashes one at a time. The curved needle would slip under the skin on one side of the wound, then cross over and so the same on the other side. After a dozen of these stitches, the needle would catch the thread, pull it tight, closing up the skin, then knot it, and start again.

At times, his hand would shiver uncontrollably, and the contact would begin to slip. When that happened, I would reach down and hold his hand with mine, trying to comfort him. Whether I managed to do so or not, the fit would pass

and the sewing continue, until, finally, all the gashes were stitched up. As my hands tied the last knot, I noticed for the first time that his chest showed the marks of many similar wounds, some faint, some more pronounced.

“I get better,” Teshnar’ad mind-spoke to me, “but perfection is denied me. Or the sacrifice would have no meaning.”

I nodded. He had released my leg, his hand falling to the floor beside it.

“This was well done, Nithaial,” Teshnar’ad said, opening one eye. “You are almost as good as Do’arma’ak. I think I shall survive.”

He made a gesture with his hand. *“Take my dagger and slice open the tyger from its throat down to its belly. Then step out of the circle as fast as you can, and complete the ritual.”*

The tyger’s body had continued twitching for most of the time I had been treating Teshnar’ad, but now it lay still. Even so, I prodded it with the spear before approaching. It was completely dead.

Even so, the task Teshnar’ad had set me proved a difficult one. The dagger was so finely honed that it sliced through the tyger’s tough hide without difficulty, but I had to struggle to lift up its front leg to pass the blade beneath it. But I succeeded, felt the blade bump against the ribs, then sink in deep when it reached the belly. By the time I had cut down to its sex, its guts were spilling out onto the floor, making a horrendous stink. Only a God, I thought, my nose wrinkled, would find this stench a pleasing tribute.

Once I was done, I hurried out of the circle, taking both the dagger and the spear with me, and leaving behind a trail of bloody footprints. As I did so, Teshnar'ad was hauling himself slowly up onto his knees. The tyger's blood slid toward him over the floor, surrounded him, continued to spread. Again I cleared my mind, struck the base of the spear loudly against the floor, and as the stones rang, uttered the second chant, which began as so:

Behold, O Ra'asiel. To honor Thee, Thy Avatar offers up the brightest gift, the darkest gift. Truly is it said: Proper fear of Thee leaves no room for fear of others. So shall it always be.

As before, a scarlet mist rose up from the spilled blood, but now it was thicker, and swirled about and into itself in elaborate patterns. As this happened, the corpse of the tyger began to shrink; there was the sound of snapping bones; everything within its body was being consumed, until after a mere moment or so, nothing remained on the floor but the animal's skin, lying there like an empty sack.

Now the mist rose up, revealing the outlines of an invisible figure standing in its midst, wrapping itself around it like a translucent cloak. As it did so, it shone with a greater and greater brightness, until the entire temple glowed as if set on fire. Then, suddenly, the mist flowed into the figure as if inhaled through every pore—and Ra'asiel revealed Himself.

This time, His skin was not the color of iron but a dark,

glowing red, and His hair, countless strands of glittering gold. All this time, Teshnar'ad had remained kneeling where he was, silent, his forehead touching the floor, letting me do the chanting. He was probably finding it difficult to draw breath.

The God looked down at him and pointed a finger. A pulsating thread of energy passed from the finger and struck the Avatar's body. Teshnar'ad gave a cry of awful pain and collapsed onto the floor.

Then Ra'asiel turned toward me, so quickly that I had no chance to avert my eyes. When, before, I described His eyes as being a deep and luminous green, I meant not just the pupils but everything, as if two brilliant emeralds glittered in His face.

However, rather than reflecting light they emitted it, a translucent, viridescent beam that penetrated at will anything it touched. In a flash of time, Ra'asiel scoured my brain, His vision refracted only by an inner core that was sacred to the Blessed Gesryma.


Just as quickly as it had entered me, it left, brushing instead against the outlines of my face. If I had not been a *Nithaial*, my flesh would have melted from this scrutiny, and even so I quickly found it painful.

Ra'asiel held out His hand. A glittering, many-colored multitude of sparks clustered above it, settled against each other, forming a shape that hardened into gold. Alchemy has many more dreams than accomplishments, but not even in its wildest dreams did it imagine gold, precious jewels, being

drawn from energy latent in the surrounding air. I was agog.

The God closed His fingers around the thing and offered it to me. I received it and found that it was an emerald the exact color of Ra'asiel's eyes, attached to a chain of gold links, and nearly identical to the one Teshnar'ad had worn around his neck when first we met. On this one, too, a sigil glowed in gold.

Ra'asiel made a gesture and I took it and hung it around my neck. When it fell into place on my chest, He reached out and touched it, filling it with His power. The horrible thought flashed into my mind that He was making me Avatar in Teshnar'ad's place. However, if this was so, I hadn't the power to refuse. In the God's immediate presence, I had no will at all.

Ours eyes met, Ra'asiel's face impassive, impenetrable. And then He or rather, His presence, drew into itself, as water swirls down a drain, and He was gone. My mind numb, I struck the base of my spear against the floor, and began chanting the first strophe of the Farewell. 

Chapter 24



THE LAST WORDS OF THE CHANT were still floating in the air when Teshnar'ad began to stir. He got weakly to his knees, slowly, painfully shaking his head. I let the spear fall from my hands and clatter onto the floor as I ran to him, tears of relief streaming down my face. As I approached, he reached out a hand and I helped him, in gradual increments, to get back on his feet.

He swayed unsteadily. I took his other hand to keep him from falling back, glancing down at his midriff as I did. I expected to see the stitching all ripped open again, but instead he was entirely healed. There were no scars; even the thread was gone.

I threw my arms around him and hugged him tight. "And I thought Ra'asiel had *killed* you," I whispered.

Teshnar'ad went totally rigid for a moment, then tentatively put his arms around me. Embracing, apparently, was not something his people did. His scales, tough but smooth and supple, were so unlike human skin but still pleasant to the

touch. I wondered if he could feel my touch the way I could feel his. He had interlocked his fingers, to keep his claws from digging into me, and was pressing his palms into the small of my back.

“Ra’asiel,” he replied, “in His wisdom, punished me for not conducting the ritual properly, even as He chose to heal my wounds.”

Teshnar’ad released me and gently pushed us apart. “Ra’asiel, all blessings on His name, punishes me often and severely,” he added, looking away. “It is not easy, being His Avatar.”

He swayed unsteadily, and I wrapped my arm around him. “Let’s get you downstairs,” I said.

“No! Wait.” This time he shook me away. “Bring me the spear. The knife. The pelt.”

Puzzled and somewhat hurt, I went and gathered these things up. The tyger skin was amazing. The God had sucked every bit of life out of it, leaving behind something that was little more than a rug—albeit one with long sharp teeth and claws. It was also surprisingly heavy.

‘I was going to drag it to Teshnar’ad, but fearing that might be disrespectful, managed to get it over my shoulders. It had only the faint sweet smell of animal fur. I made my way back to where he waited and dumped it at his feet, then went back and picked up the two weapons.

Teshnar’ad took his dagger and returned it to its sheath, then took the spear and used it as a staff. With his

free hand, he reached out and lifted up the sigil that now hung around my neck. He turned it in his fingers, examining it carefully, then let it drop.

He seemed puzzled and upset, started to speak, then held his tongue. There was a moment of silence. “That is a very strange and powerful gift, Niccas,” he said, speaking my name for the first time ever. He looked into my eyes and repeated, “A *very* strange and powerful gift.”

He sighed. “Examine mine,” he said.

Actually, I was eager to do so. The moment I touched it, though, a bolt of energy struck me, so powerful that it flung me across the temple floor and smacked me against a pillar. My head filled with stars and I slumped onto the floor.

I must have lost consciousness for a moment, because suddenly Teshnar’ad was kneeling beside me, lifting my head with one hand, while the other supported himself with the spear.

“That was *not* meant, Niccas,” he said, when he saw I could comprehend him. “I’m... I’m...” he wrestled with himself for a moment then spit it out. “I’m angry at myself.”

“From you, that’s something,” I thought, saying instead, “Why didn’t mine throw *you* across the room?”

“Because I am the Avatar,” Teshnar’ad replied with dignity. “If it had, *you* would have become the Avatar, which would have been a disaster.”

“You mean, we would have had to fight to the death?” I asked, shuddering at the thought.

Teshnar'ad made one of his snuffling laughs. "Worse," he said. "Then *you* would be forever imprisoned here, too." He snuffled again. "Very... *ironic*, I think. But, fortunately, not so. Ra'asiel does not make humor."

He helped me to my feet. This time we each put an arm around each other, and stumbled our way down the stairs. Then we both crawled into his sleeping nest and, despite the fact that it was midmorning, dropped instantly off to sleep while the sun crossed over the sky.

I WAS WOKEN BY DO'ARMA'AK, hissing my name, and bearing a flagon of fresh warm milk. Teshnar'ad was nowhere to be seen. My head throbbed a bit, but otherwise I felt fine. And hungry. I took the flagon from Do'arma'ak and half-drained it. Then I looked at him. His eyes were duller than usual and I sensed a headache far worse than mine.

"Are you all right?" I asked him. "You look terrible."

Do'arma'ak made a groaning noise. "I feel terrible. I *am* terrible."

"You mean that the Avatar scolded you for last night?" I asked. "Are you to be punished?"

Do'arma'ak looked down. "No, *Neeca'as*. My shame is my punishment. My folly is my punishment."

"I know," I said, finishing the milk and passing the empty jug back to him, then pushing myself to the edge of the nest and dropping my legs over.

"I'm sorry." I added. "I only hope it was worth it."

His eyes bulged out and he made a strangled noise I chose not to decipher. As he took the flagon away I slid off the edge of the nest and stood on the floor, stretching my arms above my head. For someone who had all too recently sustained injuries both above and below, I felt unreasonably fine. Sometimes it was nice being a *Nithaial*.

Do'arma'ak came across the floor, holding something else, which he held out to me.

"The Avatar had me make this for you. He wishes you to don it and meet him above."

It was a leather belt, with a codpiece made of a tyger's snout attached to the front, and to the back a slightly padded triangular flap of tyger skin, shaped so that it would curve inward.

"It is because..." He hesitated, and a patch of skin beneath his eyes began to glow slightly. Do'arma'ak was *blushing*!

"It's because I lack a tail," I said, completing his sentence. Exposing oneself from behind was obviously a matter of great embarrassment to demons.

"It is not your fault, *Neeca'as*. I know that."

"Does it lift up when I wish it to?" I asked, giving him a sly glance.

The color patches turned an even deeper color. "We do not... talk about such things, *Neeca'as*!" he protested.

I glanced down at his crotch to see if anything else was glowing. But, of course, his privates were covered.

“My meaning,” I answered with hurt innocence, “was only that this would be helpful when I squat to relieve myself. Even so, I apologize for my unseemliness.”

Do’arma’ak gave me a look. My quick scan of his crotch had not gone unnoticed. But all he said was, “It is nothing. But sometimes, *Neeca’as*, you learn things much too quickly.”

I fastened the belt around me. My waist was much narrower than that of any demon save a very young one, so I imagined Do’arma’ak had simply cut one of his or—given the exquisite design of the buckle—one of Teshnar’ad’s down to size. The codpiece required a little adjusting and would take more getting used to. I had the feeling something might pop out of it at any moment.

The “tail,” I could feel, nicely covered my butt. But time would have to pass before I shook the feeling that someone was trying to grope me. Praise to Gesryma that they hadn’t thought to attach the tyger’s actual tail behind me. That *would* have been something.

Preening a little, I trotted up the stairs and went to where Teshnar’ad was watching the sun sink down into the west. He barely glanced at me when I was standing beside him, and something about his posture told me not to put my arm around him. He was Avatar now.

After a while, he asked me, “Do you know why we call the *dre’aganzd* the Wise Ones?”

“No,” I answered. It was certainly true that it was

hard to imagine dragons poring over ancient scrolls in some dark and dusty scriptorium.

“Their minds are all connected, one with the other,” he said. “What one learns, all soon know. And it is *all* remembered, at least by some—who can recall it for the others.”

“You’re telling me this for some reason,” I said.

He nodded. “You must watch very carefully what you say to a *dre’aganzd*. Because if it differs one whit from what you told another, or said the day before...” He turned his head and looked at me. “Well, they find it upsetting.”

“This must mean I’m about to meet one,” I said, my heart lifting at this realization.

“As soon as the sun goes down,” Teshnar’ad said. “It is time for you to depart. While you were sleeping, I sent Do’arma’ak down to get this for you.” He handed me my wand of power, encased in its sheath. “Affix this to your belt,” he said. “It is why I made that for you—not, as you think, to make you beautiful.”

“Well, does it anyway?” I asked, a little stung.

“You must ask one of your own kind,” he replied, shrugging. But after another moment he added, somewhat reluctantly, “I admit I have grown used to your looks. And your skin has darkened pleasingly while you have been here. You are no longer as pale as a grub.”

“And the belt...” I said, prodding him for more. From a demon, this was heady stuff, and I was starting to flush.

“Yes, I like it,” he admitted. “That fluttering cloth

thing—always dirty, always smelling.” He snorted. “Now, like us, you are clean and smooth. Better, still, if you sliced... *shaved* off all that fur from your head, and the little bit from your legs.”

I shuddered, suddenly having a vision of myself hairless all over and, no doubt, with my teeth filed to points. So much for demon flattery.

Teshnar’ad made a snuffling sound. “As your people wisely say, provide an unsound query, receive an equally unbalanced response.”

“Your mastery of our language knows no equal,” I politely replied. Then, pointing to the flute he was clutching in one hand, I asked, “Will I have to master one of those?”

“To communicate with the *dre’aganzd* who will be carrying you?” He snapped his jaws. “No, no. This must be used to penetrate their sleep. The one selected will be wide awake, and will speak your language. Perhaps better than you.” He shot me a glance. “Perhaps even better than I.”

AT LONG LAST, the sun slid out of sight in the distant west, leaving in its wake a dazzling display. The swirling ring of magical force that surrounded *Fyre-wourmhaem* caught the light and refracted it into a glittering bracelet woven entirely of sparkling light, shifting each moment from hue to hue, now rose, now sapphire, now violet, now jade edged with gold.

It took my breath away, but Teshnar’ad, of course, was used to it. As soon as the edge of the sun was no lon-

ger visible and the colors were assuming darker and darker hues, he picked up the flute and began to play.

I had never been with him when he had done this, and so I watched with fascination. The mouthpiece was shaped so he could grasp it between his long sharp teeth, freeing both hands to play. These flickered among the stops, his claws ever so lightly clicking against the instrument as they did. The tone was so pure and penetrating that it made me shiver.

Slowly, listening, I understood that this wasn't music or speech, but both of those things together, producing something far more complicated than human—or demon—speech. It worked on you like a song, affecting you even though you didn't understand the words.

Except, now, I almost understood them. Either because of what had happened to me at this place or because of my near proximity to Teshnar'ad or because he was allowing me awareness of his mind as he played, what I heard was like a conversation overheard but not quite understood.

This time, too, I was also, in another part of my mind, aware of a response, at first dimly and darkly, like an underground current of water. But just as it was about to burst to the surface, I saw a movement in one of the dragon hives, and, transfixed by that, lost my grasp of it.

Even though the sun had set, the twilight was still with us, augmented by the dying but still radiating colors of the magic ring. The hive was not one of those closest to the

temple, but it was near enough. I could clearly see first the snout, then the head, then the long neck emerge in a single sinuous motion. Finally, the forepart of the body could be seen, the astonishingly long front claws clutching at the rim of the hive's mouth.

The head stretched straight up into the air, the nostrils dilated, inhaling the evening air. Then it swung about to the left, then the right, as its body compressed, preparing to leap. Then it did. In a fluid, miraculous moment, it sprang from the ledge, unfurling its great, bat-like wings, and, with steady, mighty strokes, lifting itself into the air.

Moving in tight circles, it rose steadily, slowly, up and up, our heads lifting to follow it. Soon it was higher than the temple and still it rose, until it was high enough for the sun, invisible now to us, to shine on it, illuminate it, reveal that its great wings were shot through with crimson, and that the scales of its body had a luminescent sheen.

Then the force that enclosed this place revealed itself to be not a ring at all, but a great dome. I could barely see it except where the dragon passed just beneath it, sending ripples flowing across its surface, like a gust of wind ruffling the waters of a calm sea.

"It uses magic to fly," Teshnar'ad said, "and it is that which causes the ripples, not the *dre'aganzd* itself."

"Does it have a name?" I asked.

The Avatar glanced at me. "Yes, of course," he answered. "And it would take you a day to say it and a lifetime to

learn it, were that ever permitted, which it certainly wouldn't be. If it so chooses, it will give you something by which you may address it. But always remember—the *dre'aganzd* are not all that well disposed to the *Nithaial*, and especially the *Nithaial Elimiel*."

"I am not my predecessor!" I said, angrily. "Nor is He any more a *Nithaial*."

Teshnar'ad merely shrugged. "Look," he said.

The dragon had flown a distance just below the magic barrier, and, I realized, at that very moment, had been sharing all it was discovering with its sleeping brethren. Now, however, it was turning around. Wings no longer flapping, it was swiftly gliding back to us, this time directly approaching the temple. As it came close it dipped down just below us, swung its body so its wings now braked its flight, and rose up just far enough so that its massive hind claws could grasp the edge of the temple floor.

Of course, I had never seen a dragon before, but I had seen many illustrations of them, some very old. In most, a dragon looked something like a snake with wings and feet. Seeing this one, I understood those drawings, although they were wrong. Unlike the *skalgür*, the sight of which inspired mere dread, a dragon took one's breath away.

It was twice the size of the tyger that Teshnar'ad had just slain, and like the tyger its body was sinuous and expressive, and its movements, graceful. For the most part, its scales were a dark, mottled red edged with cinnabar, but

those on its underneath, from its jaws down to its tail, were a supple, translucent gold. A bright vermilion crest lifted up behind its sharply pointed ears and ran like a banner part-way down its neck.

As its wings folded in, its long, snakelike tail, held rigid behind it when the dragon had soared in the sky, now coiled about itself like a gigantic bullwhip. The dragon dropped down on all fours, then lifted its head and, with a roar, sent a great blast of fire scorching high above our heads. Then it came toward us. It considered us one at a time with its glittering fiery eyes, then turned to Teshnar'ad and spoke to him, using words that sounded as though they were demon speech, but weren't.

The Avatar responded in the same tongue, gesturing at me as he did so. The great head swung in my direction and its baleful glittering eyes considered me. Then it addressed me directly. Its voice was deep, musical, and seemed not to come out of its throat but out of thin air.

“Wæs Ƣμ, Nithaial Elimiel, hal!” it said. *“Dracon Wælfyra is min nama. Ne biøpe wilna gad, gif Ƣμ cæt ellenweorc aldre gedigest.”*

I bowed my head respectfully, then turned to Teshnar'ad and said in a low voice. “I don't understand a word of that. Do you?”

The Avatar made a snapping sound. “It speaks to me in the Old Tongue of your people. Have you not been taught your own old way of speaking? Recall that the *dre'aganzd*

have not spoken to your people in nigh a thousand years.”

Inwardly, I cursed myself. “I slept through all those lessons,” I admitted, adding, “I can read a little of it, but understand it? Not a chance.”

“I’ll explain that your language has so greatly changed that you, to your shame, no longer command the venerable speechways,” Teshnar’ad said.

“Thanks a lot,” I muttered under my breath as he did so. The two conversed for a moment, then Teshnar’ad turned back to me. “The *dre’aganzd* wishes to absorb your speaking ways from you,” he said. “It will be just as it happened with me, except there will be no exchange. They reveal their own tongue to no one outside of their kind.” Then, in a lower voice he added, “And don’t even *try* to enter its mind. Nothing could be less wise. Neither yours nor mine would have the strength to deal with what it found there.”

The dragon again swung its head toward me, moving it so close to my face that I could smell its breath, which had the odor of oven stone. Then it reached out its enormous forked tongue and placed the two tips of it against my forehead. Even before it touched me I could feel how entirely different the *dre’aganzd* were from both the demon and human people, kindred instead to both the Avatar and the *Nithaial*, to Teshnar’ad and me. But, unlike either of us, they were children of *both* Gods. I could feel how old their magic was by its very density, reaching back almost to the moment this world was formed and life cast into play.

The dragon extracted what it wished from my mind and withdrew its tongue, leaving me, even so, with all the blood drained from my face. In a way, not even my encounter with Ra'asiel Himself had affected me more. For, while the *dre'aganzd* were the offspring of Gesryma and Ra'asiel, they also embodied the magic that existed when the Two were One, a belief I was taught to consider blasphemous, but now realized was true.

“Hail to thee, *Nithaial Elimiel*, wyhrrn slayer, doom bringer, maker of wizards, lord of fire and earth, favorite of the holiest,” the dragon said, slowly but with surprising fluency. “Thou mayst call me Dracon Wælfyra.”

“Greetings to thee, also, Dracon Wælfyra,” I replied, wracking my brains as I did so. “I bid thee greatly welcome, for thou art time brought to life, wiser than all the tribes of men and demons together, and, as all attest, the most puissant of beings.”

It was the dragon's turn to bow its head. “You are most polite to humor me,” it said as it did. “I retain a fondness for the old ways of speaking.” It sighed, sending a blue flame flickering about its jaws. “So much is lost. So little is gained. So many years spent for nothing.”

The dragon drew its head back and, unexpectedly, blasted me with fire, a searing bolt that enveloped my head and the top half of my body with flame. Teshnar'ad gave a startled hiss and jumped aside. The sigil of Ra'asiel that hung around my chest blazed out but neither it nor the chain that held it was

affected by its fire.

Nor did I burn, even in this unimaginable heat. Instead, the dragon flame awoke in me a hunger I had never felt before. Something inside me recognized this as nourishment and struggled to partake of it. But, just as suddenly as it had appeared, the fire was gone.

“You are indeed the *Nithaial Elimiel*,” Dracon Wælfyra said, adding in an even voice, “he who unjustly imprisoned us; he who toyed with the Great Wheel and caused the calamity that is this time.”

I cast my eyes down. “Although He who did that still lives and works His evil, Mighty One, he is no longer the *Nithaial Elimiel*,” I answered, feeling chilled as the fierce heat dissipated. “It is my doom to slay Him and do what I can to set to rights, as best I and my twin are able to, the terrible things He has wrought.”

The dragon regarded me impassively. “Yes,” it said, “for this reason I have come to bear you to Faeÿstirran and Ernfarðast on the night wind. And, beyond that, at last, to Gostranar, within the Holy Wood.”

It bent its neck so that its head was beside my own, and softly spoke into my ear. “Know this, *Nithaial Elimiel*. I stood this close to the one of whom you speak when He was as you are now. The resemblance is uncanny, and it greatly disturbs me—though why it should, I ken not, all of you being cast from the same mold.”

“The fact that I resemble Him doesn’t mean I’m *like*

Him,” I answered, this time with some heat in my voice. “What you say frightens me, but I swear to you in the name of Gesryma, the Blessed Mother, that I would have the line of *Nithaial* ended forever, should I become like Him, or even desire it.”

“So may it be,” Dracon Wælfyra said, pulling back its head. “Let us make preparations for the journey.” 

Chapter 25



fLYING, I THINK, IS ALMOST BETTER THAN MAGIC, and riding a willing dragon is much easier than staying mounted on even the most docile of horses. Dracon Wælfyra bore me on its shoulders just in front its wings. I could feel the sinews tighten beneath its skin with each mighty stroke, lifting us up, higher, higher, higher. Then it would extend its wings to the full, and we would soar swiftly, silently, over the sleeping landscape, a great dappled black and purple darkness.

We flew due west, to The Wall of the World, where the moon was just now poking its head over its distant peaks. I clutched Dracon Wælfyra with my legs, but no longer as fiercely as I had when we set out. Everything about the dragon's motion was smooth and slow compared to the endless jostling on a horse's back. Horses are smart but nervy animals, and a good rider is always prepared to save himself from a fall. Now, I would have to fall asleep before I fell off, and right then sleep was the furthest thing from my mind.

The air was sweet and cool and now and then fragrant of the sleeping earth. For the first time I became aware of air as an element in itself, like earth or water. On the ground, it seemed mere absence—even when the wind blew, that seemed something separate, not part of a whole. But taking to the sky is like going to sea, where water becomes everything. Here, there was not wind but currents of air, to be ridden on or to be ridden over.

Even more surprising were the updrafts and down-drafts that lifted you up or flung you down with equal suddenness. Dracon Wælfyra managed the drops, especially, with such ease that they were thrilling rather than terrifying, although we once came so close to the treetops that we startled an owl. It leapt from its perch and with a started screech, swept down among the trees and vanished in an instant.

Above us spread a field of stars, glittering brightly in the sky's perfect black. After a bit, we reached a great lake, the surface of which was as pitch dark as the sky. I broke the silence to ask Dracon Wælfyra what it was called.

"In the human tongue, The Waters Esseldor," the dragon replied. "From it flows the swift-running Flëara, which waters the roots of the mountains and carries their news to the sea. But behold!" and, dipping its wings, the dragon sent us soaring down and down until we skimmed over Esseldor's dark surface.

I caught my breath. The unruffled stillness of the lake reflected the starry sky above with such perfection that

it seemed as if we were lost in the emptiness of the heavens, a vastness filled in all directions with an endless sea of stars. It was at once beautiful and terrifying, for I lost all sense of direction, of what was up and what was down.

I fell forward and clutched at Dracon Wælfyra with my arms as well as my legs, and felt the slight tremor of the dragon's chuckling. "Open your eyes again, *Nithaial Elimiel*," it said.

As I did so, it made a mighty sweep of its wings, casting ripples across the water, and turning the stars beneath us into a shimmering dance of light. The same stroke lifted us up



TRISTAN ALEXANDER

NICCAS ON DRACON WÆLFYRA OVER THE WATERS ESSELDOR

and a few more carried us high enough so that the lake was once again pure blackness.

Flying is magic.

WHEN DRACON WÆLFYRA had talked of preparing for the trip, I hadn't understood that it was speaking entirely for itself. The dragon would, naturally, accept no saddle or bridle, just a tyger pelt tossed over its scales to keep my legs and underparts from chafing.

A water skin hung from my shoulder; a small pack strapped to my belt held what food Teshnar'ad thought I ought to carry. The trip would take about ten days, but, he assured me, Dracon Wælfyra would keep me fed.

Indeed, even as he said this, the dragon was carrying off one of Teshnar'ad's prized cattle, bellowing at the top of its lungs, to the summit of Wyldmast Druim for a solitary feast. The thought of it made me long for a nice piece of beefsteak, broiled on hot coals. But I said nothing. When Do'arma'ak learned I liked my meat cooked, he had boiled some, and I think if I hadn't had my sachet of salt for seasoning I would have choked to death. It wasn't meat at all but cooked dead flesh. Raw, in fact, would have been much better.

Fortunately, though, demons also prepare meat for travel by salting, seasoning, and drying it, and Do'arma'ak had presented me with a wad of this journey meat to tuck into my sack. In fact, I was chewing on some as we flew, discovering, once the excitement had faded a bit, that I was starving.

By the time Dracon Wælfyra had finished its “preparations,” darkness had fallen. It was time to depart. I hadn’t expected either Teshnar’ad or Do’arma’ak to embrace me goodbye—which was a good thing because neither did. Do’arma’ak’s eyes and mine met for a second, just enough for something to pass between us, but not enough for me to know exactly what it was.

Teshnar’ad merely seized both my hands in his and said solemnly, “I wish you a valiant death.” “After you,” I thought, but said something equally flinty and noble. Then I vaulted up to my perch. Despite the fact that Dracon Wælfyra lowered its neck for me, it took all my strength—and all my riding skills—to do so. Even then, forgetting the tiger pelt was unattached, I almost shot over the other side.

That first moment was the worst, for even as I was struggling to retain my balance, the dragon reared on its hind legs, shot out its wings, and launched itself off the edge of the temple and into the night. One moment I was falling backwards, the next moment I was flung forward against the dragon’s neck.

But, somehow, I stayed on—no doubt with some assist from the dragon’s magic powers, and because, once launched, we rose upwards in smooth tight circles into a night of velvet black, the temple, Teshnar’ad, Do’arma’ak, all shrinking in size with each completed turn.

Although I could increasingly feel the field of force as we approached it, I wasn’t able to see it until we had al-

most flown right up into it. Then, suddenly, there it was, a pulsating dome of dark-hued colors, almost close enough to touch, and Dracon Wælfyra could rise no more.

“Get us through, *Nithaial Elimiel*,” the dragon cried, “get us through.”

I understood then that it was fighting to keep from being flung down. I raised my arms up, lifted my head, and mind spoke a command to let us through. It took all my powers to manage this—in part, I realized, because of the pendant from Ra’asiel hanging around my neck, which was now burning against my chest. I felt an unexpected impulse to take it from my neck and fling it away, but before I could make sense of this, let alone act on it, a rift appeared directly above us. It took only one mighty beat of Dracon Wælfyra’s wings to carry us up and beyond. At long last, I was free.

The plan, devised by Dracon Wælfyra and Teshnar’ad, was to fly east, the safest direction by far. Long before sunrise we would reach the edge of the Wall of the World and would then fly south, looking for a lair in the mountains where we could rest and hide from spying eyes during the day. Everything depended on no word of our flight reaching The Unnameable One—at least until we arrived at Faeýstirran, home of the spirit of fire.

The moon, also, was our enemy, because the night has many eyes. But by the time it had risen fully over the mountains, we were already flying south among the mountain peaks, far from any prying eye. The scenery here, too,

filled me with awe, but I found my attention turning (with utmost delicacy, since I was nervous of mind hearing) to Dracon Wælfyra.

I still was ignorant even if the dragon was male or female. “Dracon Wælfyra” in the old tongue means “Dragon Balefire,” which gives no hint of sex. However, I *was* coming to understand that magic was deeply woven into the dragon’s ability to fly, or at least to fly so effortlessly. It was magic that gave it buoyancy; the wings had simply to power its flight. Consequently, a faint shimmer of magic tightly enveloped the dragon as long as it was in the air. This glimmering was as tactile to me as would have been a pelt of fine fur—and, in its way, just as comforting as I ran my fingers through it.

“How far south shall we fly, Dracon Wælfyra?” I asked.

“Hmm,” the dragon answered. “If the wind favors us, I mean to take us to Wethrelad—or what remains of it. It is sited at the edge of the Wall of the World and there, perhaps, we might learn something of your twin.”

“Jessan,” I said. I remembered my astonishment, the flash of foreboding, when the *telesma* had revealed his name to me—or rather, to another me in another, now so distant life. “Do you know anything about him?” I asked. Then, realizing the ridiculousness of the question, added, “Sorry. I know that’s a stupid thing to ask.”

The Dracon Wælfyra was silent for a moment, then replied, “No, not stupid. We *dre’aganzd* have powers your

race knows little about. One of them is an ability to sense the currents of power as they flow through the inner world and, to some extent, to parse out their meaning. Your enemy has directed much of His attention to the west, which can only mean your twin is still alive and still free. And since there is much rage in this attention, I suspect the *Nithaial Galgaliel* has successfully eluded His grasp more than once.”

The dragon soared on in silence, but I could tell that as it did so, it was also circling about in the inner world, using some other unimaginable senses to taste, listen, feel, smell, see what went on there.

“Ha!” Dracon Wælfyra suddenly exclaimed. “That’s something new! Your twin has raised Sondaram up out of its rubble. A great victory! No wonder The Unnameable One is enraged.” The dragon swung his head back to give me a quick glance. “The *Nithaial Galgaliel* is one step ahead of you, my friend. We’ll have to hurry to catch up.”

A surge of excitement filled me. This news did more to make Jessan real to me than anything else I could have heard...or make me happier. “We’re winning!” I whispered, more to myself than to Dracon Wælfyra. “By eluding Him, we’re already starting to beat Him.”

The dragon heard me, however. But its only response was to say, “This is a war of many battles, each harder than the last, *Nithaial*. Say not that you’re winning, but that at least there seems to *be* a war, not just a rout.”

I nodded my head in agreement, but deep within, my

heart glowed. We *were* winning. Perhaps, I thought, Jessan was even now waiting for me at Wethrelad.

AS THE HOURS PASSED, I began to slip into sleep, at first just for the merest of moments, waking at once with a nervous start. But these spells began growing longer, and when I woke from the last one, I realize I had been dreaming.

I was back in the master bedroom of Lidaegas ffŷr Lissator's hunting lodge, but this time alone. I was pressed against the closed door with fear gnawing at my stomach, listening to a pack of wyhrn sniffing for me just outside.

Furthermore, that feeling seemed to intensify rather than fade as I shook the sleep away, and at last I decided to mention it.

"Dracon Wælfyra?" I said, tentatively. The dragon shook its head—it had been half dozing itself—and immediately swerved to the left, tilting so sharply that I gave out a yelp of fright, since only luck and my skills as a horseman kept me from plunging straight into the maw of the mountainous blackness below us.

The dragon shot downwards even as it turned, and in a moment the mountains were so close around us that I could smell their stony breath. Its wings passed so close to the face of a cliff that they nearly brushed it and then it turned again, this time tilting so far to the side that, when it righted again, my arms and legs were oozing blood from multiple cuts, caused by the fierceness with which I clamped

myself to its sharp-surfaced scales.

“Wethrelad is being *watched*,” Dracon Wælfyra said, “and by something far more powerful than a Summoner. I think it had time to become aware of us, but my hope is that we were still too far away for it to make out exactly who and what we are. And we are out of its range now.

“Hold on,” it added. “I want to take a look.”

Hold on! I thought. *Now* it tells me. “I don’t think I can,” I replied. “My legs are slippery with blood.”

“Just a manner of speaking,” Dracon Wælfyra said. “I meant only that we’re going to climb again.”

And so we did, circling up and up until it brought us to roost on the edge of a ridge that ran down one peak and up the side of another. It seemed a rather precarious perch to me, but the dragon’s hind claws gripped it firmly and it folded in its wings.

“Our night is almost over, *Nithaial*,” Dracon Wælfyra said, “but let us sit here for a moment and watch.”

I leaned to one side so that I could see around its neck. I hadn’t a clue at what I was supposed to be watching. The sky was lightening into softer shades of gray behind us, but everything to the west of us was hidden behind various shades of impenetrable dark.

“I don’t have your eyes, Dracon Wælfyra,” I said. “I can see nothing at all.”

“Ah,” the dragon replied. “That can be remedied.”

The film of magic that surrounded it during flight

had faded away once we had stopped flying. But now I could feel its tingle as it returned, this time flowing up and around my own body. When it reached my head, it poured into my eyes, shaping them into some simulacrum of the dragon's own. Darkness lightened; distant shapes, while remaining distant, became clear.

Now, between the peaks, I could see the contours of a large valley, and somewhere in the center of that, a dark tower, surrounded by dark circles, which must be roads. Of course, all towers are dark at night, but this one had a sheen of blackness that made me think it was made of some sort of jet black stone.

Dracon Wælfyra had taken us beyond the range of the search spell that emanated from it, but I could still sense its presence, like that of some fell beast lurking hidden in the brush.

The dragon uttered a sharp hiss. A thin sliver, like a blood-red fingernail, appeared at the edge of the tower, near its top. As we watched, it grew larger and larger still, until it formed a full circle, a baleful eye. As it slipped across the surface of the tower, the sense of lurking menace increased.

Dracon Wælfyra spoke some words of command, casting a spell to protect us from it. Even so, the eye was aware of us at some level. I could feel it struggling to find a way through the barrier, feeling it over as if seeking a single loose brick that might fall away at its touch.

Dracon Wælfyra drew back its head so that it was lev-

el with my own, without once taking its eyes off the glowing red eye. “It knows *something* is different,” the dragon muttered, “even if it can’t discern what. I think we should duck out of sight.” And with that it fell off, more than launched itself from, the ledge, spreading its wings only after a brief but hair-raising drop.

Mere seconds later, a bolt of power struck the ledge where we had been sitting, sending fragments of rock scattering in the air. The dragon made no comment about this until it had spotted a place to land, where we might spend the day—a reasonably horizontal shelf of granite protruding from a sheer cliff. Above us and below us was nothing but rock face and the vastness of the air.

“The sun will be on us for only a few hours,” the dragon said. “Then we can sleep until nightfall. Meanwhile, if you’re all right, I think I’ll go find something to eat.”

My eyeballs, freed from the dragon’s powers of sight, felt like two lumps of lead. The cuts on my legs and arms burned. I was shaken by both the tower and the obvious danger it presented—not to us but to my twin. How would Jessan ever manage to deal with that? All my confidence about us winning this war had fled. Dracon Wælfyra was right; we had a very long way to go.

“I guess I’m all right,” I lied. “If that power bolt had struck us, would we now be ashes blowing in the wind?”

The dragon snorted. “Far from it. I would have turned it about and sent it back, with a little extra added for


interest. Red eye would now be black and blind.”

My eyes widened in astonishment. “Dracon Wælfyra!” I cried. “Why didn’t you?”

The dragon lowered its head to look me directly in the eye. “Because our survival depends on our not being discovered. Whatever the one in the tower thought it was dealing with, it now thinks has been dealt with. And so it will report to its master, if it reports anything at all.”

“Will Jessan be able to overcome it?” I asked, realizing that my voice was trembling slightly.

A dragon should never be the first choice of someone needing cheering up. “Very unlikely,” it answered. “That, I believe, is the tower of a necromancer, and a very powerful one. Your twin’s only hope is if The Unnameable One has ordered that he be taken alive. That would tie the necromancer’s hands a bit—but *only* a bit.”

“Perhaps by then I can be there to help,” I answered. But I spoke to empty space. Dracon Wælfyra had simply vanished, soaring away from the side of our small ledge, and leaving me all alone. 

PART SIX



FÆYSTIRAN

Chapter 26



IT TOOK US FOUR FULL NIGHTS of flying to reach Fæystran. When darkness fell, we flew south along the edge of the Wall of the World; when light tinted the horizon, we found a place where we could sleep as much as we could and then wait out the day. Dracon Wælfyra flew at dawn and again just before dusk to hunt mountain ox in the steep mountain valleys—bringing back a dripping gobbet for me to sup on, clutched in one claw.

These I cut into steaks, spearing each on the tip of my dagger and holding it up so the dragon could sear it for me with a blast of fire. As it did so, I noticed that the flame did not come up out of its throat. Instead, it appeared, as if by magic, a tiny distance from its lips. And so, for a happy moment, the *Nithaial Elimiel* was replaced by Niccas, apprentice alchemist, delighted to be granted a great discovery.

For I had caught a whiff of an extremely rare, vaporous fluid—instantly combustible when exposed to ordinary air—known to alchemists as fellfire. But our way of produc-

ing it was crude, very dangerous, and always impure. Dragons, it seemed, created it naturally, the way snakes produced venom. Once our voyage was over, I would beg Dracon Wælfyra to eject some directly into a flask for me, that I might bring it as a gift to the Honorable Porphoras. He would be almost as pleased by that as by the destruction of The Unnameable One Himself.

In any case, once we had passed beyond the black tower, we encountered no signs of habitation in the valley, and certainly no towns or castles except in a state of ruins. The only exception was a straight road paved of black stone, in perfect repair, that ran south on the far side of the river, which is to say, in the same direction as we were traveling ourselves.

“I was taught that men controlled all the land hereabouts,” I said to Dracon Wælfyra, wincing as I rubbed ointment on the network of painful cuts that ran up and down the inside of my legs, the marks of which I would bear for the rest of my life. “But all I see is ruin and all I feel is evil. Why is this, do you think?”

We were, obviously, again waiting out the day on another shadowed ledge, deep in the mountains. The dragon, whose head was buried under one wing, performing some sort of grooming or, perhaps, massaging sore muscles, withdrew it to snort, “What do I know of the doings of men?”

“More than you let on to me, Ancient One,” I replied. “I understand nothing of the ways of the *dre’aganzd*, but I

know *you* well enough to suspect you have given this matter more than a little thought.”

Dracon Wælfyra swung its neck, bringing its head over to where I was sitting. “You are clever for your years, nestling,” it said. “Yes, we of the Hive have given your question some thought. When I was young this was a place of surpassing beauty, a prize jewel among the lands where demonkind held sway. Many, many men died here to seize it from them. It is recorded that for days after, the Flëara was filled more with blood than water, and it was months before the river ran clear again. Why fight so hard and so bitterly, and then leave the prize to rot?”

“The war was fought to drive the demons from our lands,” I answered. “This place is far from our cities and settled country. As much as demons may have prized it, I’ve seen nothing that sets it apart in beauty or richness from other parts of our kingdom. To come here out of jungle and desert is one thing; but to cross over from the other side of the hills....”

“Are you answering your own question?” the dragon interrupted, with a hint of asperity.

I looked up. “No,” I said, shaking my head. “I would understand if the valley felt mournful or forgotten. But it doesn’t. It feels evil and uncannily alive.”

The dragon lifted its head, spread its nostrils, and sniffed the air. “Time to hunt,” it said. “The sun will soon set.” It then looked back at me. “I feel these things, as well.

And as I do, so does the entire Hive. It puzzles us all. Alas, in our current state, we are unable to gaze into the Deepest Well to seek for answers.

“Even so, *Nithaial*, none of the auspices are good. Something dangerous and evil is coming forth, luring men *and* demons to serve it. That is the presence you feel. Beyond this we know nothing more.”

The dragon said these last words out of the edge of its mouth, its head extended over the side of the small ledge on which we perched, peering down into the sheer depths below us. Suddenly, it plunged over the edge, barely opening its wings. I could hear the air whistling past its body. Supper was about to be served.

THAT NIGHT WE REMAINED resting on our ledge until only a few hours before dawn. Then, during the last few hours of darkness, we left the safety of the Wall of the World and flew out over the southernmost reach of the valley.

It was there that the Flëara swung west to merge with the mighty Alsorel and flow into the sea, turned in its course by a spur of mountains that stretched almost to the borders of Pharros. Beyond these the Great Barrens began.

These were called The Broken Teeth, and dawn reached us as we were crossing over these. From above they certainly lived up to their name, resembling a crowded mass of stained and rotten tusks. Even so, they served as protection to the Kingdom, for they were difficult to cross, and only one pass, hacked from the rock by the demons when they

conquered these parts centuries ago, led through them. On the far side of this was the southernmost of the Kingdom's cities, a trading outpost called Shavagar-Yasí, a place where—it was said—no one went unless they sought to make a fortune or steal another's; a city where no one lived unless they had no other choice.

It was from here that High Lady Sophaera and my mother had come, to join a caravan heading south. Only now that I had traveled this distance myself, did I begin to understand what an undertaking that had been.

The pass itself had no gate, but it was far from unguarded. A great watchtower had been built there on a mountain top. It was called The Eye of Knoltan, after the king who had driven out the demons. No demon army could approach across the Great Barrens without being spotted long before it reached the pass, and no caravan could hope to slip quietly into Shavagar-Yasí and thus evade the custom's tax.

The Eye of Knoltan was one of the Kingdom's Five Wonders, and to serve with the elite force stationed there was the desire of every boy in the kingdom. Most would have been almost as happy simply to lay eyes on one who did. Its members were recruited mostly from the nobility and thus came from Tarrusor, the City of the King.

We were passing well to the east of it, but even so I could see it, in the shape of a giant obelisk, agleam in the reflected light of the rising sun, rising out of the same sea of mist over which we now flew ourselves. "To think that I've

actually seen the Eye of Knoltan!” I cried when I first spotted it. “My father dealt with a few merchants who had done so, wary-eyed, silent men who filled me with awe the few times I was allowed to meet them.”

“Look at it all you like,” the dragon said grimly. “You’ll be able to see it from here to Fæyſtirran, just as they will soon be seeing *us*... and the palace, too, once you bring it back into being.”

A simple matter, that, I thought, but said nothing. Earlier that evening, Dracon Wælfyra had explained to me that once we crossed these southern mountains, we would no longer be able to keep our travels secret. And without the mountains to guide us, the surest way to find our way across the Great Barrens was to follow the track used by the caravans, since we knew Fæyſtirran lay close to one of the oases through which they passed.

Even so, the dragon decided, it would be wise to avoid being seen by the inhabitants of Shavagar-Yaſí—those in the watchtower would keep secret what they saw until news of it had been brought to the king, whereas whatever was seen in the town would be news all over the kingdom before a cat had time to sneeze. So, we crossed these mountains far to the west of Shavagar-Yaſí, then flew southeast to intersect the track far from prying eyes.

I understood the wisdom of this plan as soon as the sun fell fully on the Great Barrens and revealed their endless, shapeless mass. From Sophaera’s tale, I had expected a rolling

sea of sand, but this was to appear only gradually, after we had flown many leagues. Beneath us now was a realm of baked earth, broken, wind-scoured rocks, and scraggly brush.

I groaned. “Why did Fæyſtirran have to be set in the middle of this! Jessan is *so* lucky—one palace by the sea, the other in the mountains. I get the desert and the ice!”

The dragon snorted. “The Deep Dwelling is not *that* far north. It lies in the northern wilderness, a place of crystal lakes, deep conifer forests, and rugged mountains. As to the desert, you will eventually come to realize it is a place of great beauty and strength—as well as a safe place to house the Home of Fire.”

Even as it spoke, the dragon banked steeply, and there was the track below us, running due south. If the sun had been higher, it would have been very hard to see, but the caravans had worn a deep groove in the hard ground over the centuries, which caught the morning shadows. It was as if someone had taken a thin piece of charcoal, and sketched out a line as far as the eye could see, broken only where sand had blown across it.

Now we flew straight and true, only deviating when the sun was higher and we could catch the occasional updraft. These lifted us up high into the sky and the dragon needed only to hold its wings outspread for us to effortlessly soar for leagues.

After our last exchange, we flew on in silence. Dracon Wælfyra, I realized, was tired and irritable, while I, truth

to tell, was about as excited as I had ever been in my life. The heat was fierce and the dry air parched my throat; no caravans passed beneath us, traveling either north or south. There was nothing here but the burning blue sky above and the scorching sands below.

Even so, I felt somehow as if I were coming home. I had no memories of Fæyſtirran—even after Sophaera’s description, I had little idea of what to expect. Still, there it was, my heart lifted with each league we covered, so much so that I found it impossible to sit still. So I scrambled up onto bent legs, and then, slowly, ever so carefully, found my balance and stood up straight.

Now I could see over Dracon Wælfyra’s head into the distant south. I could see nothing but more desert, of course, but what I was looking at was *mine*. “Behold!” I whispered to myself, spreading my arms out wide. “The *Nithaial Elimiel* comes on dragonback to reclaim his rightful home.”

WE REACHED THE OASIS A BIT BEFORE SUNSET, exhausted and dizzy from sun fever. I had imagined something lush, with a green verge and a cluster of date palms, but it was nothing more than a clump of the same scraggly bushes—covered with vicious thorns, I quickly discovered—in the midst of which was set a well.

Dracon Wælfyra unceremoniously tossed the heavy wooden cover aside and plunged the entire length of its neck down into the dark opening of the well. I could feel as well as see that it had found water; its neck pulsated with such force

as it swallowed that its whole body quivered.

I was desperate for a drink myself, since I had long since drained my water skin. Eventually, afraid that the dragon would drain the well dry, I leaned over the edge and half gasped and half wailed, “By your love, Dracon Wælfyra, don’t drink it all!”

The dragon gave no sign that it had heard me, and probably it hadn’t, but eventually the neck began to flow back up, followed finally by its head. This, it turned toward me and made a sharp jerking motion upwards. As I stared at it, the dragon did this again, this time shaking its head up and down.

“What are you trying to tell me?” I croaked. “Is your jaw locked? Is the well poisoned?”

The dragon gave me a disgusted look, reached its head close to mine and opened its mouth, drenching me with a stream of water that left me wet and spluttering.

“*Nithaial*,” Dracon Wælfyra said, once I had shaken most of it out of my ears, “what is missing here? How were you hoping to drink?”

I looked around. There was no bucket and no rope with which to lower it. Each caravan brought its own, or, more likely, several. The dragon had been summoning me to lift my head and open my mouth.

“My thirst has gone to my brain,” I said, apologetically. “Would you mind drawing me some more?”

Dracon Wælfyra sighed, turned, and once again

briefly plunged its head down into the well. When the head came back up, I had assumed the proper, mouth-gaping position, and drank my fill. The water had a flat, lifeless flavor, with perhaps a slight taste of its recent vessel, but it was like sweet wine to me.

After I recovered from my second drenching, something occurred to me, and I asked, gesturing about us, “Do you see what I see?”

The dragon slowly nodded. “The desert is reclaiming this place. Caravans are fewer and fewer, the water level in the well has begun to rise, the roots of these prickly bushes discover the moisture and begin to thrive. Soon men will have to hack their way to the well to drink at all.”

“In other words,” I said, “the news from the southern lands is not good.” I went to the dragon to remount. “We had better begin our search for Fæyſtirran.”

But Dracon Wælfyra moved its head to block my way. “Launching myself from this place would take great effort,” the dragon said, “and I’m weary. We will find Fæyſtirran by foot. And no,” it added snappishly, catching my look of hope, “I’m not a horse.” It snorted. “You can use your own two legs. Indeed, in all fairness, it is your turn to carry me.”

“Just jump up on my back,” I muttered, but I smiled despite myself. “At least you might go first.”

And the dragon did, breaking a path to the west. When we came to the end of the brambles, we did find the remnants of campfires, so at least a few caravans still came

this way. I put my hand over my eyes to shade it from the setting sun, and scanned the desert around us.

“You can see better than I,” I said. “There is supposed to be a way that leads from here to Fæyſtirran, paved with stone, and lined with colored tiles. See if you can spot any sign of it showing through the sand.”

Dracon Wælfyra stretched its neck up and looked about. Then it brought its head down and placed it close to my own, so close, in fact, that one of its nostrils touched my face. I sensed again the mysterious depths of the dragon’s mind, which seemed as endless as the horizon about us. But it was not inviting me into its own inner world but looking deeply into mine.

After the briefest of moments, it pulled away, then said, “You forget, *Nithaial Elimiel*, that your powers are over earth as well as fire. You must awaken Ernſardast before you can take complete command of them, but even so they await you now. Take your wand of power from its sheath and command the way to reveal itself.”

It should be so easy, I thought. But I did as he said. Sure enough, nothing happened.

“Again,” the dragon ordered, “only this time speak as if you expected it to happen.”

Dracon Wælfyra was right. I had imagined arriving at Fæyſtirran on its back, a grand entry that persuaded me of my powers. Now, dusty, tired, the hot sand burning through my sandals, I felt distinctly *un*-immortal. I groaned, took an

end of the wand in each hand, and raised it up. “Road to Fæÿstirran,” I intoned fiercely, “*reveal yourself to your master.*”

If I had actually expected anything to happen, it would have been a great gust of wind sweeping in to blow the way clear. But, instead, the desert itself, at least that part close to us, began to slowly shudder and ripple.

The sun was just now setting, coloring the desert a deepening shade of gold. In this light, with the play of shadow, the sands seemed as liquid as the sea. Several paces to our right, a straight line of sand began to roil like a boiling pot, then churn about, then start shifting to and fro. Finally, with a low, earth-shaking groan, the mass heaved itself aside, revealing the way that Sophera had described, leading away to the west.

I stared at all this in amazement, then shot a quick sideways glance at Dracon Wælfyra. But the dragon was already making its way to the road, as if none of this was worth an exchange of words. “Bless a turd!” I exclaimed to myself, as I hurried after. I felt elated but also a little shaken. If this was what I could do with almost no powers....

THE RUINS OF FÆÿSTIRAN were at the most a league distant, and even at our tired pace we were soon there. However, it gave the sun time enough to set, and we arrived in twilight. I had expected to find a certain nobility to the place, a landscape dotted with broken columns, shattered friezes, toppled plinths. But it was nothing like that. What met our eyes was something smashed, pulverized,

shattered, broken down to stone and gravel.

I took one long look at all this, then cried out in pain, “Dracon Wælfyra! This is so terrible. Why have you brought me here?” I felt my yearning to find my true home felt as crushed in my heart as the scene before me.

The dragon said nothing but instead extended a claw and shoved aside the rubble from the ground just ahead of where we stood. Beneath it, as one swipe of the claw followed another, appeared a large square of luminous tile, totally undamaged. From it shone a familiar emblem. The Cronnex!

With a sense of shock, I looked down at my arm, realizing how long it had been since I had seen my part of it glowing on my right arm. Never had it appeared once during my whole stay at Fyrewourmhaem! Or in the nights since, when we had flown from there to Fæyðstiran....



My blank arm still extended, I looked up mutely into the eyes of Dracon Wælfyra.


The dragon nodded. “Take the pendant given you by the Dark Lord from around your neck,” it said, “step back several paces, and lay it on the ground. Even a *Nithaial* can serve only one God at a time.”

“I do not *serve* Ra’asiel!” I replied sharply, but did as the dragon directed. The moment I laid the pendant on the ground, the silver tracing began to glow. By the time I stood beside the dragon, it blazed. I looked again at the

ruins, expecting to see, if nothing else, the dancing flames that had greeted my mother and Sophaera. But nothing had changed.

No, that wasn't true. To the eye, all was the same. But within myself—or within the ground before me, for, in truth, I couldn't tell—I could feel a great welling of force, as if gathering itself before it burst out into full view.

“Now,” said Dracon Wælfyra, “it is time for you to summon Fæyſtirran back into being. Call it up just as you ordered the way here to reveal itself.”

It swung its massive head down until its mouth was level with my ear, and hissed, “Only this time, speak out of your power, *Nithaial Elimiel*.” 

Chapter 27



THE AMAZEMENT THAT IS FÆYSTIRRAN. So different from the temple to Ra'asiel or the places of worship from my youth. Once the great roar subsided, the cloud of dust faded into the air, what met my eyes so melted my heart that, at first, I was unable to move. Perhaps to flaunt its indifference to the fierce desert storms, perhaps out of love for the desert's sere beauty, perhaps for reasons I had yet to discern, the palace was totally open to the elements, possessing neither roof nor walls.

Instead, it was in the shape of a great open circle, defined by a ring of columns. These, at the entrance where we now stood, came up only to my waist. But they grew higher and higher as they continued, until at the far side they reached high into the night. Then, at the farthest point, there was a second gap, mirroring the entrance to the palace where I now stood.

Before us, a flight of wide steps led down to a circular walkway and, beyond that, another flight of steps rose up

to a dais, of lovely and elaborate design, which softly glowed in the growing darkness. This was quite wide, with a saucer-like declivity at its center, clearly the place where Sophaera and my mother had found me as a baby.

“You must now step inside,” said Dracon Wælfyra, breaking into my reverie, “and, if you wish, invite me to step within as well.”

Tentatively, not knowing what to expect, and remembering the dancing flames described by Sophaera, I stepped from the entryway, a large rectangle of colored tiles, onto the descending flight of stairs. As soon as my foot met the first step, a great burst of flame erupted from the center of the dais, a flame so pure that it had no color, only shape and heat.

I wanted so much to approach it that my body shook with desire, but, before I did so, I remembered, as if from some other life, my manners.

I turned and said, “Please enter my home, mighty Dracon Wælfyra, now and at any time you desire, with my leave and love. And I extend this welcome to all of your kin, the venerable and puissant race of *dre’aganzd*, with the hope they shall come to trust and advise the *Nithaial* again.”

The dragon lifted its head high into the air, and issued a great blast of fire. Then it lowered it again, even bowing it slightly, and replied, “I gladly accept your welcome, *Nithaial Elimiel*, and I am honored to be your guest. May all your visitors be so gladly received.” It then gave me a knowing glance. “Now go, you, to your flame.”

As I crossed the walkway and ascended the steps that led to the dais, I saw for the first time that the columns were made of some translucent stone that captured and held the firelight. But more than that, because the flame itself was pure, what the columns reflected was a delicate play of colors. It is a common alchemical belief that what is pure is by definition colorless. But those who study these things more deeply know that what is pure contains *all* colors in perfect harmony.

The stone from which the columns had been shaped must possess some subtle prismatic quality that refracts this perfection into its many parts, letting each flow in and out of view like the presences that the learned mages can discern about us in the ether. And once again I longed for the company of my master Porphoras, to show him these things and discuss them with him. But not yet. Not now.

When I stepped onto the dais, I had eyes only for the flame. It sang to me, it called to me, it drew me to it. I could not have resisted it had I wanted to, but approaching it slowly added to the sweetness of the moment, like a lover approaching the sleeping form of his beloved.

As I came to it I unfastened and shed what little I wore heedlessly on the beautiful tiled floor. Amazingly, this remained cool under my feet, even as the heat from the flame caressed my body. But when I reached the declivity in which the flame burned, my feet no longer touched the floor. The moment I stepped over its edge, the force drew me into it,

swallowed me up, and consumed me.

How hard this is to write! No human could endure this for a flash of time and yet the human in me revelled in the incandescence I had become. I was no longer made of flesh but of fire. Each strand of my hair glowed separately; even my breath burned, issuing from my nose and mouth in a luminescent cloud of fiery blue. I stared at this in wonder, even as my mind fell from consciousness.

I closed my eyes—or perhaps I could no longer tell what was seen and what was felt. Seeing, tasting, hearing, smelling all became one, an embodiment of the force, its power, its purposeful if endlessly mysterious flux. I knew that at the end of my days I would return to this entirely; that those who had come before me were here around me, part of me, aware of me perhaps much more than I was aware of them. Tears that sparkled like diamonds fell from my closed eyes and rolled down my cheeks.

Then I sensed something outside the force that was summoning me. At first it was a kind of tugging, but as I grew more aware of it I knew the voice and understood the words. “Come, *Nithaial Elimiel*, enough. You must come out while you still can, unless you mean to wed the force forever.”

I understood. And as strong as the temptation was, in my heart I knew I wasn’t yet ready to become one with the force that enveloped me. And, feeling that, I was able, with sweet reluctance, to will myself outside the flow.

When I did so, to my surprise, I found that I was float-

ing high above the floor. Outside the flame, but still glowing from its contact, my mind and body continued to blaze. I dropped easily to the floor, leaving a trail of light behind me like a shooting star.

By the time my feet touched the tiled dais, the fire was fading, the sense of power and exultation it had engendered fast fading into an awareness that I was starving, both for food and sex. There was no satisfying the last, alas, but surely Dracon Wælfyra could find us some supper.

SO, THE DRAGON FLEW OFF to hunt desert gazelles in the moonlight, while I set out to explore Fæystir-ran. There was not, it seemed, much to see. When I followed the walkway that surrounded the dais, I found it quickly dropped down so that the dais itself was a good distance above my head. That side remained a wall, covered with colored tiles, into which glowstones had been placed to illuminate the way.

As the walkway continued, it began to widen into a small but lovely proportioned inner courtyard, in the center of which a fountain softly played. On the far side of the courtyard ran a portico, supported on slender columns, and onto this opened a series of rooms, one after the other. These, I thought, must be my living quarters—open, cool, private, well shaded from the sun, but open to the stars.

I chose to explore these later, continuing along the walkway until it narrowed again and ascended upwards. I had traveled the full circle and was again at the short flight of

stairs leading up to the dais. However, I was now facing east, and found that during my walk the moon had risen above the Wall of the World. It seemed almost close enough to touch, floating large and lustrous just beyond the columns of Fæystirran. Ever since my midnight ride in Lorithar, that silver orb was for me the embodiment of Gesryma, Great Mother of Blessed Name. Now, overcome by all that had happened that day, I sank to my knees, my heart overflowing with feelings of gratitude and a warming sense of her closeness. I bathed in the brilliant moonlight for some time, the Cronnex glowing fiercely on my arm.

I was just rising to my feet when I sensed some movement in the desert, just a stone's throw away from where I stood. Despite the brightness of the night, it took me a moment to pick out the pack of beasts approaching across the sands. As they moved within the light cast by the force, I could see there were a dozen all told, standing at least half again as tall as a man or a demon, with compact bodies of rippling muscle beneath an earth-colored mottled hide, their thick tails rising straight up behind them, their glittering eyes fixed solely on me.

They approached with a curious motion, leaping suddenly to the left or right, but in some sort of communion, for they never came in contact with one another. It was almost as if they were dancing, but it was an eerie, frightening dance, and when they reached the outer edge of Fæystirran they had spread out in a line. When they discovered that they could

approach no further, there was a high-pitched keening, then, simultaneously, they thrust their heads in my direction and opened their jaws, baring long rows of pointed teeth.

Strykul. I knew these beasts from my reading. They were voracious hunters who lived in packs and were said to be as smart as men or demons—smarter in their hunting, for they killed and ate either race with impunity, while no one hunted *them*. But they wandered the veldts in the distant south, where there were herds of game to prey on. What were they doing in this desert?

I stepped backwards to where I had left my tyger pelt and my wand of power. I stepped into the former and belted it on, then drew the latter from its sheath. I was sure the *strykul* couldn't enter Fæyðstirran to attack me, but without Dracon Wælfyra to advise me, I decided not to take any chances. Even so, the wiser course seemed to be to approach them as close as I dared, to show them that I had no fear of them—as, still filled with the wash of power, I did not.

However, as I came closer, something peculiar happened. The beasts crowded together, opened their jaws again, and hissed at me with such ferocity that their whole bodies shook from the effort. It was an expression of such pure sibilant hatred that it came close to unnerving me.

I lifted my wand. I could have set them all ablaze, if I wanted, but I was safe from them and I wanted to understand more about why they were here. So, instead of a burst of flame, I sent several small balls of fire toward them, letting

these float slowly through the air. As one, the *strykul* sprang back, stopping their hissing, but I hardly noticed this. As the fireballs passed through Fæyſtirran's protective shield, they ignited sheets of scarlet flame.

This could only be some mysterious vapor spewed by the *strykul*! Searching through my memory, I couldn't recall reading anything about this power, but it was deadly poisonous—of that, I had no doubt. I looked at them with fresh interest and tentatively reached out to touch their minds. This was like trying to fondle a hotly blazing coal, and I pulled away.

Even so, the *strykul* felt it, shifting uneasily and backing away even further from Fæyſtirran. They were now regarding *me* with fresh interest, their small, hard eyes all regarding me fixedly, absorbing all they could of a frustrating prey that they had never encountered before.

Then, suddenly, all their heads turned at once, and, even as they did, I heard a distant, high-pitched keening, like their own call, but not quite the same. They answered it, and this back-and-forth was repeated a few more times, until, out of the dark, came a group of riders, demons, I saw, mounted on yet another kind of fell-seeming saurian beast. In shape they were much like the *strykul*, but larger, their heads well shackled with strong iron bands.

The leader dismounted and strode up to the entrance of Fæyſtirran. He was easily as large as Teshnar'ad and was clad in the battle armor of his kind, made of thick, mottled hide, covered with sharply pointed spurs. In one hand he

swung a rider's mace with three blades at its end in the shape of a cross, so that it could impale no matter in what direction it was swung, and be used as a spear if there was no room to swing it at all. When he was stopped by the protective force, he stepped back, showed me his teeth, and snarled.

“Warrior, you stand at the entrance of Fæyſtirran, House of Flame,” I said to him in his own tongue. “I am the *Nithaial Elimiel* and this is my home. You have no chance in battle with me. Depart now back whence you came or set down your weapon and speak your name.”

The demon stepped back in surprise, then regarded me carefully, up and down, with deliberate slowness. “I am the Demon Lord Mazh’dagh, of the Clan Deshgka,” he said at last. “I am in pursuit of a witch and a wizard of your people, impious violators of the sacred temple.”

“Baskast Prûl?” I asked. “The Temple of Destruction? How did they come there?”

However, even as I asked the question, I knew the answer. This was how Teshnar’ad had come from that temple to battle Me’iddorkasz for the role of Avatar. Likewise, once they stepped into the circle of *dagmast* stones, Helias and Nassazia had been taken directly to Baskast Prûl—or as Teshnar’ad had remarked, from the frying pan straight into the fire... and, it seems, managed to escape from both.

The Demon Lord was speaking. “We intend to pursue them to the very gates of The Eye of Knoltan to learn the answer to that question, *Nithaial*. They would be our

captives already, if it weren't for the strength of their horses and the spellcasting of the witch. But we have now received assistance that will put an end to *that*!

"They would have passed by here shortly after twilight," he continued. "If you have not provided them with refuge, we will capture them before the night is over." The Demon Lord snapped its jaws and regarded me coldly. "So, answer—do you hide them here?"

Before I could digest what the demon had just told me, let alone reply, we were interrupted by a loud shriek of rage. Both of us turned to find one of his traveling companions bent down and examining the ground. It was wrapped in a dark robe of a material that made it all but invisible, but the sinuous way that it moved was more like a snake than a demon. Almost immediately, it stood back up and stepped over to us, holding out the pendant Ra'asiel had given me, clutched in three snakelike fingers.

"How do you come by this, thief of a *Nithaial*?" it whispered, tossing back its hood as it did so. My heart shrunk within me. It was a wraith ghoul. I closed my eyes and silently pleaded, "Dracon Wælfyra! Come to me. Come to me now."

MEN KNOW LITTLE OF WRAITH GHOULS, and I might have been numbered among them were it not for a line that had been etched in my mind during my studies in Porphoras's library. There, I had noticed a tome bound with black iron bands, held fast by two locks. It was strange

to have a locked book in so impenetrable a place, and so I asked Porphoras about it. He recoiled when I pointed to it, and would say only that its contents had little to do with alchemy and everything to do with horrors that would plague my mind long after I had closed and relocked it.

Needless to say, in the ignorance of my youth, this had only whetted my curiosity, and I importuned Porphoras for access to its pages until he finally surrendered the keys. The book was called *THE TOME OF FOREBODING: A HISTORY OF WHAT THE LIVING HAVE LEARNED OF THE DEAD*, and it revealed the doom that is Ais Dysmassia, the house of lost souls.

That place is the destination of all who are not by the grace of the Blessed Gesryma given refuge in the Hallowed Halls. (If such a holy place also awaits those granted the favor of Ra'asiel, I know not.) All others wander through Ais Dysmassia, where they are hunted down, one by one, by the wraith ghouls. This, then, is the sentence that haunted me:

So it is in death that all men become prey, the high and the low, the good and the bad, for these things care not of the values or deeds of the living—no more than we give reprieve to the virtuous hare or the prince among fishes.

A firmly held belief among men is that Gesryma awards to all who live a virtuous or heroic or especially pious life a place in The Hallowed Halls. This thought gives them hope and comfort, but it is far from true. None can know before they die whether Gesryma has granted them

a refuge, and for what reason, but most likely she has not. You might as well hope that, opening your mouth, a gold coin would fall into it.

The wraith ghouls find especially succulent the despair of those who took for granted their admittance to the Hallowed Halls, and these they devour with excruciating slowness. Those eaten experience no physical pain, for in death all feeling is lost. What they do suffer are all the agonies of the forsaken soul—terror, despair, hopelessness—as each bit of memory, belief, and knowledge is ripped away, until nothing remains but a vacant shell. And this, with the countless others like it, will be blown like fallen leaves hither and yon by the icy winds of Ais Dysmassia for all eternity, wailing in mindless grief.

When at last I closed this book, I pushed it away from me, and buried my face in my hands. Although I was surely assured a place in the Hallowed Halls, this terrible fate would befall all I loved—and had already happened to my slain family. And I had so wished that they had gone to a place of peace.... Tears leaked from my eyes as I struggled to understand how the Blessed Mother could allow such a thing. When I finally rose from my seat, I understood all too well why this knowledge was kept hidden from the living.

THE TOME OF FOREBODING had but one illustration of a wraith ghoul and it was nearly impossible to make sense of. I now knew why. The body of the one before me was still draped in its gray robe, but I could see that its flesh was

shapeless, translucent, and slimy, and its head possessed only the most rudimentary eyes, ears, and nose.


The only thing that stood out from its damp and formless face was its circular mouth, which came thrusting out of its face like a snout, the thick, wet lips pulled back to reveal a nest of needle-like teeth, perfectly shaped to rip its way into its victims. The thing's breath reeked of carrion; its voice was a gurgling whisper.

"I do not fear *your* magic, *Nithaial*," it hissed. "Your god has been granted no power over me."

"If that is so, beast of darkness," I answered back, struggling to keep my voice firm, although my heart quailed, "it's because you are forbidden to come among the living. Who dared break the inviolable boundary between the living from the dead to bring you here?"

"I like this trinket," the wraith ghoul said, shrugging off my question. "It has more magic in it than this whole paltry palace."

"It was given to me by Ra'asiel, Himself," I said. "You touch it at your peril." Now my voice *was* shaking, but it was as much in fury as it was in fear.

The wraith ghoul hissed. "Maybe so," it said, "but I wear it at my pleasure," and draped the pendant over its neck. Then, suddenly, one of its ropy arms shot out from under its cloak and seized me by the throat. "I have toyed with you long enough," it sneered. "Now, I eat." 

Chapter 28



THE SMELL OF ROTTEN FLESH that the wraith ghoul exuded should have told me how a creature from Ais Dysmassia had gained substance in this world—it had been feeding on the living. Its feeble-looking arms had a surprising amount of strength, and they left me with two dismal choices: to struggle to break their grip around my neck, or to use my remaining strength to keep that terrifying mouth from clamping itself onto my face.

Worse still was the fact that as we struggled, the wraith ghoul exposed its mind to me. It was a jackdaw's nest of thoughts and feelings sucked from the dead, a miasma of grief, terror, despair, and spiritual hurt. The more I feared this thing, the more it hungered, the stronger it got.

“Nithaial Elimiel,” a voice called out to me, “pull it over the boundary! Drag it into Fæyſtirran!”

Already half unconscious, at first I thought it was telling me to stop pushing away the wraith ghoul's face. But then I understood. I flung myself backwards, falling down,

pulling the spectral being down on top of me. But it did not get that far. The instant the pendant touched the force that protected Fæyſtirran, two irresistible forces collided and a vortex opened up.

The wraith ghoul was sucked into it, not all at once, but particle by particle, as if it were being torn apart into the smallest possible bits. The noise that accompanied this was in a pitch beyond the reach of my ears, but the force of it left me deafened and sent the *strykul* fleeing off into the desert—or so I discovered later, because right then I passed out where I lay.

When I opened my eyes, Dracon Wælfyra's head was hovering just over mine. It had been the dragon who had called to me, destroying the wraith ghoul and saving my life. In the distance, I could hear the demon force that the Demon Lord Mazh'dagh commanded chanting something, but my brain was still too muzzy to make it out.

Instead, such thoughts that I had were fixated on what had almost been my fate—the fragments of my mind scattered and jumbled inside the wraith ghoul's mind, amongst those of countless others, all in madness and in pain—and I turned my head to one side and violently retched.

My stomach was empty and nothing came out but bile. But its sharp stink brought me to my senses, and I sat up. The demons were still chanting, in, I now noticed, a pleading tone. "*Dre'aganzd, morsh yr ghusk! Dre'aganzd, morsh yr ghusk! Dre'aganzd, morsh yr ghusk!*"

I looked blearily at Dracon Wælfyra. I wanted to talk about the wraith ghoul, but the noise of the chanting was hurting my head. I understood the words, I thought, but I couldn't make sense of them.

"What are they saying?" I asked.

"Just that they're glad to see me," the dragon answered. "It's their traditional welcome to the *Dre'aganzd*."

"No, no, no," I said, clutching my head, listening. "They're saying, 'Dragon... *shit for us*. Dragon... *shit for us*. Dragon... *shit for us*.'"

Dracon Wælfyra sighed. "Same thing," it said. Then, rising to its feet, it added, "I suppose I might as well," and lumbered out of the precinct of Fæyſtirran. A short distance away, it squatted down, grunted, and deposited a large, glistening turd onto the sand.

The chanting stopped. And as soon as the dragon returned to where I sat, the demons hurried over to the deposit and began arguing fiercely among themselves. A sharp command from Mazh'dagh curbed this, and they stepped to one side as he approached.

He pulled his dagger from its sheath, carefully apportioned the chunk of dung into shares, then stood up, taking two pieces with him. After snapping an order to his aide, he approached us, made a motion of obeisance, and asked if he could approach me.

I struggled to my feet. "Enter, Lord Mazh'dagh," I said. "You now wish to parley?"

The demon lord approached respectfully. He was clearly in awe of Dracon Wælfyra. “Never in my lifetime had I thought I might find myself in the presence of *Dre’aganzd*,” he said. He squatted down and bent his head, in the demon manner of submission. “Thank you, Eminently Ancient, Wise, and Powerful One, for your favor.”

Dracon Wælfyra lowered its head and regarded Mazh’dagh inscrutably. Then it snorted and closed its eyes.

Meanwhile, Mazh’dagh’s aide approached us, halting when he came to the edge of Fæystriran. I beckoned him in, and he again halted slightly behind his commander. He was bearing two small pieces of cloth. Without looking at him, Mazh’dagh handed back each of his two chunks of dragon shit, one at a time. The aide wrapped each into a neat bundle.

While he was doing this, Mazh’dagh carefully wiped his hands all over his snout, inhaling deeply as he did so. His eyes glazed over. “We demons are incapable of resisting *dre’aganzd’morsh*,” he said. “It is the one thing that overpowers us.” He glanced at Dracon Wælfyra. “That is why we have so assiduously cultivated a connection with them—both to obtain it and to keep it out of the possession of our enemies, who might use its effects against us.”

He extended one hand behind his back, and the aide deposited one of the bundles in it. Mazh’dagh then offered it to me. “However, Ra’asiel has clearly marked you a Demon-Friend, *Nithaial Elimiel*, and, in recognition of this, we offer you a share of the bounty.”

“You do me great honor, Lord Mazh’dagh,” I said, accepting it. Despite myself, I lifted the bundle to my nose and sniffed. *Dre’aganzd’morsh* had a complex, spicy overlay, it was true, but the basic aroma was—and not in the least delicately—of, well, turd. I regarded the bundle and wished I also had an aide I could hand it to.

Instead, I held it behind my back and said, “Lord Mazh’dagh, it is not untrue to call me a Demon-Friend, but I am not any kindred spirit of wraith ghouls. How did it happen that such a thing became a member of your company? Surely, it was not under your command.”

The demon looked at the ground for a moment, considering. Then he lifted his head and answered. “I am a warrior and warriors do not question what they have been ordered to do. I was told to pursue the violators of the temple and destroy them, and in this I would be aided by a being summoned from the spirit world. This was to join us once we had left the precincts of the temple, and so it did.

“Fortunately, it did not require a riding beast, for none, I think, would have carried it. The thing had the power to float above the earth and moved easily with us. I wondered why it did not pursue the wizard and the witch on its own, but I came to realize that it could barely see or hear. Our task was to bring it close enough so that it could sense its prey.”

His eyes hardened. “I was *not* told,” the demon lord went on, “that this thing would feed off my soldiers, one by one, bringing each a terrible doom.”

He glanced over at his troop. “I left Baskast Prûl with a dozen riders,” he said bitterly. “I now have seven. However, I will say that the more it fed, the more conversant in our tongue it became. If you had met it two days ago, its conversation with you would have been much shorter, if no different in its end.”

“And what do you mean to do now?” I asked.

The demon lord snapped his jaws. “Our task was to bring the wraith ghoul, as you call it, within sensing distance of those we pursued. That is now impossible, and we cannot approach Shavagar-Yasí alone. So, we are defeated, and must return to Baskast Prûl without our prize.”

“You will bring a better one, Lord Mazh’dagh,” I replied. “You can report that you have seen one of the *Dre’aganzd* a mere arm’s length away and stood within the precincts of the palace Fæyſtirran, now reborn.”

I regarded Mazh’dagh for a moment in silence, then added, “You have not told me who summoned the wraith ghoul to join your hunt, but, whoever that was, they have violated the most sacred of rules, held both by Ra’asiel, the Lordliest One, and Gesryma, Our Blessed Mother.

“My Lord, the Avatar is about to return to his people, and you will then have to decide where your allegiance will be sworn. I hope you make the right choice.”

“The Avatar has abandoned us,” the demon lord said shortly. “He will not return.”

Dracon Wælfyra suddenly snorted, lifted its head

and sent a blade of fire up into the night air, so startling Mazh'dagh that he jumped backwards, his eyes widening from shock. The dragon then stretched its neck so that it could look the demon directly in the face.

"I am not impressed with you, lord," it hissed in demon tongue. "Both of your statements are false, and show a small heart. Open your eyes; look. Open your mind; think. And be careful of what you say on your return. Or else you will be denied a warrior's death but be trod on like a worm."

Mazh'dagh dropped down into the posture of submission. Complete silence fell all around us. Dracon Wælfyra retracted his head and looked away.

"You had better go now, Lord Mazh'dagh," I said quietly, feeling sorry for him. "You have much to ponder on your long ride home."

The demon lord got slowly to his feet. Dracon Wælfyra's words had cut through the effect of the *dre'aganzd'morsh* like a knife through fat, leaving him stricken with the fatigue of the long chase and its failure. He made a deep obeisance to me, turned, then stopped and looked back.

"Do you know this wizard, *Nithaial Elimiel*?" he asked. "The one we've been pursuing."

"Yes," I answered. "I know him well. But I'm not hiding him here at Fæÿstirran."

The demon snorted. "You misunderstand me. I meant to tell you only that when he and the witch fled from Baskast Prûl, he bore an arrow in his back. That he has lived this long

amazes me. The signs show that the witch abandoned him in the desert, and rode on alone. The *strykul* hunt him now. If they catch him or, more likely, find him lying in the desert, they will devour him. However, if he makes it to Shavagar-Yasí....” The demon shrugged a very human shrug.

As he did so, a horrible thought entered my head. “Lord Mazh’dagh, you never intended to capture him alive, did you? The answers your master sought, he meant to pluck from the mind of the wraith ghoul, after it had fed.”

The demon lord was walking away as I spoke. I thought he was going to ignore me, but once he had mounted his saurian, he called back, “My orders were to take them captive. What you say I see now to be true, but that thing did not consult with me. *Nithaial*, I hope you find your wizard alive, though I fear you will not. I think it is already too late to help him.” Then he gave a cry and he and his troop wheeled about and rode off into the south.

DRACON WÆLFYRA SIMPLY REFUSED to take me to Shavagar-Yasí and was furious that I even asked, pleaded, begged that it do so. Worse still, the dragon was right. I had no business risking our mission out of concern for one person, especially one that right now most likely resided in the stomachs of a pack of *strykul*.

No mention was made of how Helias had treated me, how little he deserved rescue, even if that were possible, although I’m sure that was as much on Dracon Wælfyra’s mind as it was on mine.

The argument was fierce, but it was also short. I was exhausted beyond belief, so much so that tears of fatigue ran down my face as I pleaded with, then shouted at Dracon Wælfyra. When I saw there was no moving the beast, I less capitulated than collapsed.

I must have done so in slow motion, because when my eyes opened, I was in one of the rooms that opened onto the portico. It was early morning and the sun blazed without, but I lay in shadow, stretched out on the cool tile floor. It was so delicious, this sleepy feeling, and I knew the moment I shifted, all my joints would start complaining in unison.

Even so, I staggered to my feet, my mind racing with the events of yesterday and my argument with Dracon Wælfyra. I went to the fountain in the inner courtyard, drank deeply, then splashed water all over my body. I shook myself like a dog and went up the ramp to find my companion.

The dragon was gone. Last night's hunt, because of my summons, had been unsuccessful. So, after it, too, had slept, it had flown off to find us both a decent meal. My belt and travel pack lay where I had dropped them on the dais. I looked longingly at the flame, almost invisible in the brightness of the day, a pulsating mass of what almost looked like liquid air, touched now and then with various tints of fire.

Instead, I put on my belt, scrounged in my travel pouch for a scrap of dried meat, and, chewing thoughtfully, made my way back across the dais and continued until I reached the entrance to Fæystirran. There, lying in the dirt,

was the pendant of Ra'asiel, where it had fallen when the wraith ghoul had unwittingly brought it into contact with the force that guards the palace. It might not have feared my magic, but it should have thought better of pitting the powers of Ra'asiel against those of the blessed Gesryma. I was about to pick the pendant up when I noticed that the wraith ghoul's cloak was lying close beside it.

Even so close and in broad daylight, the cloak was hard to see. It had the power to cast sight away from it. I had caught a glimpse of it out of the side of my eye when I was looking at the pendant. If I had looked directly at it, I would not have seen it at all.

I lifted it up and shook the sand from it. The cloak was woven of a silvery thread and very light. It also reeked of its previous wearer, so much so that I almost gagged. But, I thought, this enhances its invisibility; repelling the nose even as it confuses the eyes.

I was deciding whether to don it or not, when I heard a snuffling noise somewhere close by. I dropped the cloak, pulled my wand of power from its sheath and cautiously climbed up the sand dune from where the sound had seemed to come. There, squatting on the other side, was one of Mazh'dagh's saurian riding beasts.

When it saw me, it struggled up to its feet. It was untethered—either Mazh'dagh had left it for me or else it had somehow gotten free and had returned here because... it was thirsty! It had sensed the fountain in Fæyſtirran but

had found no way to approach it.

Immediately, a plan formed in my mind. It was reckless, irresponsible, and dangerous, but I could do no better and I was determined to do this. Dracon Wælfyra would not understand, but I was *bound* to Helias. It had nothing to do with love, at least not in any swoony sort of way. I was furious at Helias, hated him from the very core of my being. But I couldn't let him get away from me, not the way he had.

These thoughts racing through my mind, I clapped my hands and summoned the beast, the way I would a horse. It looked at me curiously, but my posture of command made it decide I was not a meal but a very peculiar looking master. I knew it wasn't entirely convinced of this, so I briefly touched its mind, impressing my power on it.

"I shall call you Nisn'zahsk—Dune Rider," I said. "Bear me well." The beast met my eyes, then, submissively, bowed its head. I took it to the fountain where I left it to drink its fill, while I stepped into the room where I had just been sleeping. On the floor, I saw what I was looking for, the small parcel of *dre'aganzd'morsh*. It was the only remembrance I had of Dracon Wælfyra, and I tucked it into my pouch.


Then, quickly, we departed. Once I had slipped the pendant in my pouch and wrapped myself in the stinking cloak, I ordered the saurian to kneel and climbed up onto its saddle. Demon buttocks are not as ours and I knew I would be sore by the end of the ride, but that was a small price to pay to race across the leagues of desert between here and

Shavagar-Yasí. As the Saurian got back onto its feet, I raised my hand to shade my eyes and scanned the sky in all directions. The dragon was nowhere in sight. I asked the Blessed Mother to forgive me this madness, and slapped the side of the beast with the thick leather quirt.

I had never ridden a two-legged beast before and I expected to be jolted until my teeth rattled. But it wasn't so. One great claw reached out, dug into the sand, and thrust us forward, then the other did the same, and we moved quickly and lightly, with an almost dainty swinging motion. In a matter of minutes, Fæjstirran was out of sight, and a short while after that, I no longer worried that we might be caught.

On its return, Dracon Wælfyra would assume I was still deep in sleep, and feast on its kill. There would be no reason to wake me, since our plan was to depart at sundown. Eventually, it would wonder why the smell of meat had failed to rouse me. But by then we would have gone too far for easy pursuit.

The cloak would hide my scent; there would be no footprints showing I had left the palace; and even if its eyes were keen enough to spot the saurian, they wouldn't make out the rider. Nor would the dragon have any reason to connect it with me. The plan was perfect; it was its consequences that did not bear looking at.

I set our direction by the distant gleaming spire that was The Eye of Knoltan, emptied my mind as best I could, to keep from being sensed by friend or foe, and settled down for a long and very hot and dusty ride. 

Chapter 29



We reached Shavagar-Yasí just after sunset. As I feared, the great gates to the city were closed, but I had a plan to deal with that. I let my cloak fall down to around my waist, and rode Nisn'zahsk boldly up almost to the gates themselves. Then, quickly, I dismounted and unfastened the iron bands from around its snout—thus freeing it to hunt for prey. Immediately, it stretched open its mouth, revealing a maw lined with large and glittering teeth.

It did so to stretch the cramped jaw muscles, not devour me, but I suddenly realized that this beast was trained for other killing besides the hunt for food. Already, the gates of the city were swinging open, and a patrol of mounted horsemen was spilling out. Nisn'zahsk immediately raised its head and roared a battle challenge.

This was *not* what I had in mind. I punched the sau-

rian hard to get its attention, and ordered it to return to Fæystirran and await my coming. Now that I had allowed in entry, it could go in and out as it wished, and its arrival would give a message of sorts to Dracon Wælfyra as to what had happened to me.

The beast roared again, looking longingly at the approaching horsemen, but I pressed my command firmly into its small brain. Reluctantly, then quickly, it turned and raced off across the sands. Even as it did so, I flung the cloak over my head, squatted low, and hurried to one side.

Almost instantly, the riders passed me by, shouting and spurring their horses. When they saw the saurian was riderless, however, they reined in, then cast about to find me. However, because of the smell of my cloak, the horses wouldn't come near me, and I was able to move stealthily toward the city gates.

When, eventually, the thickening dusk rendered any further search impossible, they rode back, arguing among themselves, and I had no problem slipping with them into Shavagar-Yasí. The gates clanged loudly behind me and huge oak crossbars were slid into place. I had entered a nest of enemies, after first prodding it sharply with a stick.

The horse soldiers were already vanishing into a military compound built into the city wall just beyond the gates, and the open space in which I now stood was alive with guards, busy closing down in a corner of the square what was obviously a public market. They harassed merchants

into folding up their booths and packing up their wares, and hurried customers on their way.

This, no doubt, was a scene that happened every day at sundown, but the curtness of their orders and their general vigilance suggested that they had been put on alert. I kept close to the walls, and moved as stealthily as I could to the nearest street.

This was lined on both sides with the gates of caravanserais—inns with large courtyards where caravans from the south could find rest and a place to stable their beasts. When caravans from the south had been more numerous, all these places would be filled to capacity, and, during the day, the entire square, not just a small corner of it, would be crowded with traders and a jostling crowd.

Tonight, though, only one of the caravansarais showed any signs of life. It was into it that most of the traders that the soldiers had sent packing were now lugging their wares. Its courtyard was lit with torches, and I was able to stand at the edge of the gate and take a quick look around.

The inn's rooms, as was the southern custom, opened directly onto the courtyard, their entrances shaded with a lengthy portico, as had been the case at Fæystirran. True, some of these doors were shut, but it would have been a foolish place, I realized, for Helias to hide himself. If he had reached the city alive, I was sure he had buried himself deeply inside it somewhere.

Yet where? I had been certain that I would at least

sense the presence of Whynnya in a stable somewhere. But then, I had imagined the city to be little more than ramshackle huddle of clay-brick huts, not this hulking place of narrow, crooked streets lined with high walls and tightly barricaded buildings.

Most of these had no opening on the ground floor at all apart for a massive door, and the windows on the next level were small and guarded with stout iron bars. Only on the levels above that did these places open themselves, with long, narrow balconies, and windows, some fitted with colored glass, others with decorated paper, that were hinged so that their several frames could be pushed back to let in the night air.

There was still an early evening glow to the sky, and I could make my way easily enough through the streets, invisible to passersby, who, in any case, became fewer and fewer as the night drew in. Of those I encountered, few moved at a leisurely pace, and almost all—men and women both—bore ornately decorated daggers, conspicuously shown.

Fortunately, there seemed to be no general search for me inside the city and no seeking mind brushed against my own. No, the problem was that the dark was setting in around me and by now I had lost all sense of direction. I might easily be wandering around in circles. In the dusk, all the streets seemed the same, and all the alleyways had a sinister feeling.

Unlike Lorithar, there was nothing that divided the city into quarters—this one for the nobility, that one for the

merchants, that other for the poor, the artisans, the warehouses. No avenues, no network of gates and walls. Instead, I would be walking along a narrow, featureless street, only to have it suddenly open up onto a large square, in the center of which some imposing edifice sat staring down at me, like a monster waiting in the center of a labyrinth.

These were often lit with flaring torches, and I noticed to my dismay that my cloak did not keep me from casting flickering shadows, often in several directions at once. So, I would hurry toward the nearest adjoining street, where I could vanish into darkness again, even more lost now than I had been before.

And now someone was following me. I wasn't absolutely sure of this, since I could see no one, and when I paused I heard no sounds of pursuit. It was just that in the quiet I would hear a noise—a skittering pebble, the rustle of cloth—that by itself would mean nothing. But then, in a while, there would be another... and another.

Whoever it was came on light feet. No soldier or watchman, certainly, but it could easily be a cutpurse, or worse. And how could it follow me? Now that I was sure I was lost, I took any turn that appeared, some to the left, others to the right. The night was thick about and I was as invisible as a black cat, and in the stretches when I didn't stumble, I walked so softly I could barely hear my footsteps myself.

Finally, I decided it was time to find out for sure. I slipped into the darkness of a doorway and touched my wand

of power, turning it into a dagger. The last thing I wanted right now was to set off a display of fire and light.

I waited, barely letting myself breathe, and listened. In a bit, steps approached, slowed, and stopped—just as I was easing my blade from its scabbard. A voice said very softly, “Greetings stranger. Do you come to us from Ais Dysmassia? I have never smelt the reek of death so strongly.”

“It comes from an old cloak I picked up in my travels,” I whispered back. “You risk your life unnecessarily, talking to me. Go on about your business.” As I spoke, I let the blade glow slightly, just enough to be seen and to frighten.

Instead, I heard a soft laugh. “You risk yours by not talking with me, *Nithaial Elimiel*,” the voice continued. “I, if you wish, will give you help. But others... well, there is a great reward out for you, and many would be glad for even a tiny portion of it.”

“Who are you?” I asked, startled by the use of my name. “And how could you see me?”

“This isn’t the best place in the world to hold a conversation, Fire Bearer, Earth Holder,” the voice replied, “even in whispers. But to answer at least that—I *can’t* see you, only sense and, I must say, smell you. You will understand better when I reveal that I am a foreseer, my name, Adelantas.

The speaker stepped before me. I lifted the blade, increasing the gleam of it as I did so, even as the other reached up a hand and tossed back his hood. I gasped in surprise. Despite the fact that I could barely make out his face, I knew

at once that he was blind. Each eye socket was fitted with a large gemstone, a beryl, glowing a pale yellowish green.

“I thought the practice of foreseeing was forbidden in the kingdom,” I said. I was standing naked in a shallow basin in a small tiled room in Adelantas’s living quarters. These were lost in a warren within a warren.

He had taken me through a dark gate into a tiny courtyard, into which spilled innumerable passageways that soon split into even narrow ones, full of twists and turns, some leading to flights of steep stairs, others ended in doorways that, when unlocked, opened onto more passageways still.

Adelantas dipped a cloth into a steaming bowl of herb-scented water, wrung it out slightly, and began to wash away the dust that covered my body. His gentle touch, the heat of the cloth, the soothing aroma of the herbs, opened my fatigue like a blossoming flower.

“You shall sleep soon,” he said softly, answering my yawn before he did my question. “We can do nothing until the time just before dawn, when even the wolf dozes.”

Adelantas, I had discovered, knew much of Helias. This was not exactly attributable to his foreseeing. Indeed, it would have been hard to find anyone in Shavagar-Yasí who hadn’t heard the story—of how a lone horseman had appeared out of the desert from the south, slumped over an exhausted horse, with an arrow wound festering in his back and a black dagger emblazoned on his cheek.

What Adelantas did know, however, unlike the rest

of the city, was where he had been taken—to a compound in the western part of the city, which housed (another fact not generally known) the local complement of initiates of the Order of the Narrow Blade.

In some ways, this was good news. Helias would get good care there; the Order was expert at dealing with nasty wounds. Also, he was now reasonably safe—from any agent of the demons, certainly. On the other hand... even though Stalcas was dead and the Order most likely pledged to serve me, it seemed prudent to try to see Helias without announcing myself. If I were caught there, well, then I could find out how the land lay. But there was no good way to do so first.

“As to foreseeing,” Adelantas was continuing, wringing out the cloth into the basin and then dipping it again into the clean, hot water, “Shavagar-Yasí is a very, very long way from Gorzungâd.”

He now stepped behind me, and began scrubbing my back. “This is as good a thing for me as it is for you,” he went on. “Not that The Unnameable One doesn’t have His spies here, as everywhere, which is why I am so cautious. But like many others, He thinks of this city as a kind of rubbish dump, home to the refuse of the kingdom and unlikely to hold anything of interest to Him.”

Adelantas paused to adjust the oil lamp, alerted to its flickering by the smell of smoke. The lamp was, naturally, a courtesy—and much needed aid—put there solely for me. He had opened the shutters when we had arrived and the

cool night air had started spilling in. However, no light entered with it, just darkness flowing into darkness.

Blind or not, Adelantas quickly and deftly trimmed the wick. The pale glow burgeoned and, for the first time, illuminated both his face and his body. As to the former, it was all the clearer because his jet-black hair was tied tightly into a knot at the back of his head. And, once one got past the shock of his eyes, his features were hawkish but well made: a stern nose and sharply angled cheekbones softened by a sensitive if thin-lipped mouth.

Apart from his breechcloth, he, like me, was naked. He carried himself in an easy way—because, I realized with a shudder, he hadn't been born blind, but had his sight, and eyes, taken later, when he was apprenticed to his art. His body was slight and supple, as I had already sensed, even in the half-darkness. What I hadn't realized until now was that he was also young—truly, almost as young as I.

Or, perhaps not. As a kind of mage, his powers would keep him looking young far longer than other men (although this would be nothing compared to me). Then, again, there was a freshness, an uncertainty to his form that spoke of true youth rather than a body that had yet to fade.

I felt embers suddenly glowing where before there had been only ashes. Self-consciously, I put my hand down to cover a slight stiffening—before realizing he could hardly witness it. All this time he had been talking, and surely I had been half attending? At least I was not totally lost when the

current of his conversation broke again into my consciousness.

“... oddments of forgotten practices, ancient tomes, objects of virtue, wash into the marketplaces or suddenly appear in the shops that specialize in these things. One has only to keep an eye open...” he paused and made an irritated gesture, “keep alert for them—or have others do that for you.”

He picked up a large piece of toweling and began to dry me, thoroughly and quickly, pausing not a whit when he encountered my slight erection. When he was done, he folded the cloth neatly in half and spread it on the floor beside the basin.

“Now *Nithaial Elim...*,” he began, before I interrupted him.

“Please, Adelantas, let me be Niccas to you. I long to hear my ordinary name.”

He raised his head and smiled, further melting my heart. “I understand,” he said. “Adelantas is the name I took as a foreseer, but my born name is Iannas. Let us be boys again together.”

“Now then, Niccas,” he went on, “if you will get down on your knees and bend over the basin, we shall rinse all that dust out of your hair.”

I did as he instructed, closing my eyes as the warm and scented water sluiced through my hair. As Adelantas rubbed soap into it and worked this into a lather, my mind drifted back to a similar scene, where Mathias had performed

the same ritual in Porphoras's attic.

How far off that seemed—my studies, the noisy camaraderie, and nothing to wake me with a start in the night except the snoring of Dortmas—and yet that time was such a short time ago. Tears came to my eyes, only to be sent into the basin with the rest of the water as Adelantas—Iannas!—thoroughly rinsed out the suds.

He then drew me to my feet and, standing close behind me, began to dry my hair, briskly at first, but then more gently, making little exclamations as he did so. Finally, he let the drying cloth fall to our feet, put his arms around me, and pulled me tenderly close to him.

“Niccas,” he said, his mouth right beside my ear, “your hair is in such tangles. When did you last comb it?” And, when I hesitated, added, “be truthful now. I can tell.”

I blushed. “Not for... months, Iannas,” I said. “Really, I can’t even remember.”

“Well,” Iannas said, laughing, “I’m going to rub a little oil of pethēast into it, then I’m going to comb out the knots.”

And so he brought me to his bed, sat on it, had me sit on the floor between his legs, and did just that. It was so painless as to seem magical, but it was the deftness of his fingers, drawing the comb through the stands with such delicacy that he stopped the moment he sensed a knot, then rubbed a little more of the bitter-smelling pethēast oil into it so that it almost disentangled itself. At first it was slow going, but then the strokes grew longer and longer, until I realized he was doing

it just for the pleasure of feeling it flow through my hair.

“Now let me do yours, Iannas,” I whispered, catching his hand and taking the comb. He stood up and let loose the knot that bound back his hair, tossing his head to let it fall down around his shoulders, for it was quite long.

I took his place on the bed while he nestled himself between my legs. I lifting up whole fistfuls of it and drawing the comb slowly through them, one after another. It was smooth and fine and had a delicious odor, partly his own and partly the oil he rubbed into it, until, at last, I could stand it no longer, and set the comb aside and buried my face into it, reaching down and seizing hold of his nipples as I did.

He moaned, or maybe it was I, or both of us, and in a moment we were lying together in the bed.

“Wait,” he whispered, and turned away. When he turned back, I realized he had removed the beryls, leaving his eye sockets empty, two dark holes in a barely visible face.

His body stiffened a little, afraid that I would be put off by this, but, in fact, it filled me with a deep erotic tenderness. I seized hold of his head, kissed his lips, sucked the tip of his nose, then sent my tongue exploring.

It was an uncanny thing, feeling his eyelids fluttering like moth wings against it, the cavities themselves, seeming so large when pressed close to my mouth. Their sensitivity was astonishing; I could feel the sensations pulsing through his body, his nerves all quivering in sympathy.

Holding him close, I did to him what I never dared do

to Helias—or perhaps never realized I could do—and brushed my mind against his, not entering it exactly, but knowing it, feeling the hurt in him, the wisdom, and a center of calmness that tasted so bittersweet.

Iannas was a seer; I let him look into me as much as he wished. He did so with great circumspection. But, even so, I could feel his mind touching against mine, the most intimate imaginable caress. Then, suddenly, it flitted away. He was sitting up, bending over, starting to take me in.

He formed his lips into an O, pushed the head of my cock through, formed his mouth tightly around it, suckled it, pulled it out, pushed it in again. I suddenly realized what he was fantasizing—that he was taking my prick into one of his eye sockets, closing that around it, sucking me.

In reality, alas, they were too small to take in the knob of a prick, at least one like mine, but the image alone was so charged with heat that it made me whimper. Now, holding me tightly, he began to shake his head, back and forth in rapid, short motions, flutter-tonguing my knob hole as he did so. My loins were shuddering uncontrollably from the intense sensation; I knew I was close, so close, to coming.

By now I had ripped away his breechcloth and seized hold of his own cock. It, like the rest of him, was long and thin; even the head was as sleek as the tip of an arrow. My mouth was totally dry because of my excitement. I tried to wet it so that I could take him in my mouth. But it was too late. He had closed his a hand around my balls and was pull-

ing at them, kneading them. It was too much, I couldn't wait, spasms shook me as though I were wet laundry tossed by the wind. I moaned, cried out, shook feverishly, shot my seed in pulsating bursts, one following fast on the one before.

I lay there, limply, but Iannas was hardly done. Effortlessly, he lifted my legs, got between them, then leaned down close to me. "Shall I fuck you, Niccas?" he whispered.

"Oh, yes, yes," I replied, rolling myself up so that he could wedge a bolster under me. Then his hand swept across my stomach, scooping up what I had just gushed there to lubricate his cock, then my own hole. His fingers went in first, two, three, I couldn't tell, opening me, finding the nut inside me there and stroking it, refiring my lust.

Then Iannas entered me, smoothly, painlessly even, because of the arrow shape of his cock. Still, I felt it, its stiffness, how deep inside me it went. He spread my cheeks so that he could root me deeper still, so deftly so that each stroke slammed home.

"Harder," I gasped, thrusting myself to meet each stroke, clamping the muscles around my butt hole tightly around him as he pulled back.

"Hold yourself open, Niccas," he gasped, and I reached down, my hands replacing his, holding myself wide. He reached down and seized hold of my sack, tugging hard at my balls as he fucked me. I was stiff again, my cock throbbing to each thrust of his, my eyes glazing.

His rhythm quickened, short strokes now, then even

these weren't enough, and he leaned into me as hard as he could, grinding his cock up inside me, his groin feverishly shuddering as he came, the heat of it inside me making me crazy. Even as his head fell forward, his mouth gaping open, he took hold of my cock and shook its head with his slippery fingers, until my balls began to spasm and released what little they still held in little spurts onto my stomach.

Iannas fell down the bed beside me, rolled onto his side, flung his arm across my chest, and buried his face in my hair, panting softly. I hadn't the energy to turn on my own side, but I reached over and softly stroked the smooth skin of his arm as it lay on me. And so we lay for some time, both of us dropping in and out of sleep.

At last, Iannas whispered, "I must wash us both, and will do so. But first, I ask a favor."

"Anything," I whispered back.

"I feel that you will find it disgusting," he answered, "and spoil your feelings for me."

Now I turned my head and looked at him, seeing only the outline of his head in the dark. "Now you *have* to tell me," I said. And, when he didn't reply, I prodded him. "Come on, or else I'll never get to sleep"

Iannas sighed and rolled onto his back. "When we were mind-touching, Niccas," he whispered, "I felt your power, and my foreseeing warned me I was not yet ready to take it into myself. That's why I guided our lovemaking so that your seed would spill outside of me."

He found and squeezed my hand. “Otherwise, of course, I would never have hesitated. Indeed, I wanted you inside me... everywhere.”

He turned his head away in shyness when he said those last words, which actually made my cock half stiffen again, despite my exhaustion. I reached over, turned his head toward me, and kissed him. Then kissed him again.

“There’s plenty of it all over me,” I whispered laughingly, “if you’ve changed your mind.”

I could feel Iannas blushing, and hesitating yet again, his nerve failing him. Then, suddenly, I understood. Of course! “Let me do it,” I whispered. “Hold still.”


I reached my hand down to my stomach, scooped up one of the—there’s no other word—blobs of come on a finger, and spread it onto the tip of my tongue. Then I leaned toward him and delicately spread it in one of his eye sockets.

Iannas gasped aloud.

“Does it hurt?” I asked.

“No, no,” he said, his voice shaking.

“Then let’s do the other,” I said.

Afterwards, I did roll onto my side and held him tightly, wanting to help him gain control over what powers came from this but, instead, fell instantly asleep. Somewhat later, I was dimly aware of a wet cloth carefully cleaning me, a soothing sensation that easily wove itself into my dream. 

Chapter 30



I AWOKE WITH A START, brought back to consciousness by the mere touch of Iannas's hand. I groaned, sat up, stretched, accepted the heated cloth he put into my hands, and buried my face in it. This time, I groaned with more feeling.

"I hope you have something to eat," I said through the wet fabric. "I'm starving."

Iannas laughed. He took the cloth back and handed me a large cup. "I am not a foreseer for nothing," he said. "Although the mists still obscure whether you have the stomach for *shubat*."

"Having survived the food of the demons," I replied, "I'm sure I can face *shubat*—whatever it is." Iannas began to tell me, but I grabbed his arm. "No, please don't. Better I should have some first." I took a sip. It was tangy, thick, cool, slightly salty, delicious. And, I found, after I had drunk it all down, very filling. As I tilted the vessel to let the last of it drip onto my tongue, I heard someone—or something—stir

slightly in another part of the room.

Iannas, alert as ever, felt me stiffen. “It is Rabih,” he said, “your guide. Your destination is some distance, and I’m not familiar enough with the route to take you myself. But Rabih knows every alley and back lane in the city.”

I felt him turn as he addressed the other. “Isn’t that so, Rabih?”

“Many a six-year-old can say *that*, Adelantas,” replied a child’s scornful voice. “*I* know the roofways, the hidden stairs, the routes atop house walls where the winds have scoured down the broken glass.”

“Indeed. You have the bruises from angry house stewards to prove it,” Iannas replied, teasingly. “Well, even better then.” He turned back to me. “A boy of ten is so unnoticed on the streets that he needs no cloak of invisibility. Speaking of which...” he reached down to the floor, picked something up, and tossed it onto my lap. “What do you think?”

I immediately recognized the soft, smooth fabric of the wraith ghoul’s cloak. But the terrible stench had all but disappeared.

“A miracle, Adelantas,” I said.

“If you hadn’t entered the city after sundown,” the seer replied, “you would have formed the center of a whirlwind of flies. And *that* would have drawn more attention than if you had casually strode in wearing nothing but your demon belt.”

He tossed something else in my lap. This time it was a shirt, woven of coarse thread, as a servant or worker might

wear. “I suggest you don this and leave your other things here until you return—except for your wand of power, of course.”

I hesitated, but what Adelantas said was true. The pendant of Ra’asiel would serve no good purpose inside the house of the Order and neither would any of my demon gear. And the seer was wise enough not to meddle with powers beyond his ken. I nodded, then realizing the gesture was made in the total dark and directed to a blind man, I said, simply, “Let it be so,” then took him in my arms for a long, lingering kiss.

WHEN RABIH LED ME OUT INTO THE STREETS, the sky was still gray, but with a faint glimmer of pink. No fear that the company of a child would slow my progress—the boy moved easily at a fast trot and I had to push myself to keep up with his pace.

Rabih came up only to my chest. His arms and legs were all muscle and bone; his head was topped with a wild mop of roughly cropped hair, his features pinched and thin. Only his eyes made him at all distinctive, large and expressive, with a glint of intelligence.

Usually, he was ahead of me, but when occasionally we had the chance to walk abreast, I noticed, he would repeatedly glance at me, fascinated by the powers of the cloak.

“So,” I finally asked, “can you see me or not?”

“No,” Rabih admitted. “Well, yes and no. I can sense that you’re *there*. But if I didn’t already know it was you, that

feeling would be so creepy that I would hurry away—and definitely not cast about to find what was there. Evil things wander in the streets of Shavagar-Yasí, Niccas. Even a boy knows that.”

We hurried along through the empty streets without speaking, until Rabih eventually whispered, “Are you really a demon in disguise?”

“Is that what Adelantas told you?” I asked, amused.

“Oh, no!” His voice expressed shock at such a breach of etiquette among those who did business in the shadows. “He said only that he needed me to help a stranger enter... *that place*, and that I should bring you a bowl of the *shubat* fermented from the milk of my uncle’s prize camel.”

Rabih looked quickly in my direction. “I’m not surprised you liked it. It’s famously good.”

I said nothing, my attention turned totally to the contents of my stomach. But when that organ made no complaint, I had the wits to mutter, “Praise to your uncle *and* his camel.”

“Thank you,” the boy said happily. “As to you being a demon, well, first there *is* the cloak, which before Adelantas cleansed it, smelled just as demons must. But most of all, it is your eyes. If you wish to pass among humans, you must do better in disguising them.”

I looked at Rabih in surprise. “My eyes?”

“Yes,” the boy said. “Either you were fathered by a cat or else...” His face took on an expression of sudden comprehension. “That’s it!” he exclaimed. “You are half demon,

half human!” He actually reached over and touched me, as if afraid this mysterious being was a figment of a dream. When I proved solid, he shook his head. “What an *interesting* fate. Was the demon your mother or your father?”

“My father,” I said, which was practically the truth. While Rabih had been talking, my mind had moved from shock to simple realization—this was the physical manifestation of Teshnar’ad’s seed. No wonder Mazh’dagh had said I had been marked by Ra’asiel as a Demon-Friend! This was an honor I hadn’t sought, and certainly didn’t need.

Rabih, as it turned out, did not lead me over any rooftops or along walls with shards of glass poking out of the masonry, but we did squeeze down passageways between buildings almost too narrow for me to fit through, alleyways strewn with garbage, and others lined with black doorways where slept the homeless and lost.

All the way we had been climbing, for Shavagar-Yasí had been built in the shadow of the mountains, and its northern side rose up to meet them. Each time I paused to catch my breath, Rabih flailed his arm in my direction until it landed on my own, and he would drag me onwards. This time, though, I had a stitch in my side, and I fought him off.

“Just give me a moment, Rabih,” I whispered, gasping.

“I *can’t*, Niccas,” he hissed, desperation in his voice. “We’re too close, and they have dogs who can smell us. We have to get underground.” He gestured at what looked like the rim of a well just a short distance away. “To there, that’s all.”

Clutching my side, I allowed him to drag me to the edge of a black pit, from which came the whiff of human waste. “Say it isn’t so,” I whispered. “Surely, you don’t mean for us to go down into *that*.”

“As quickly as you can,” Rabih whispered back. “Don’t worry, it’s only disgusting down there when the rains come and wash through the drains. But it’s dry now and you can step around the piles of shit and stuff.”

“Come,” he added, and started lowering himself down inside. In a second, he had vanished, and I could hear him scraping his feet against the rough stone sides to find footholds. I took a deep breath, took hold of the edge, and tentatively lowered down a leg.

Almost at once, I felt a hand grasp my foot and bring it to a projecting edge of stone. Firmly perched, I lifted down the other leg, which Rabih also set where my toes could find a grip. So, carefully, I descended, having only to find the handholds by myself. The sewer tunnel was not far down, and in a moment I heard the thud of Rabih’s feet as he dropped down into it. And, sure enough, when I lowered my leg again, it groped about in empty space.

I tried to find some lower handholds to shorten the fall, but without my feet to brace myself, I couldn’t keep my grip. So, down I fell, hoping I wouldn’t drop on Rabih’s head. I didn’t. But he was right there to steady me when I landed, and keep me from falling over into the... well, whatever the word is for desiccated muck.

Ais Dysmassia could not be darker than the hole in which we found ourselves, and, possibly, smelled better. “Rabih,” I asked, “is it all right to strike a light?”

“I have a brand to light with my tinder box,” he answered, “but perhaps your own flame would be better.”

“As well as letting me see the wand of power in action,” I mentally concluded for him, as I pulled it from its sheath. I caused a ball of flame to appear, floating just a finger’s length away from the wand’s tip.

Rabih gasped—not out of wonder but from fear. “Too bright!” he hissed. “Even down here, Niccas, we must be very careful.”

I dimmed it until it barely glowed, changing its hue from that of fire to the greenish blue of marsh spirits. *Those* would have been right at home down here.

The sewer system was simple enough: on the rare occasions when rain swept in from the east, even as cisterns on rooftops captured drinking water, culverts caught the down-pour as it rushed down the hills, guiding it into these underground sewers, where the rushing water swept away the piles of waste it encountered down through the system—eventually depositing it in a series of shallow cesspits built a short distance away from the city. There the filth would dry out in the hot sun and finally be blown away by the desert winds.

This detritus, Rabih told me as we crept along, included any number of bodies in various states of decay. After a good rain, the relatives of anyone missing would travel

out to the great shallow cesspool where all this accumulated, hoping that if the remains were there, rats hadn't devoured so much of them as to make identification impossible.

Indeed, rats were everywhere down here, scurrying away ahead of us and creeping up behind us, always just out of the circle of light, but not so much as to hide their glittering eyes. I let the light flare up to scare them off and wished I hadn't: the rats of Shavagar-Yasí are large as cats and there are many, many of them.

"Rabih!" I whispered, "how did you ever dare to come down here alone?"

"*Never* alone, Niccas," he whispered back, "always six or seven of us. And a ball of twine to unwind to guide us back. And no one too young. If a child came with us and fell back, even a few feet...." He made a gesture indicating rats swarming all over his body and shuddered dramatically, then slyly eyed me to see the effect.

Not in the least to please him, I turned pale, then swore at him, which made him giggle. I made a mental note to look Rabih up in ten years, to see if he was still alive, and, if he was, whether he ruled over the shadow world of Shavagar-Yasí.

All this time the boy had been counting softly under his breath. When he reached a certain number, we turned left into a side branch, smaller than the main sewer, forcing me to proceed in a crouch. My legs were beginning to protest, but they would have to give way before I would travel on

all fours in the filth that covered my feet.

Fortunately, it didn't come to that. Rabih, who was now scanning the wall to the left of us, suddenly reached over and took hold of my hand, guiding the light up close to the wall. He examined it carefully, taking a few steps forward, then retreated back.

"Come stand next to this," he whispered, gesturing to a stone that was protruding slightly from the wall down at the level of my knees, "but first extinguish the light."

Once I had done so and returned the dagger to its sheath, Rabih started to wiggle the stone free from the wall the way a barber might extract a bad tooth. There was a grating noise. The boy whispered, "Niccas, you take it out. These stones are too heavy for me to lift."

"Won't the stones above them just drop down on us?" I whispered back, as I seized hold of the stone, which was now pulled about a third of the way out.

"No," he answered. "The stones we're pulling out were used to block an old drainage hole. Lift your hand and you can feel the lintel above them. Remember, be *quiet*."

The stone *was* heavy and much longer than it was wide. I grunted when I took its full weight, swung it away from us, and let it drop—and swore. Its impact sent up a choking cloud of desiccated filth. We had to hold our shirts in front of our faces until it settled; after that I set each one down carefully on its end.

Despite the weight of the stones, the task moved

along quickly, Rabih freeing them as quickly as I could lift them out. Whoever had sealed the opening had used a poor grade of mortar, which had gradually leached out each time the sewers filled with rain water. There must have been seepage, but not enough for anyone to bother to find out why. Perhaps the whole wall oozed when the sewer was running.

We were on the second course when it occurred to me to lay some down directly beneath me so I could kneel on them while wrestling out those in the third and final one. By then, I was covered with sweat, and welcomed the cool flow of air that was now coming out of the widening hole.

Suddenly Rabih stopped. He leaned over and whispered softly directly into my ear, "I can fit through now. Can you?" I ran my hand around the circumference. It felt about as large as the neck of a flattened keg. "I don't know," I answered back into his ear. "Can I strike a small light?"

"Let me go through first. After you look, pass me everything you're wearing. That will not only make it easier to get through, but it will keep your clothes from getting filthy."

At that, I balked. In fact, we both must have had the same image of me standing stark naked in the sewer and Rabih on the other side of the wall with all my possessions. "I owe Adelantas my life, Niccas," he said, seizing hold of my arm, "and more. I swore to him that you would be as an elder brother to me, and so you are." He paused, and I could sense a smile spreading across his face. "Still, you're

right—it would have been a *very* artful cozening.”

He got down and squirmed through the hole, then scrambled to his feet on the other side.

“Here,” I whispered, handing him my cloak. “Block the hole with this.”

Just then something brushed against my leg, making me jump and bang my head into the mat of cobwebs spread over the tunnel roof. A rat! Cursing under my breath, I sent a bolt of fire down the tunnel, first one way, then the other. These incinerated everything in their path, laminating the acrid stench of burnt rat to the sewer’s sour stink.

A quick examination revealed that I had only to pull out a few more stones to make the hole large enough to accommodate me. Then, after a quick check up and down the tunnel, I passed everything else I had to Rabih and began to work my way through.

I had already debated the best way to do this. I took firm hold of the lintel and lowered myself down, easing my legs through the hole as I did. That way, if I got stuck, my unguarded legs would be on Rabih’s side, not dangling helplessly in the sewer.

In fact, these moved through easily, followed by my lower body. But things got tight around my chest. Rabih grabbed hold of me and started pulling, and I shifted some more, gritting my teeth as the stone scraped against my chest. I could no longer hold onto the lintel—my arms had to be stretched out straight and squeezed as tightly as I could man-

age against my head. As I took that position I could sense the rats approaching again—little hot points of hunger and fear.

“Blessed Mother, help me,” I prayed, and hissed to Rabih, “*Pull.*” He began yanking on my legs with all his strength. Pain shot through my shoulders, there was a harsh scraping noise, and suddenly I was through, bringing two large stones with me to crash onto the paved floor.

I lay there panting in the deafening silence, blood trickling down my side, Rabih sitting beside me. Here we were, I thought, two pathetic burglars who, having cleverly broken into the most dangerous place in Shavagar-Yasí, had no idea what to do next.

WELL, AT LEAST THAT WAS TRUE OF ME. Rabih leapt to his feet and, when I failed to do the same, found my hand in the dark and began to tug. “Get up and get dressed, demon’s spawn,” he said, “then let’s find the door that will let us out of this place!”

Soon, the wand of power softly glowing in my hand, we were cautiously poking about the lower cellar. Despite the occasional seepage when the sewers ran, the room was used for storing the leavings of life upstairs that servants had been unwilling or forbidden to throw away: broken chairs, empty casks and flagons, lengths of board, bundles of rags.

Rabih yanked one of these free from the its heap and began to use it to clean the powdered mortar and stone dust off his face, arms, and shirt. He was passing it on to me, when something else in the rag bundle caught his eye. He

grasped it and yanked it out.

It was a servant's tunic, which once had been dyed crimson but had now faded into a shade of rust. As well as innumerable stains and patches, it bore the mark of this house, a black slender dagger. Even a casual examination revealed why it had finally been discarded: a tear up one side had been partially mended, the task abandoned when the cloth proved too worn to hold the stitch.

Rabih pulled off his own shirt and pulled this one over his head. It was a least two sizes too large on him and came perilously close to resembling a shift. Even so, it was not at all a stretch to imagine it worn by one of the lowlier drudges, like a scullion, turnspit boy, or chimney sweep.

He used his hands to smooth the sharp edges from the wrinkles, looked at me, and grinned, saying, "Now, all we have to do is find the door."

That, a solid wooden affair with rusty iron hinges, was set in the wall opposite to where we had burrowed in, and, fortunately, had a simple latch lock that could be opened from within without a key. In fact, the room must have been seldom used, because the door fought against our opening it and protested loudly—its hinges groaning, its bottom scraping against the wood, when we forced it to do so.

We came out into a dark, dank corridor and followed that until we came to a flight of stone stairs. These led up to another door, which let us into what must have been the upper cellar, where the humbler work demanded by the house

was carried out.

Here, for the first time, was there any sign of life, because long before anyone else awoke, the cooks needed to be hard at work, baking the day's bread and starting the preparations for breakfast. The kitchen had no door, and its doorway cast a pale rectangle of light onto the dark hall floor.

I slipped the wand back into its sheath and wrapped the cloak around me, preparing to pass by the doorway as quickly as I could. But, when we reached it, Rabih, bold as brass, strode in, rubbing his face on his tunic as he did.

I peered around the doorway. There were two cooks inside, hard at work, one of them kneading a huge mass of dough at a worktable. The other, the one Rabih approached, was bent over, feeding chunks of wood into a massive fire-box, the top of which had holes cut into it. Most of these were belching smoke into the chimney hood that stretched above, but already a few had pots set over them.

"Please, mistress cook," Rabih said in a supplicating voice. "I was sent to get some soothing broth for our guest upstairs."

The cook lifted her head and glared at him. "I thought he was dead," she said—adding with a cackle, "my broth won't cure *that*."

My head reeled at her words and my knees became so unsteady that I had to hold onto the door frame for a moment. As I did so, I was aware of another exchange of words between Rabih and the cook. Whatever was said must have

convinced her, for she sent him to wash his face and hands in a bucket near her on the floor.

When I was able to focus on the scene again, she was dipping a ladle into one of the pots and emptying its steaming contents into a small bowl. This she set on the other end of the work table, took a folded cloth and placed it under it, then took up a loaf of bread, pulled away a piece of crust, and dipped it into the broth.

“Here,” she said, not unkindly, handing it to Rabih.

“Thank you, mistress cook!” he said, genuinely surprised.

She snorted. “I know well enough that without it, half the broth would be gone before you climbed the stairs.” True enough, with the sopped crust in one hand and the bowl resting in its cloth in the other, Rabih would be hard pressed to get at its aromatic contents without burning his mouth.

“Tell whoever’s there to dip an end of the cloth into the broth and place that between his lips,” she instructed. “If he can suck on it, well enough. If not, just let it drip into his mouth. That’ll be the only way he can take it in.”

“Yes, mistress cook,” Rabih mumbled through a mouth already full of wet crumb.

“And do you know where you’re taking this?” she asked. “Don’t lie! The house is empty and if you arrive with the broth cold, we’ll both be beaten!”

Rabih swallowed and said meekly, “I was told, but I was too scared to understand *exactly*.”

The cook cuffed his head. “I thought as much,” she replied. “Well, it’s up the stairs all the way to the fourth landing. Take the second corridor, the one with the carved demon’s head set over it, and go down until you see a guard sitting—and probably sound asleep—by a door.

“He has the key to it, so you’ll have to wake him, and I’m glad it’s you and not me who’s got that little task. Did you follow all this, Badly Mended Shirt?”

Rabih nodded, then turned and started for the door.

“Make sure I get my bowl back!” she called after him. “I’ll have your hide if I don’t, I promise you.”

Rabih, of course, had the good sense not to ask where the servant stairs actually were, but we had little trouble finding them, for they started up just a short distance from the kitchen. We climbed up the four flights, as directed, and opened a door onto a long hall dimly lit with glowstones.

The cook hadn’t mentioned that there was a guard also stationed at the head of the second corridor. But she roused herself only enough to ask Rabih how long it was until sunrise.

“Too long,” he answered pertly, making her smile.

“I agree, boy,” she said. “Now, some advice—the best way to wake up Morral is to pour some of that steaming broth onto his lap. Otherwise, you may never rouse him at all.”

“Cook will have my balls for dumplings if I wasted any of this precious stuff on a mere guard,” Rabih answered haughtily. “Wouldn’t it work just as well if you came along and prodded him with that?” And he gestured at the javelin

that rested on her shoulder.

“As much as I’d like to, your royalty, I’d be hung up by my thumbs for leaving my post,” she said, adding, “Hurry along, now, before your precious burden cools.”

By the time this banter had ended, I had already slipped by and hurried down the corridor. I was concerned that any dealings we had with Morral would carry back to Rabih’s new friend. Again, cook’s instructions weren’t exact—this corridor was actually short, leading to another that ran at a right angle to it. I looked left, then right, and saw another guard leaning against the wall by a door.

This must be Morral. I softly approached and, encouraged by the snoring noises he was emitting, went up right next to him. I closed my eyes, touched his mind, and intensified his slumber.

Unexpectedly, this caused him to slide down the wall, falling into a tumbled heap on the floor. I had the presence of mind to seize hold of his own javelin before it could fall with him onto the floor. As I set the javelin down beside him, I sensed Rabih come up behind me.

“Nice trick, demon’s spawn,” he whispered. “Now, how do we get hold of the key?”

“Haven’t you ever rolled a drunk?” I hissed back.

“Not with a bowl of broth in one hand,” he said. “See if it isn’t hung around his neck.”

Morral’s head slumped to one side. I worked my hand delicately under the neck of his tunic and immediately

encountered a leather cord. I slipped the loop over his head and pulled out the key.

Now for the moment of truth. “Stand back,” I whispered to Rabih, and eased the key into the keyhole. I twisted, but it wouldn’t turn. Sweat burst out in my armpits before I realized that my fear of making a noise had made my fingers weak. I gritted my teeth and turned again, hard. The bolt slid silently open.

I stood up, took a deep breath, pulled the wand of power from its sheath and transformed it into its dagger shape. Then I swung the door open and stepped into the room.

It was larger than I was expecting. The only light was that of a candle, glowing on a bedside table on the other side of the room. Helias lay on the bed next to it, and a cowed figure bent in attendance over him, pressing a thin white hand against his forehead. The other hand emerged from the folds of its garment and gestured for me to approach.

“I fear you have arrived too late, *Nithaial Elimiel*,” it whispered when I stood by the bed. “I have done my best, but, as you see yourself, the last glimmering of life has finally flickered out.”

Helias lay naked on the bed, only partially covered with a thin blanket. His skin was deadly pale, with a bluish pallor; his hair had all turned white. His eyes were open and unseeing. To my shock, I saw that his hands and feet were bound to the bed with broad strips of cloth.

In a state of frenzy, I cried out, “No!” then took the

dagger and, seizing hold of one icy-cold hand, cut it free.

“It was to restrain him during the worst of the fever,” the cowed figure explained, but I hardly listened. I cut Helias’s other limbs free as well, then, setting the dagger on the bed beside him, dropped onto my knees. I lifted his head in both my hands, and pressed his freezing lips against mine. If I had the power in me to snatch him back from Ais Dysmassia, I would. The vision of the wraith ghoul burned in my mind.

As Helias’s lips touched mine, our minds merged as well. I gasped. *Our minds!* I could feel him there, alive—a tiny pulse buried deep inside him.

He wasn’t dead. Instead, a terrible spell had been cast upon him, a spider web of malice that had been slowly wrapping its strands around his mind.

I cast about, deep in his thoughts, trying to discover what had happened. The spell had been there for a long time—it was the poison from the arrow, itself under enchantment, that had brought on this collapse. The arrow had not been meant to kill him but claim him, and its evil power had been battling to control him as its slave—and, in doing so, had brought him to the brink of death.

I felt this sickening corruption as if it were within myself, and my powers began to fight against it as though that were so. The spell behind this poisoning of Helias’s spirit was no match for it. My powers rushed through him like an ocean tide, sweeping the darkness away.

As I scoured his mind for remnants, I wondered why Helias, with his own wizardly powers, hadn't been able to break this spell, himself. At that moment, though, his eyes fluttered slightly, and I freed his lips to let him draw in a gasp of air. His body shuddered. As it did so, I became aware of sounds behind me, remembered as if from a dream Rabih's thin-voiced warning cry. There was a thud, and I turned my head in time to see the boy's crumpled body sliding down the wall.

I lunged for my dagger, lying by Helias's side, but I was too late. Even as my fingers reached the hilt, a band was clamped around my neck and clicked shut. It was some kind of collar, lined within with studs that pressed hard against my neck. These, like a host of tiny vampyric mouths, began greedily sucking out my power.

I had already used much of it to battle against the spells that had infected Helias. Now I felt all the rest flowing out of me, and a great weakness overcame me, so much so that I couldn't make my fingers take hold of the knife. Instead, a hand seized me and flung me onto the floor, dragging off my cloak and flinging it away.

"Niccass, Niccass, you have learned so very little since last we met," a familiar voice sneered. The cowed figure stood before me when I dizzily lifted up my head. It shook its head free from its covering, and our eyes met.

The image flashed in my mind of the forest trail leading from hunting lodge full of ravaged bodies, of Nassazia's

quickly launched arrow burying itself in the back of a fleeing horseman. “Stalcas!” I exclaimed. “But you’re *dead*!”

“So I thought, too,” he replied. “But, alas, death didn’t come quickly enough. I was captured by *His* forces and....” He reached up and pulled back his hair, and my heart quailed. For he disclosed a metal disk annealed to his skull—the mark of a Summoner.

“Death,” he repeated. “Now that you, too, belong to Him, you’ll soon learn how *very* desirable that can be.”

He watched my dawning realization with icy eyes, then displayed his teeth in a simulacrum of a smile. “Yes, Niccas,” he said, “your little flight has finally come to its end.

“And since that is so,” he went on, drawing a long, thin dagger of hardened black iron from his sleeve, “I think it’s time to put our poor young hapless friend—our mutual lover, I might add—out of his misery. He has suffered for you—and because of you—quite enough.”

“No,” I begged. “Don’t! Don’t! What do you want?”

Stalcas, who had been turning toward Helias, hesitated and looked back at me. “From you?” he asked. “I want nothing. I am but a slave. It is what He wants: you; your powers. There’s nothing else you possess.”

He made a dismissive gesture with his hand. “But even slaves get their rewards, and now I’m taking mine. Don’t look so shocked, Niccas. It was only a matter of time before *one* of us killed him. I rather imagine you came to Shavagar-Yasí to do that yourself. If I hated you as much as you think,

I'd make you do it, too. But, as it happens, I'd prefer to reserve that pleasure for myself."

Then, suddenly, he screamed. His eyes widened in shock and incomprehension; blood spread in a huge dark stain across the front of his garment. The black dagger slid from his suddenly nerveless fingers and fell onto the floor, the blade shattering as it hit. More blood came gushing out of Stalcas's mouth, his knees buckled, and he pitched forward onto his face. My own dagger, buried to the hilt, stuck out of his back.

Helias sank weakly back onto the bed. He stared down at Stalcas and said to the corpse, "No, master, the pleasure was reserved for *me*."

Then he glanced up at me, smiled faintly, and added, "Miss me?" 

PART SEVEN



THE EYE OF
KNOLTAN

Chapter 31



IT WAS NOW RABIH, not Helias, who lay unconscious on the bed, where a healer held a small pot of smoldering herbs close to his nose. Their sharp, penetrating fragrance reached over to where I slumped listlessly in a chair, but it made no impression on the despair and fury that were chasing each other through my mind.

Adelantas was kneeling beside me, his fingers lightly tracing over the band clamped tightly around my neck. “The thing itself is made of gold” he said thoughtfully, “but it is embedded with tiny kernels of *mythral*, a very rare and costly metal. In fact, I have only sensed it once before, and that was...,” he stopped in mid-sentence, a look of pain on his face.

“Never mind, Iannas,” I said. “I just saw it myself on Stalcas. It’s used to control Summoners, isn’t it?”

The seer nodded, but added, “Though not—I think—in this case. Here, its purpose is to drain away your powers. The moment your spirit produces more, the *mythral* sucks them away before you can even sense it.”

It was true. I felt nothing like the *Nithaial Elimiel*, and everything like a sorely defeated sixteen-year-old youth. I had forgotten how my powers had deepened my awareness and sharpened my senses. Now everything was drab, washed out, including the workings of my own mind.

Meanwhile, Adelantas continued his examination. “There is no break in it anywhere,” he said, “which means there is no lock we can seek to unfasten, no hinges we can try to break. The spell that forms it must be met by magic even greater than that which made it.”

His last words seeped slowly into my mind. I doubted if Teshnar’ad could help me with this, or at least I still had no firm grasp of his powers. Dracon Wælfyra? The dragon’s magic was very powerful, but even it might not dare acting directly against... .”

I lifted my hand, touched Adelantas’s cheek, and asked, “Can you tell me for sure who is absorbing my power?” I dreaded to hear the answer but the answer had to be faced. To know that would be to know how to find a way to counter the magic, undo the spell.

Adelantas reached into the bag that hung at his waist and took out two orbs of rosetone, which he placed first in his mouth and then into his eye sockets. As the name suggests, these gems are of a translucent pinkish hue, but these had eerie filaments of black tracing through them that gave his face a diabolic cast.

He closed his eyelids over these as his fingers gin-

gerly touched one of the studs. His face grew tight with concentration. Then, immediately, he jerked his hand away. When he opened his eyelids again, the stones glowed.

“It feeds Him, of course,” the seer whispered, grasping my hand. “I’m so sorry, Niccas, beloved.”

THE GUARDS WHO HAD STORMED INTO THE ROOM shortly after Stalcas’s death had brought us to Urvasor, the *Koryphaios* of this house, who, rumpled and sleepy as he was, regarding me with intense interest, pausing for a long moment to examine my eyes.

These clearly bothered him, but I felt under no obligation to explain, while he possessed sufficient powers to know that I was who I claimed to be. So, touched his forehead in the gesture of respect, and said, quite sincerely, “You are welcome in this House, *Nithaial Elimiel*. We exist to serve you, Guardian of Earth and Fire, and I am horrified to learn what shame Stalcas has brought upon us. We had heard that he was dead; his appearance at our door astonished us and put us off our guard, especially since he claimed to have escaped death because of powers granted by you.”

Urvasor was a very thin man, clean shaven and with closely trimmed white hair, so old that the dagger emblazoned on his cheek was gray more than it was black. “He told us he was waiting for an important messenger coming from the south, and when word spread that Fæyſtirran had been sighted by the Watchers atop the Eye of Knoltan, we

thought we understood who that messenger was.”

He turned to the guards and pointed at Helias. “Take him away,” he ordered, “and bind him well in chains.”

“No, please, *Koryphaios* Urvasor,” I said at once. “I have many questions to ask him.”

Urvasor hesitated, looked hard at Helias, who was barely able to keep to his feet, even when held up by the guards, then said, “Very well. We’ll deal with him when you’re through. However, I strongly advise you to remain here, protected by the Order, until we know better how things go in the city.”

He looked now at Rabih, whose body hung lifelessly in my arms, and added “We’ll take care of him, too.” Sensing my interpretation of his words, he ordered a guard to fetch a healer, then turned back to me, saying, “Don’t think we are totally ignorant of this Rabih and his doings. He is too clever for his own good, but we admire his spirit and cleverness—and now his loyalty. He may well be recruited into the Order. But no one can break into the House without paying a penalty.”

“Then you must exact the same one on me,” I said. “It was because of me that the crime occurred and I participated in it just as fully.”

Urvasor smiled wryly. “One cannot break into one’s own house, *Nithaial*,” he said and shrugged. “So we shall simply consider Rabih your servant of the moment, and neither of you need to spend a fortnight slaving for Ephorina, our head cook.”

I suspected that Rabih’s punishment would have

been a bit more severe than that, but I simply nodded and thanked him. After all, from Urvasor's perspective, our forced entry into the House was a deadly serious crime and an embarrassing one as well. The mortar used to repair the wall would, this time, be of the best quality—and laid on thick.

"We shall bring you to the traitor Stalcas's own rooms," Urvasor was saying. "They are for our most important guests, and I think you'll find them comfortable."

I asked him if, besides the healer, he might also summon the foreseer, Adelantas, since I needed to consult with him, as well.

Urvasor must have done so immediately, for Iannis was brought to us while I was still exploring our new living quarters. I had thought my heart would warm when I saw him, but the chill on it was too deep.

Even so we embraced and kissed, and I brought him to where Rabih lay unconscious on the bed. Iannas gently stroked his head, his fingers lingering on the bruise, gauging both its size and the heat of the injured tissue.

"He'll live," the seer said. We sat down beside the boy at the edge of the bed, and I went over the events of the morning as best as I could remember them. We were still talking softly when the healer entered, carrying a basin of steaming water, fragrant with herbs.

He was a gentle, slight man, with an amazingly attentive face; in a moment he seemed to absorb all that he needed to know about each one of us, and what treatments

he would be called upon to perform.

He and Iannas embraced, then he turned to me and bowed low. “I am Fayrfallan, and it is a rare day when I have a *Nithaial* as a patient.” I opened my mouth to speak, but he held up a hand to stop me. “The boy first, of course, but don’t dismiss your own wounds, for they also need treating.”

Fayrfallan dipped a cloth into the steaming water, expertly wrung it out, and folded it into a compress, which he placed over the lump on Rabih’s head. As he did so, the boy groaned, groaned again, louder this time, then weakly muttered, “Shit.”

All of a sudden, he began fiercely struggling to get up, and when Fayrfallan pinned him down by the shoulders, tried to bite his arm. The compress went flying onto the floor.

“Rabih!” Iannas and I cried out together. When the boy saw the two of us, he stopped fighting. He turned his head, taking in the room around us. “Shit, shit, shit,” he said again, when he realized where he was. “I’m fucked.”

“No, Rabih,” I said. “In fact, you’re a hero.”

Rabih heard this with a dubious expression, reaching up and gently sizing up his bruise, which must have felt as large as a demon’s egg.

He winced and said, “If this is being a hero, I’d rather remain a guttersnipe.” He glanced first at the band around my neck and then over at Helias. “I hope he was worth it.”

Fayrfallan made a second compress, applied it to Rabih’s bruise, then placed the boy’s own hand on top of it.

“Sit up, if you wish,” he said, “but hold that in place.”

The healer then produced another cloth out a pocket in his robe, prepared it just as he had the others, but this time came over to me. “Lift up your shirt, Holy One, and let clean your wounds.”

I had forgot about the abrasions from the stone that had left my shirt ripped and bloody. The skin beneath it looked just as shredded and was hot to the touch. I no longer had my healing powers.

As I submitted to the healer’s ministrations, Rabih pushed himself up to the end of bed and pulled Iannas to him. Once the seer had sat down on the bed, the boy climbed into his lap and unself-consciously pulled his arms around him.

“Iannas,” he said, “*you* can hold the cloth in place,” and guided the seer’s hand to it. “You should have used your powers to warn me that I was going to get knocked unconscious and captured!”

Rabih then looked over at me, and specifically at the neckband. “Are you now that man’s slave?”

“Stalcas?” I asked in surprise. But of course, Rabih was already unconscious when the final struggle took place.

“No,” I said. “Helias ran him through with my dagger. He fell down dead almost right on top of you. That’s his blood on the hem of your shirt.”

Rabih’s face brightened as he lifted it up to examine the dark stain. “Shit on a demon!” he said, sniffing it. As he did this, of course, he revealed his entire body, which I saw

was no stranger to bruises. Or, for that matter, scars—a livid one ran down his side and then turned in toward his groin.

He saw me looking at it and grinned proudly. “A butcher’s knife,” he said. “I had jumped up to snatch off a string of sausages hanging from the ceiling of his shop, and the string refused to break. So”—he made a sweeping gesture with his hand— “as I dangled there, I got sliced instead. Good thing I was swinging back as he did so, or all my guts would be sausages, now, too.”

He was eyeing my own body as he said this. “Your skin is almost as smooth as Iannas’s,” he remarked, “apart from the marks of our own adventure. That’s a terribly nasty bruise on your back.”

The healer was even then rubbing a salve on it that soothed its heat with a fragrant coolness. “Stalcas threw me down on the floor, too,” I admitted. “Unlike you, though, I was lucky enough not to hit my head on the wall.”

“And what caused those marks between your legs?” he asked, leaning over.

I looked down to where he was pointing, two dark bands just below my crotch.

“Oh, those,” I said. “Well, I rode a dragon to get to Fæy-stirran, and then I rode a demon’s saurian mount back here to Shavagar-Yasí. I got these from one or the other—or both.”

Rabih’s mouth dropped open with astonishment. He stared at me and then looked up at Adelantas for confirmation of this unbelievable tale.

The seer felt him do so. “What he says is true. But save your amazement for Niccas, himself, Rabih. You have become a friend of the *Nithaial Elimiel*.”

The boy looked amazed, then, glancing at my neck ring, horrified. “Still,” he whispered to Iannas, “Isn’t Niccas now *somebody’s* slave?”

ARVASOR RETURNED TO US in the early afternoon. By then, Rabih was up and poking about our rooms, Adelan-tas was talking to Helias in a low voice, and I was lying on the bed, feeling much the worse for wear. In fact, I dropped off to sleep more than once, and I was still groggy with it when the *Koryphaios* strode in, followed by servants bearing food.

A large low table was taken from where it leaned against the wall and set down on the floor. A covering was spread over it and the food and drink was laid out on this. It was a modest feast—skewers spitted with roasted song birds, a bowl of cooked barley studded with nuts and other good things, a cooling plate of sliced and salted cucumber swimming in sweet wine vinegar, and a heap of flatbread with which to eat it all—but there was plenty of it and we were all starving.

At Urvasor’s invitation, we sat on the floor before it and fell to, even as goblets were set before us and filled with a refreshingly cool white wine. Out of companionship’s sake, Urvasor ate some himself, although he had clearly dined be-

fore, not wishing to start talking until our hunger was sated.

Finally, curiosity began to overcome appetite, and after I delicately spat out a mouthful of tiny bones onto the plate provided for them, I gestured to a servant for the steaming cloth to clean my hands and mouth, belched politely, then caught Urvasor's eye.

"Honored *Koryphaios*, what news have you brought us and what decisions have you now reached?"

Urvasor smiled slightly, then shook his head. "No, *Nithaial Elimiel*, the decisions are all for you to make. As to the news, rumors abound that you are in the city, but so far no one seems to know this for certain, let alone have any idea where you may be."

"Even so," I replied, "I sense a 'but' in what you say, *Koryphaios* Urvasor."

He nodded. "Have you noticed, *Nithaial*, that your companions have needed no instruction as to your nature, or why you have come here?"

As Urvasor said these words, I realized at once that he was right. Adelantas was an adept and may have come upon this knowledge through his studies, but Rabih? When the seer had told him who I was, he obviously knew immediately what that meant.

The *Koryphaios* did not wait for me to answer, reading my response in my face. "Much, much has happened in the kingdom these last few months. First, your twin, the

Nithaial Galgaliel, has revealed himself, resurrected Sonda-ram as you have Fæyſtirran, and, it is said, has fought and won a terrible battle with The Unnameable One, taking from Him much power that He will find hard to replace.

“Secondly, all the kingdom between the Western Mountains and the sea has risen up against both Him and King Temblar, led by Prince Caelas, who claims that His Majesty is merely a pawn in the hands of The Unnameable One and should be removed from the Amethyst Throne.”

Urvasor raised his eyebrows. “Not that this wasn’t already perfectly plain to those who knew what was going on, but now it’s been cast down like a gauntlet in the king’s own face.

“Finally,” and here the *Koryphaios* lowered his voice, “it is rumored that the *Nithaial Galgaliel*, in his battle with The Unnameable One, actually broke the spell that brought death to anyone who says his real name—even anyone who directly thinks of it.”

“And do *you* now know His true name, Honored *Koryphaios*?” I asked in astonishment.

Urvasor nodded his head reluctantly. He opened his mouth, then shut it again. “Old habits die hard,” he said, “and old terrors die even harder. I don’t know that I can say it.”

“Maerdas,” whispered Adelantas, unexpectedly. He must have snatched it directly from the *Koryphaios*’s mind. The seer then repeated it in a firm clear voice. “Maerdas,” moving his hand carefully over his dishes to his wine glass,

as he did so. He then lifted it up, adding, “May each time we speak his name take him one step further to his doom.”

Everyone raised their glasses and chanted, “Maerdas, Maerdas, Maerdas,” at first nervously, then excitedly, “to your doom.”

Urvasor lifted his hand for silence. “Yes,” he said, “May His doom come quickly. But until then there remains good reason to speak that name ever so softly outside of this room. He has not been defeated yet.

“And, as to the king, he is at once furious and terrified. He rightly fears that if the elite forces that man the Eye of Knoltan should cast their lot (and that of Shavagar-Yasí!) with the rebels, he would be hard put to keep it from spreading all across the kingdom. It is rumored that he has sent his son, Crown Prince Poëstil, to command the garrison here.”

Urvasor sighed. “I have sent a message to the current commander, Prince Tristfanas, of the same family as Prince Caelas, to ask for a meeting. Perhaps if he learns of your presence in our house, *Nithaial Elimiel*, this news might sway him to close the gates to the pass through The Broken Teeth and throw in his lot with his cousin. Surely he must realize that the Crown Prince may well have his head, if only to sober up the others.”

The *Koryphaios* turned to me. “Unless this happens,” he went on, “in my opinion, it will be extremely dangerous for you to stay in Shavagar-Yasí, and even more dangerous, perhaps impossible, for you to attempt to leave the city—ei-

ther to return to Fæyſtirran or to try to slip through the pass into the kingdom itself.”

Urvator took a long swallow of wine, wiped his lips dry, and, since no one else had broken the silence that washed up in the wake of his speech, asked, “Might I ask what plans you yourself have devised, *Nithaial*?”

I barely absorbed his question, I was so shaken by his news. I suppose his account of Jessan’s amazing successes should have lifted my heart. But how could I rejoice when every one of them mirrored a terrible failure of my own?

True, I had summoned forth Fæyſtirran, but only yesterday. I had been consorting with demons while Jessan was persuading a prince to rise in revolt against the king. And it would be now clear to Adelantas—even to Rabi!—the source from which Maerdas was now drawing his power.

Inadvertently, I touched the band clasped tightly around my neck. It was an emblem of not only slavery but helpless, endless treachery. I had either to find a way to remove it or destroy myself. There were no other choices.

I became aware that Urvator was staring at me, waiting for me to respond. I pulled myself together enough to say, “Honorable *Koryphaios*, we have held off making plans until we could learn your news. Your tidings are both hopeful and grim, and we will need to mull them over before we decide what our next step must be.”


Urvator took my hint graciously enough, and made a gesture with his hand to the servants, who immediately

began to clear away the remains of our feast, apart from a jug of wine, which Helias claimed for himself.

We all rose to our feet. I went over to our host and, putting my hand on his shoulder, asked, “Tell me truly, *Koryphaios* Urvasor, does my presence bring a doom upon you and all of this house?”

Our eyes met. “Perhaps, *Nithaial Elimiel*,” he replied without hesitation. “But that need be no concern of yours. Concentrate on what you must do, and let us deal with what fate has ordained for us.”

He smiled a mirthless smile. “These are times that will reveal which of us has marrow in our bones, and which of us, water. Let it be enough for you and me to be counted among the first group; all else is beyond our reach.”

Then he wrapped his robe about him and, followed by the retinue of servants, left us to ourselves. 

Chapter 32



I STARED AT THE CLOSED DOOR, lost in thought, when Adelantas called to me. I turned and found him huddled with Rabih over a small, highly polished wooden box. “Rabih found this while you were sleeping, Niccas,” he said, “but decided to keep it to himself when the *Koryphaios* appeared. It obviously belonged to Stalcas. Shall we try to open it?”

I shrugged. “I have absolutely no interest in Stalcas’s possessions,” I replied, “unless you think the key to my neck band is lurking in there.”

“Not much chance of that,” Helias said, coming up behind me, reeking of wine. “Sorry, Niccas, but once the band closed around your neck, it was never intended to be opened again. That’s the good news—it’s yours to keep.”

Not waiting for any reply, he turned to the seer and asked, “Well, *can* you open it?”

Adelantas’s fingers had been caressing the box all the time we had been talking, prodding gently here, press-

ing firmly there. He nodded. “Yes, Helias, I think so. To unlock this box, you need to solve a puzzle, not find a key or know a spell. And I am very good at puzzles.”

Rabih watched Adelantas’s every move with the intentness of a mouse closing in on a cat. If he ever found such a box again, he wouldn’t need any help opening it all by himself. Suddenly, a piece of wood slid out and another slipped into the space it had vacated.

Instantly, Adelantas reversed the box, holding it in the palm of one hand, fingers splayed away. As he did so, needles shot out from all four sides, their points encrusted with a dark resin—instant death to anyone unwary enough to be holding the box by its sides.

Then, almost casually, the lid lifted up, revealing a shining jewel glistening just inside.

Both Helias and Rabih reached for it, but Adelantas, sensing this, moved the box out of their reach, hissing, “Wait! Wait!” Sure enough, the jewel dissolved into a fetid cloud of vapor, which hovered over the box, then melted into the air.

“I think the little tricks are over, now,” Adelantas said. “Tell me, Rabih, what do you see now?”

The boy leaned over the box in a familiar way that spoke of how many times he and the seer had done this together. “A tiny scroll, Iannas, with gold writing on it, all bound in a red cord. A small leather bag. Two rings, one of pure gold, the other bearing a gem with an inscription engraved inside.”

“So,” the seer said, slowly. “Very well. The scroll is very dangerous and we should burn it at once, *without touching it*. It grants Stalcas certain powers and comes from Maerdas himself. The rings—the one of pure gold is magic and the other... pretends to be. It fooled Stalcas, perhaps, but not me. You can have that, Rabih. As to the bag, that belongs to Helias....”

“No, to Niccas,” Helias said. “I stole it from him.” He gave Adelantas a push with his free hand. “As you knew well, seer. Don’t provoke me—I may be a worthless piece of shit, but I’m still more powerful than you.”

There was a crash as the jug of wine went flying, and Helias along with it, with Rabih at his throat. Before any of us could say or do anything, the boy had produced a small knife from somewhere and was holding it to Helias’s throat.

“Shall I kill him, Iannas?” he asked, with icy seriousness.

“Rabih!” Adelantas answered. “He only gave me a push. *You’ve* done worse to me.”

“I have privileges,” Rabih retorted. “Anyway, it wasn’t what he did. It was what he *said*.”

“What he said was true,” Adelantas replied. “He’s an actual wizard. Haven’t you figured that out?”

“Even so, he has to apologize,” Rabih said. “I won’t stand for you being treated like that.” Then, to Helias, “Well?”

Helias’s face took on an expression of contrition, and

he opened his mouth to speak. There was a blur of motion; Rabih gave a cry, dropped his knife, and was flung face down onto the bed.

Helias scooped up Rabih's knife and jumped to his feet. "Listen, little street rat," he said coldly, "don't get into fights you can't win." He tapped the black dagger on his cheek. "We were trained to always work out the odds before attacking, rather than finding them out afterwards."

Rabih, who had rolled himself over and then dragged himself up so that he was leaning against the headboard, opened his mouth, then shut it again. Helias took the boy's knife by the blade and snapped it in half, tossing the separate parts across the room.

Helias looked at Adelantas, opened his mouth as if to say something. But nothing came out. Instead, he turned to me and said, "I'm going to go find a fresh supply of wine," and left, slamming the door behind him.

"I'm sorry, Iannas," I said. "He seems more deranged than usual today."

Rabih had already scrambled down onto the floor to find his broken knife. "I'm going to *kill* him," he said, tucking them carefully into his pocket and throwing himself back on the bed.

"Rabih!" Adelantas exclaimed. "Enough!" He groped in the boy's direction, found his arm, and pulled him over.

"I would *die* for you, Iannas," the boy said, as the seer caressed his head.

“I know, I know,” Adelantas said. “You’re my only protector. But right now, all our lives are at stake, and so you mustn’t underestimate Helias. Remember, he had just come back from the edge of death when he had to kill his first lover in order to save his second.”

“And then he met *you*, who had just stolen his second love away,” Rabih replied. “Now that I think about it, I should be Helias’s friend, not *yours*, Niccas.” He looked at me with mock severity.

“Hush, Rabih, you idiot,” Adelantas said. “You have several years to wait before you can even *think* of saying things like that.”

“Well, a *few* years,” the boy assented. “I suppose it’s all right if Niccas keeps the bed warm for me until then.”

“Good,” Adelantas said. “Then, he can come over and start warming it now.” Before Rabih could reply, the seer said to me, “Sit beside me, Niccas, so I can fully sense your presence. Let us all take our ease together on the bed and talk.”

I came and sat beside him, resting my head on his shoulder for a moment. Then I sighed and, shaking away my thoughts about Helias and me, Rabih and Iannas, started to explain the plan I had begun to piece together.

“If I parse Urvasor’s words correctly,” I began, “he believes we are trapped here, since we can neither leave the city nor stay in it. In fact, I had hoped to escape back to Fæy-stirran. There, I could get close enough to the force to find

out if I can't absorb it faster than the band can suck it away."

Adelantas nodded. "This seems to me the most hopeful course," he said. "But getting there will be difficult. Even if you can get hold of some horses and steal out of the gates, you would immediately be spotted from the Eye of Knoltan, and a troop of riders sent after you. And there are no horses in the city faster than theirs.

"Besides," he added, turning his face to me, "neither you nor Helias is in condition for that sort of hard ride."

"Certainly Whynnya isn't," I said, then realized with a twinge of remorse that I hadn't given her a thought all the time I had been in Shavagar-Yasí. Surely she was stabled in this very compound. I would have to see her.

Not quite yet, however. "I have worked out a better way," I said, and plucked my small leather sack from Stalcas's box, which still sat open on the seer's lap. I undid the knot in the cord that held it shut, and poured out the contents into my hand, then reached over so that Rabih could see what I held.

My father had chosen a lovely selection of gems to give me at our farewell; they sparkled with every imaginable hue, two dozen of them at least, small in size but exquisitely choice, and each was a knife stab into my heart.

I wrenched my eyes from these to the single oddity, a much larger, perfectly round gem which, rather than refracting the light in the room, drew it into itself, so that, rather than sparkle, it softly glowed—my *telesma*.

I took it and pressed it to my forehead, but, as I ex-

pected, heard and felt nothing. Its powers, too, were shut off from me. Rabih was watching this, his eyes round with wonder, all the more so when I passed it over to him.

“Examine it for yourself,” I said, “then put it into Iannas’s hand.”

Rabih took the stone, turned it over in his hand, pressed it to his own forehead, and closed his eyes. When he opened them again, he gave me a curious look, but said nothing. He just took up the seer’s hand that rested on his knee and closed its fingers around the stone. Adelantas gasped.

“Yes, Iannas,” I said. “It is a *telesma*. I want you to use it to contact Dracon Wælfyra, the dragon who bore me to Fæyſtirran—and tell it I beg it to come and rescue me from Shavagar-Yasí.”

Adelantas took his hand from me, bent over, and, using his fingers to spread open his eye sockets, let the two rosetones fall out into his lap. He wiped them carefully with a small cloth, and set each in the special pocket sewn for it inside his pouch.

Then he took the *telesma*, held it up to his open mouth and exhaled, polishing away the moisture with the same cloth. Then he raised his left eyebrow and began to press it against the eye socket beneath it.

It was my turn to gasp. “No, Iannas! It is way too large. You’ll only hurt yourself!”

I looked at Rabih for moral support, but he looked back at me scornfully and said, “Bet you weren’t saying that

to him last night.”

Adelantas smiled. He wasn’t trying to force it in. Instead, he simply pressed it firmly against the eye socket, the facial muscles around it now visibly quivering.

The stone glowed with increasing brightness, so much so that we could actually see the light bathing the seer’s fingers.

Then suddenly the glow was snuffed out, and Adelantas, looking drained, took it away from his eye.

“This is a marvelous thing, Niccas, love,” he said, “but it opens me to a multitude of voices, and some are very, very dangerous. How would I know if it were your dragon I spoke to, and not someone, *something* pretending to be it?”

He closed his fingers tightly around the stone with one hand and put the other on my thigh. “Would you spread your legs for me?”

Ignoring Rabih’s smirk, I did as Adelantas requested. His fingers slid down to my crotch—but only to touch the bruises that Rabih had been examining earlier. As the seer’s fingers passed delicately over them, I looked away, being careful *not* to catch Rabih’s eye, but even so felt a quiet stirring. If Adelantas noticed this, he gave no hint of it. Instead, he shook his head.

“I can only sense the saurian,” he said. “Its rankness has obliterated all presence of the dragon.” He took his hand away. “If only you had *something* that would allow me to direct my seeking.”

Immediately, the small packet that Mazh'dagh had pressed into my hands appeared before my mind's eye, and for the first time that day I actually smiled. "You won't believe this, Iannas," I said, "but in the pack I left in your rooms, you'll find *just* what you're searching for."

WHEN ADELANTAS WAS READY TO DEPART, I accompanied him and Rabih out of the room. We parted at the entrance to the servant stairs, after I had tightly embraced the seer. Rabih and I gripped each other's elbows, using the warrior's farewell.

"Courage," I said to him, in the same manner.

"Always." That was the expected reply, but the boy said it with such conviction, that I almost took him in my arms and kissed him, too.

Instead, I turned and went down the stairs, found the kitchen, and begged some carrots from the cook. She was surprised, but word must have reached even down here as to who I was, for she gave me none of the sharp banter that had been Rabih's lot.

Once I was out in the courtyard, finding the stables was no problem. The stable boys stared at me curiously but said nothing, especially when Whynnya sensed my presence and began nickering and then banging against the gate to her stall.

"Easy, beloved, easy!" I said, hurrying to her. Too impatient to open the gate, I climbed up the boards that

walled in the stall and wrapped my arms around her neck. Her sweet clean scent sent a wave of the happiest kind of sadness through me, and for a while I just babbled in her nearest ear and stroked her head and muzzle, tears streaking down my face. How good to not know how much I had missed her until I was pressing against her again.

Then when she gave me a nudge that almost knocked me off my perch, I remembered the carrots. I laughed, wiping away my tears. “No pippins this time of year, my love, so these will have to do.” I proffered a fat one on my open palm, and she gently took it and, her eyes still linked with mine, began to contentedly crunch on it.

I gave her two more, then jumped down into her stall. As she turned to follow me, or rather, the remaining carrots, I saw that she was limping slightly. Also, her former sleekness was gone. She was so gaunt that her ribs showed clearly, and while she was well-brushed, her coat had lost its gloss, and looked dull and shabby.

“In another week or so, she’ll look just like you remember her,” said a voice, and I turned in surprise to see Helias pushing himself out of the heap of hay in the far corner. Obviously, Whynnya bore him no ill will, but instead batted her head affectionately at him when he came up on the other side of her.

He casually threw an arm over her, saying to me as he did, “Don’t worry, they’re taking good care of her here. No one connects her with you, so she should be safe enough.”

“Did you bring her carrots, too?” I asked.

Helias shook his head. “No,” he replied, a trace of a smile crossing his lips, “I took one look at the head cook and decided to leave that pleasure to you.”

“Here,” I said, passing him the two that remained of the bunch. “Since she saved your life, you might as well give her these yourself.”

I watched Helias as he fed her. He and Whynnya were well matched—both were all muscle and bone and looked like laundry beaten on rocks by the river and left there to dry. Even so, he looked better than he had last night, except that his skin had the same faint tint of blue.

“When you’re finished, let’s go back to the room,” Helias said. “Urvasor will have a fit if he finds us both wandering around, and, besides, I want to talk to you.”

I dreaded talking to *him*, but there seemed no point in putting it off. Seeing Whynnya again had cheered me up a bit, and seeing her express affection for Helias had felt oddly chastening. So after a little more stroking on my part and nuzzling on hers, I told her I’d see her again tomorrow, and we left her and quietly slipped up the back stairs.

Once safely in the room, Helias threw himself on the bed, and, cautiously, I lay down beside him.

He reeked of wine, and even that much of a physical encounter made my body stiffen.

Helias turned his head toward me. “Shit, Niccas,” he said, “you really *were* getting screwed by that demon, weren’t

you? Just as Nassazia claimed. I thought she was just jealous of me.”

He shook his head. “I won’t ask you what is what like until we’re on better terms. But I do wonder one thing—did his seed give you anything else besides those rather scary eyes? Some demonic powers, perhaps?”

“Ask Maerdas,” I replied shortly.

He sighed. “Yes, sorry, I forgot.” He reached over and, holding my shoulder, pressed his forehead for a moment against mine, then fell back again.

“Fuck, you really *have* lost all your powers, thanks to me. You’ve been thrown back to where you were when we first met... a boy on the run.”

I closed my eyes. Helias’s words had an unexpected effect on me—especially that word “boy.” I suddenly realized I wasn’t one anymore. Somewhere during my adventures I had become sixteen, and attained the right to be treated as a man. And for the life of me, I couldn’t even guess as to when exactly that day had passed me by. But one thing was certain: there were no festivities, no formal donning of the symbolic belt.

Even so, perhaps I *had* become a man. Not too long ago that realization, redolent as it was of my lost life, would have caused tears to flood into my eyes. But now I merely shoved the thoughts away, turned to Helias, and asked, “Did you see Stalcas clamp the band around my neck?”

He nodded. “It was the first thing I did see once you

had drawn me back into wakefulness.”

“Am I right to remember that it closed around my neck from the back, snapping together over my throat?”

Helias thought for a moment, summoning up what memory he still could. “Yes,” he said. “Right where it has that little ripple that fits around your windpipe. But why are you asking these things? Your seer couldn’t find the seam.”

I didn’t bother answering his question, saying instead, “I haven’t touched the wand since you killed Stalcas. Go and get it, would you? I think when Urvasor returned it, he left it on the side table by the door.”

When he came back with it, I didn’t take it from him but asked, “Can you sense any power still residing in it?”

Helias nodded. “Quite a bit, actually. But, Niccas, I can’t wield it.”

I looked at him. “Not the wand, no. But I’m going to make it into a dagger—and that you can certainly wield. I want you to press the edge of the blade against the band where you remember the join to be. I want you to press *hard*. I think the remaining magic held in the dagger will make the join appear, and perhaps you can force the blade into it and pry it, twist it open.”

Helias’s mouth dropped open. “But, but... it could so easily slip and plunge into your throat!”

I held his eyes with mine and said, “Who better than you?” And, before he could respond, I added, “Bring that lamp over, get on top of me, and do it.”

Stunned by my tone, Helias did as I directed. He climbed on top of me, one leg on either side. I looked at the wand, and willed it to shapeshift into a dagger. It did so, instantly. Helias took it by the hilt, lifted it up over my neck, lifted the dagger... and froze.

“Do it,” I said, through clenched teeth. “I’m going to die soon anyway, and I’d rather go like this, fighting. If I do die, *you* didn’t kill me. At my insistence, you performed a very difficult service that proved to be impossible.” I paused, then added, “Try to bring the wand to Jessan and explain what happened. For him to know how I died is the best thing I have left to give him.”

Helias bent forward and, placing one hand on the mattress beside me, pressed the tip of the dagger against the band. Nothing happened. He pressed harder. Nothing, again. I lay motionless, my body icy cold.

“Use both hands,” I said. He looked at me, fear in his eyes—something I had never seen there before. There was a momentary struggle of wills between us, then he shrugged, lifted his other hand from the bed, and wrapped it around the one clutching the hilt. Then he leant forward and began to press with all his strength.

The blade shifted, infinitesimally, and I thought I was about to die. But as my mind reached out to Gesryma of the Blessed Name, Helias began to mutter through gritted teeth, “Yes, yes, yes, yes.” The blade had split the join apart. Not enough to force the hinges, yet, but it was in. In fact,

Helias had now forced the tip through the band and into the flesh of my neck. Blood began to trickle from the wound.

“Now *twist* it,” I hissed.

The muscles in his arms bulging, his teeth clenched, Helias struggled to turn the blade. The band was giving. I could now sense the space opening. As it did, the points of *mythral* were being eased away from my neck. A glint of hope flickered to life deep inside my heart.

Beads of sweat had appeared all across Helias’s brow. “Just one more turn, I think,” he said, and visibly girded himself to make it.

Just then, I felt a shift. *Power was now flowing into the band from somewhere else.* Maerdas was fighting back! I gave a cry of warning, but it came too late. Tiny bolts of power shot out of the dagger directly into the points of *mythral* like a display of miniature lightning.

Almost as soon as we grasped what was happening, it was all over. The wand was drained. The gold band snapped shut, spitting out the blade tip. Only the blood oozing down my neck remained. Helias gave a cry of rage and pain, shoved the dagger out of his way onto the floor, and fell face down on the bed beside me.

Strangely, despair did not flood back inside me. Perhaps the fact that my plan had almost worked emboldened me; perhaps it was watching Helias struggling to save me, the hope we had shared for a few precious seconds together. In any case, at that moment, I felt more for him than for my-

self. I reached out and tentatively took hold of his shoulder.

For a moment, he did nothing, then reached out a hand and laid it on my thigh. We lay together like that for a while. Then I whispered, “Roll over, I want to hold you.”

I thought he would offer me his back. But, no, he turned to face me. I put my hand on the back of his head, working my fingers into his hair, pulled him close, and kissed him. I felt no pain or anger, just hunger for his closeness, for the taste of his mouth.

Eventually, we pulled apart. He reached up to my neck, wiped my blood onto his fingers, and, our eyes locked, licked it off them. Then he struggled to speak. He opened his mouth, closed it, shook his head, opened it again, but still nothing came out.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “I know something inside you will always keep you from saying you’re sorry.”

Anger flashed briefly across his face, then he lowered his head. “It’s true,” he said. “I can’t. Even when I fight my way to *feeling* regret—which I almost never can—all I can do is let it burn inside me. You’ll never know how much I’ve punished myself because of what I did to you.”

He looked back up at me. His eyes were bloodshot; his look was wary and full of despair.

I stroked his cheek. “How long was that spell of Stalcas’s working on you?” I asked.

He shrugged. “I don’t know. He was very clever. He drew me into his power so softly and completely that I never

noticed how he was using magic to reinforce the emotional and sexual control he already had over me.”

He closed his eyes. “I thought when I became a wizard, that would give me the power to free myself. Instead, it just made him all the more intent on controlling me.”

“When did you realize he was still alive?” I asked.

Helias shook his head. “I should have realized it when I started to go mad in *Fyrewourmhaem*. I thought it was because of something...”

He looked away, then finished the sentence. “Something Nassazia was doing to me. I still don’t know how much he—Stalcas—was involved in that, how much of it was just her using me to get to you.”

“I could have helped you,” I began, “if you had only told me.”

The anger flashed in his eyes again. “And *you* could have noticed what was happening,” he said bitterly. “We had great sex and that was enough to convince you everything was fine for me. After that you were so wrapped up in your mysterious doings with Teshnar’ad that you never gave me a thought.”

I flushed and retorted furiously, “That’s because I *trusted* you.” I was going to say more, when I saw the impact of my words.

I cursed myself, lowering my head until I had mastered my emotions. Then I said to him, “You’re right. I was just learning about mind touching then, and I thought I had

no right using it on you, even when we made love.”

As I said these words, for the first time since *Fyre-wourmhaem* I felt desire for him. Our eyes met, looked away, met again.

“No,” Helias said, shaking his head sadly. “I failed you. Utterly. What you did, you repaired by coming here to rescue me...”

I smiled slightly. “Or maybe to kill you,” I said. “Stalcas truly read my heart when he said that.”

Helias shook his head, lifted my hand, brought it to his lips, and kissed it softly. “No,” he said. “Stalcas was wrong. That feeling only served to comfort the hurt I had done you. *He* decided to kill me once he learned I had fallen in love with you. Sleeping with you was fine, as long as I kept acknowledging he owned me. But I couldn’t even pretend that anymore. And he and I, well, we both knew what that meant. He was going to put me down the moment I had lured you into capture.”

Our eyes met and this time he held them fast. “Niccas, I know you didn’t track me down to rescue me. You didn’t even know I needed that. But you didn’t set aside your quest to come and kill me, either. You just had to understand.”

I thought about this. I so wished I could still mind touch, not because I didn’t trust Helias, but because there was so much I wanted to know.

Suddenly, I thought of something. “Can *you* mind touch?” I asked.

Helias looked surprised. “I don’t know. I guess. I’m a wizard, after all. Just not a very practiced one.”

I smiled. “Well, let’s teach you something, then,” I said. “Press your cheek against mine, close your eyes, and try to slip into my head. And I’ll see if I can open the way a little for you.”

Our cheeks touched. At first I felt nothing other than the whisper of his breathing, the warmth of his skin. But then there was something else. I could sense him inside me. Words were never devised that could hope to describe that sensation, something like a waking dream, something like a vivid, familiar, but not quite placeable memory. Mostly it was a total blurring of where I ended and he began.

“Shit!” Helias whispered, and I could feel the word moving through his brain before it came out of his mouth.

“You’re *so* romantic,” I said, and he was already giggling before I was able to speak the words.

“I want to be in you while I’m feeling this,” he said, which I already knew because all my senses were awash with his desire.

“Yes,” I affirmed, kissing his lips. “Fuck me. Only I don’t have...” Then I remembered the salve the healer had rubbed onto my wounds, and as I did, Helias did, too. His fingers slid along my side.

“Enough.” I felt him rub it onto his cock, the tingle from what was left of the salve’s active properties.

“Good thing it’s not freshly potent,” one of us thought,

or both of us together.

Our lips parted so that Helias could enter me, but the link remained. I've never been so aroused so immediately or so fully. It was as if my whole body was on fire.

I rolled onto my back and pulled my legs against my chest, raising up my ass as I did so.

Even as I could feel the throbbing swollenness of his cock, Helias could feel both the muscle ring around my butthole expanding to let him in and the trap door in my mind spring open as he worked it in, suddenly dropping me into the void. I fell and fell, nothing to hold on to except the rush of sensation, the pain of being opened, the surrender to the heat, the solidity of his invading cock.

We both groaned as he pushed it in, deeper, then deeper still. I was so shaken with lust that my cock was already weeping on my stomach.

Helias pulled back until his knob pushed against my hole, then rammed back into me, savoring the tightness that gripped his cock, the shuddering of nerves all through my body. Out he pulled, in he thrust, again and again, both our bodies dripping with the sweat of lust, our mouths gaping, our eyes wide and unseeing.

Then he discovered he could actually tell when the back edge of his knob rubbed against the nut deep in me. He changed his thrusts to quick strokes, back and forth, rubbing the nut continuously, driving me crazy.


I began making a whimpering cry, my whole body

convulsed, my balls began pumping crazily, my cock juddered, spewing seed.

Then Helias gave a cry, shoved himself into me until his groin was jammed fiercely against my spread cheeks, and came and came inside me, taking me with him as he rode the crest, holding onto me both inside and out, opening me to everything.

Then the explosion was over. He dropped down onto me, sobbing, his body quivering still. We both felt his cock slip out of my hole, followed by a thick stream of his come, oozing out onto the sheets. He realized along with me that my asshole was still gaping open, the deliciousness of my shame in knowing how well he knew.

We lay together like that, until he surrendered to his exhaustion, rolled off me, and fell asleep. I wrapped an arm around him, threw a leg across his thighs, buried my face in his hair, and joined him, letting myself slip away, following hurriedly after him.

But before I could catch up, I sensed another presence in my mind, and a voice whispered, “Ah Niccas, I had forgotten, really forgotten, how astonishingly delicious sex between power-wielding lovers can actually be. You have so much to offer Me, give Me, let Me *take*. Sleep well. I shall have you in My hands soon enough.” 

Chapter 33



THE SOLDIERS SEIZED US A FEW HOURS LATER, smashing in the door and pinning and binding us before we understood what was happening. They wore uniforms I had never seen before in all my life—cut from fine cloth dyed amethyst, the color royal, with fittings in silver. The leather of their boots and belting was a polished black. Even their helms were silver-plated.

But if these were the king's own, they didn't serve his majesty as palace guards. This was a battle-hardened elite, handsome, hostile, disciplined, and smart. They swept through the room, searching everything, even as Helias and I were bound and gagged.

No one spoke to us. Once we were well trussed we were marched out into the hall, surrounded by sword-wielding guards. As we were hustled down the stairs, I glimpsed signs of violence, then saw direct evidence of a battle. A scattering of initiates lay where they had fallen. When we reached the main hall, I saw three soldiers holding swords

pressed against Urvasor's neck. He was bleeding in several places, but held himself erect. Our eyes met as I passed, but he made no sign of seeing me. Already, I knew, he was contemplating his death—by his own hand if the soldiers didn't dispatch him first.

Outside, we were rushed down the steps and out into the night, for while we slept the day had passed. Helias, then I, were picked up and thrown into a horse-drawn van. Four soldiers climbed in with us, the doors were slammed shut and barred. There were shouts, the snap of a whip, and the van lurched forwards, sending Helias and me flying as it swayed and bounced over the cobblestones. The soldiers had straps to hold onto, but not us.

Eventually, Helias and I were able to press our backs against the front of the van, and brace ourselves with our legs. But when we tried to squeeze together, a soldier drew his sword and rammed it into the wall between us. He said nothing and did nothing further, but we got the hint.

In any case, the ride was short enough. The rhythm of the wheels changed—the road beneath us was no longer paved with cobblestones but granite blocks. The van slowed, stopped. Orders were shouted, acknowledgments made. Then came the groan of heavy metal hinges, the screech of wood dragging against stone. The van moved forward again a short distance, then stopped.

The doors were unbolted, thrown open, and the soldiers seized us and dragged us out. Torches blazed ev-

erywhere. Around us, our captors were springing from war-horses. As before they grouped about us; as before—this time to my surprise—they drew their swords. We were met by a superior officer, how superior I didn't know, although he alone among the others had insignia made of gold.

He also said nothing, barely glancing at Helias and me. He simply wheeled about and led us into what I had merely the briefest moment to look up and confirm, the Eye of Knoltan itself. We passed through two great doors, and entered the scene of a terrible slaughter.

Unlike the House of The Narrow Blade, where the killing had stopped when the resistance was overcome, here there had been no resistance, only massacre. Now at last I saw the elite guard I had so longed to join as a boy, and every one of them was dead, dismembered, beheaded. Bodies were heaped in careless piles, weapons still resting in their sheaths.

The place smelled of a butcher's shop, sickly rich with the odors of blood and meat. These deaths were too recent for the stench of decay to set in. Indeed, even as we were hurried up a flight of wide stone stairs, other members of the guard, shackled together, were being dragged down it to be added to the heaps.

When they saw me, a shout went up. "*Nithaial! Nithaial! Nithaial!*"

Then, as we passed them, they saw the gold band around my neck, the cords that bound me, and the shouting

suddenly died. Even as it did, a great coldness had swept over me. I finally understood that all this slaughter was because of Jessan and me.

At the top of the stairs, we were brought to an elaborately worked pair of brass doors, each the width of three men, on which in beaten gold was inlaid the sigil of Knoltan himself. One of the soldiers left off guarding us long enough to drag down on a bell pull. A distant gong sounded, then, after a moment's silence, we could hear a strange grinding noise, which grew louder and louder until the brass doors shook from it.

Then, again, silence—until, with a deafening clang, the brass doors swung upon, revealing, not the great hall I had imagined, but a tiny room made, it seemed, entirely of brass. Into this room Helias and I were pushed and set against the back wall. Someone else entered with us, who I could not see.

The doors closed together with the same loud clang. In the far distance, we could hear the same gong sounding again, and then, with a lurch, the room began to rise. The ascent was slow but smooth; the noises we had heard when this thing approached were outside it, as well, and were clearly made by the mechanism that made it move.

“It is done using cylinders with helical grooves cut into them,” a voice said, speaking with the hyperarticulate accent of the high nobility, who spoke as if those beneath them couldn’t understand them otherwise. I suddenly real-

ized the significance of the gold insignia—this person was actually of the same blood as the king. “These in turn are rotated by a complicated mare’s nest of gears and levers, all of it in the end, of course, powered by slaves.

“Quite a miracle, too, the whole thing, until a support gives way and this... ascender, they call it, drops like a stone all the way to the bottom of the shaft.”

There was a sigh. “I don’t like talking to myself and the ride to the top is quite long. I am Prince Sadaras, second in line to the Amethyst Throne. And you, they say, are the *Nithaial Elimiel*. And this, from the looks of him, is your love boy.”

I felt a knife slice away the knot that bound the gag to my mouth. It fell to the floor.

“*You* may turn around. A *Nithaial* may look on even the Prince Cadet, I hear, without being stricken for impiety.”

I turned and faced him. He had a noble if troubled face, with high cheekbones, a hawklike nose, and hair so flaxen it was almost white.

“So, it is said, can a cat, your majesty,” I replied. “And my companion is the wizard Helias.”

Prince Sadaras raised his eyebrows. “If I were you, *Nithaial*, I would rather call him my love boy. That is a position in life much more esteemed—and much less dangerous—than being a wizard.”

He shrugged. “In any case, I do not care to have him looking at me, let alone *speaking* to me, if that’s your

meaning.”

It had been, but I let it pass. “I have no idea what you think I’ve been up to,” I said, “but getting the Guard troops of the Eye of Knoltan to rise in revolt hasn’t been one of them. You are slaughtering these men in vain.”

Prince Sadaras smiled thinly. “I *was* just about to ask your advice concerning that,” he said. “But I see it would have been worthless. From what we have heard, you have done nothing much at all, except free a dragon, bring Fæyſtirran back from its rubble, and get yourself captured...”—he eyed the band around my neck, then continued—“first by The Unnameable One, and now, it seems, by me.”

He shook his head. “No, *Nithaial*, we’re not concerned about you—or about your brother either. That is His concern, and He is quite capable of dealing with it Himself. Our worry is a family matter, having to do with our cousin, Prince Caelas, and his outrageous attempts to seize the Amethyst Throne.”

Our eyes met. His were as cold and translucent as ice. “Our purpose here is simply to demonstrate that no force, no matter how elite, how *esteemed*, that has sworn allegiance to their king can ever, ever *even think* of revoking that oath.”

He looked away. “And we have reason to think that there are some here who might have gone even further than such thinking. We are killing them all because they hadn’t the sense to find and discard the rotten apples themselves. That left us with *no idea* as to whom we could trust.”

The ascender rattled and shook all of a sudden, and the prince's eyes widened. He tugged at the collar of his uniform. "Damn this contraption," he said. "You just can't breathe in it."

I realized as he did so that the ascender had no fourth wall. Behind the prince was nothing but the masonry of the outside shaft. I glanced at the opening between it and the ascender. It was wide, but not wide enough to push the prince to his death. Still....

I edged a little closer to him. "Why have you brought us here, your majesty, if we are of no concern to you?"

The prince half-closed his eyes. "*I* didn't bring you here, *Nithaial*. The person who can address *that* question is, of course, my dear brother, the High Prince Poëstil, who eagerly awaits your arrival."

He paused, listening. Even as he did so, a lip of stone dropped into view. Above it was a second set of brass doors, twins to those below. The ascender stopped rising. The screw cylinders halted. With the same clang, the doors swung open, and we were met with a breath of indescribably sweet, cool, fresh air.

"Which, I think, is right now," Prince Sadaras said. "Pick up the gag and bind your love boy's eyes, if you want him to keep his sight." I did so, and the three of us stepped out into a room so close to the top that its walls were those of the tower itself.

THE HIGH PRINCE POËSTIL was standing over a table as we approached, fingering through some things scattered there. My things, I realized, as I came closer—the wand of power, the sack of jewels, the pendant of Ra’asiel. The Prince was just then unwrapping the small packet of *Dre’aganzd’morsh*. I could smell its spice-edged intensity from where I stood.

“All bow low before the High Prince!” said a voice behind me, and I had only time to realize that it wasn’t Prince Sadaras, when a violent blow on my shoulders sent me flying to the floor.

“Thezar!” said the High Prince, in mock admonishment. “If we are to follow protocol here, I’m sure I should be the one to bow low. You must look into this subject some time.” He must have made a gesture, for the same hands that felled me now grabbed me and lifted me to my feet.

Prince Poëstil was a bull of a man, tall like his younger brother, but massive where Sadaras was slight. Some of it was fat, to be sure, but more of it was muscle. His glance was just as freezing, but his eyes lacked Sadaras’s intelligence, being canny and mocking, instead.

“The very *Nithaial Elimiel*,” he said. “How amazing this is.” He suddenly strode up directly in front of me, and seized hold of my chin, jerking my head so that his eyes met mine. Then he nodded and flashed an amazingly nasty smile. “Even more amazing, though, is the fact that you were actually fucked up the ass by a demon lord. Of course, I had pre-

viciously put that down to mere calumny, spread by a witch, no less. But now, here is the proof right before me.”

The prince shook his head and sighed. “A Nithaial with demon eyes. You have brought such shame upon the Blessed Mother—it simply beggars the imagination.

“And then, on top of that, there is *this*”—and here he gingerly picked up the pendant—“truly beggars the imagination.” He eyed me for a moment, then added, “Deliciously dangerous, too. Even I can tell that. You do know that the mere possession of such a bauble by an ordinary mortal would mean death by exceedingly ruinous torture.”

He dropped it back onto the table.

“How did you come by that, Your Majesty?” I asked, trying with all my might to keep my voice from shaking.

The prince affected a look of puzzlement. “How? We seized it, of course. Perhaps you mean ‘where’? Where did you come upon this, Thezar?”

“The same place where we discovered the *Dre’agan-zd’morsh*, Your Most Royal Highness,” the courtier said. “In the apartments of the seer.”

“Oh, yes, the seer,” said Prince Poëstil, “a *very* interesting fellow. In fact, he’s the reason I’ve had you brought here, *Nithaial*. Come over here...” and he gestured me to follow him up the flight of stairs that led to the very Eye of Knoltan itself.

“Wait, Your Majesty,” I cried out. “If you are holding Adelantas, I beg you to free him. He’s no threat to anyone.”

The Prince turned back to look at me. “Of course, he isn’t,” he replied. “At least not any more. And if you’ll kindly follow me up the stairs, you can see me free him, yourself. I do admire those who speak up for others.”

I ascended the stairs behind him, my heart in my throat. We came up into a large room, mostly unfurnished, dominated by a huge circular window, that started from the floor and rose to twice the height of a man. Beyond it was nothing but pitch darkness. There was a large crossbow-like device set near this, and, to one side, was an armchair with a large rug thrown over it. There was absolutely no sign of Adelantas anywhere.

Prince Poëstil went over and patted the device. “This, *Nithaial*, is an arbalest, and a very demonish time I had, too, getting it up here.” He ran his fingers down its long frame. “As you see, it is built on the same principle as a crossbow, but instead of an arrow, it casts a spear, and at a very great distance. Or, if the target is closer, it hits with astonishing impact.” He glanced over at me to see the effect of what he was to say next. “Enough even to kill a dragon, don’t you think?”

My heart froze. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, Your Majesty.”

Prince Poëstil’s face hardened. He snapped his fingers. There was a sharp snap, and Helias gave a cry. He staggered forward. Lines of blood were streaking across the back of his shirt.

“That’s just one taste of the cat,” the prince said. “I

may not harm you, but there have been no restrictions placed on your love boy. So, *don't* toy with me."

He sighed. "But then, perhaps, I do you wrong. All this disruption might have affected your memory."

He went over to the chair with the rug thrown over it. "Let me *stimulate* it a little." He tossed back the covering, and I cried out in rage and pain. The body of Adelantas lay crumpled there. Hardly a bone in his body was left unbroken, and great gouts of blood were oozing from his eye sockets.

"Apologies," the prince said. "I forgot what a sad mess your seer had become. Thezar, keep our promise and set our captive free."

"As Your Most Royal Highness commands." The owner of the voice finally stepped into view, pushing the butt of his cat-o'-nine-tails into his belt. He was at once strong and hard and submissive, handsomely dressed as any courtier, but with flecks of blood dotting his costly robes. He effortlessly lifted Adelantas up, carried him to the open eye on the far side of the room, and tossed him out.

"May the Blessed Mother clasp him to her bosom," said Prince Poëstil with mock piety. Then, walking back to the arbalest, he picked up where he had previously left off. "So, there it is. You wanted to summon your dragon, the seer arranged this for you, and I, for my part, have provided the place and time."

He picked up one of the spear-arrows that the device was meant to discharge and examined the cruel, curved

barbs that would fasten into its victim's flesh, making it impossible to extract. "My price for this is the chance to kill it, thus adding such luster to my name that it will live forever—'King Poëstil, Dragonslayer.'"

He turned over at me. "So, *Nithaial*, you may summon the beast right now—unless, of course, you feel the need for more persuasion?"

I was in such a state of shock that his words seemed to reach my ears long after they left his mouth. My grief was so fierce that tears froze hard before they could escape my eyes. My rage was such that my body shook.

Power surged up within me and was just as quickly sucked away. The emptiness that remained was the purest pain that ever could be devised. Nothing could ever be worse. At that moment, my heart turned to stone.

Even as that happened, I summoned my brain to serve me where my powers could not. I met the prince's gaze and said, "With this neck band on, I am helpless." And as he began to snap his fingers, I shouted, "It's true! If you know so much, you certainly know that!"

"So?" the Prince asked. "Obviously you had some plan, for you were already in this state when you set your seer to do the summoning."

Actually, I hadn't thought that out. I suppose I imagined Adelantas having us meet the dragon at some midnight rendezvous inside the city. On the other hand, if Dracon Wælfyra *was* now waiting for a call....

I closed my eyes for a moment, then opened them, looked at Prince Poëstil and said, “What you say is true. But, for my plan to succeed, it must be done exactly as I say.”

“If you swear to the Blessed Mother not to warn the dragon,” the prince replied, “you may proceed as you wish.”

“I so swear,” I said. “First, you must let me hold my wand of power. As you already know, I’m unable to wield it, but it will amplify my call. Secondly, you must let me approach the Eye alone with Helias, in case the dragon is already outside, watching. It won’t approach if it knows that you hold us captive. As soon as I make the call, we will get completely out of your way, giving you a clear shot.”

The Prince thought it over, nodded, then sent Thezar downstairs for the wand. While he scurried off, I went to Helias, pressed my head against his, and, melding myself with him, silently called out, “Dracon Wælfyra, come to the Eye of Knoltan at once. *Waste no time.* Helias and I await you.”

“What was *that* about?” the Prince demanded.

“I was saying goodbye to my beloved,” I answered, shortly. “I know you mean to kill him the moment the dragon is slain.”

“Or even before,” the prince agreed, equably. “Very well. Here comes your wand.”

And, indeed, we could hear Thezar hurrying back up the stone steps.

I took it from him, grasped Helias by the hand, and led him nearly to the edge of the Eye. Then I removed his

blindfold and tossed it onto the floor. Behind us, I could hear the sound of Thezar cranking back the bow of the arbalest.


“You know what I mean to do?” I asked, not looking at Helias, but staring straight ahead.

“Yes,” Helias answered, also remaining motionless.

“And you’re with me?”

This time there was no answer; he merely squeezed my hand.

“On the count of three, then, my dearest love. One. Two. *Three.*”

Hand in hand, we ran the last few steps to the open Eye and, together, leaped out as far as we could. A cry followed after us, but the wind blew it away. For the shortest of moments, the night embraced us. Then we slipped through its fingers and fell, down, down, down, into the empty darkness. 

Chapter 34



ISAT BESIDE A SMALL FIRE, across from Helias, watching him gnawing away at a meaty haunch of desert gazelle, his face glowing with grease. I had no appetite, myself, but I could tell from watching Helias that I ought to, so now and then I would rip off another bite from my own, smaller portion, and force myself to chew and swallow it.

We were sitting in the sun just outside a small cave at the foot of the mountains that had been Dracon Wælfyra's hiding place while I was in Shavagar-Yasí. It had been there only two days, and, were it not for the jackals who appeared as if by magic when the dragon was off hunting, the place would have been indistinguishable from an abattoir. As it was, collectors of *dre'aganzd'morsh* would have marked it as a major find.

These sour thoughts were an indication of my current relationship with the dragon, who was sprawled within the cave itself, picking its teeth with a long shin bone.

I was being childish, I knew. When the dragon had swept down and caught us both in midair, my relief was such

that I was forced to realize that I wasn't really ready for death. I had positively yearned for death after seeing the remains of Adelantas. In fact, I had been so willing to throw myself out of the tower that I might not even have called the dragon, were it not for the fact that I was bringing Helias with me—had to, really, given what would have happened to him otherwise.

What I hadn't prepared myself for, though, was Dracon Wælfyra's outright refusal to consider any of my plans, even ones that seemed perfectly reasonable—from now on, it seemed, it was the dragon's way or nothing. So far, that meant leaving Helias on the other side of the mountains to fend for himself and absolutely *not* returning to Fæyſtirran.

"That neck band has powerful magic woven into it," the dragon had said, after examining it. "It will kill you before it lets you overpower it. Only the *Nithaial Galgaliel* has the powers to break it, and we would be fools indeed to try to get him to come to Fæyſtirran.

"Furthermore, it would now be futile to take you on to Ernſardast. Without your power, you couldn't bring it back into being, and so there would be no protection for you there. The only thing I can do for you now, *Nithaial Elimiel*, is to take you to Wisferon, the only place where you will now find a safe refuge from The Unnameable One."

This, of course, was the most reasonable and the most humiliating of options. How could I face Jessan, fresh from his series of triumphs, as a slave of Maerdas? There *had* to be another solution, as much as I was at a loss to think

of what it could be.

After a while, Helias finished his meal and tossed the bone into the fire. Ignoring my moody silence, he turned toward the cave and asked, “Dracon Wælfyra, are you male or female?”

The dragon turned its head slowly and regarded Helias coldly, which didn’t seem to faze him in the least. After Stalcas, he was inured to icy looks. He simply smiled and added, “I apologize if this is not a proper question.”

“Wizards, it is said, are eternally curious, and there is no satisfying them,” Dracon Wælfyra replied. “The moral of which is: answer them not at all.” It snorted. “But in this instance, an answer may quell your curiosity soon enough. We dragons have the ability to be either male or female, depending on circumstances, none of which apply here.

“So you can think of me as both or neither, as you like. We, on the other hand, think of you humans as broken fragments of a greater whole, restlessly casting about for your missing parts—and not knowing what to do with them when you find them.”

Helias cast a look in my direction, this comment being obviously directed at me. “That is possible, Most Puissant One,” he said, “but there are other possible explanations. Don’t dragons bond, one to one, like Niccas and me? Would you never go against the dictates of wisdom to save a loved one from certain, horrible death?”

“No,” the dragon answered shortly. “Among us, the

connection with the nest is all; the rest, nothing. To be banned from the nest is a fate so horrible that it can hardly be imagined. But it is what would have happened to me if, for example, I risked what Niccas has, to rescue you. And so his action has horrified us all. My head aches from the effort of all to make sense of it.”

“Let me ask you another question, then, to spare your head and further pain,” Helias replied. “Is there a third god, apart from Gesryma and Ra’asiel, about which we humans are not permitted to know?”

The dragon arched its neck and widened its eyes, regarding Helias with something not unlike respect. Then it replied, speaking cautiously, “If there were, that could never be revealed to you.”

“Indeed, it could,” Helias shot back, “since Niccas is not exactly human and neither, for that matter, am I. If you feel free to scorn Niccas for following his heart, perhaps you should accept some of the same for not revealing to him the true nature of his enemies.”

Flames flickered around the dragon’s lips, and I held my breath, thinking Helias was about to be roasted alive. But, instead, the dragon said simply, “When you find the answer to your question, wizard, you may well wish you had never asked it,” and withdrew back into the cave.

I gestured to Helias to come sit by me. When he had, I said in a low voice, “Beloved, please don’t aggravate Dracon Wælfyra any further. We have to persuade it to come up with

a better plan than dumping us at Gostranar.”

“Dumping *you* there,” Helias replied. “We have yet to persuade your dragon even to carry me over the mountain.” He picked up a stick and poked at the fire. “Truly, Niccas,” he admitted, “neither of my questions was idle, and especially not the second. I think we need to find out the answer to it, if we’re to make any sense of our plight.”

It was my turn to regard Helias with astonishment. “What do you mean?” I asked.

He leaned even closer to me and whispered in my ear, “I want to find out who or what, exactly, rules over Ais Dysmassia. You know better than I how little we know about that terrible place.”

“You’re right,” I said thoughtfully. “Everything we’ve been told about the place turns out to be mostly, or maybe even entirely, lies. But how did you come to think this?”

There was a crunching noise as the dragon finished up some morsel it had freed from between its fangs. Even so, I knew from its pricked ears that it was listening to every word we were saying. I realized with a half smile that that was exactly why Helias was whispering—to pique its interest.

“It’s this alliance between Ra’asiel and Gesryma you have been drawn into,” he answered. “It is all very hidden and unexplained, but how could the *Nithaial Elimiel* be sent to one of the high temples of Ra’asiel? And *welcomed* there by the Avatar?”

Helias suddenly paused, remembering something.

He hesitated, then asked, “How could it be that Nassazia knew you were having sex with your demon? There is no way she could have seen you.”

I looked at the fire. “Well, strange to say, she *did* make it up and it *did* happen—but only after the two of you left. She was very suspicious of my visits to Teshnar’ad—she might have possessed enough power of foresight to see what was coming, but most likely she just suspected the worst.”

“By the Goddess!” Helias exclaimed. “I still can’t get over it! You actually had *sex* with a demon.”

“With two, actually,” I said a little sheepishly. “I think I sucked off Do’arma’ak, as well, but I can’t really remember. I was drunk that night.”

“Niccass, you are such a *slut*,” Helias said. He rolled this around in his mind for a moment, then asked, with no change of tone, “Was it hot?”

“Yes,” I said, blushing, “strange, but *amazingly* hot. Their pricks are....” I stopped in mid thought, the crumpled body of Adelantas suddenly before me, and my throat was as if filled with ashes. I gagged. “My heart *is* dead,” I thought, and hated myself almost as much as I hated Prince Poëstil.

Helias touched my hand, but I drew away. “This alliance you were talking about,” I stammered out, “wouldn’t that simply have to do with defeating Maerdas?”

“Why would *they* join together because of him?” Helias shook his head. “To them, he’s nothing. Or, at least, he ought to be nothing, and certainly nothing to Ra’asiel. What

reason would He have to help Gesryma out with a *Nithaial* gone bad?”

Helias shot a look toward Dracon Wælfyra. “My guess is that the dragon nest knows no more than we do. But the more I think about it, the more I think that the meaning of our visit to the demon Avatar had little to do with our being pursued by Maerdas.” He glanced up at the band around my neck and added softly, “As if that weren’t bad enough.”

I lowered my head and stared into the fire. I didn’t like what he was saying, but I couldn’t argue against it either. “It’s as if halfway through one story we were seized by the scruff of our necks and dragged into another, very different one,” I said. “There, I agree with you completely.

“As to your theory about this god of death, I agree at least that the demon necromancers seem to have tapped into the powers on the other side. That wraith ghoul... I can’t imagine Ra’asiel having anything to do with it. Someone not only had the power to summon *that*, but to force it to go hunting after you.”

Helias leaned over, kissed my neck, and then whispered in my ear, “You do have a brain! And all along I thought you were just another pretty face.”

IN THE END, Dracon Wælfyra agreed to carry Helias as far as Plæcenon, the southernmost of the kingdom’s three great cities. I protested this decision bitterly. I would be all alone in Wisferon until Jessan came, if he *did* come,

camping out in the forest among the rubble of Gostranar, for I didn't have the power now to bring it back into existence.

"I'll safely starve to death there," I moaned, "rain-soaked and bitten by wild animals."

"That would certainly be the case if I brought the two of you there," Dracon Wælfyra agreed. "But by carrying you alone, we can send Helias into Plæcenon for supplies, and I can bear those with us in place of him. You will still be soaked by rain and bitten by wild animals, but at least you won't starve."

"I prefer my dragons without a sense of humor," I said sourly. "What is Helias supposed to do on his own?"

The dragon glanced at him. "His task is to try to get to the *Nithaial Galgaliel* and tell him where you are and what has happened to you," the dragon said. "After all, he can't get to Wisferon by magic yet, and Maerdas will do all he can to stop him from reaching the forest by foot or horseback. Perhaps he will bring an army with him from over the mountains, but my own thought is that he will require a subtler plan."

Dracon Wælfyra half-closed its eyes, then added, "Or, perhaps, a dragon."

"You!" I said, feeling a wave of relief sweep over me.

The dragon nodded. "The nest has decided that I am to stay with you in Wisferon, in case I am needed."

So it was, as soon as darkness fell, that Dracon Wælfyra carried us over the Broken Teeth and soared with us over the plains that bordered the mighty Alsorel, which here

flowed west to the sea. Helias clung hard to me at first, but his grip loosened even as his wonder grew. A small moon came out once we were clear of the mountains, and its light dappled the darkness beneath us with silvery tints, making it seem more like a great piece of mysterious, deftly woven fabric rather than the prosaic countryside it was.

Likewise, a keen and searching eye might have spotted us as we soared past, dark and fast-moving, unlike anything else that traveled the night sky. But that was the risk we had elected to take, now that speed was all. In any case, there was little our enemies could learn from such a spotting that would add to what they already surmised. They knew our choices as well as we did, and would act accordingly.

The country around Plæcenon is richly fertile and well farmed. Wheat fields stretch as far as the eye can see; even the few hills are terraced and planted with vineyards. Even so, there were coppices aplenty, since firewood was always needed, and here and there an unruly burst of real woodlands, hunting preserves of the lordly and those with the wealth to ape their ways.

As dawn crept in, Dracon Wælfyra chose the burnt-out ruins of a farmhouse set just within a wooded verge that bordered a road that went directly to the city. Enough of the building's stone walls were intact to provide us a hiding place, and, most importantly, Helias would have no problem finding us again on his return.

He set out at once, for his would be a long day. When

the soldiers had seized us, they had taken his purse as well, but they had not found the several silver coins sewn into the hem of his shirt. These would prove more than enough to purchase some blankets, cordage, a hatchet, water skins, and other such outdoor gear, as well as enough foodstuffs to sustain me, for taking game was forbidden within the boundaries of the Holy Wood.

I traded shirts with Helias, since his was scored with blood from the lash of the cat-o'-nine-tails the night before. The marks on his back were livid and sore, but he was amazingly cheerful—I suppose because he had ridden a dragon all night and was now about to head off on an important mission. He mussed my hair affectionately when he saw the pain in my eyes, knowing I would be worried sick the whole time he was gone.

“Silly boy,” he whispered in my ear. His kiss was barely fading from my lips when he vanished into the morning mist. I then turned and went to settle in as close to Dracon Wælfyra as I could get, for I was shivering from the chill. The dragon allowed me to settle in against the smooth scales of its neck, and feeling so absurdly safe with its head on one side of me and its body on the other, I forgot my sadness and fell immediately and deeply asleep.

I didn't wake up for several hours, and when I did, I had a desperate need to relieve myself. I made to get up, but the dragon moved its head just enough to pin me where I was. “You'll have to wait a moment,” it said in thought speech.

“Someone is coming.”

And, indeed, a few moments later, when I would have been in mid-piss, I could hear the sound of a horse’s hoofs approaching, then passing us by. The rider, of course, would have no idea that we were here, but I wondered if the horse could sense our presence.

“Yes,” Dracon Wælfyra told me, “but it also knows that I’m not hunting—which, really, is all it *does* comprehend about me—and that all will be well if it just keeps moving. If its rider had decided to rein it in, he would have found his mount suddenly deaf, dumb, and determinedly ignoring him.”

I smiled. “Wouldn’t we be safer, though, if we were deeper in the woods?”

“Go relieve yourself,” the dragon answered. “The road is empty. While you were sleeping, three ox carts laden with hay have gone creaking past and any number of travelers on foot, none of whom felt any inclination to wade through the weeds to pay us a visit.”

I stepped behind a tree, and when I was done, sat down beside the dragon and leaned against the crumbling wall. The sun had burnt away the mist and now the coolness of the shadows was welcome. My stomach rumbled, and I thought with regret of my unfinished supper.

“I could regurgitate something for you, if you wish,” the dragon offered.

I reached out a foot and kicked it. “Save that for your nestlings,” I replied. “But I wouldn’t mind an answer to my

question.”

“I’m not an owl or a falcon,” Dracon Wælfyra said, “and I can’t swoop into a wood through the tangle of branches. We’d have to find a clearing, and clearings often exist for reasons that aren’t always apparent.

“Here,” the dragon slightly moved its head to indicate our present location, “we already know all we need to know. If I sense a troop of soldiers heading our way, we will indeed slip away into the trees. But that’s highly unlikely. All we really need to worry about are skalgür, and Maerdas doesn’t have an unlimited supply of them. I expect those that are hunting for us around here are busy searching out clearings deep in the woods.

“Furthermore, lying here I can lightly mind touch those who pass us by, and so learn what thoughts, if any, are passing through their heads.” The dragon sighed. “Not that peasants are much inclined to think. But I can tell you that none have been questioned about us.”

After this exchange, we fell silent, surrendering to the torpor of the noonday heat. The weeds, their flowering invigorated by the charred earth, played host to countless bees, buzzing in their drunken way from blossom to blossom, while a cloud of tiny flies made a shimmering haze just above them.

I drifted in and out of waking sleep, only snapping out of it when I sensed the dragon’s body tighten. “Did I say we need only worry about skalgür?” it muttered. “By the

sanctity of the nest, I forgot about... *dogs*.”

At that moment, several things happened at once. A dog burst out of the weeds, barking like mad at the dragon. Simultaneously, Dracon Wælfyra shot out its neck and, to my complete astonishment, snapped up the entire animal in its jaws. Almost as quickly, it swung its head sharply and opened its mouth. The dog soared over the weeds for a good distance, then plummeted into them with a thump.

There was a scrambling noise, some very terrified whimpering, and then an explosion of curses. “Dorfa! You bad dog! *What* have you fallen into? It’s *disgusting*. Look, Andras, the damned animal is covered with spit.”

There was a laugh, and another voice said, “Well, next time, cover your mouth before you sneeze.”

This was followed by the sounds of scuffling, then more laughter and mutual taunts as the two youths, as I guessed them to be, passed on down the road.

“That was brilliant,” I said, once they were well past. “If the dog had emerged from the weeds covered with blood—or hadn’t come out at all...”

The dragon, who had rested its head back on the ground, opened one eye. “You know,” it said, consideringly, “I’ve never acquired a taste for dog. All fur and no meat, that’s my experience. So, when I found one in my mouth, my first instinct was to spit it out. My second instinct was to eat its owner—and his friend. But that might have been a bit... messy.” It closed its eye again.

HELIAS RETURNED WELL BEFORE SUNDOWN, having begged a ride on one of the returning hay wagons. What he had bought for me was stuffed into a stout pack, which he refused to let me open.

“We’ll never get it all back in,” he said. “Besides, there’s some surprises, and if you see them now there will be no fun in it. I want to imagine you coming across them when you’re groping around for firesticks in the pouring rain.”

Helias had also purchased a small pack for himself, and from this withdrew a big piece of bread, a chunk of cheese, a small crock of wine, and, lastly, an entire raw beef heart, wrapped clumsily in greased paper.

“I apologize for not bringing you anything more, Dracon Wælfyra,” Helias said, proffering it with a slight bow. “I know this will merely whet your appetite.”

The dragon, however, was quite pleased. “Many thanks, wizard,” it said. “This will at least get the foul taste of dog out of my mouth.” Then, as the dragon chewed on it leisurely, I told Helias about our adventure, as we ourselves ate, sitting shoulder to shoulder against the wall.

“Well, you had more excitement staying here than I did on my whole trip in and out of Plæcenon,” Helias said, after draining the dregs from the crock. “There were no patrols out; the guards at the city gate barely glanced at me when I passed through. Certainly, I had no trouble finding a merchant willing to gossip with a stranger.”

Dracon Wælfyra opened one eye.

“According to him, a great battle has been fought in the western mountains, and the king’s army was routed by the magic of wizards. These are now conspiring to overthrow the Amethyst Throne, which, it is further said, has made alliance with the demons to foil them in this. Prince Poëstil is rumored to have led a small army through the Broken Teeth to join with these same demons to conquer Pharros, so that a navy can be built there to attack the rebel forces in Gedd...”

Helias paused to catch his breath, and as he did so, Dracon Wælfyra closed his eye again, and snorted.

“No mention of Jessan, then?” I asked.


Helias shook his head. “Not exactly,” he replied. “But your question does lead me to the most interesting bit of news I picked up today. Nassazia is in Plæcenon! She has taken up residence in the High Temple of the Sacred Mother, and has summoned the Daughters of the Moon from all parts of the kingdom to come there.

“This alone is an act of defiance against Maerdas, and it has the priests scared silly. But she has also been publicly displaying magic powers—for instance, giving the owl who accompanies her the power of speech.

“Lastly, believe it or not,” and here Helias gave me a wicked grin, “she’s announced that she’s pregnant... with a baby given to her by Gesryma herself.”

The blood drained from my head. I thought at once of Nassazia riding on top of me. “No!” I thought. I looked at

Helias in horror. “It can’t be,” I stammered. “Not me!”

“Hey, not me, either,” Helias replied. “When either boys or girls are admitted to the Order of the Narrow Blade, we have to swallow a potion that makes us sterile. So you and I are both supposedly unable to produce children. But if you do the calculation, it *has* to be one or the other of us.” He hesitated, then added softly, “Or both of us.” 

Chapter 35



DRACON WÆLFYRA STIRRED only when night had fully come and the Star of Fäena shone brightly in the sky above. “It is time for us to go,” it said. “But first we will go down the road a bit to where there is a stream, and drink.”

Helias was sound asleep with his head in my lap. I had been softly stroking his hair, my heart sore with the pain of our coming separation. Each time we were reunited, I felt I could never bear losing him again—and yet here we were, parting again. So I had sat and watched over him as he slept, the late afternoon light spilling onto his body, then slowly fading away.

I lifted his head, slid out from under him, and bent over to kiss him, first on his forehead, then on his lips. He stirred, but the hold sleep had on him was strong—he had not slept since the soldiers had broken into our room the day before. I couldn’t find it in my heart to wake him to say goodbye, fearing the sadness I felt would envelope him as

well. So, I tucked his pack under his head, shouldered my own, and followed after the dragon through the track it had made in the weeds.

Dracon Wælfyra said it would take at least two full nights of flying to reach Wisferon. But the wind was with us the first night, and we traveled a great distance, always within sight of the river Alsorel, for it was now our guide.

For most of the flight, each of us was lost in our own thoughts. When the moon rose, I thought to check the sigil of the Cronnex on my arm. I pulled back my sleeve and there it was, softly aglow, the only part of me still with the power to remind me that I was a *Nithaial*. As I was about to cover my arm again, a cloud skidded in front of the moon, and it gave the silvery lettering an unexpected bluish tinge.

This reminded me of something, and I leant forward to ask, “Dracon Wælfyra, have you also noticed that Helias’s skin has been taking on a bluish tint? It’s hard to see on his face and hands, but this afternoon, when the sunlight fell on his chest at the opening of his shirt, his skin was too blue to be mere pallor.”

“Yes,” the dragon replied, “I noticed it at once.”

“Do you think it is a residue of the spell that Stalcas cast over him?” I asked.

“It is the *result* of the spell, yes,” the dragon answered. “As time passes, his skin will turn completely blue, and his hair will change to silver. Stalcas has left him with an interesting legacy.”

“Dracon Wælfyra,” I cried out, my heart beating fast, “tell me what you know. Don’t torment me like this.”

The dragon sighed. “*Nithaial*, we of the nest know little about this subject, since it does not affect our kind. Do you know of *familiars*, companions to those who practice the black arts?”

“Yes,” I said, “if you mean the crows that often sit on the shoulders of evil wizards or the cats that keep company with witches. Or so it is in the tales.”

“That is what I mean,” the dragon said. “What the tales don’t tell you is how these creatures get their powers. Their masters have contrived to dip them into the River Cyll, across which lies Ais Dysmassia itself. The most powerful necromancers, it is said, bathe in that river themselves, but that means trusting another to first submerge you in that river’s black waters, then pull you out.”

I shuddered. “But how could anyone alive find their way there?” I asked.

“The chosen one must be brought to the verge of death,” Dracon Wælfyra replied somberly, “and then is taken there through the use of powerful spells. If it survives, it provides a conduit for any number of arcane powers, most of them rather unpleasant.

“This immersion affects animals in different ways depending on their species (although it gives them all human speech). Human familiars are the least likely to survive this treatment, but if they do, they change as Helias is changing.”

I began to understand where the dragon was leading me. “That spell that Stalcas cast over Helias....” I said slowly, the words bitter in my mouth. “But why then did he mean to kill him afterwards?”

The dragon flew on for a few moments in silence. “I pondered much on that,” it said. “He would have been far too dangerous to Stalcas to use as a familiar. My guess is that he was using your wizard as a kind of bait. But, before whatever he was fishing for had a chance to leap on it, you arrived.”

“You began to suspect what had happened when Helias asked you those questions about what power controls Ais Dysmassia,” I said. “Before you ever saw the change of color in his skin.”

The dragon grunted in assent. “It was a *very* strange conversation, *Nithaial*, talking to someone who had worked out half the problem in his head, while knowing he would discover the other half when he next looked into a mirror.”

“You had the ability to explain this to him,” I said with a flash of anger, “instead of leaving him to puzzle it out for himself.”

“No,” Dracon Wælfyra answered, “I had no such knowledge. What I tell you now comes from hours of debate within the nest. It was only when I saw that slight tint to his skin this afternoon that I lost all doubt. And at that point, what service would I have done him or you, by revealing any of this? If I had tried, we would still be there—and *that* is a luxury we can no longer afford.”

Before I could reply to this, the dragon abruptly shut off mind contact, thus ending the conversation. But, for the rest of the night, its import kept turning over and over in my mind. Helias now had some sort of access to Ais Dysmassia, but what sort of access? And, conversely, without necromantic training, how vulnerable would *he* be to those who inhabited that place? I began to suspect that Dracon Wælfyra had worried about the same thing, and decided that it would be dangerous to bring him with us to Wisferon—which was precisely why it had said nothing until it was too late.

As we flew through the night, I raged on in silence, furious not at Dracon Wælfyra but about my own helplessness, my blindness, my failure, again and again, to help the person I loved most in the world.

AS WE HAD THE NIGHT BEFORE, we flew on until the arrival of the gray light that presages dawn. This time, Dracon Wælfyra alighted on a small island in the river Alsorel. Most of it was barely above the surface of the water, and it was thickly covered with reeds. A few scraggly trees grew at its center, and there we settled in to wait away the passing of the day.

The morning sun brought the river to life. I had barely finished my meager breakfast when I heard the sounds of barges, many of them. All were laden with goods, some slipping easily downstream, others creeping along in the opposite direction propelled by bargemen shoving on quant poles. I could hear these barges long before they passed by,

because the men sang to the river as they worked—

Sweetest of sisters, Alsorel,
Once more, once more, heave ho!
Soften the current, ease the swell,
Once more, once more, heave ho!
So many leagues await us still,
Once more, once more, heave ho!
And nary a hope to rest a spell,
Heave ho! Heave ho! Heave ho!

Although I had lived in sight of the river all my life, I had never heard the bargemen sing before, and I crept close enough to the edge of the island to watch them through the reeds.

Four of them worked each side of the barge, each stripped to the waist and already glistening with sweat. The bargeman would start at the prow, plunging his pole into the river bottom. (It was forked to keep it from sticking there permanently.) Then, leaning hard against it, he would walk to the stern, each of his steps moving the barge slowly upriver.

I found the sight, the sound of these passages so entrancing that I was loathe to pull myself away, and so tumbled off into sleep right where I was spying on them, unconscious of the darkening clouds that had rolled in by midmorning. But the first heavy drops of rain did wake me up. I was drenching wet by the time I had crawled back to the company of Dracon Wælfyra and the shelter of the few trees. I sat against one of the trunks and wrapped my arms

around my legs, waiting glumly for the water to start dripping through these, as well.

“Can we fly through this?” I asked the dragon.

It lifted its head. “If there’s no thunder or lightning,” it replied, “we shall go ahead. The problem isn’t with the rain but the clouds. I’ll have to fly above them and use the stars to guide us, something at which—unlike the Lustrous Ones—I have little skill.”

“The Lustrous Ones?” I asked.

“The oldest among us,” the dragon explained. “As we dragons age, our scales lighten and become...” I felt it gently prod my mind for the word it wanted, “iridescent. They are the only ones among us who had the freedom to learn and memorize the great map of the heavens.”

“And can’t they still advise you?” I asked.

The dragon snorted. “We shall see. Even the stars change over a thousand years.”

BECAUSE OF THE GLOOM, darkness came early, but Dracon Wælfyra waited until true night arrived. Above the clouds light still lingered, and skalgür still flew. When the sun was truly gone, the darkness was so black that I couldn’t see my hand when it touched my nose.

It was our good fortune (or, perhaps, the dragon’s careful planning) that we were on an island. We felt our way to the water’s edge, I mounted up, and we took off over the river, circling up and up until we broke through the clouds

and found the stars.

Dracon Wælfyra took us due north, but the wind blew from the east, so we were being carried to the west as well—how far it was impossible to tell. When the moon rose, it lit up the clouds below us, and what before had been mere darkness now became a fantastic world of mountains and valleys, unstable and impermanent—a place where landmarks mocked the traveler instead of aiding him.

We flew and flew. I asked Dracon Wælfyra whether we might see the castle of Lord Lissator, which towered high over Lorithar, poking through the clouds. But the dragon replied tersely that these clouds were far higher than any hill, and that it rained equally on the lord and his castle as on the rest of the city. I felt foolish for having asked my question, and kept silent from then on.

Indeed, despite my dulled senses, I could feel that the dragon was vastly uneasy. It swept its head back and forth, trying vainly to find any break in the clouds with which we might take a bearing. Here the stars were no help, and neither, it seemed, was the advice from the Lustrous Ones, if any was offered.

I could only comfort myself by thinking that we could hardly fly past Wisferon. The worst that could happen is that we would find ourselves to the east of it, a place that, as best as I could remember, was mostly wild and unsettled. To the east, of course, on the far side of the Alsorel were the Plains of the Lhennad, another vast and empty place. It was

only when one was well past the Holy Wood that one came to the great city of Tarrusor, where lived the king.

The moon was now half full, hardly bright enough for me to see the cloud cover beneath us very clearly. Even so, a large circular patch of it seemed to be rotating just ahead of us. As it did so, a clear patch appeared in its center, a tiny black dot at first, but then larger and larger. Dracon Wælfyra also must have seen it, swiftly changing course so as to fly to one side of it. But the opening eye was even quicker—as fast as we flew, we couldn't outrace the huge darkness spreading out beneath us.


Then came an explosion of blinding light, harsh and brilliant. Its color—a sickly greenish white—was somehow familiar to me, and the reason came unprompted from my memory. On that night last winter when I had ridden away from my meeting with Gesryma of the Blessed Name, I had seen just this sort of light illuminating the sky. It had come from Gorzungâd, and in its brightness I had discerned—at that distance, seeming like a cloud of flies—a host of...

"Skalgür!" I cried out, half in terror, half in warning. These foul beasts never fly at night, but Maerdas had found the solution to that—a huge ball of fellfire ignited at the very top of his dark tower, burning as bright as the sun. And they were already around us, shot aloft by the updraft from the fellfire's heat.

Dracon Wælfyra pulled back its head as one of the skalgür swooped down at it, and engulfed the thing in a blast

of flame. The light from this revealed that the thing was carrying some kind of pack strapped to its chest, as was the one that appeared beside it, veering away to avoid the flames.

Just then the first skalgür exploded and, as it did, set off the pack strapped to the one close beside it as well. The combined blast struck the dragon with full force before it had a chance to close its mouth. Instantly, the fire glands in its throat ignited, with terrible consequences. One moment the dragon was fiercely alive; in the next, it was inert, headless, and plunging toward the earth as gouts of blood from its ruptured neck spurted all over me.

A flick of an instant later, I felt a terrible stabbing pain as the claws of a skalgür snatched me up. As I reached out futilely to grasp hold of what was left of Dracon Wælfyra, I heard a distant screaming. My fingers, of course, found no purchase—I barely managed to touch the dragon before it plummeted out of reach and then, almost in a heartbeat, out of sight. The skalgür, its wings straining, swooped down dangerously fast toward the looming battlements of Gorzungâd. The screams continued, and in a dull, almost disinterested way, I realized that they were coming from me. 

end of book two