

CHAPTER ONE - JEZZIL

A gleam of westering sun pierced the dimness of the forest, turning the light from emerald to pale jade tinged with gold. Jezzil squinted, momentarily dazzled, then straightened in his saddle. Ahead of him lay shorter trees, scraggly underbrush, then the amber gleam of late summer crops. The climate was mild, this far south. The people of Taenareth were justifiably proud of their clement winters. The young Chonao warrior regarded the vista ahead with satisfaction and a touch of relief. At last! I was beginning to think we'd have to ride through this forest until the end of time.

His knees tightened fractionally as his hands closed on the reins. Beneath him, Falar halted as smoothly as flowing water. Jezzil raised a hand, and the men behind him halted. The young Chonao warrior had been raised in the fertile, forested lowlands of Ktavao, and his experience with this kind of terrain had led the Captain to appoint the young man the lead scout for this mission -- an assignment he'd now completed successfully.

Ahead of them lay a stone fortress at the top of a hill, surrounded by a wide moat. This was their destination...the stronghold of m'Banak. Their orders were to take it before sunrise the next morning, take it by stealth, from within. They were the pen jav dal, the Silent Ones, the elite of the Chonao forces. Their leader, the Redai of Chonao, had led his invasionary forces across the Eastern Sea, bent on the conquest of the large, fertile isle called Taenareth. They'd landed a week ago at

Fiere, then ridden north. m'Banak was the last, unfallen fortress in the north. If they took it, the Redai's victory would be complete.

Gardal, Jezzil's Amato, urged his gelding up beside the younger man, then both Chonao dismounted, leaving their mounts' reins dangling as a signal to stay. Placing a finger to his lips, Jezzil beckoned, and both men picked a soundless path through the underbrush until they were crouched at the edge of the forest, staring up at their destination.

m'Banak's stone domes and slender timbered spires stood outlined against the reddening gleams of sunset. The fortress stood straight and proud, like a warrior on guard...and rightly so. m'Banak was the heart of the Taenareth defenses. The Redai, Kerezau, had beaten the island's forces in every battle since they'd landed, but the island's ruler had fled to this spot, the most secure in his land. A massive water channel surrounded the hill, a channel cut, some said, by sorcery. Rumor also had it that the dark waters hosted strange creatures swimming in their depths.

"So that's where Zajares is holed up..." Gardal muttered, half to himself. "A snug den, for an old fox."

Jezzil pulled off his helm, enjoying the play of breeze across his scalp, and pushed a sweaty lock of dark brown hair off his forehead. His green eyes narrowed. "It won't be easy, getting inside, much less getting close enough to Zajares to take him out. How many troops does Intelligence say he has in there with him? How many pistols and muskets?"

"A full Company is assigned here to guard Zajares," Gardal said. "But Intelligence says he's been sending out raiding parties, preparing for a siege. So there's no telling how many are actually in there with him. He has firearms, but his powder supply is very low. Enough for a few volleys, perhaps. Not enough for heavy artillery." Gardal's eyes narrowed as the grizzled Amato studied the fortress. "And it's not like he'll have a chance to use cannon."

Jezzil nodded. The information about the lack of powder came as no surprise. The Redai had cut Zajares' supply lines weeks ago. "So he could have a hundred soldiers," he said. "We're outnumbered."

"The Pen Jav Dal often are," Gardal pointed out, truthfully. "But a surplus of troops can work

to our advantage, youngster."

Jezzil gave him a quizzical glance that he barely kept from being openly skeptical. "How, sir?"

"The more of them there are to be thrown into chaos, the greater that chaos will be," Gardal replied. "The first thing we must do is make them see what is not there."

"But, sir..." Jezzil struggled to phrase his question so it would not seem insubordinate, "we have no Caster with us. How can we create an illusion?"

Gardal sighed, shaking his head reprovingly. "Youngster, what are they teaching you nowadays, eh? The Silent Ones can make enemies see what they want them to see, believe what we want them to believe, whether we do it by magic, or by stealth and guile. Haven't they taught you that yet?"

Jezzil flushed at the reproof. "Of course, sir. I know that. It just...slipped my mind."

Gardal gave him a wry glance. "How many missions have you been on, youngster?"

The scout took a deep breath. "This is my second, sir. Don't worry, I'm ready for this." He patted the pommel of his short, slightly curved sword. "By dawn, this place will be the Reidai's for the taking."

His officer nodded. "That's the spirit, Risore Jezzil. You and Risore Barus come from the same Company, yes?"

Jezzil nodded. "We do, Amato. Barus and I have known each other since our first days in ranks. He is my best friend."

Gardal nodded. "You both speak Taenarian? You work well together?"

"We both speak it, sir. And we trust each other as we trust ourselves."

"Good. You will need that kind of trust, Risore, because I am sending the two of you in first. You will be responsible for scouting a way across that moat and into the fortress. You will locate Zajares's quarters and determine how many men he has guarding him there. You will make recommendations as to how we can carry out our orders to assassinate Zajares and open the fortress to the Reidai's onslaught. Understood?"

Jezzil squared his shoulders, his green eyes shining at the honor his Amato was bestowing

upon him. He threw the officer his best formal salute. "Yes, Amato! I am grateful for the honor, sir!"

Gardal returned the salute. "Ease up. You may not thank me an hour from now -- that fortress won't fall into your lap like an overripe pluma. Now get Risore Barus up here and plan your foray."

"Yes, sir!"

Quickly, the young man headed back through the trees to where the thirty members of the scouting and infiltration party were waiting. He was very conscious of the honor Gardal was giving him in allowing him to plan this raid. If he were successful, it might mean a step up in rank -- possibly even a commendation from the Reidai himself. The 49 other Chonao were gathered together, having taken the opportunity to water their mounts from a tiny creek that threaded through the forest. Falar had her head turned, obviously scenting the water, but still obedient to her master's command to "Stay." The Chonao felt a surge of pride. The Chonao horses were the best in the world, and his mare was the best of the best.

The young Risore was the fourth son of a nobleman whose vast estates included many acres given over to the raising of some of the finest horses in all of Chonao territory. Falar had been by his best stud, out of his finest broodmare. She was not as tall and fine-boned as a Pelanese racer, but she was far more delicately built than the sturdy horses from the Chonao steppes that the other party members rode. With her smoky dapples, dark mane, tail, and points, she was a beauty, from her wide-set dark eyes, to her small ears that nearly touched as she pricked them up upon hearing her master's step.

"Are you thirsty, lady?" Jezzil murmured, in his southern dialect, picking up the reins. Falar whuffled assent, turning her head deliberately toward the water. Her master led her to the tiny stream, then slipped the bit from her mouth so she might drink freely. As the mare sniffed delicately, then began to gulp the water, her ears moving with each swallow, Jezzil beckoned Barus over. Signaling his own mount to "stay," his friend did so.

Barus was shorter and slighter than Jezzil, with the swarthy skin of a steppe-dweller. His slim, wiry build made him look almost inconsequential when at rest, but he was a master at both armed and

unarmed combat; he had the quickest reflexes Jezzil had ever seen. Barus's lank sable hair was longer than his friend's shoulder-length, and had to be elaborately braided and pinned to fit beneath his close-fitting helm. "What's up?" he asked quietly.

Jezzil jerked his chin at the distant fortress. "The Amato has assigned the two of us to scout the place and help plan the attack."

Barus's dark eyes lit up, and his teeth flashed briefly in a broad grin. "Superb! I can hardly wait!"

Jezzil's mouth twitched. "Contain yourself. There are over a hundred soldiers quartered there, guarding Zajares."

The junior officer dismissed the thought with a flick of his left hand in a rude gesture. "We are the Silent Ones. We'll cut their throats before they even know we're among them. This is a great opportunity for us. If we do well..."

Jezzil nodded. "My thought exactly."

The two scouts quickly checked their weapons and armor, abandoning their swords for the moment in favor of several knives and throwing discs of assorted sizes which they concealed in sheaths and holders concealed beneath their loose-fitting tunics and trousers. Jezzil slipped a vial of poison into the holder sewn into the top of his riding boot, where it was concealed by the thick tooling on the outside calf. Gathering his shoulder-length hair in his hand, he secured it with a leather thong, then wound a coil of cutting wire around the thong so it appeared to be held by a silvery mesh clasp. He tucked the leather-bound free ends under, concealing them. His leather wrist guards could also be unwound and used as strangling cords.

All the while he was doing this, the words of the training song all cadets learned in their first year of schooling ran through his head. The song was called, "The Arming Rhyme of the Silent Ones" and went like this:

Arming Rhyme of the Silent Ones

Helmet rivet solid, plates without a crack

Body armor fastened, front and side and back

Neck and arms and body, free to stoop or stand

Weapons in their scabbards, ready to the hand.

Check if blades are solid; pommel, grip and guard

Weapon belts all fastened? Check them quick and hard

Jump and see what rattles. Tie and pad it fast

Second chances never come. Fool's luck doesn't last!

Check the shadow weapons, set and out of sight

Steel and cord and poisons, stopped and fastened tight

Skin and face all darkened, metal dulled of shine.

What's your ordered mission? What's your place and time?

What's the secondary plan? What way in and out?

Where's the second rally point? What's the hidden route?

Feet and hands are weapons, but number one's your head.

Stay relaxed and use it, and you may not end up dead.

As the final words ran through Jezzil's mind, he slipped two ruby studs into the holes in his left earlobe. Each stud had a tiny drop of a powerful soporific coating the inside shaft that was inserted into the thicker, outside wire. All the young Chonao had to do was twist the inner shaft free of the outer sheath, and he held a tiny, sharp, potent dart. One pinprick would be enough to fell a strong

opponent in less than two minutes.

Falar whuffled softly and bunted him gently as he loosened her girth and tethered her close to a bush with succulent leaves. "I'll be back, lady," he told her, stroking her satiny neck for a moment. "Wait here for me. Stay."

Then the two scouts, clad in their traditional garb that was the color of shadow, eased out of the forest. Meadows encircled the hill where the fortress stood, and the two young warriors moved quickly across them, until they came to the narrow fringe of trees and undergrowth that had sprung up on the bank of the moat.

Barus and Jezzil crouched in the shadow of a scrubby oak and stared up at the fortress. The sun had set, and twilight gathered around it like a dark cloak. The spires that had appeared so proud and stately in the sunlight now looked blade-like and forbidding. The stone domes seemed to hunker down between the spires like animals hiding in burrows. Jezzil, who had a lively imagination that he tried sternly to ignore -- too vivid an imagination was a drawback for a soldier -- repressed a shiver.

"Let's get on with it," Barus said, his voice barely a breath on the evening air. "We know what we're looking for."

The two Chonao began a systematic search in the waning light. Each was equipped with a night lantern, should that become necessary, but both young men had excellent eyesight, and they found what they were seeking before the last light had faded away.

A trapdoor, set into a tiny clearing, was carefully camouflaged with cut brush that must have been replenished only yesterday. Most men would have walked past it without noticing the droop of the leaves, but the Silent Ones were well-trained in ferreting out secrets. A moment's investigation revealed the cut branches and the wooden slabs set flush with the ground.

"No ring," Barus said, staring down at the uncovered trapdoor with a frown.

"Of course not," Jezzil said. "They don't want anyone using it to get in, they just want to make sure they can get out."

"We'll have to dig and lever it up," Barus said. "And that's going to make noise. I'll give you

good odds there's a sentry down there."

"No doubt," Jezzil agreed. "There's probably another at the exit on the other side of the moat. We'll have to take care of both of them before we can get into the fortress."

Barus glanced around the clearing, evaluating it as a site for an ambush. "You start digging, and I'll take care of him when he appears."

Jezzil opened his mouth to protest, then shut it and shrugged. Barus was a better swordsman and hand-to-hand fighter than he was, even on his best day. The steppe warrior was the acknowledged champion of the troop. "Oh, very well," he said gruffly, but he was conscious of a stab of relief. Jezzil had been in two battles and had fought hard, but there was a difference in deliberately luring a man to his death by stealth, rather than killing him in open warfare. Besides, as long as the job was done, and done well, who was he to protest?

Walking over to the concealed door, Jezzil dropped to one knee and began hacking at the dirt on the opening side with the point of his dagger. There had been little rain for weeks, so it was as hard as stone, but crumbled once it was loosened. He made no effort to disguise the scraping noises he made.

The young Chonao had a brief moment of apprehension, then; what if the sentry sent for reinforcements before coming up to investigate? But surely the man would want to assure himself that there wasn't some animal up here digging...

His reasoning was borne out a second later when the door suddenly burst open and an armed guard catapulted himself out of the ground.

Jezzil fell back with a half-genuine squawk of dismay, deliberately lost his footing, and went sprawling onto his backside, scrabbling to put distance between himself and the guard. He had only a moment to glimpse a bared sword in the other's hand before a dark shadow flowed across the little clearing and merged with the guard's moving figure. The man was jerked back on his heels, and had barely time for one muted gasp before he dropped limply to the ground.

Barus stood where the man had been, a broad smile on his face, his garroting wire swinging from his hand. Red droplets flowed along it. "You make a perfect decoy, my friend," he said

admiringly, extending a gauntleted hand down to help his partner to his feet. "You chose the wrong profession. You should be on the stage. I've never seen anyone look both stupid and scared more convincingly."

Jezzil chuckled a little hollowly as he stared down at the fallen sentry. The body gave one final twitch, then lay still.

"We've got to hide him, before he's missed," he said.

Barus nodded, then eyed the prone figure measuringly. "He's closer to your size. Take his armor and surcoat. We'll dump him in the moat."

Carefully, Jezzil turned the sentry over and began tugging at the fastenings. Barus had slipped the garroting wire in so expertly that there was little blood, only a few drops stained the top of the surcoat. He donned the armor, concealing his own weapons beneath the scout's metal-studded leather kilt. Buckling on the short, straight Taenarith sword, he slapped the helm on his head. "How do I look?"

Barus studied him critically. "Stay in the shadows," he advised. "In a dim light, you'll pass."

Quickly, the two scouts grabbed the stripped body and carried it down the bank of the moat. After listening for a moment, they swung it back and forth, then sent it splashing into the dark waters, where it sank with scarcely a bubble or ripple.

"They say --" Jezzil began, only to fall silent and step back hastily as a monstrous, barely seen form slid past in the black water.

"Wh--What was that?" Barus sounded, for once, faintly unnerved.

"I was about to tell you. They say there are monsters in the moat."

"I would say they are correct," muttered Barus. "I wouldn't swim across that thing for a year's pay."

Returning to the trapdoor, the scouts levered it up out of its frame, and prepared to descend into the torchlit tunnel at the bottom of the ladder. "You first," Barus said. "If you meet anyone, don't try to talk to him. Your accent would give you away."

Jezzil gave his friend an exasperated glance. "I know that. Stop treating me like a first-year

recruit."

"Sorry," Barus muttered.

The Chonao warriors made their way along a stone-blocked tunnel. Green ooze and the faint sheen of oily water stained the sloping walls, ceiling and floor, making the footing treacherous. They did not speak, only conversed in the pen jav dal's language of signed gestures.

When the tunnel began sloping upward, obviously nearing its end, Jezzil gestured for Barus to stay behind him. His friend gave him a quick "victory" gesture with thumb and two fingers, and dropped back.

Jezzil eased forward, inwardly cursing the clumsy Taenarith boots that made squelching noises in the wet muck on the floor. Mentally, he assessed the armor he had donned, calculating its weak points. The metal strips studding the boiled leather shirt started several inches above the belt...

Flexing his right wrist and little finger, he felt the blade strapped to the inside of his forearm ease downward. A hard squeeze and twist would send it sliding down into his waiting grasp.

The guard at the top of the slope turned as he heard a faint splash. Seeing Jezzil, he visibly tensed. "What's going on? It's not time for shift-change."

Jezzil shook his head grimly within the concealing shadow of the helm, and, turning, pointed back down the tunnel-way. "What did you say?" he mumbled in Taenarian, careful to keep his voice muffled so it echoed oddly in the tunnel.

"What?" asked the guard, coming toward him. "Speak up, Carad!"

Jezzil coughed, clearing his throat like a man who was catching a rheum from the dank air. Just as the man reached him, he bent over, hawked and spat. When he straightened, the knife was in his hand, a muted metal flash in the torchlit dimness. Jezzil put the entire force of his body into the thrust; the razor-honed blade entered the sentry's body just above his heavy belt, stabbing upward through leather, flesh and viscera in one swift stroke. Jezzil's aim was exact; the blade found its target in the left chamber of the man's heart.

The sentry gasped with the force of the blow, gurgled once, and sagged, dead already.

Jezzil stepped back, yanking his blade free with a practiced gesture, then, feeling a slight queasiness in his middle, he stood looking down at the blood soaking his gauntlet and dripping off his knife. He'd practiced that stroke thousands of times in sparring practice or against wood and sawdust dummies, but had never before used it on another living being.

"Nice work," Barus commented, grinning broadly. "Almost as smooth as if I'd done it. Next time twist your wrist a little harder to the right, and you can get both chambers. Even quicker that way."

"We'd better get rid of the body," Jezzil said. "Do you want to put on the armor?"

Barus turned the man over and regarded the blood-soaked form measuringly. "No, too stained," he said. "You stay here, so they'll think the sentry is still on duty, and I'll scout the fortress, count how many troops."

Jezzil nodded, and, together, they lugged the body out of the tunnel and dumped it into the moat, where, as before, it barely sank before something they could only glimpse was upon it.

Then Jezzil took up "his" station, while Barus stole into the fortress.

The young Chonao fretted as he stood guard, his unfortunate imagination presenting him with images of Barus discovered, attacked, killed, and m'Banak alerted and impossible to take from within - their mission a total failure.

Nobody came near him. Jezzil had little way to judge the passing of the time; only his increasing need to relieve himself made him guess that nearly an hour had passed before a gray shadow flowed down the ladder leading up into m'Banak.

Jezzil repressed a sigh of relief. "What took you so long?"

Barus gave him a quizzical glance. "I came and went as quickly as I could. What's wrong? Place giving you the jumps?"

"Of course not," Jezzil snapped. "Are you ready to report?"

Barus nodded. "Zajares is quartered in the west dome, on the top floor. The guards are all wearing surcoats with his insignia, just as intelligence said. If we put on those ones we brought with us, taken from those prisoners, we can march right in."

"How many?"

"No more than sixty. They've got patrols out, all right."

"What if one of those patrols returns while we're attacking?"

Barus made a dismissive gesture. "You worry too much."

"What about the security surrounding Zajares?"

His friend shook his head. "That will be harder," he admitted. "They change the passwords with every shift of the guard. But we should be able to divide our force, set fire to the Main Hall, and use that as a diversion. Then we'll just have to deal with Zajares's personal guard. The door's locked, but we can handle that. We'll get in, never fear, youngster."

Jezzil glared at his friend. Barus was a year older than he, and never let the younger Chonao forget it.

"You'd better get back to Gardal and report. I'll stay here," Jezzil said, with a swift glance up the ladder. "Try to bring the troop in before midnight. I'm betting that's when the guard changes."

"Likely," Barus agreed. "We've got at least two hours before then. We should make it."

"Don't forget to bring my blade. I don't want to have to fight with this," Jezzil said, resting his hand on the pommel of the Taenarith sword. "Clumsy thing."

"You said it," Barus nodded. "Don't worry, I won't forget."

"Good. Hurry."

When his friend was gone, Jezzil walked a little way down to tunnel to relieve himself, then waited impatiently, striding back and forth to keep warm in the dankness of the tunnel. He found the sentry's half-eaten supper and drank the half-cup of overly sweet wine, then chewed determinedly at the tough, grainy bread and nearly tasteless cheese. Even though he was not hungry, he knew the food would give him energy.

The faint sound of footsteps finally reached his ears, and he straightened, hand on his weapon. Recognizing his Amato in the lead, he saluted briskly, and signed, "Quiet here, sir."

Gardal's fingers moved in answer. "Good. Follow me, Risore."

Jezzil joined the small troop of soldiers, all clad in surcoats taken from captured Taenarith soldiers. His heart hammering, the young Chonao fell into step beside Barus, who handed him his sword. As he belted it on, the other Risore gave him an excited grin and a wink.

The troop of Silent Ones climbed the ladder leading into Zajares's stronghold. They found themselves in a small wooden guard chamber. Outside lay a courtyard. Sentries were stationed on the walls surrounding the fortress, but the doors leading into the stronghold were unguarded. Barus, with Jezzil beside him, moved up to take the lead.

Soft-footed, the Silent Ones scattered and crossed the courtyard, unseen. Stealth was their speciality; each warrior melted into the shadows like something spawned from the darkness. The sentries never heard a thing as the pen jav dal crossed the hard-packed surface.

Barus led them to the western dome. Gardal signaled to the young Risore to take twenty of the men and head right, into the main hall. Jezzil knew the plan. They would fire the hall, making it appear as though there was a troop rebellion in progress.

The other thirty Silent Ones followed their Amato into the western dome. They waited in the corridor, around the curve of the corridor, backs pressed against the stone, for their signal to begin the planned attack.

Despite the chill air, Jezzil was sweating, and he was vaguely sorry he'd eaten. The food roiled uncertainly in his stomach, and the wavering dance of the smoky torches added to his queasiness. He couldn't stop remembering the way it had felt when his knife had punched upward through the sentry's vitals, ending his life.

He'd had a name. Carad. Had he had a mother, father, perhaps brothers and sisters? Or a wife, children? Was he young, or old? Jezzil hadn't taken off his helmet. He would never know.

As they waited, breathing shallowly, evenly, every muscle poised to explode into action, they heard shouts and crashes from behind them, in the direction of the main hall. The others were doing their part.

A minute or so later, a dozen or more guards came thundering down the ancient wooden staircase, shouting harried orders and directions at each other:

"Buckets! Get them from the stables!"

"You, Ranla, stand by at the well!"

"Weapons at the ready! This is sabotage!"

"I told you Adlat wasn't to be trusted!"

As Zajares's men charged around the corner, the pen jav dal were ready. Blades flashed, throwing discs whizzed. Meaty thunks, grunts, and a muffled scream or two --

-- and it was done. Fourteen guards lay dead. Gardal's troops made no effort to hide their bodies. At this stage in their attack, they wanted their work to be seen, to strike fear into the hearts of Zajares's soldiers. The troop merely pulled the bodies out of the way, stacking them up along the wall to leave a clear path, should a retreat be necessary.

All the while the sounds behind them had intensified. Jezzil smelled smoke, then heard the pound of running feet. He checked his fighting stance, then relaxed as he heard a familiar whistled signal. Moments later, Barus and the others appeared and saluted quickly.

Mission accomplished, the young Risore signaled.

Gardal acknowledged the message, then the Amato pointed to the rightmost corridor, making a questioning sign. The young Chonao scout nodded. Zajares's quarters lay in that direction. At Gardal's signal, the Silent Ones followed their Amato deeper into m'Banak.

In response to a silent order, Jezzil and two other men grabbed torches off the wall and fired the next two rooms they came to. The main structure was stone, and would not burn, but there was plenty of wood around, and oil lamps to kindle it with.

Barus pointed to a stairway, then the young Risore's hands moved in quick gestures.

"Upstairs. Zajares has the uppermost apartment, right beneath the dome. There's a back stairway down to the courtyard, the one I told you about."

Gardal nodded. "Let's go," he signaled.

With Barus in the lead, the Silent Ones raced up the stairs. Twice they had to pause, and each time when they moved on a guard's body was shoved to the side. The stairs dead-ended in a

huge, timbered door. Barus stood before it. "Locked," he signaled.

Something flashed in Gardal's hand, and the Amato positioned himself before the massive timbered portal. His fingers moved, twisted, slid, twisted...and the door swung open.

Gardal did not hesitate. He opened the door halfway, using his body to block off the sight of the troop, and began yelling at the occupants. "Help! They've turned against us!" he screamed, his Taenarian accent perfect. "Adlat has rallied them!"

A babble of questions and orders followed. Gardal's fingers moved in a quick signal, then, without warning, he kicked the door all the way open and leaped in, with his troop on his heels.

So far, Gardal's bluff had worked -- but the officer in charge was no idiot. The moment he got a clear view of the newcomers, he shouted, "Kill them! They're Chonao! Call for reinforcements!"

Chaos erupted around Jezzil as the guards fired their pistols. Several Chonao went down. Jezzil tried to stay beside Barus, but they were quickly separated. Chairs and furniture went flying, as the Taenarith guardsmen surged forward. Men shouted battle cries and curses, and someone was blowing a horn. He tried to listen for Gardal's voice, but couldn't make it out. Jezzil realized he was nearly surrounded by Taenarith troops. So far they had taken him for one of their own, probably because of his stolen armor and helmet.

A hard blow resounded against Jezzil's helm, and he found himself almost engaged with one of his own troop! Quickly, he shouted at Darin in Chonao, then yanked off the helm to prevent being attacked again. A blade whizzed by his ear, nearly cutting it off, and Jezzil whirled, his sword at the ready.

He found himself engaged with a burly Taenarith guardsman, fighting to stay on his feet and not trip over broken furniture or other men. The man attacked furiously, and Jezzil forced himself to concentrate on watching for an opening in his guard. All around him the Chonao forces were similarly occupied, and he was constantly being shoved and bumped. The young Risore drew his dagger and used it to parry thrusts aimed at his left side. His curved blade flashed in the light of ruby-crystal lamps hung from the domed ceiling on silver chains as he fought.

There was a loud crash behind him, then a man's shriek. Jezzil smelled smoke, guessed that

someone had knocked over a lamp and started a fire. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a flash of yellow. The tapestries were alight.

His opponent was immensely strong, but Jezzil was faster, far faster. The young Chonao forced himself to concentrate on the work at hand, and a few strokes later, an opportunity presented itself. He did not even have to think about it; his blade turned and sought out the opening in the man's guard, slipped through, and slid neatly into his throat like an extension of his arm. Jezzil gave his wrist a quick twist, then smoothly disengaged and looked for another Taenarith.

Smoke stung his eyes. The shouting intensified, suddenly, behind him. There seemed to be more Taenarith than before -- where had they all come from? Jezzil turned in time to see the door behind him, that presumably led into Zajares's bedchamber, slam back on its hinges. Armed figures poured out through the veil of smoke. Jezzil leaped forward, his sword at the ready.

The din was incredible, and it was nearly impossible to tell friend from foe in the welter of fighting bodies and the haze of smoke. A sword rang against Jezzil's and he halfturned to engage again. A pale figure, short, half-wreathed in smoke...

Parrying automatically, the Chonao blinked sweat and smoke-born tears out of his eyes, trying to clear his blurred vision. At that moment, a gust of fresher air swept past his face, parting the clouds of smoke. Jezzil's eyes widened as he caught sight of his new opponent.

She was small, lovely, and naked.

Jezzil hesitated, completely taken aback. He had never fought a woman opponent; indeed, as a pen jav dal, he was sworn to celibacy as a novice priest of the warrior's god, Arenar. He would serve Arenar as a soldier until he became too old or crippled to fight, then live out his days as a full-fledged priest. Women, especially naked ones, were completely outside his experience.

Yet despite his training, his years of conditioning to reject and despise females, he was still a man, and he could not help noting her beauty -- her long black hair that rippled as she moved, the brown circles that surrounded erect nipples and the dark thatch of hair between her legs. She must have realized her effect on him, for her teeth shone in a savage grin as she lunged at him inexpertly, swinging the huge sword that was far too heavy and long for her to wield.

Jezzil parried again, automatically. He could not fight her, he decided. It would be butchery. She was scarcely more than a child, she knew nothing of weapons...and she was so beautiful. It would be unthinkable to slay her. He blinked stinging sweat from his eyes, forcing himself not to stare at her breasts, her sex. In all his life he had never seen a woman naked, and the sight fascinated him, the way a snake's swaying form fascinated a tree vole. He parried another clumsy lunge, his mind formulating strategies for disarming her. There was no doubt in his mind that she would not give up; her entire countenance fairly shouted determination. He admired her courage, even as he twisted his wrist, his blade engaging, then twisting hers from her grasp.

The girl gasped and made a frantic lunge for the sword that was already falling. As she did so, Jezzil found himself shoved violently from behind. His weapon, still extended, pierced her left breast, and her own impetus spitted her on the blade past any hope of survival.

Shocked, Jezzil jerked back, retreating from the spurt of crimson that followed his blade's exit path. He had one final glimpse of her, eyes wide and accusing, before she fell forward and was lost amid the surging melee of struggling bodies.

Even as he stood gaping, he caught a blur of movement out of the corner of his eyes. Only years of training saved him; without having to think about it, he tucked and rolled away from the sweeping slash that would have turned his head into a wall-trophy. Coming up to his feet, blade in hand, he engaged for a moment with his opponent before he recognized Barus, even as his friend did likewise. "Sorry!" his comrade shouted, his wide, infectious grin nearly splitting his sweaty features, "Damned smoke's in my eyes! We should --"

Jezzil caught another blur of motion, and leapt forward, but was a fraction of a second too late to deflect the mace that thudded against his friend's helmet. Scarlet blossomed beneath the steel, even as Jezzil's sword pierced the throat of Barus's attacker.

Grief-stricken, Jezzil shouted, "Barus!" and threw himself toward his friend. At the same moment a screaming, flaming form hurtled across the room and crashed into him, writhing and shrieking. Jezzil shoved the dying warrior away violently, then tried again to reach Barus, but dead and dying bodies were everywhere, and he had lost his sense of direction. As he peered desperately

through the smoke, Jezzil was horrified to realize he was the only Chonao still standing. His comrades lay strewn around him like straws from a child's pick-up game.

Gasping, half-sobbing, Jezzil focused on his Amato's features, grimacing horribly above the gaping red maw that had been his throat. Some of the Taenarith were still alive, and he knew what Gardal would decree he should do: fight to the death and take as many of his comrades' slayers with him as he could.

Jezzil gripped his sword hilt in suddenly nerveless fingers. Across the smoke-wreathed room, one of the enemy had caught sight of him, shouted an order, and three of them staggered towards him, tripping on the bodies of the slain.

Stay and fight! his brain ordered, but his body would not listen. Whirling, Jezzil bolted away from them, seeking escape, shelter, refuge -- he didn't want to die! His mind kept yammering at him to obey his training, to turn and fight, but the panic driving his body was too strong. He tripped over something, looked down, saw a severed arm still clutching a sword, and a shriek burst from his throat unbidden.

Reaching an arras, he yanked it aside, searching for a door, but found none. The shouts of the Taenarith warriors came closer and closer, and he knew he was done for, and part of him was glad. He was a coward, after all, and did not deserve to live.

As he edged along the stone wall, gulping desperately at the cleaner air that had been trapped behind the arras, Jezzil saw a hand grab the curtain and jerk it violently. The entire drapery came tumbling down.

The young Chonao closed his eyes as the folds descended, and, with every particle of his being, willed himself to invisibility. It was a silly thing to do, he knew only too well he was no Caster, but in a moment they would see him, and he would be spitted on their blades like a piglet, and he did NOT want to die, he wanted only to vanish, to disappear, to --

The last of the concealing folds pulled free, and the Chonao braced himself to feel steel sheathe itself in his vitals. He had gone beyond fear, now, and seemed to be floating somewhere in a

state of agonized but passive expectation. He braced himself...

And nothing happened.

After a few moments, Jezzil opened his eyes, only to find himself confronting the three Taenarith. The central one was barely a foot away, his head moving from side to side as he scanned the area where Jezzil was standing. Then turning to the soldier on the right, he growled, "Where'd he go?"

The man he addressed shrugged elaborately, then pointed to the window in the next room with a questioning expression.

It was only then that Jezzil realized what was happening, and that knowledge shook him to his core.

They couldn't see him.

By Arenar's balls, they couldn't see him! He, Jezzil of the Chonao, was a Caster, one who could cloud the mind of others with illusion, make them not-see what was before them. Some Casters could even Cast illusions and make others see things that were not there. But...how was this possible? The ability usually surfaced when the caster was young, ten, or twelve...

Jezzil's mind wavered, then reeled at the knowledge --

-- and the man before him suddenly blinked, eyes going wide. With a baffled roar, he swung his morningstar at the Chonao. Even as Jezzil's trained reflexes took over, and he dodged and ducked automatically, his mind was spinning, and he was trying frantically to re-gain the Casting.

With a shout, the three Taenarith were after him, and he blundered through the room, tripping over bodies, feeling the flames lick at him from the walls. By now half the fortress must be alight, he realized.

With a last, frantic effort, he dived through the door into the next chamber, and went rolling across the floor. Flame seared him; the bedclothes were on fire. Hearing the pound of feet approaching the entrance, he concentrated, willing, grasping and holding that center of passive calm, will beyond conscious thought, fear so great it went beyond panic into strength and calm...

And this time he could feel the Casting settle over him like a muffling blanket of invisibility.

The guards charged into the room and went rampaging around, roaring like dune-cats cheated of prey. Holding the Casting firm in his mind, as he would have gripped the hilt of his sword to defend himself physically, Jezzil rose to his feet, careful to make no sound. He had no idea whether the Casting would cloak him from their ears, but intended to take no chances.

His heart thudding with the effort of holding the Casting around him, sweat pouring off him as though he'd run a league in full armor under a summer sun, he moved cautiously over to the high, barred window. He noted with a stab of relief that the bars were set in a framework that could be swung inward.

The guards, not seeing their quarry, withdrew to the doorway and huddled there for a moment, whispering uneasily. Then, making The Sign against demonic possession, they vanished into the smoke.

With a gasp, Jezzil released the Casting, and reached for the pin holding the barred window shut. When he had it open, he shoved a chest, already sparking and smoldering, into place beneath it and climbed up.

Below him -- far, far below him -- lapped the waters of the moat. The Chonao remembered those half-seen shapes and nearly gagged with fear, but he knew this was his only way out. He could not possibly hold a Casting long enough to go back through that charnel house that held the bodies of his comrades -- especially knowing in his soul that he belonged there with them -- and down those steep stairs, and fight his way out through all those Taenarith. Where had they all come from? One of the raiding parties must have returned, he thought bitterly. Barus had said there was nothing to worry about. He'd been wrong -- and had paid for his mistake with his life.

The fabric of Jezzil's tunic was beginning to smolder. He looked down again at the grey water. It was either the moat, or go back into the next room, fall on his sword, and join his comrades.

Jezzil shook his head, hating himself, knowing himself for a twice-damned coward. But by all the weapons in Arenar's Arsenal, he wanted to live.

Hearing a shout behind him, he sprang from the window sill, launching himself into empty air.

He was falling...falling...

It seemed to Jezzil that all of time and yet no time had passed before he struck foul, chilly water. The shock of his landing drove the breath from his lungs. He thrashed desperately, swimming upward with all his strength, but his heavy sword and armor weighed him down.

He gagged, fighting the water more fiercely than any enemy of flesh and blood, and knew, with a sudden, terrible clarity, that he was going to drown.

Frantically, his fingers found clasps, buckles, and the heavy armor slipped from his shoulders. His lungs were bursting as he discarded the metal-studded kilt. Fortunately, his stolen footgear was a little loose, and he was able to kick it off.

With those burdens gone, Jezzil was able to kick upward, until his face broke water and he grabbed a quick, blessed

breath before he sank once more.

His sword -- his fingers found his swordbelt, just as his thrashing brought him up again. Another breath, longer, deeper, then the flame-edged darkness of the moat enclosed him again.

He unbuckled the heavy swordbelt, but hesitated. Abandon his sword to the dark water? He'd as soon leave an arm or a leg at the bottom.

Jezzil drew his weapon, then let the heavy, metal-studded swordbelt and the attached sheath go. Kicking hard, he swam back up to the surface, and this time, he managed to stay there, though the sword dragged at his arm.

Grasping the hilt, the Chonao warrior began a clumsy one-armed stroke-and-kick, his eyes fixed on the low stone wall that marked the other side of the moat.

He was within a body-span of touching it when an oily ripple in the flame-marked water announced the arrival of one of the moat's rightful inhabitants.

In the murky darkness of the water it was naught but a black-scaled shadow. The eyes gleamed fiercely from behind horn-studded ridges, golden and slit-pupiled. Jezzil estimated each of those eyes to be as large as his closed fist.

The creature came straight for him, its mouth opening wide, wider...

Jezzil fumbled, trying to concentrate, but this time his effort at Casting flickered like a guttering candle. He tried harder, fighting panic, and felt the Casting work -- but he knew he could not hold it.

The approaching behemoth swung its massive head back and forth, seeking its prey. As that huge, barely seen head moved towards him, Jezzil thrust hard with his sword, and the blade slid deep into the creature's eye.

The water exploded in a froth of blood and bubbles. Jezzil almost lost his sword as the creature thrashed violently. He pulled his arm back, felt his sword slide free.

He clawed his way up, up, towards air and sanity, his fingers still gripping the hilt. His arm burned with the effort of keeping his fingers tight. Jezzil was barely conscious when his head finally broke water.

He was sobbing for breath as he paddled clumsily along, and the water that washed his face tasted now of blood. Finally his questing hand encountered the edge of the moat. He grabbed it, hung there, trying to breathe. Even under the threat of another moat-inhabitant's finding him, it took Jezzil nearly five minutes to regain enough strength to hoist himself and his sword up and over the low stone wall.

He lay on the ground for a while, hearing the roar of the fire, a few scattered shouts and screams, then rolled over and got to his feet. Falar... he allowed himself to think only of his horse. She was waiting for him. He longed for the silken feel of her coat, for her warm, living breath. Falar.

Jezzil glanced back only once as he staggered away from the fortress. The entire place was aflame, though most of the stone walls were still standing.

When the Chonao reached the horses, he went from animal to animal, removing their saddles and bridles, and speaking the Word of Release that would free them to behave as horses once more, and not as Chonao war-mounts.

As he spoke the Word, over and over again, each horse snorted, then ambled away towards the field, in search of grass.

Jezzil's hands were numb as he tightened Falar's girth. He was further disgraced to find that he hadn't the strength to mount Chonao-style, by swinging up onto Falar in one fluid motion. He was

forced to use the stirrup, like a farmer or a tradesman.

As he rode out of the clearing, he heard the distant rumble of thunder, like an echo of the turmoil in his spirit. He had no idea where he was going, or what he would do when he got there. He was Chonao, and he had left his brothers-in-arms. He was Chonao, and he had run from a battle. He was Chonao, and his honor was gone. He was Chonao, and his life was over.

Jezzil touched Falar's neck with the reins, and she headed south. The last of his strength flowed from him like water, like life-blood, and he slumped over his horse's neck and began to weep.

CHAPTER TWO - THIA

Night gathered around the westernmost of the two stepped pyramids like the folds of demon wings, enclosing them in darkness and dank winter chill. High above the ground, deep within that ancient pile of stone, cold air gusted through a narrow window-slit, abruptly extinguishing the flame of a single, guttering candle. Thia, Novice Priestess of Boq'urak, blinked and shivered in the sudden gloom. Dark already? How could it grow so late? I must hurry and finish...

She fumbled as she re-lit the candle; her fingers were cramped with cold. Thia spared a moment to rub and flex them as she quickly read back over the page she had been copying and illuminating.

The sacred text told of the travels of Blessed Incarnate Balaj, recounting his sojourn among the infidels of the southern regions, and of his first days in the northern reaches of Galrai, before Amaran had taken it over and renamed it Amavav. Balaj, dead for nearly a hundred-year, had been an educated man, as well as a lively and astute observer. His tales of his travels were fascinating to read -- and Thia, unlike most of the novice scribes, could read.

A swift glance at the water-clock on the wall made her gasp sharply. Only a quarter-span till dinner? I'll have to run, or I'll be late -- and I daren't risk another Penance!

Novice Priestesses who garnered too many Penances did not remain long at the twin ziggurats in the capital city of Verang...there was no public disgrace, but they tended to quietly vanish

overnight, without farewells. Thia supposed the High Ones did it that way so as not to dampen the spirits of those who remained by exposing them to the sight of the ones who had failed to please Boq'urak...but she found it unsettling, all the same. And she had no desire to be sent home.

The Novice could barely remember her home; she had been given to Boq'urak on her sixth birthday, nearly thirteen years ago. Her parents had wanted a son, and they'd been willing to give their daughter to the god in the hope Boq'urak would heed their prayers.

Thia could no longer picture their faces, or recall her family name, but she still occasionally heard their voices in dreams. "Stay here with this man for a little while, Thia, while we shop," mother had said, her head bent so she seemed to study her dusty peasant shoes. "No, Mama!" the child Thia had wailed.

"I don't want to stay here!"

"It's only for awhile, child," her mother had said, still not looking up. "We'll be back for you, daughter," her father had added.

But they'd been lying, of course. Thia had known it instantly. Ever since she could remember she'd been able to tell when anyone was lying. It was nothing she did consciously; she simply knew, the way she knew she had two hands and eyes so dark the pupil could scarcely be discerned from the surrounding iris. It had been a surprise to discover that most people could not instantly discern truth from falsehood.

So Thia had known instantly that they were not coming back, not ever. She would never forget the way she'd felt as she'd stood on the temple steps, her hand clamped in the huge hand of the elderly High Priest, watching as they walked away, melting into the throng of petitioners and worshipers until they were lost to view.

Sometimes, just before she fell asleep, Thia wondered whether Boq'urak had ever granted their wish for a boy. She was as devout as most novices, but she had never been able to force herself to pray for that.

The candle flame wavered in the night breeze, and she adjusted the wind-guard, then began

putting her work away. Next New Moon would mark her tenth year in the scriptorium, and she knew the routine well.

She picked up the tiny vials of cobalt blue, scarlet, and leaf-green ink and placed them on a tray. The big inkwell held the deep purple writing ink, a hue so dark that it would dry nearly black. Thia twisted the stopper into its mouth with a quick jerk of her slender wrist. Then, carrying the tray, she scurried over to the cabinet and inserted each vial in its proper slot.

Now for her horn-pens and brushes...her steps came faster and faster as she cleaned and stowed her materials away. At last, only the texts themselves and the tiny, precious vial of liquid gold remained. Thia scurried to put the gleaming vial in its correct place, then locked the small cabinet with the key she carried on her scarlet cord that girdled her gray, hooded robe. Her bare feet were soundless against the massive yellow sandstone blocks that formed the floor and walls of the scriptorium.

As she examined the day's work, automatically checking each page to make sure the inks were dry and smoothing out any wrinkles, Thia forced herself to be careful. If she damaged a Sacred Text, that would be an even worse penance than being late for dinner.

Thia had actually been in the scriptorium on the day that Ryleese had overturned her desk and spilled all her inks onto the text she'd been copying. It had been awful, hearing the other girl's shrieks and wails for mercy as the Scriptorians dragged her away. They said she'd been possessed by Outer Demons, who had caused her clumsiness to punish her for sinning, and that, under questioning, she'd blasphemed. They said that Ryleese was fortunate that Boq'urak, in his mercy, had granted her the blessing of cleansing.

All Thia knew for sure was that two days later, Ryleese had been declared Chosen and given to Boq'urak. Thia swallowed uneasily. Don't think about it. Concentrate...

As she rolled up the day's work, she felt pride in the neat rows of precise letters, the beautifully illuminated Capitals that marked the beginning of each page. Thank you, Master Varn, she thought, remembering the first day he'd noticed her. She'd been sitting on her stool at this very same desk, eagerly poring over a scroll, wondering about the meaning of the words and letters on the

vellum. Unlike many of the other fledgling scribes, Thia understood the theory of written language, if not the symbols themselves. Each time she worked here, she listened intently to all the conversations going on around her, and she'd learned quite a bit that way. Until that day...her lips curved in a smile, as she remembered...

I was sitting here on this very stool, at this very same desk, she thought. I was all alone, so I dared to trace the letters with my finger, wondering what they meant.. "What are you?" she'd whispered softly, under her breath. "What do you say?"

Then, as if in answer to her plea, a deep voice said, almost in her ear, "That is the letter om-ee."

Startled, she'd swung around in her seat to find Master Varn, vivid in his scarlet robe, standing beside her. The priest was a handsome man, with the typical coloring that betokened Northern blood - like Thia, he was tall, and slenderly formed, with dark, dark eyes. Like all the priests and priestesses, his skull was shaven, but he was standing so close that the girl could see a faint pale fuzz on his pate, just like the fuzz that she had to remove from her own head. His hair must be the same color as her own. The color of ashes just before they blew away.

"And that one there is the letter ty," he said, quietly. He put out his hand, and his fingers closed around Thia's, warm and strong. "Would you like to know all of them?"

Thia had stared at him worshipfully. "On, yes, Master! What word is that?"

"That word is 'ocean,'" he said.

"Ocean," she repeated, under her breath. "What is an ocean, Master?"

"A body of water. Like a sea, but larger. They lie on the other side of Boq'urain."

"The other side, Master?"

"The world is shaped like a ball, Child."

The child priestess had stared up at the Priest who would become her Mentor, her dark eyes wide with amazement. "How can that be? If I look out any window, the world is flat, save for the mountains surrounding us here in Verang. If I look out through the pass, to the sea, it is flat. If the

world was shaped like a ball, the sea would pour off it!"

He'd smiled at her, his big white teeth flashing in amusement. "Not only curious, but intelligent," he said, and the approval in his voice made the girl flush with pleasure. "Would you like me to teach you to read, little one?"

Thia could only nod, struck dumb with the enormity of his offer. Young as she was, she'd known it was forbidden for the novices to read, but she'd wanted to learn so badly that she'd convinced herself that she could do her job better, copy better, for the glory and worship of Boq'urak if she knew what she was copying. So they'd met, secretly, late at night, for months, then years, while Varn taught her...first, to read, then about the world as he knew it. Her mentor had traveled as a missionary priest in his youth, and he told her all about his journeys as he'd preached Boq'urak's scripture and doctrine.

Thia had learned to be circumspect, to never reveal that she and her Mentor had a relationship outside the ordinary one of Mentor and Novice. She knew that revealing their mutual transgression would result in both of them being thrown out of the temple, or worse. And she'd treasured every minute they spent together. Her Master was the wisest, kindest man in the world.

Master Varn had made it possible for her achieve her dearest wish -- to learn, to understand, to accumulate knowledge. He'd even arranged for her to leave the temple complex on several occasions, to accompany some of the lay workers when they went to buy provisions or other goods. Unlike her sisters, she knew what money was for, and how to count it. The Novice had watched the townspeople at work and at play, had witnessed staggering drunks and rowdy fights between street urchins, seen lovers holding hands and embracing...

Of course Thia had averted her eyes quickly from such sights. She was a Sacred Vessel, soon to take her final vows. Such carnal pleasures were not for her.

Thia would not even allow herself to recall the dreams that had come to her after seeing those lovers. Dreams where Master Varn touched her face, her hand, even, once, her breasts...

Realizing where her memories had led her, the novice blushed violently. What is wrong with

you? Be careful, or you'll make a mistake! Do you want to wind up Chosen?

Memories of the daily sacrifice performed before dawn each morning to ensure that the Sun would rise, made the novice shiver, her chest suddenly tight. To have a huge hole punched into one's breast, so that the entire living heart could be removed...

But she knew it was necessary. Boq'urain needed the Sun for the crops to flourish and the people to thrive, but...

But sometimes the Chosen would remain conscious for a long minute as they beheld their own dripping, pumping hearts. Usually they lost consciousness and died quickly, but not always. Thia had learned to look at their hearts, rather than their faces, since it was a Transgression to look elsewhere than at the High Priests and their victims.

All of the scrolls were now safely stowed. Thia closed the cabinets, slid the bolts into place, and activated the locking bars with urgent haste. Seconds ticked by in the novice's head as she extinguished the candle and darted out the door, carefully closing and locking it behind her. Then, holding the skirt of her gray habit high, she began to run.

The corridors around her were whitewashed, nearly featureless, and spotlessly clean due to the ministrations of the acolytes and postulants. Thia's bare feet pattered against chill stone as she ran, but she was used to it and never noticed the cold hardness. Verang was a city built in the mountains, surrounded by peaks on three sides...even the summers were chilly. Winters could be deadly for the unprotected.

Swish-slap, swish-slap...the sound of her feet striking stone warred with the pounding of her heart. She rounded a corner, darted down a flight of stairs so time-worn that a faint depression hollowed the center of each step.

Down...down. Around another corner. So far she had not met another soul, and that was a bad sign. That meant the community was gathering in the eastern ziggurat, where the refectory was located. Acolytes and lay priests and priestesses would be moving among the rows of tables and benches, handing out bowls of barley-lamb stew and thick chunks of bread for sopping up the gravy.

Thia had not eaten since the noon repast, six hours ago; her stomach rumbled loudly at the thought of food.

She hesitated but a bare instant at the tapestry near the end of an otherwise bare corridor, then she lifted it and slid through the door beyond into darkness. Fumbling with her cold fingers, she lit her tiny travel-candle, shielded from drafts in its protective cylinder of metal.

No time to run down the ten tiers of steps that led down from the western pyramid, cross the cobbled courtyard and then up the ten tiers to the eastern ziggurat. Instead she would take the secret way, the way Master Varn had first shown her all those years ago. It was forbidden -- but taking it would save her so much time that it was worth the risk.

The corridor here was more like a tunnel; the blocks of gray granite were bare of whitewash. The novice kilted her habit up into the knotted scarlet scourge that served as her belt, and set off again. The flame from her tiny lantern threw barely enough light for her to see ten paces ahead, but she knew these secret ways well; she had been traveling them for years.

There were crypts down here, and that was not all. Secret conference rooms hidden within mazes, ancient altars and confessional cubbys...even abandoned prison cells and places of torture. It was in the first level beneath the western ziggurat that she and Master Varn had conducted their clandestine lessons, hunched together over a single flickering flame as Thia pored over reading scrolls, or laboriously worked out the sums the High One set her to ciphering. Varn had warned her sternly against venturing below the first level, but, over the years, Thia had explored on her own, becoming braver as she translated the guiding symbols that marked each tunnel.

Each branching tunnel was marked with secret signs, combinations of letters and numbers. Some were in script so old that no one alive could translate it. But overlaying the ancient runes were modern letters and numbers that provided an infallible guide to one lessoned in its use. Even though she had been this way many times before, Thia was careful to check the symbols. All of the tunnels looked alike, and a mistake could mean a slow and torturous death, wandering these hidden ways without hope of being found and rescued.

Forty-two, sun sign, overscribed with the letter kay... she read, scarcely pausing in the swaying light to dart down the left-most branch of a triad of tunnels.

She was now far, far below the level of the ziggurat, deep within the foot of the mountain itself. It was so cold that her nipples tightened, and she hugged her arms across her breasts. Her steps came quicker in the chill dankness. This place...she had never traversed this section without the sense that Someone was watching. The walls were clammy, the floor sloped down, steadily down.

Despite her urgency, Thia came to an abrupt halt when the sounds of chanting mixed with the rush of water reached her ears. Oh, no! One of the Hidden Rites! It has to be...

Her mouth went dry. She had never seen one of the secret ceremonies. She was only a Novice, and it was forbidden for her to even stand here and listen to the chanting. And yet...her path led through a gallery that ran along the top of the huge chamber where the rites were held. There was no other way she could go.

For a moment, she hesitated, half-turning to look back up the tunnel. Dared she try it? Or should she go back all that long, weary way to the western ziggurat? If she were caught in the vicinity of a Hidden Rite...she had no idea what would happen to her, and she did not even want to think about it. On the other hand, the stone parapet lining the gallery passage was low but thick, with small ornamental patterns cut into the stone. If she stayed low and crept along, the High Ones would not see her. And she was over halfway to her destination...

With a sudden squaring of her shoulders, Thia began to run again, down the tunnel, toward the huge, echoing chamber. The chanting sounds grew louder, and were now mixed with other sounds, low and muffled, with an occasional loud shriek or wail rising above the rest of the cacophony.

Reaching the huge archway that led into the gallery, above the enormous chamber, Thia extinguished her light, dropped to her hands and knees, then began inching along, careful to stay below the level of the ornamental pattern cut into the parapet. The stone of the gallery floor was smooth and chill against her hands. Her robe caught her as she tried to creep, until she kilted it up to mid-thigh. Her feet were toughened by constantly going barefoot, but not so her hands and knees. They began to ache almost immediately.

When she reached the first hole in the parapet, she could not resist putting her eye to it and gazing down at the Rite that was underway.

The chamber beneath her had been hollowed out over ages by an underground branch of the River Ver. The water rushed through the chamber, cold and dark as the mountains in winter. The chill of the black water reached the Novice even in her high perch. Great stone icicles hung from the ceiling and thrust upward from the floor, glistening in the light of dozens of torches.

Beside the rushing river stood a huddled group of children, a full score of them, ranging in age from perhaps ten to a few that could barely toddle. All were dressed in the white, flowing robes of Boq'urak's Chosen.

Thia made a low sound in her throat, even as her hands went up to cover her mouth. Children? Babies? Dressed for the sacrifice? By all that was sacred -- no!

But there they were. Most of them were crying, and the ten High Priests moved among them with alabaster bowls, carefully collecting their tears, encouraging them with pokes and frowns to cry harder. One youngster, a lad of perhaps nine who stood scornfully tearless, suddenly broke and ran for the entrance, but was roughly dragged back. He began to weep, and the High Ones scurried to catch his tears, as though they were to be treasured above all.

Thia had lived with sacrifice as a daily part of her life since she had first come to Verang. She'd been taught to think of the Chosen as fortunate, because as soon as they died, they would be with Boq'urak in the Paradise Beyond the Sun. It helped that the Chosen were usually enemies of Amaran, either outlaws, captives or enemies of the State. They were not innocent, they were being given a wonderful opportunity to redeem themselves and to enter Paradise.

But to sacrifice children? Innocent children? It was unthinkable! How could Boq'urak demand this? How could anyone do this?

Now she knew why the Hidden Rites were shrouded in such secrecy, concealed in the bowels of the mountain. It was only because of Master Varn's illicit teachings that she'd learned the codes that had allowed her to ferret out the tunnels leading to this place. He'd warned her against going down to the lowest tunnels, and now she knew why.

The chamber contained a huge obsidian altar-stone, a solid square block of blackness that seemed to draw the light of the torches as it lay gleaming and ready.

Ready for what?

Not for the children, it seemed. Thia tried to make herself crawl on, away from what she knew must be coming, but she was frozen with horror. She tried to close her eyes as the High Priest, in his scarlet robe, raised a stone knife to the first little one's throat. But she could not look away.

A quick slash, a hideous, gurgling moan, and the little girl collapsed, twitching, her white robe spattered with scarlet even more vivid than the High Priest's robe. Carefully, the High Ones collected a generous dollop of blood, then poured it into the rushing river, chanting loudly all the while. The remaining children screamed and wailed, and a few of them struggled to break past the line of priests, but to no avail.

Quickly, one by one, each child was sacrificed. They saved the boy who had tried to escape until last. The child kicked and shrieked, bit and fought like a wild snow-cat from the heights, but they held him hand and foot and head, and the knife moved, slicing slowly through his pulsing throat until finally, he was still.

Thia bit down on her finger until her own blood flowed sickly sweet into her mouth, making her chapped lips sting, as she fought not to be noisily sick.

All thought of dinner and why she had come down here had vanished. The Novice knew she was doomed. Boq'urak saw everything, was All-Powerful. Surely he could see her now. Surely any moment a blast from the heavens would strike her, reducing her to a charred heap of flesh and blackened bone. But that would be better than living with what she had learned, Thia thought, blindly wiping away tears.

The children, the children...those poor little ones...

But the expected smiting did not come. Thia watched dully as one of the High Ones made a summoning gesture, and two more entered, half-supporting a swaying figure between them. The Novice recognized the young woman...Narda, a first-year Priestess. She'd been a year ahead of Thia

throughout their Postulancy and Novitiate.

Narda was a pretty young woman with dark eyes, hair the color of winter snow-roses, and a full, womanly figure. Thia did not know her well, but she remembered what an expert cook she'd been while they'd served together in the kitchen.

Now Narda's dark eyes looked twice their normal size. She was smiling, an ecstatic, wide smile of complete bliss.

Drugged, Thia realized.

One of the High Ones threw a handful of dust onto a brazier that was burning near the collapsed bodies of the children, and coils of reddish smoke began eddying up from the coals. Thia pressed herself against the floor, trying to breathe shallowly, lest she lose consciousness from the intoxicating fumes.

Narda's Mentor, a High One whose name Thia didn't know, approached the young Priestess, and her smile widened even further as she gazed at his familiar features. The chanting, which had subsided to a throbbing background murmur, picked up tempo and grew louder, increasing in intensity until it made Thia's head pound even worse than the fumes from the smoldering brazier.

Waves of something began to fill the air. Thia could not see it, could only sense its presence. It was like sensing the place where lightning had struck only moments before...a prickling of the downy hairs on her body, as though some unseen hand had tipped a sacrificial bowl filled with cold, congealed blood and allowed it to engulf her spirit. The Novice struggled not to scream aloud in protest against that unseen presence.

When she glanced through the hole in the parapet again, she saw that the High Ones were stretching Narda out on the huge block of black stone, securing her wrists and ankles to rings embedded in the rock. Narda's mentor bent over her, and with one fluid motion, tore the Priestess's white robe from neck to ankles, rending it in two. For the first time, Narda's smile faded; her expression of dreamy contentment vanished.

The Priestess shook her head, her gaze focusing on her Mentor as he stood at her feet, his voice rising above the others in the chant. She shook her head again, then cried out in fear.

Thia could not see the Mentor's face, but she was aware, suddenly, that he was changing.

Changing...

At first it was as though his shadow had gathered around the outlines of his body, gathered and rippled in the torchlight. The shape of his head altered, grew broader, more domed. His hands...they curled, and ridges of scaled flesh sprouted upward from the backs. The fingers were engulfed, turning to talons like those of a lizard.

By all that is holy -- he is becoming Incarnate!

Thia knew that it happened, that Boq'urak could transform himself into the bodies of his High Priests for brief periods of time, there to work miracles. She knew that from her illicit reading. But to even reveal that she knew of the Incarnation Rite, Master Varn had warned her, would mean her death. To actually see it...she stifled a whimper of utter despair.

The chanting intensified, but all of the priests had fallen back against the walls, as though they did not want to be too close to the god when he became Incarnate.

With a muttered growl the transforming Mentor threw off his robe. He had nearly doubled in size, and was half again as tall as his human height. Tentacles sprouted from his sides, two on each side, flexible tentacles tipped with a sucker at each end. In the depths of each sucker was a viciously curved claw or tooth. His skin darkened, darkened! It was now a smoky violet, now a brownish purple...

Scales erupted from beneath his skin. A ridge of frilled flesh poked up from his back, ran down to a tail that suddenly extruded, whip-thin. His body seemed to constantly crawl and shift, as though it were somehow fluid, mutable.

Thia felt her mind reel, and fought to stay conscious. She couldn't afford to faint.

The Incarnate's breathing intensified, changed rhythm, and he growled again, louder, as he bent forward. His transformed "hand" came up to rake his talons along Narda's bared body.

The Priestess, who had closed her eyes as though she could not bear to see what was happening, opened them. Her mouth opened, and Thia's throat ached in sympathy. Narda was trying to scream, but, like one caught in a nightmare, she could not force any sound to emerge. Narda

began to thrash and struggle as the Incarnate fell on her, between her parted thighs.

Thia saw his body plunge downward, and finally Narda's scream burst free and rang in the air, rising even above the sounds of the chanting. For a moment Thia wondered if the Incarnate was going to devour the young woman, then she blinked in horrified realization. The novice had been only six when she'd left the farm, but farm children grew up quickly, and no effort had been made to keep her away from the sight of the animals mating.

Mating...

Thia gagged, choked, and time seemed to slip sideways, away from her. She did not -- quite - lose consciousness. Some shred of self-preservation made her cling to a thread of reality. She returned to full awareness to find herself lying with her cheek pressed against the floor, her eyes tightly shut. She had to force herself to open them.

The novice pushed herself upward, and managed to crawl a few feet farther along the gallery, forcing herself not to look. She could not shut out the sounds, however, the wet, gurgling noises, the sucking sounds. There was no further sound from Narda.

How could Boq'urak's High Ones lend themselves to such a rite? How could they let themselves be used in that fashion? Had her own Mentor, Master Varn, let that happen to him?

The thought of her esteemed teacher lending his body to be used in that obscene manner made her reel sideways, until she fetched up against the stone parapet again.

If you faint, they'll find you. You'll be punished. The same thing might happen to you. You have to get away. Away from the temple, away from Verang, away from Amaran. Get away, away, away, away from that Thing!

That Thing, the Incarnate... Had it discovered her? She couldn't stop herself from looking down, through the stonework.

The chanting was now at its height. Plumes of reddish smoke filled the air, curdling and thickening as they wrapped tendrils around the body of the now fully transformed priest. He was enormous -- the body of the god nearly eclipsed the black stone altar. With a last, obscene plunge of his torso, he stiffened, then a shudder rippled through the giant frame. The tail lashed like an angry

cat's.

Boq'urak reared back, straightening, and Thia could see Narda's body. Her throat was a bloody ruin, and huge puckered circles oozed red along her sides. Her parted thighs were scarlet.

The god raised his head, and, for the first time, Thia saw the countenance of the being she had been trained to worship above all.

Boq'urak's face was wide, with a frill of flesh where the Priest's brows had been that extended across his face to shield slits that had replaced his ears. The god had eyes, two huge, staring, lidless eyes that seemed to see Everything. No nose. A sucker-appendage with a single tooth served as the creature's mouth. The facial skin was lighter than the body, a pale grey.

Thia stared into those eyes, and knew that Boq'urak saw her. Saw her, and knew her for who she was.

She was dead, and she knew it, but her body refused to believe. With a gasp, the novice scuttled through the doorway and, scrambling to her feet, ran like a hunted animal.

Her mind was whirling, and she barely retained sense enough to check the doorposts for the secret signs. Her flying feet carried her up steps, down tunnels, up more stairs. She turned the corner into the hallway leading out of the ziggurat, breath sobbing, feet like two lumps of ice --

-- and crashed full-force against a solid, unyielding form. Her mind gibbered and teetered on the edge of utter madness for a moment, then she realized the newcomer was human.

She staggered back, gasping, and looked up, ready to begin babbling explanations and apologies --

"Master!" she cried. "Oh, thank Boq'urak!"

Master Varn stood gazing at her, his dark brows drawing together in concern. "Thia! Child, where have you been?"

"I...I..." she dragged in a deep breath, marshalled her wits, forced her mind to cast off its panic and work again. She made the proper obeisance of a Novice to a High One. She plunged into the ritual response, grateful not to have to think about what she was saying. "Master, this unworthy one begs forgiveness. I am late to supper. Assign me Penance, that I may redeem myself and cast off my

sin."

He was staring down at her, and his eyes, behind his hooded lids, were filled with a mixture of exasperation and humor. "Thia, Child! What shall I do with you? Late again! Do you know how many --"

He broke off as Thia grabbed his sleeve, clutching it in both hands, twisting. "Master Varn, do you know what they're doing down there? They killed children! And Narda --"

She stopped, gagging, one hand pressed to her mouth.

Master Varn stared down at her, his black eyes intent. "What? What are you saying?"

"It's true, I saw it!" Thia whispered. She was shaking, and her knees threatened to buckle.

Master Varn put a steadying hand on her shoulder, and gratefully, she rested her forehead against his chest. His warmth steadied her, comforted her.

"You saw?" his voice was strained. "Tell me what you saw, child."

"A monster," she whispered into the folds of his robe, whimpering at the memory. "Horrible." She raised her head. "We have to stop them."

"I understand," he said. "We must --" he broke off, eyes widening, then narrowing. His entire body stiffened, and he blinked several times. Then his gaze once again fixed on her.

Thia gazed up at him, feeling a chill that had nothing to do with the fact that it was winter, and the ancient stones were as cold as well water. "You, you believe me, don't you?"

"Yes I do," he said, steadily. "I know you, child. You could never lie to me."

"Have you ever seen...it?" she asked.

"No," he said. "No, of course not."

He's lying. Thia knew it immediately. How could I have been so stupid? Of course he's seen it! She felt betrayed. Only her realization that she was in terrible danger kept her from collapsing into tears. She bowed her head, hiding her face against his robe, thinking fast. He's a priest of Boq'urak. They say Boq'urak can communicate his wishes to his priests. Boq'urak is Incarnate even now. Could he be communicating with Master Varn?

Whether or not the Incarnate was sending instructions to her Master, she couldn't take the

chance that Varn would let her leave, after what she'd admitted to seeing. I have to get away!

Just then her Master wrapped both arms around her, holding her tightly, rocking her. Once she had longed for such an embrace from him. Now, she shuddered with revulsion.

He was whispering softly, so softly that the Novice could barely make out the words. "Child, child...what shall I do with you?"

Thia gulped, forced herself to think clearly. I must get away. She raised her head and looked up at him. "Master, we can leave together. Fetch your cloak. I will wait here."

Gently, she pulled back, and he released her. Thia smiled shakily at him. "Hurry, Master!"

He hesitated, and for a moment Thia actually thought he was going to turn away. Then he shook his head. "No. You must come with me." He took a step towards her.

Thia took a step back.

His eyes narrowed as he took in her reaction. "Child, calm yourself. You trust me, yes? Come, I will take you to place where you will be safe, and we can talk."

He extended his hand, smiling reassuringly.

He was lying, and Thia knew it as surely as she knew the sun would not rise without the pre-dawn sacrifice of the Chosen each day. She shook her head and backed away further. "I'm afraid. It was horrible."

"I know," he said, speaking truth. He hesitated, then repeated, "Child, come here..." Thia realized that he was torn, truly torn, between his duty to the god, and his genuine affection for his protege.

She stood there, wondering what she should do. He was between her and the way to freedom, the corridor that led outside, to the open air, to the postern gate that led away from the temple courtyard, to the path that was the shortcut down the mountain to Verang.

A brief memory flashed into her mind. Once, in the streets of Verang, she had seen two streetboys fighting, and the smaller one had disabled the other in a most decisive manner...

Thia took a step forward, her hands going to the skirts of her habit, still partially kilted up. She took another step.

Varn smiled, his mouth curved upward, but there was no warmth in his eyes. "We will talk, Child," he said.

Thia took another step --

-- and then her foot flashed upward with all her strength in a hard, swift, kick. Her scrunched-up toes buried themselves in the space between her Mentor's legs, bunching his robe around her. For a second her foot was encased in warmth and softness.

Then she leaped backward, in time to see Varn's eyes roll back in his head. The High One dropped to his knees, then rolled over on his side, gagging and writhing in agony.

"Master Varn, I'm so sorry, please, please forgive me..." Thia fell to her own knees, wondering if she had killed him.

But he was still breathing, though he did not seem aware of her, or her babbled apologies. The novice made the Sign of the Incarnate over his gasping form, then began to pray.

"Boq'urak Incarnate, save thy servant, heal him, bless him, let him not know pain, only thy blessed succor --" she gabbled, then, realizing what she was saying, Thia stopped, shook herself, and scuttled backwards. What was she doing? Praying to that...that Thing? That obscenity? Never again! Not if they sacrificed her a thousand times!

"I'm sorry," she whispered, edging around her fallen Mentor. "Farewell, Master."

Then, grabbing up her skirts, she began running again. Tunnels and doorways flashed by, until she was at the portal leading to the courtyard. She eased the big door open and slipped out, into the yard where patches of frozen slush made her feet burn as she stumbled and slid through them. Across the courtyard, dodging into the blessed shadows, she scurried to stay out of the torchlight. Thia shivered as she felt the first lash of the wind.

Even the mountains seemed to bend down and look at her, making her feel hemmed in as she wrestled with the latch of the postern gate. Surely the god would not let her get away! Surely she would struck down at any moment in a blast of fire -- or perhaps he would turn her to stone, as a lesson to other erring Novices...

Through the postern gate, now, and the pathway down the mountain stretched before her. No alarm yet sounded. She was outside at night, and that alone was an offense worthy of being declared tomorrow's Chosen and being offered to the god to ensure the sunrise.

Freezing, snow-laden air assaulted her shaven pate, her bare feet. The first storm of the season had arrived. Pulling up her hood, then hunkering low against the blast of the wind, Thia began to run again, her arms wrapped around her, holding her warmth in, holding her life to her. It was all she had...and who knew how long Boq'urak would chose to toy with her, permitting her to remain alive?

Perhaps it would be better just to sink down into the deepening snow, stay still for a very few minutes, and let the blizzard work its will. It would be a brief, merciful death, compared to what the High Ones would do to her.

But something in Thia's nature would not allow that. While she lived, she would fight to keep on living.

Her jaw tight with resolve -- and to keep her teeth from chattering -- Thia trotted on, down the path, down the mountain.

She did not look back.

CHAPTER THREE - KHITH

The ruins of the Ancients stood deep within the Sarsithe Jungle, surrounded by monstrous trees that seemingly challenged the clouds. The ruins were so old that trees had grown and spread amidst them, and the roots of the forest giants cradled, clenched, and, in some cases, crushed the strange building materials of the Ancients. Gnarled grey roots stretched down like talons to enclose the opalescent material of the cracked domes. Broken spires shimmered with bands of oil-slick color amid the lacy green curtains of selshir leaves. The caved-in domes and the ruined spires seemed to sprout from the soil and the broken paving like giant fungi.

None of the Hthras, even Khith, who had been studying them for nearly thirty years, knew who those Ancients had been. They had left no images of themselves. They were not Hthras, that was certain -- the dimensions of their buildings, their doorways, their furnishings, proved that. Even a tall human could walk into one of the ruined domes without stooping. Khith was tall for a Hthras, yet the scholar stood barely half the height of one of those vine-tangled doorways.

Khith's people lived in the giant trees, avoiding the ruins as forbidden. But Khith was...different. Had always been different. Ever since it had reached the age of responsibility (though not maturity, for Khith had never developed a sexual attraction for another Hthras, and thus remained in the neuter phase) the scholar had made frequent trips into the places other Hthras shunned, searching out the secrets of the ruins.

Unlike most of its people, Khith enjoyed solitude. The scholar's father had been a trader who

had done most of his trade with humans, and, as a result, Khith had spent more of its childhood years interacting with human children than with its own kind. The ruins fascinated the scholar; their mysteries beckoned the young Hthras into defying one of the most basic tenets of the Hthras culture -- that the ruins of the Ancients were forbidden ground.

The Hthras authorities had spoken to the young scholar several times, cautioning it against such investigation. Once the scholar had even been summoned to a meeting of the Council of Elders.

"The Ancients had great powers, but they were reckless and, at the end, wicked," First-Elder Nkotha had admonished, shaking a bony digit at the younger Hthras. "They unleashed such destruction as has never been seen, according to our legends. There are even hints that they caused the Great Waste that lies to the east of the Sarsithe. Before their time, that land was a garden. Now, it is death for any who walk there for more than a handful of days."

Khith stared at the Council of Elders, fascinated. "How could that happen? The Great Waste is larger even than the Sarsithe! And our forest is larger than the islands of Pela and Taenarith put together. The Ancients' sorcery must have been as far above our magic as we are above the animals of the forest! How could they control such power? Elder, if we could but solve their mysteries --"

"Control...that is the point, youngling!" old Nkotha broke in, pounding a veiny fist on the table. "They had no control! They unleashed what they did not understand, and could not control! We Hthras will not make that same mistake...we will not!" Nkotha sank back in her seat, panting, and her attendant bent over her solicitously.

"Nkotha is the wisest among us," Second-Elder Sthaal declared. "We are determined never again to delve into those forbidden things, lest the fate that befell the Ancients become ours. Cease your investigations, youngling!"

With an aching heart, Khith had bowed its head and spoken the words the Elders wanted to hear. "I shall obey, Elders. I respect your wisdom."

And, for many years, Khith had kept its promise. The scholar had gone back to live with its people among the treetops, in their cities of bell-shaped dwellings Hthras Growers had ripened in their nurseries. Hthras knew plants, knew growing things, as no other creatures did. Rather than maim or

destroy the jungle to accommodate their species, they cultivated, coaxed, and "convinced" it to do their bidding.

But after another handful of years had passed, years of frustration when none of the unmated Hthras caught its eye, Khith's curiosity about the Ancients proved more than it could conquer, and, one day, the scholar went out for a walk...and never returned to the treetops. Instead, Khith stole back to the ruins and resumed its studies there.

The Hthras scholar had always been good with the magic of its people: herb lore, healing, a little farseeing, magics to sooth, confuse, or frighten. But the Ancients had delved into so many powerful magics! Deep in vaults beneath the ruins, the Hthras scholar found ancient texts, some crumbling, others miraculously preserved. Khith spent days laboriously copying the most decaying tomes. Slowly, the Hthras worked at deciphering their language, puzzling out their letters and numbers, slowly piecing together words, phrases and, finally, reading the ancient texts. It took the Hthras scholar nearly two years to learn to read the language of the Ancients, and longer still to be able to understand and put into practice what it had so painstakingly translated.

At first Khith had maintained some discreet ties with other Hthras villages, trading with them for food and supplies, but then, sensing the disapproval of the Council of Elders and realizing it was under observation, the scholar went underground, literally. The domes and structures still visible on the forest floor represented only a small part of the Ancients' city. Beneath the ground were networks of chambers and seemingly endless tunnels. There were also many record storerooms and several libraries. For the past half-year, Khith had ventured out mostly at night to search the jungle for herbs and food.

The scholar had been content with its search for knowledge. Content...until the dreams had started.

Dreams held great import for the Hthras. And every night for the past tenday, Khith had dreams of jaws in the night, of teeth tearing, of trying to run from an unseen foe while weighted down with invisible chains...

Khith knew that such dreams should be taken seriously...but these warnings were so vague,

so formless. It was not enough for the scholar to sense danger approaching -- Khith needed to know what the danger was, and who presented it.

Reluctantly, the scholar had realized that it must find out what those ominous dreams portended.

So it was that one afternoon, Khith sat perched atop a tall stool in one of those underground chambers where the Ancients had practiced their version of alchemy. The scholar frowned as it stared uneasily at a bowl of oily black liquid resting on the high table before it.

Hthras foretelling spells usually caused the worker to dream in highly symbolic terms of danger. Such dreams could be useful, but they required interpretation, and they were never precise.

But the spells of the Ancients were different.

Khith had found this spell in an crumbling tome, and it had been extremely difficult to translate the fragmentary and vermin-chewed pages. And even when it had determined the proper ingredients, there was something missing -- the correct proportions. For that, Khith had to experiment, trusting instincts honed by years of experience in brewing potions, tisanes, infusions and teas.

This brew was the strongest it had ever made, the most distilled. Khith stared at the concoction, thinking perhaps that knowledge wasn't worth the risk. The scholar wasn't sure exactly what the effects might be, but it knew lian roots were a powerful hallucinogen. There were tales among the Hthras of magic workers who had taken potions to farsee only to leap to their deaths from their homes in the forest giants, thinking themselves winged, or invulnerable.

But even now the council might be meeting...

Khith stared at the dark, viscous liquid, feeling a chill that had nothing to do with the temperature control that still prevailed, deep in the bowels of the ancient city. It had worked for two days to decoct this mixture. But...would it work for anyone but an Ancient -- whatever they had been like?

What if it poisons me? Khith thought. I could die down here and no one would ever know...

The thought caused the silky fur on its arms and back to stir and rise up in reaction to danger.

And yet, to have the power to see things happening far away...or possibly even the future...

The mixture was a distillation of lian roots and vilneg leaves. The Hthras had combined them, adding a dollop of its own blood to give the spell strength and focus. But if I haven't the courage to use what I've learned, I might as well go back to my village, give up sorcery, the scholar thought. There is no gain without risk.

Khith stared at the potion for another moment, then resolutely picked up the bowl, balancing it on its slender, four-digited hands. Cautiously it sniffed the brew, its nostril-flaps quivering at the sharp, bitter odor. It hesitated for only a second. I must know!

The liquid tasted every bit as vile as Khith had expected. The scholar's throat tightened, and for a moment it feared its stomach would revolt. Putting down the bowl, it clapped both hands over its narrow-lipped mouth, fighting the urge to retch.

Now to say the words...

Khith stared down at the text, and the letters tilted strangely. It blinked, trying to read the words, but its eyes would no longer track.

The Hthras looked up, and slowly, the room swung, rippled, and elongated. It was now long and narrow, like a burial net. Then it contracted, rotated, and widened, extending farther, farther...

With some small, still-unaffected portion of its mind, Khith realized that the potion was a powerful hallucinogen. Must focus...speak the spell...

Fumbling atop the table, the Hthras managed to close one narrow-fingered hand around the rune-pieces carved from jagowa bone. Shaking the pieces, it mumbled:

*Forest-juice, help me see,
Bones of hunter, let me hear,
Show me those who wish me harm,
Let me farsee, so to warn...*

As Khith spoke the final words of the charm, it opened its fingers and the bone pieces thudded down onto the tabletop. Khith peered at the pattern. The rune-sign for danger...the sign for the present or the near future, the jagowa itself... As it peered down, its vision blurred, swam, then darkness gathered around the Hthras...the darkness grew...enfolding...

Khith sighed and closed its eyes, letting the darkness take it...

It opened its eyes and was in a different place, seeing with eyes that were...strange. Eyes that did not perceive most shades of color, eyes that were faceted, so that each view was repeated a hundred or more times. Khith tried to blink, tried to focus, but the eyes it was seeing through were so alien, it was several minutes before it could force itself to see through only one of the multiple eye lenses and make out what lay before it.

The Council of Elders sat hunched around a high table. Their voices sounded odd through the insectoid ears, but Khith could hear them: "...cannot allow this to go on," the Eldest was saying. "Who knows what young Khith has found there, in those ruins? Foolish one! We warned it. In this very chamber, we told it what would happen!"

Third-Eldest spoke up. "Shall I summon the Peacekeepers?"

First Elder Nkotha considered, then signaled assent. "Yes, do so. And tell them to bring their Trackers. We cannot have Khith roaming loose after we have angered it. It was a Sorcerer before living amidst the remains of the Ancients. What vile spells may it have learned from them?"

Third-Elder made a quick gesture of assent and respect, then stood to leave the chamber.

"Go with the Peacekeepers, Drahnik, Vleth," Nkotha motioned to two of the youngest Elders. "See that no one is harmed. The Trackers can be dangerous when loosed."

The Elders rose and the three of them left the Council Chamber.

Khith made an effort to withdraw its mind from the creature that was hosting it, but the spell still held it in thrall. First Elder glanced around the Chamber, then lowered her voice. "The first thing we must do when Khith is back among us is to force the Change upon it. Once safely wedded, it will no longer have these yearnings after dangerous knowledge."

Second-Elder Sthaal blinked in surprise and distress. "Force the Change, First One? That is forbidden!"

"We are the Elders," Nkotha said. "Who is to judge what we do? But we shall be discreet."

Sthaal still seemed taken aback. "You know how it can be done, Eldest?"

Nkotha leaned back in her tall chair. "There are ways, Sthaal...a tea brewed from uinto

berries should accomplish what we want."

Sthaal sat straight up. "But that can be dangerous. Uinto berries can be poisonous, if consumed in quantity!"

"Certainly they can. But we have shahmin who know the proportions. Khith will not be harmed, only Changed."

"And who will volunteer to become Khith's mate, First One?"

Nkotha examined her long, double-digited fingers as though she had never seen them before. "That hardly matters, Second One. I am sure one of the unwed laborers can be persuaded. After all, young Khith inherited wealth, did it not?"

"Indeed," the Second said. "Most wise of you, First-Elder."

"But first we must capture our young scholar. And that may prove no easy task. We must --"

With a massive effort born of encroaching panic, Khith managed to separate its mind from that of the host-insect. The farseeing spell was still in force, though. Khith discovered that it could, with little effort, "see" the band assembling on one of the massive limbs, ready to step into the powered lift-basket. The Tracker-handlers stood by, a safe distance away, bracing themselves against the lunges of the snarling jagowas. There were four, three with mottled fawn and cream coats, their spotted hides bright against the green backdrop of leaves, and one black one that seemed no more than a sinuous shadow.

Khith struggled against the drug's effect. Must...think...

Khith's former village was at least a half-hour journey away. Time enough to escape, to hide any betraying sign, if it did not dawdle.

Khith swung around on its high stool, then slid down. The room tilted and rocked like a boat in a storm, and it had to catch the edge of the table to steady itself. The Hthras shook its head, fighting to throw off the effect of the potion. Staggering slightly, Khith headed towards its living quarters. Must pack...must escape...

Swaying, weaving, Khith made an unsteady way through the underground warren. It seemed as though hours had passed when it reached its own rooms, but the Hthras knew that blurred time-

sense was typical of the hallucinogenic potions.

The scholar grabbed a pack and began stuffing things into it, trying desperately to concentrate. Scrolls, herbals, the herbs themselves, the Ancient reds I copied, gold to pay my way...

Hthras usually went naked in their own forests, but that would not do for the outside world. Khith grabbed a hooded robe from a shelf. Soft blue-grey, with red borders: the traditional garb of a physician. Stuffing the robe into the pack, the Hthras spared a moment to "see" its pursuers, calling them up with an ancient Hthras farseeing chant:

*Find the center of the self
Hear the heartbeat, feel the breathing
Feed the air and blood to mind
Feel the thought-flow sparking, seething*

*Sense the Forest round us all
Sense its slow and frantic bustle
Sense the Forest and its mind
Sense its bone and vein and muscle...*

This time the Hthras was seeing the hunting party through the eyes of some small animal crouched frozen only a few feet from the trail, its every instinct insisting that safety lay in non-movement. Khith watched the Elders with the Peacekeepers walk by, following the faint trail it had forged all those months ago. The Trackers snarled and lunged on their leashes. Thinking about what jagowa teeth could do to its softly furred hide brought Khith up out of the trance, panting with fear.

Calm, stay calm. You'll only escape them if you can out-think them.

Food and a flask of water went into the now-bulging pack. Khith stood looking down at the stacks of scrolls it could not carry. Best hide them. If they find them, they'd likely destroy them...

The unsteadiness caused by the potion was waning now. Khith stacked the scrolls, balancing them in a high, tottery stack across its long, furred arms, then the scholar headed out of the room, moving quickly. The alchemy laboratory -- that would be the safest place. I'll bar the door, then get out through the back...

Minutes later, the scrolls were concealed as much as possible, and the main door off the corridor was barred from the inside.

Khith hurried back towards its quarters and the waiting pack. As the Hthras trotted along, it chanted another verse of the farseeing song.

*See with eyes of hunting birds
See the world with eyes of raptors
See that they may not see me
See so they won't become my captors.*

The scholar stumbled as another vision unfolded. Again it was seeing through the eyes of another. It was a strange overlay. "Behind" the vision Khith could still make out the Ancients' corridor, the diffuse lighting following it along as it moved.

But the vision was as close and immediate as if the scholar were standing beside its would-be captors. The hunters were having problems fording a sluggish stream. Tiny, savage swimmers waited there, ready to attack any warm flesh unwary enough to be placed close to their fanged jaws. The hunters tested the water, then wandered off downstream to look for a better, safer place to ford.

I've gained a few more moments...must hurry!

When the Hthras reached its quarters, it quickly assembled the makings for yet another spell - this one for confusing trackers. This spell was an old one it had learned from one of its own kind, not from the Ancients. But the Hthras who had taught this rede to the youngster had died long ago, leaving behind no apprentice. The old magics were being lost. The Hthras Wise Ones these days practiced only healing spells, and few of them.

Khith glanced over the ingredients, mentally checking them off.

Thread, spun from a corpse's hair. Beetle carcasses, and a large, wax-dipped fringe-leaf. And a special distillation of a powerful herb that was as subtle as it was intoxicating.

Quickly, Khith stuffed the ingredients into the belt it wore around its slender waist. Then it grabbed the overloaded pack, swung it up into place and fastened the harness across its narrow, soft-furred torso.

Out, into the hallway, turn right, two lefts, up a stairway, then left again. Another stairway, and another. Khith raced up the Ancients' wide-flagged stairs, up and up, until it reached ground level.

The Hthras paused once again to farsee. This time it was difficult to gain any images. The spell was waning quickly.

Another insect was the best "view" the scholar could find. They had crossed the stream, and were making good time, moving nearly as fast as the lunging jagowas that led the procession. Khith's heart pounded. Now they were only minutes from the Ancients' City.

Khith's hastily formed plan called for it to travel west, then north, crossing the Sarsithe, then heading up out of the rainforest into the Steppes that lay southwest of Severez. There were settlements aplenty on both the mainland colony of Kata, or on the island kingdom of Pela.

Turning south, it plunged into the jungle, deliberately picking a path along a muddy trail, and making only a cursory effort to smooth out its trail behind it. Even if the Hthras were fooled by this ruse, the jagowas would not be.

Straining its rounded, upstanding ears, Khith listened with every sense for the sounds of pursuit.

When it had gone far enough to reach the banks of the wide stream that its pursuers had crossed upstream, Khith paused to check that there were no killer swimmers there, then stepped delicately into the cool water. The Hthras stood there for a moment, allowing the liquid to flow around its spindly, furred legs.

Quickly it took out the materials from its belt-pouch, arranging them in the middle of the leaf it spread across its hand. Hair, herb, dried husks of beetles, and finally --

Khith took a deep breath and sank its sharp teeth ruthlessly into the skin covering its palm. When it drew back, two half-circles of red welled up. Khith held its palm over the leaf, letting the blood drip down until the silver-green was splashed with deep red.

Quietly, it whispered the first few verses of the Chant for Confusing Trackers, tapping time with its wounded hand against its furry belly:

Searchers <beat, beat>
Seek to find me
Hunters <beat, beat>
On my trail
Forest <beat, beat>

*Help to hide me
 Help me with the Forest's veil
 Help me help themselves to fail*

*Slow them <beat, beat>
 Glide me farther
 Shake them <beat, beat>
 While I run
 Lose them <beat, beat>
 Walk through water
 Let this prey their hunt outrun
 Slow their searching...or I'm done.*

*Footprints <beat,beat>
 Can confuse them
 Backwards <beat, beat>
 Walking false
 Streambeds <beat, beat>
 Can refuse them
 Draw them where the forest calls
 Block them with your living walls...*

Then the Hthras bent and placed the leaf on the water, releasing it to the sluggish current, watching for a moment as it went bobbing downstream.

Glancing back over its shoulder, Khith took a slow, cautious step backward -- then froze, ears alert.

Those sounds! The swish of vegetation, the hushed sounds of voices, the low snarls of the jagowas...

They're right behind me!

Khith forced back panic, and took another step back, careful to ease its foot down into the same footprint it had made minutes ago when it had first walked up the muddy path.

Another careful backward step, echoing the existing footprint, then another, and another...

Khith's heart was hammering so hard now that it was increasingly difficult to track the progress of its pursuers. It tried to control its breathing, listening so hard it seemed like a physical effort.

And always, those slow backward steps, setting its feet precisely into its prints.

Softly, under its breath, it chanted the next verse:
*Wild pigs <beat, beat>
 Root in pathway
 Insects <beat, beat>
 Buzz and bite
 Birds fly <beat, beat>*

*Up from cover
Spread unease with dying light
Let them dread the coming night...*

Khith paused for a moment, feeling the mud squish beneath its bare feet. When it donned clothing to walk the land of men, it would also put on sandals to shield its feet from their hard roadways, but Hthras in their homeland were tree people, climbers, and they never went shod.

All around it, the Hthras sensed the forest. Closing its eyes, it concentrated, and was finally rewarded by a blurry image of the searchers amidst the ruins. They had not found the vine-shielded entrance to Khith's lair, or, if they had, they had not entered. Instead they were casting about, plainly searching for a trail.

One of the jagowas snarled, its cry rising into a roar as it surged forward, dragging the handler.

Time to disappear. Khith realized. They'll be here in moments.

Slowly, balancing on one foot, the Hthras thrust its right foot backward, full into the blade-brush that encroached onto the narrow trail. Smooth, sharp-pointed leaves raked along its hide, but its fur provided some protection. Then, awkward with its heavy pack, the scholar gave a little hop, leaving the path and crashing back into the blade-brush. It stifled a whimper as the leaves drew blood.

Hastily, trying to ignore the stinging of its palms from the leaves, Khith pushed the screen of brush back into place. Then the Hthras wiped the edges of the leaves to remove the narrow blood-trails. Sprinkling herbs to hide its scent, the scholar arranged the branches as it would a living sculpture. When the brush was back in place, Khith ducked its head to protect its eyes, then backed away on hands and knees, ignoring more stinging little slashes from the leaves.

Finally, when it was at least three body-lengths off the trail, it subsided into a little huddle, trying to repress its shivers. This was a calculated risk. The blade-brush might discourage a jagowa, but it would also make flight nearly impossible.

Voices...

Khith's ears twitched. They're here!

It stiffened with fear as its pursuers came swiftly up the trail, with the jagowas bounding in the lead.

Khith whispered another verse of the chant, its voice so soft that it could barely hear itself:
Briars <beat, beat>
Tear their clothing
Roots catch <beat, beat>
At their feet
Swamp ground <beat, beat>
Stirs their loathing
Hold them until I can retreat
Hold them so we will not meet...

The Hthras heard the hunting party go past, headed for the stream, then heard the irritated snarls and yowls of the jagowas. The big hunters hated water. Still, from the sounds of it, they splashed right into the stream. Khith heard the hunters exclaim excitedly, and dared to hope that its spell was working, and they would be lured downstream.

If only the Hthras trackers trusted their senses! If they did, the spell would work on them, fooling their eyes, their ears. They would follow the leaf downstream, thinking they saw glimpses of a running figure, thinking they heard running footsteps, thinking they smelled the fear of a fugitive.

The spell would not fool the jagowas, of course, but the water would do that...or so Khith hoped.

Still whispering, Khith began edging back again, careful not to move the brush more than necessary. Stoically it ignored the scratches, chanting in a voice that was scarcely more than breath:

Searchers <beat, beat>
Will not find me
Hunters <beat beat>
Lose my trail
Forest <beat, beat>
Help and guide me
Shield me with the forest's veil
Help me that I may not fail...

It was a long, slow, miserable crawl. Khith backed away for many lengths before it could find a place to turn. Once it could crawl forward instead of scuttling backwards, it was a little easier. The Hthras ducked its head, ears flattened with misery, crawling doggedly as insects feasted on its cuts,

and its palms, knees and feet grew sore and abraded, despite the softness of the forest loam.

Finally, the Hthras took a chance and crawled out of the brush. Only then did it dare to turn and look back whence it had come.

Dusk was falling, and the searchers must have activated their lightsticks. There was a distant phosphorescent gleam far downstream.

The spell had worked!

Khith drew courage from that knowledge, feeling the swell of pride. It had studied for years, but never before had a spell been so important. The scholar had feared that the old spells would prove ineffective. Khith had wondered whether Hthras magical abilities had waned over generations, and that was why most Hthras had given up on the old spells.

But that one had worked. Khith hugged itself in triumph. Now to --

The scholar stiffened as it heard a different sound. Snarls and growls, then a keening, uncanny wail, and it was growing louder!

The jagowas! They've loosed them! They only sound like that when they're coursing free!

Quickly, Khith changed its escape plan. It could no longer hope to stay to the forest paths on its way northwest. No, for now it must go due west. And quickly!

Khith was already tired from its long crawl, but the scholar forced its body into a fast trot. The heavy pack bounced uncomfortably on its back, but there was no time to adjust the straps. Khith glanced up at the treetops, wishing it could travel those byways. To the Hthras, even narrow treelimb were like roads, and they felt most comfortable traversing the forest canopy.

But if it took to the treetops, its pursuers could send for reinforcements, and, in a short time, it would be caught. Khith had no illusions about being able to outdistance searchers in the treetops. Only here, on the forest floor, far below the Hthras' domain, might it hope to elude its pursuers.

Unlike most Hthras, Khith knew the forest floor. The scholar had spent so much time down here, where most Hthras never went, that it could sense the green pulse of the forest life.

As the scholar ran, following faint paths that were little more than game trails, Khith strained every sense to its utmost. Where are the jagowas?

Dream-memories of sharp teeth assailed the fugitive as Khith imagined the creatures gaining, gaining, then their bodies arcing up in a huge pounce. Khith shook its head, telling itself to calm down. If the jagowas were within pouncing range, it would have heard them.

The trail grew less distinct, then vanished. Khith was wading through scattered blade-brush now. The tiny cuts and slices smarted and drew insects to feast on the blood.

Gasping, Khith ran faster, abandoning its efforts at stealth. It could hear the jagowas coursing, sensed them drawing nearer. Without their handlers to control them, the beasts would tear Khith to pieces within minutes.

Khith wished fervently that it had studied spells of warding, spells of defense, spells meant to render an enemy helpless. But such spells were not in its nature. It found the idea of violence abhorrent.

Its world narrowed until there was nothing but the forest and its terrible need to flee the bloody fate coursing behind it. Run! Run! RunrunrunrunRUN!

Panic threatened to overwhelm the scholar, but with one small, sane part of its mind, Khith forced itself to look around as it plunged onward. Where am I?

The ground beneath its running feet was ascending...a good sign. The forest giants were smaller here, mixed with other varieties of trees. Khith's night-vision, like that of all Hthras, was acute. Putting on a burst of speed, it managed to gain a minute or so on its pursuers.

With frantic haste, the scholar leaped for the bole of a rough-bark tree, swarmed up it halfway. From this vantage point it could clearly make out the landmark it needed -- a tall, dead forest giant shone ghostly silver by the light of the Moon.

Khith scabbled back down the treetrunk, the air tearing its chest with every breath it drew. Altering course slightly, it headed for the dead giant.

As Khith approached the huge, silver bole of the lightning-blasted tree, it could hear the pursuers. They had gained again, and were now only minutes behind. The jagowas were in full cry, maddened by the blood-fresh scent of their prey.

Moving cautiously despite its haste, Khith walked due west of the dead giant. Fifty paces...

It nearly overshot its goal, despite the moonlight and the thinning vegetation. But its night vision was keen, and it saw the faintly luminescent marker far down the tree-trunk, nearly hidden by the giant roots. Pulling off its pack, the Hthras wrapped its robe around its hands as it cautiously searched for the slender cord of spun-silk that was fastened to a staple set deep into the tree-trunk.

Its questing hands found the narrow length, so fine-spun and translucent that it would be nearly invisible even in daylight. Quickly but carefully, Khith began reeling in the spun-silk cord, winding it round and round the bole of the tree.

Hurry! Hurry!

It seemed that hours had passed by the time the silken cord was replaced by the anchor-rope for the Hthras bridge.

Khith hastily fastened the bridge-ropes to the tree trunk, using the clamps attached to the cords. Only then did it regard the bridge and the chasm that yawned beneath it.

The cliff was a high one, naked rock scored as if a huge blade had slashed downward, creating a deep chasm. Far below, water rushed foaming white in the moonlight. This chasm marked the boundary of the local Hthras demesne.

Digging its narrow heels into the ground, Khith began tightening up the bridge, snugging up each cord until it was taut. The sounds of shouts and snarls from the jagowas closing in lent speed to its exhausted body. The harsh ropes scored the scholar's palms.

It seemed to take forever, but finally it was done. Khith hauled on the bridge until it was taut, then secured the end to the bolts screwed into the tree at the edge of the cliff.

The bridge was visible in the moonlight as a spiderweb of narrow cords, scarcely seeming strong enough to support a single Hthras, much less a party of them. But lian vines were strong.

Holding tightly to the two cords that served as handrails, Khith ventured out, its narrow, limber toes curving around the thicker ropes running along the bottom of the bridge.

The bridge swayed and shivered, and Khith stopped, clutching the hand-ropes tightly. It had crossed this bridge before, in daylight, with experienced guides to shepherd it over the chasm. Never by moonlight. Never when it was already trembling with exhaustion and nearly witless with fear.

Another shout, much nearer now, lent strength, and Khith wavered forward, trying to balance, trying to gain speed. The thick rope beneath its feet seemed impossibly narrow.

The scholar was nearly halfway across now. Below it the river thundered and spray from the white water shimmered in the moonlight.

Hurry! Don't look down!

Khith lurched forward, almost running, fixing its eyes on the end of the bridge. Its world narrowed to those last few strides to be crossed...

And then it was there, on the other side!

Khith whirled around, unslinging its pack, only to see one of the jagowas burst out of the forest and leap onto the bridge. The animal crouched low and started forward, snarling.

No!

Khith grabbed its sheath-knife out of the pack and began frantically sawing at the right-most hand-rope. It was sobbing for breath, and it could not look at the animal that crept so determinedly forward. The scholar had never in its life intentionally harmed another creature.

Hthras did not eat meat, did not even keep animals for fur or milk. Everything they used, they grew.

With a spung! the hand-rope parted. The bridge tilted sideways, and the jagowa, with a scream of fear, fell...

And fell.

Khith was sobbing as it sawed on the next rope. Minutes later, the last of the bridge was severed, and the scholar watched the limp rope structure twist and turn in slow motion before it came to rest against the opposite cliff.

Looking up, it saw its people on the other side of the chasm. They stood there, regarding the scholar across the nothingness, and Khith realized that it had literally cut all ties with its own people by its action. There would be no forgiveness, no pardon...ever.

Slowly, stumbling with weariness, Khith managed to shoulder its pack. Then it turned and

staggered into the forest, leaving its homeland and its people behind.

CHAPTER FOUR - THE ROAD TO Q'KAL

Despite the late-winter chill outside, the interior of Shekk Marzet's tent was stuffy from the braziers burning dried yak dung. Seated on a cushion at the back of the tent, where she had a good view of the Shekk and his many guests, Thia blinked, then blinked again, fighting drowsiness. It was essential that she stay awake. Shekk Marzet needed her, and the old man had been very kind.

It had been nearly five months since her escape from Boq'urak and the twin ziggurats. She'd staggered into Verang half dead from terror and exposure, aware that her Novice's robe and shaven head marked her as a runaway from the twin temples.

The town had been nearly deserted, all the good citizens relaxing by their fires after supper. The only other person out on the streets had been Shekk Marzet. Seeing the staggering, exhausted girl, he'd quickly wrapped her in his cloak and hustled her into his townhouse before anyone could see her.

At first Thia had been afraid that the old man had unworthy motives in rescuing her, but her fears abated when the Shekk had immediately summoned his two daughters to tend her, bathing her numb, white feet in warm water, giving her some of their own clothing, and burning her habit. When Thia had finally recovered her wits enough to ask why the Shekk and his family had risked so much for her, his eldest daughter, Joyana, had regarded her steadily, her eyes sad.

"Our father hates the Priests, and he spits when he hears Boq'urak's name," she replied, struggling to keep her voice steady. "It's because of our brother. When he was only seventeen, he and some other boys in Verang stole some trinkets and sweetmeats in the marketplace. It wasn't the first time Doren had been in trouble with the law. The Priests...they decreed that the only way he could expiate his sin was...was--" Joyana's voice broke and she began to sob.

Her sister, Loisa, finished the grim tale. "They said he must go to the god at sunrise. They took him, and they did it. Cut out his living heart, as though he were a common criminal. Our little brother! Father cursed them, and cursed Boq'urak and his worship on that day. Fear not, Thia. We will hide you. If you have turned your back on that evil god, you are our friend."

Since that time, Thia had remained in the Shekk's house, accustoming herself to wearing a thick modesty veil (as behooved a woman of marriageable age), letting her hair grow, and waiting until the search for the runaway Novice had died down. Shekk Marzet had treated her as a third daughter; she was intensely grateful to the old merchant, and extremely pleased to be of use to him in his business.

Thia realized that her eyelids were drooping again, and gave herself a vicious pinch. Wake up! Time for you to be alert! The company had just finished a huge meal, and belches and other sounds of digestive activity erupted. Marzet clapped his plump, ringed hands. "My friends, we have had our dinner, and friendly conversation. Time now for business, by your leave."

The two thin, pale-faced gem merchants nodded. Marzet gestured, and servants hastily cleared a space in the center of the tent, taking away the low table and replacing it with several thick Severian rugs, and large, tassled cushions. With surprising ease for one so old and pudgy, the Shekk dropped down onto a crimson cushion and sat cross-legged. "My esteemed guests, I am eager to see

your wares."

With a flourish, Dantol, the taller of the two gem merchants, spread a midnight-colored swath of velvet before the Shekk. "We bring only the best for our generous host," he said, with a bow, then nodded at Gervej.

Gervej reached into a pouch, and brought out a large stone that flashed green fire. "An emerald, Lord Shekk. Nearly flawless, and..." he held it out on his palm, "but see the size! As big as a woman's thumbnail, and the color," he made a kissing noise, "it is as vivid as any I have ever encountered."

"Ah..." Marzet took the gem, turned it over thoughtfully, then took out a thick lens and peered at it. "The color is indeed vivid. Natural? Or enhanced by magic?"

Gervej shook his head, his expression pained. "Shekk, how can you imply that I would offer you an enhanced stone? Of course not!"

Marzet nodded, then held the stone and lens up to study it in the light of the lantern that hung on a pole to his right. In doing so, his eyes slid sideways to Thia, who was busily adjusting her modesty veil over her left ear.

"Ah, well, a lovely piece, a lovely, lovely piece," Marzet said heartily. "How much?"

Gervej named a sum that was merely exorbitant. The gem merchant smiled, obviously anticipating a good bargaining session.

"No, I regret, too rich for my blood," Marzet said, putting the emerald back onto the cloth. "Next?"

Gervej glanced sharply at his associate, Dantol. "You are not interested?"

Marzet smiled with his mouth only. "Next?" he repeated.

Thia sat watching, now fully alert, as Marzet examined the gem merchant's wares. Thanks to her ability to sense truth from lies, the Shekk acquired two flawless and genuine flamegems, an opal, and a dozen faceted blue topazes that would be ideal for a necklace or bracelet.

Finally, when the mystified gem dealers had gathered up their rejected wares, and were

bowing themselves out of the tent, Thia caught the Shekk's eye. Marzat gave her a wink and a grin of thanks.

Quietly, Thia gathered up her skirts and slipped out of the tent. The chill was bracing after the stuffiness of the tent, and she stood gazing up at the night sky, thinking how few days were left until they reached their destination, the crossroads city of Q'Kal. This trade city, larger even than Verang, lay in the northernmost reaches of Kata.

Dropping her modesty veil, she inhaled a breath of cold, dry mountain air. The caravan was traversing the last of the high steppes that came down from the range that bisected Amavav. Within a tenday's journey they would be crossing a narrow stretch of territory claimed by Galrai, then they'd have to journey across Severez before reaching Q'Kal, which lay nearly on the Katan and Severez border.

Hugging her heavy shawl around her shoulders, Thia turned and gazed back at the mountains, which she could only see as dim black shapes, since there was no moon tonight to illuminate their jagged, white capped peaks. She could trace their outlines only by the way they blocked out the profusion of stars. This far from any city, the stars seemed almost close enough to touch, and they glittered more vibrantly than any gem merchant's wares.

Marzet's party was traveling with a large caravan bound for Q'Kal. The old merchant had explained to Thia that he always traveled with a caravan, never alone. There were bands of fierce robbers in the steppes, and there was safety in numbers.

Thia suddenly realized, that for the first time in her life, she couldn't see the mountains that surrounded Verang. The range behind her divided Amavav from Amaran; these were not the mountains of her birth.

I'm on my way to being free! she thought, with a surge of exultation.

The moment of excitement faded quickly, however, only to be replaced with apprehension. Thia frowned as she stared into the darkness. The caravan had only two tendays more travel before it reached Q'Kal. And when we reach Q'Kal, what shall I do then? Stay with the Shekk, who has been so kind? Or go off on my own?

Thia had never been alone for more than a few hours, had never earned her own living. For a moment she was tempted to remain with the Shekk and his family. They spoke her language, they were decent people. The Shekk treated her like another daughter.

Even as she thought longingly of remaining part of that family, the realization coalesced in her mind. No. I must leave them. The decision was as inescapable as the snow and ice shrouding the mountains in winter -- only if she left behind every trace of her former life, could she ever hope to be free of the Twin Ziggurats. As long as she traveled with the Shekk, she would be under suspicion from anyone sent by the priests to track her. Any priest or priestess who left the Temple voluntarily was considered the worst kind of heretic, and would be hunted and recaptured if at all possible. And if she were recaptured, Thia had no doubt she would meet Narda's fate, or one equally harsh.

And...worse...Thia knew she was endangering Marzet and his family. If they were discovered to be sheltering a runaway from the Temple, they would be judged criminal, and given to the god at sunrise. It was the law.

I can't repay their kindness to me by putting them in danger, Thia thought. Her heart felt leaden, sick with fear. I must leave them. I must find the courage. When we reach Q'Kal, I must slip away, without a word of farewell, so if they are ever questioned, they will honestly be able to say they have no idea where I have gone.

Thia tried to picture herself wandering the streets of a strange city, filled with foreigners speaking a different tongue. She'd begun learning Pelanese, the language that was spoken in Severez and Kata, but she was far from fluent. I can't bring attention to myself. I'll have to...adapt. Fit in. But, I will be alone, totally alone!

She forced back panic. You'll manage. You can do lots of things. Her truth-telling ability had been proven to be useful to one merchant. Perhaps she could find employment with another one. Q'Kal was, by all reports, teeming with merchants.

Or perhaps someone needed a clerk. She could read, write and cypher, and not everyone could do that well. She could cook simple fare, learned from her days serving in the temple kitchens. She looked down at her hands, pale blurs in the starlight. She could always scrub and clean, oh yes,

every postulant learned that skill.

She heard a soft hail from behind her. "Thia?"

The glow of an oil lamp illumined the night, its golden glow bobbing up and down in time to the quick strides of the woman carrying it. Thia knew that voice, so she did not trouble to raise her veil before turning to face Marzet's eldest, Joyana. "I am here, Joy."

Joyana was carrying a large basket over her arm. "It is time to take the watch their supper," she said. "Can you take care of that again? Father is weary after his bargaining, and has asked me to play my hand-harp for him until he falls asleep."

Thia nodded and reached out for the basket and lamp. "I will," she promised. "Tell the Shekk I said to sleep well."

"Oh, he will," Joyana assured her. "Nothing puts Father in a better mood than making good bargains -- and, thanks to you, he made many tonight."

Thia smiled. "It is good to be of service to those who have been so kind to me."

"Nonsense, you paid us back long ago, Thia. We are in your debt."

"You are the one who speaks nonsense, Joy," Thia replied. "I am more grateful for your kindness than I can ever say." She tried to put every bit of conviction she could into her voice, hoping that Joyana would remember her words after she was gone.

The two young women exchanged another smile, then Joyana turned back towards her father's tent.

After raising her veil, Thia went the other way, the light of her lamp providing a small puddle of gold in a vast black sea of night. She trod carefully over the winter-blasted turf, avoiding the prickly-bushes that could deliver a painful sting. One by one she sought out each of the guards at his post and delivered the food. She did not speak, only doled out each meal and a measure of watered honey-ale, receiving each guard's thanks with a dignified nod.

Her heart quickened as she headed for the last guard post. Is he on duty tonight? she wondered. She had no way of knowing. You are acting foolish, she chided herself. What is wrong with you? He's just a guard with a beautiful horse; the two of you have barely exchanged a handful of

words, because his Pelanese is no better than yours. What ails you?

Still, as she approached the last guard post, she realized she was holding her breath. He was stationed at the farthest perimeter of the camp, near a large rock outcropping. When her lamplight revealed the swish of a silver tail, and she heard a soft whicker of welcome, she smiled, grateful for the anonymity of her modesty veil.

She hesitated, lamp held high, searching for a glimpse of him, but saw nothing. She already knew he could move as silently as a mountain cat. Thia peered into the darkness. "Where are you?" she whispered, in Pelanese. She was still not fluent, but she did well enough; she had learned much since leaving the temple.

"Here, lady," came a voice from behind her. Thia started so violently she nearly dropped the lamp. She whirled around, to find him standing scarcely two paces from her.

"I am sorry -- I did not...have fear not..." in his distress, his command of the foreign tongue was slipping. Thia held the lamp higher so she could see him.

The guard was taller than she, with brown hair pulled back and fastened with a leather thong. He was clad in a horseman's buckskin breeches and high boots, and a leather corselet studded with metal rings. Thia could not see the color of his eyes, and wondered whether they were dark, like her own. Slowly, carefully, he held out his empty hands, palms up, plainly hoping to allay her fears.

"You move too quietly," Thia said, finally. She held out the last package of food and the flask from her basket. This guard drank only water, never ale. "Here is your supper. You must be hungry."

"Many thanks, lady," he said.

She knew from experience that he would not sit to eat, nor remain in the lamplight. She gently stroked the grey mare's neck and shoulder, while he took the bread, meat, cheese and dried fruit over to his guard post. He stood there, eating without relaxing, all the while scanning the darkness and listening for any signs of intruders.

When he was finished, the guard came back to stand beside her as she petted his mare, humming softly in a way that seemed to please the animal. "You know horses?" he asked.

"Not much," Thia replied. "Where I was raised, we did not travel, nor did we ride for pleasure."

But I like them. She is beautiful, this one. So gentle."

She caught the flash of his teeth in the lantern-light as he smiled. "Gentle, not to enemies, no. Falar is battle-trained."

"Falar?' Is that her name?"

"On her pedigree, it is Chotak Falar-azeen. In my tongue, it means 'Chotak's Silver Blade.'"

"Greetings, Falar," Thia murmured, and laughed a little to see the mare's ears flick back and forth in response to her name.

The guard motioned to her. "Time for my round. You will stay until I return?"

Thia hesitated, then nodded.

She spent the minutes petting the horse, wondering what it would be like to ride such a splendid steed. While traveling with the caravan, she'd occasionally ridden a plodding mule, but never a horse.

The guard materialized out of the darkness suddenly, with no warning. Again Thia jumped, startled. "You move so quietly!"

Again that slight smile touched his normally stern mouth. "That is my...what is the word? My duty here. I am pen jav dal...or was."

She haltingly repeated the unfamiliar phrase. "What is that?"

"The Silent Ones."

"Silent Ones?"

He looked away, and she sensed that he regretted having revealed anything. He did not talk much, not to anyone.

Silent One. It is an apt name for him.

Thia studied him for a moment, then said, softly, "I do not mean to pry. I am not one who asks for truth while withholding it." She drew a deep breath. "My name is Thia. I was raised in Amaran. Until a few months ago, I was in holy orders." She looked up at him in the lamplight, and his face held strange shadows, seeming almost a mask.

After a moment, she continued, "I wore a habit and went unveiled, because I am not a marriageable woman. If you are skilled at reading faces, you will see that I speak the truth." Greatly daring, she bent over and picked up the lamp, holding it high, then dropped her modesty veil.

The guard held her gaze for a long moment, then spoke in a low tone. "I am Jezzil. From Ktavao."

Her eyes widened. "You are a long way from home, Jezzil."

He nodded. "So are you."

Thia smiled faintly. "Yes, I am farther from where I was raised than I ever dreamed I might be."

"Where were you raised?"

She hesitated for a long moment. Jezzil reached out, his movement uncertain, unlike his movements when handling his weapons or his mount. His fingers brushed the fabric of her shawl, where it lay over her shoulder. "I am a Silent One," he reminded her. "You can trust me to repeat nothing."

Thia looked up at him, knowing he spoke the truth. "I was raised in Verang, in the temples. I was a priestess until a few months ago. Then I ran away."

Jezzil's eyes widened. "One of Boq'urak's priestesses? And you dared to run away?"

She nodded, and suddenly, found herself fighting back tears. Hastily, she raised her veil and fastened it again, using that moment to try and regain her composure. "I lost everything when I learned the truth," she said, finally. "Boq'urak is a vicious, cruel god, not worthy of reverence. I ran away when I realized what I had been serving all those years. If they find me, they will kill me."

This time he reached out and touched her hands as they held her shawl clutched about her. His fingers were rough, calloused from rein and weapons. "Sister Thia," he said. "I understand, more than you dream I can. When I was Chonao, I was..." he searched for the words, "I was a priest who fights. Warrior priest. Then, I ran away, too. Now I am no better than a dead man to my brothers, my order. If they find me, they will kill me."

Thia caught her breath and stared at him in the lamplight. "I see," she said finally. "We have

much in common, then."

"Yes."

She hesitated, then, unable to think of anything more to say, she stooped and grabbed her basket. Jezzil stepped in front of her as she turned to leave. "You will come back, Sister Thia? You are...I could not speak of this to anyone but Falar...but you, you understand. It was good to speak, after so long as a Silent One."

She nodded. "Yes. I'll be back tomorrow. Fare you well tonight, Brother Jezzil."

He stepped back, raising a hand to her in half salute as she hastened away with her lamp, leaving him alone in the darkness, save for Falar.

* * *

Khith had traveled steadily for a month, now, and still was not free of the forest giants and the warm embrace of the Sarsithe. It knew that in the North, it was late winter, and the Hthras was not in a hurry to experience snow and ice again. It remembered winter, from when it had traveled the world with its merchant father.

Khith could barely remember its mother. She was only a soft blur of warm, reddish-brown fur, and a lilting voice that had trilled lullabies to her only child. She had died after being attacked by a wild jagowa while gathering river reeds for basket weaving.

Khith had been doing some weaving itself. Knowing that it would face much harder ground soon, it had been gathering reeds and vines, so it could make sandals to shield its long-toed, narrow feet from roads and streets. When Khith and its father had traveled in the lands inhabited by the humans, it had worn protection on its feet, just as it had worn a robe to cover its slender, furred body, and a hood to shield its eyes from the sun.

With the half-finished sandals tied to its pack, the Hthras trudged on, its closely set ears alert for any sound, its large, round eyes constantly scanning the animal trail before it. Khith's people loved the jungle, but were ever mindful of its myriad dangers.

It kept the sun always to its left, and each morning it shed its pack and climbed to the top of a

forest giant to check the position of its rising, in order to make sure it was still on track. Khith was trying to gauge its travel so that it missed the arrival of the rainy season, while still not having to travel during the worst of the northern winter.

Its goal was a human port town. Q'Kal had been one of its fathers favored places for trade, with ships tying up daily to the quays, vessels containing goods from Pela and other countries lying across the Narrow Sea. Khith remembered Q'Kal as a bustling place, the busiest port in the Pelanese Colony of Kata. It has undoubtedly changed in twenty-five years, the Hthras thought, with a sigh, shifting the pack on its back. Everything changes.

A port city, it had learned early on, tended to be more open-minded to newcomers. And where there were ships and sailors and merchants and those who served them, there was bound to be need for a good physician.

Khith's constantly roving gaze caught a tiny flash of vermilion on a vine weaving across the animal trail it was following, and it froze in mid-step.

A brekiss!

The snake was long and narrow, scarcely bigger around than Khith's finger. But to touch its skin could result in severe shock, convulsions, even death. Khith's people used the brekiss's skin-venom in minute quantities to induce healing visions.

Carefully, Khith stepped back, away from the creature, and took stock. Two faint animal trails led off the main one, one on either side. Khith chose the one leading off to its right, since it appeared to roughly parallel the trail it had been following.

It hadn't gone more than another twenty paces before it saw the shimmer of shattered, opalescent material, and the half-melted spire that marked one of the Ancient Ones ruins.

Khith's eyes widened with joy at the chance to add to its store of knowledge on that long-forgotten civilization. The scholar knew that exploring ruins was dangerous, but it could not pass this opportunity by.

It circled the remains, eyeing them carefully. This had not been a large structure, as these

things went. Perhaps it had been some kind of remote outpost, or way station.

The ancients always stored their records below ground. Khith picked its way carefully into the heart of the ruined structure, stepping high over the vines wreathing the ruin, searching for an opening that would lead below. When it spotted a sunken-in place, it nodded in satisfaction, then waded out of the ruin to locate a suitable fallen branch to use as an improvised excavation tool. After half an hour of digging and scraping the undergrowth away, Khith broke through the overlay of soil and roots into emptiness. Its heart hammering with the thrill of the quest for knowledge, Khith dropped to its knees and cleared away soil, revealing a crumbling stairway leading down into damp darkness.

Khith had explored many of the Ancient ruins before, so it knew there was a good chance that the lighting systems had failed. Hastily, it improvised a torch from its trusty branch and some moss, then set it afire with a mumbled word and a hard stare.

The Hthras descended the stairway, torch held high. There was water underfoot, but the Ancients had been marvelous engineers, and the walls and ceilings were mostly intact. Quickly, Khith surveyed the rooms, many of them still containing moldy lumps it knew must have been furniture: kitchen, sleeping rooms, offices, storage rooms...and, yes! One of the storage rooms held, not unused furnishings, but record books! (Khith was aware that the ancients had used methods other than printed paper to store information, but, since there was no power for the readers, it could not read them. Still, most of the ancients had also produced some paper records, perhaps for quick reference.)

An hour later, it fought its way up the stairs, back into the light above, three crumbling record books held tightly beneath its arm. What a discovery! Hand-scribed records, the first such ones that I have located! A true treasure!

The Hthras knew it should push on, make at least some progress towards its daily travel goal, but curiosity and the desire to learn won out. Khith made camp a short distance from the ruin, then sat down after a quickly swallowed dinner to peruse its find.

Translating the hand-written records was much more difficult, it found, than the printed ones it had discovered in the Lost City. The books were actually written by several individuals, it discovered, over a period of years. They were journals of the sentinels who had been posted to this remote

outpost, far from the cities that lay to the east.

The last journal was in the worst shape, but it had the latest date, so Khith examined it first. As darkness gathered over the jungle, Khith sat, totally absorbed, attempting to puzzle out the ancient words on the filthy, crumbled and pest-nibbled pages. Fragments and snippets of meaning surfaced as it struggled to translate:

(Name) was here tonight for scheduled inspection, told me of new (untranslatable) device. I was fascinated, asked many questions...(indecipherable smudge)...told me it can open (doorways? gates? or was it corridors? hallways? entrances?) Khith puzzled over the word, then resolved to come back to it later. ...to allow passage to another (place? plane? world?)...experiments commencing...

That cannot be right, Khith thought, perplexed. I must have translated that wrong. I should cross check that word with my notes. A passageway to another world?

For a moment it considered digging out its notes, but decided to read on, instead. Perhaps the term would become clear in context. Khith waved the flame of its little torch higher, shedding more light on the damaged pages. The next few were stuck together. With painstaking care, it separated them, only to find that they were damaged beyond reading, only a few words visible per page. This section must have gotten wet at some point, and mildew set in. Finally it discovered another semi-readable passage:

Another message today from (Name) in the east. Experiments have been shut down, but now there is trouble. We are not alone, it appears.

The next page was vermin nibbled. Khith clicked its tongue in frustration, and turned the page. *...damage has been done...government crumbling...plague in (untranslatable)...war in (untranslatable). (Name) says there is a rumor that the (gateway? door? portal?) brought this upon us. Caused us to be noticed. Makes no sense to me, but every day the reports grow worse. I used to curse the day I was sent here to this remote outpost, but now I am glad to be far away from the chaos. What of (Name) and (Name)...fear for them fills me. Will I ever see them again? All is crumbling around us...*

Khith shivered, despite the warmth of the jungle night. Even in such a battered, mostly indecipherable text, the desperation of the writer came through in those scrawling, hastily written words. The Hthras realized that it might be the first person ever to read about the final days of the Ancient Ones, and shivered again. Turning the page, it saw that only a scant half page of text remained.

More refugees today. I gave them what provisions I could, then sent them on their way north. Mothers holding children. I will never forget their eyes. The world is (coming loose? unraveling? fraying?) more with every hour that passes. (Name) says that they sent a mission through the (portal? gateway? door?) to try and stop it, but they have not been heard of since departing. He calls it the Player, or, sometimes, the Meddler. How could such a thing be? But (Name) would not lie to me...Two days now since I last heard from (Name). The refugees say there was a terrible blast far to the east. The ones who were the closest to it are sick. Several died on the way. What should I --

The text stopped.

Khith turned the page, then slowly, forcing its hand to near-steadiness, turned the remaining pages in the journal.

Empty.

What did it all mean?

Khith shook its head, hugging itself against the trembling that assailed it in growing waves. It was frightened, frightened the way it had been when it had run from the searchers and the jagowas. Ridiculous! it thought. They are the words of a person who has been dead for thousands of years. How could they have the power to frighten you?

Still shivering, Khith carefully placed the three journals into its pack. Then it drew out its physician's robe, to use for a blanket, despite the warmth of the night. It could not stop trembling, and it took a major effort of will to stare at the torchlight and quench the flame.

The warm, muffling darkness of the Sarsithe enclosed the Hthras like a comforting caress, but Khith lay curled around its pack, eyes wide open, unable to relax, knowing that, tired as it was, it would

not sleep. Somehow, in some way the scholar could not yet comprehend, what it had read held some personal meaning for it. The realization was becoming inescapable, no matter how preposterous it seemed. The words of that Ancient One had brought a premonition of trouble to come -- trouble, and pain, and death. And, most of all, fear.

Khith tried to dismiss the notion that it was experiencing a true foretelling. I cast no spell! I did not scry! But try as it would to dismiss the fear, it could not.

All its adult life the scholar had pursued knowledge, but this was the first time something from the distant past had caused such a reaction. Why this terrible sense of foreboding? I did not even understand most of what I read! How can those old words seem like a foretelling of doom and death? How can what I read be a warning of trouble to come?

Khith moaned and buried its face in its hands as it lay shivering in the warm jungle night. If only I had gone the other way around that brekiss!

* * *

As the caravan wound its way past the Galrai peninsula, and continued south into the rolling hills and gentle valleys of Severez, Jezzil spent his nights on guard duty, and his days sleeping in one of the wagons. During his free time he practiced with his weapons, went scouting on Falar, or joined the hunting parties that went out each morning. Fresh meat to add to the cook pots was always welcome, and helped alleviate the sameness of the fare served to the guards.

The mountains lay behind them, now, and the foothills they traversed grew gently rolling, with pleasant valleys lying between them. The threat of brigands abated as they traveled deeper into settled lands, for the King of Severez was not known for his leniency. The gibbets they passed were seldom empty of criminals, left to rot until the next execution, a grim caution to lawbreakers.

To Jezzil, raised in Ktavao, where each landholder possessed vast sweeps of land for his herds and crops, the farms they passed seemed almost like miniatures built for children. But they were tidy and prosperous, and the winter cold had not killed off all the green. Many trees in this land remained green the year round, keeping their spicy, spiky "leaves."

For the first time since he'd embarked from Taenareth, Jezzil felt like a man instead of a walking corpse. He'd thought that his spirit was dead after his courage had failed him in Kerezau's fortress. but as the days passed,he realized he was glad to be alive. Perhaps the gods still have a purpose for me. he thought, as he rode Falar alongside Marzet's wagons, looking out across the farms with their stone and shingle cottages.

Part of his renewed interest in life was because, each night, she came to talk to him.

Jezzil had left home when his two sisters were little more than babies. His mother and his aunts were the only women he'd ever known well. Until Sister Thia came into his life, young women had been a mystery to him, forbidden and a little frightening.

But now he felt closer to his new friend than he ever had to anyone -- even Barus.

Only Thia understood what it was like to have been a member of a Holy Order, and then to be abruptly deprived of the life one had chosen. Sometimes Jezzil thought that it was even worse for her than it was for him. He still had his faith, while she had repudiated the god she had been raised to worship. Every evening when he went through his meditation rituals and prayers, he pitied her, deprived of all spiritual solace.

Jezzil thought about Thia's story, wondering what she had actually seen on that night she'd run away from the temple. A god, materializing on this mortal plane? It seemed preposterous. And yet the terror in Thia's eyes told Jezzil she'd seen something beyond his ken.

Chonao males worshipped a number of deities, just as Chonao females had their own goddesses of hearth and home. The pen jav dal were priests of the War God, Arenar, and Jezzil had invoked that sacred Name before every march, every fight, every scouting party. Yet he had never expected to actually see Arenar while still living. And now, thanks to his cowardice at Zajares' fortress, he never would. When he died, Jezzil knew, he would be cast into the Darkness and Emptiness reserved for the most black-souled of sinners.

Jezzil knew that he deserved that fate, but he was not eager to meet it any time soon. Sohe kept his blades and his warrior skills honed to sharpness.

Several times the road passed through small farming villages, and the caravan masters

stopped briefly to trade. Jezzil was fascinated by how different life was on this side of the Narrow Sea. Here in Severez, women walked boldly through towns carrying their own money, or items to barter. Many of the younger women went unveiled, this far south. And they spoke when they pleased, not waiting to be spoken to first.

Jezzil was stationed to guard Shekk Marzet's wagons while they traded with a small town that lay on the border between the northernmost reaches of Galrai and Severez. The little town of Coquillan nestled like a drowsy child into a cozy valley in the foothills. The caravan arrived there a little after dawn on market day, and already the town square bustled with vendors who had set up pushcarts and colorful awnings.

Jezzil was pleased to be able to spend his time near the Shekk's wagons, keeping a watchful eye on the townspeople as they eyed the wares spread out for them to view. Coquillan seemed a peaceful place. Except for the knives they wore on their belts, the men went unarmed. Still, Jezzil knew there were many ways to kill that did not involve blades and bloodletting, so he did not relax his vigilance.

He saw Thia several times accompanying the old Shekk as he traded. Her dark eyes above her modesty veil met his briefly, then she looked away.

After the noon hour, the guard commander sent Jezzil's relief to him, with the message that he was off-duty until his night watch. Jezzil glanced at the colorful marketplace, deciding that he'd like to go and explore.

But as he started away from the wagons, he realized that he would rather not go alone. Squaring his shoulders, Jezzil turned back and approached Shekk Marzet's personal traveling wagon. Thia, he saw, was outside, stirring something over a cooking fire. Jezzil walked up to her. She looked up at him, and he could tell by the way her dark eyes crinkled at the corners that she was smiling behind her veil.

"I was going to the marketplace for a while," he said. "Would you like to accompany me, and see the wares?"

She hesitated, then glanced towards the wagons. "If the Shekk says I may; he may need me this afternoon."

But it seemed that Shekk Marzet, having eaten a hearty noon meal, had settled in for a nap. Thia came back within moments saying that she, too, was free for the afternoon.

They walked into the town together. Jezzil had seen a number of such towns during his travels to reach Amavav, where he'd hired on with the caravan, but it was clear that much of this was new to Thia. Coquillan was prosperous enough to boast a cobbled main street. The stones were slick with spring mud, and the open sewer ran in a channel down the middle. But there were sidewalks, and raised stepping blocks so people could cross the road without treading in the slippery muck. Pigs and chickens seemed to wander at will, and horses stood hipshot at the hitching posts, drowsing until their owners chose to return. The tiny yards before the two-stored brick and timbered houses and businesses were for the most part tidy and swept, and early spring flowers opened like tiny yellow trumpets in brightly painted windowboxes. Some of the businesses boasted glass windows displaying their wares, and Thia tapped the glass admiringly, explaining that in Amaran, glass was produced only in small, thick panes.

Jezzil smiled as he watched her exclaim with wonder and delight.

She was particularly entranced by the printer's shop, and by several bound books displayed in the window. One was open, showing the printed pages.

"Their scribes are so precise!" she murmured, astonished. "How could anyone write so small, so evenly? Every line is so straight, every letter the same, no matter how many times it is written."

"An invention from Pela," Jezzil explained. "This is done by a machine, not a scribe."

She stared at him. "A machine?"

"Yes. They can print whole volumes, and each is the same. They use lead letters that they can move around to print each page."

"How wonderful!" Thia said. "That way they could print the same page dozens of times. Why, they could make hundreds of scrolls!"

"They bind the scrolls together, see? When they're bound, they call them books," Jezzil said.

"We had some Pelanese texts in the library at our cloisters."

"Did you have these printers in Ktavao?" she asked.

"No. The King of Pela, despite his shortcomings as a military leader, has been wise to encourage inventors in his land. Pela is ahead of Ktavao in many ways. They have many inventions that would prove useful to the Redai," Jezzil said. "Their firearms are far superior to the ones I was taught to use. Easier and faster to load and fire, far more accurate, and their range is more than twice that of our muskets."

"Does the Redai know that Pela possesses such weaponry?" Thia asked.

"I believe he must," Jezzil said. "He has his spies, like any leader."

They continued down the street, heading for the town square. When they reached it, they saw the market ranged around the perimeter, with its colorful stalls and displays. A crowd was gathering in the center of the square.

"What is it?" Thia asked.

Jezzil shaded his eyes from the sun. "Some kind of show," he replied. "Would you like to see?"

Thia nodded, her black eyes bright with eager curiosity above her modesty veil. They walked across the square, then made their way through the gathering crowd to the small troupe of traveling entertainers who were setting up a makeshift stage and scenery in the center of the square. They stood in the second row back, watching the preparations curiously until the performance began.

First there came a juggler, who kept daggers flying through the air from hand to hand, with nary a lost finger or even a cut. Thia made a soft exclamation of wonder in her own language. He leaned closer to hear better. "What did you say?"

She whispered back, "How does he do that? Is it a skill? Or magic?"

Jezzil smiled. "A skill," he said. "I have seen others do it."

The next performer was a man who proceeded to insert, first, a knife, then a sword, into his mouth and down his gullet. Jezzil had never seen this done, and wondered if it was some kind of

illusion. But, since his discovery in Zajares' fortress of his own ability to Cast, he'd discovered that magic had a certain feel to it -- almost an unheard vibration, a tingle in the air. It made the hairs on the back of his neck stir and gave him gooseflesh on his arms.

Several times the young warrior had been able to detect when someone was using some folk conjury to heal, or charm warts, or rid their crop of pests. Watching the sword-eater, he experienced no such tingle.

But magic or no, the entertainer put on a good show, finishing up by extinguishing a flaming torch in his mouth. The crowd clapped and stamped their feet as they threw coins into the baskets arrayed before them.

The next entertainment was a clown with a troupe of trained dogs that capered and jumped through hoops, barked on cue and turned flips in the air. Thia's eyes shone as she regarded their antics, and Jezzil heard her laugh.

When the performance was finished, each of them tossed a coin into the basket before turning to walk through the marketplace. "You liked the clown," Jezzil said. "And the dogs."

"Yes," Thia said. "Where I was raised, little was funny or even amusing. The learned priests or the Mistress of Postulants would say that such a performance was frivolous, worldly, possibly even sinful. And yet, I found no harm in it."

"That is because there is none," Jezzil said. "Since I...left...the pen jav dal, I have realized that most people live the way these folk do. Religion is but one part -- often a very small part -- of their lives. They have their own gods and goddesses. The gods I was raised to worship -- these people know nothing of them."

"Heathens," Thia murmured, as though reciting an automatic response.

"Perhaps," Jezzil said. "But Thia, you do not worship my gods, nor I yours. What does that make us?"

She paused in mid-step, then slowly looked up at him, her dark eyes wide and haunted. It was several moments before she spoke. "Exiles..." she whispered.

Jezzil nodded. "As good a word as any." He reached over and awkwardly patted her

shoulder. "But I believe it is better to be two exiles together, rather than one exile alone."

She looked down, clearly at a loss for words, and Jezzil quickly changed the subject.

Immersed in their conversation, they turned the corner and left the main street behind. The cobblestones beneath their feet gave way to ridges of dried, rutted mud, and the buildings grew seedier, less prosperous, the further they proceeded.

Finally, a burst of raucous laughter broke out, and Jezzil stopped what he'd been saying and turned. Thia was closest to the narrow walkway that edged the street, and she had to dodge out of the way quickly as the doors burst open and a big man hurtled out as though he'd been tossed by an angry bull.

He landed in the street before them, perilously close to the midden-channel, belly down. They heard him gasp as his wind was knocked out. Moments later, he wheezed, caught his breath, then rose to hands and knees, spitting out filth.

Jezzil looked back at the door, and saw that it was a tavern. As he watched, the door opened again, and a man and a woman appeared. He heard Thia catch her breath, and glanced down to see her staring uncomprehendingly at the other women.

She was wearing a yellow gown so bright it was painful to the eyes in the afternoon sunlight. It had slipped off her shoulder, revealing half of a rounded breast. Her lips and cheeks were unnaturally red. As she opened her mouth to laugh, Jezzil saw that she was missing several teeth.

The man who held her wrist was as slender and vicious as a stoat. He glared down at the burly man and snarled, "I told you, pay before you have your fun, or no deal! Now, do you want her, or not?"

The big man lurched to his feet, then stood looking sullenly at the woman and her procurer. Finally, he reached into his vest and took out a small pouch. Scowling, he hurled three coins at the pimp. "All right, but she better be worth it!" he warned.

The woman tittered. "Oh, you'll have no complaints, dearie. C'mon with me, now..." She held out a hand, and the burly man, wiping the slime from his face, took it and followed her back inside.

The pimp gave Jezzil a measuring glance, then his gaze shifted to Thia. "Come to sell me

your skinny sister, boy?" he jeered. "If you haven't, wait a few minutes. When Amalee's done for the plowman, she'll take you next."

Jezzil felt himself flushing scarlet. Turning to Thia, who was still standing there, plainly uncomprehending, he took her arm and hurried her back up the street.

"What? What was all that about?" she asked, trying to turn back to see.

"Keep walking," Jezzil said tightly. "Come on. I should never have brought you here. I wasn't paying attention."

They headed back towards the caravan. When they had left the cobblestones behind, and were in sight of the merchants' encampment, Thia suddenly stopped. "You must tell me what happened back there," she said. "You understood what was happening. Everyone understood what was happening, except me. That woman, she was laughing at you, and at me. But not in the same way. Why? Also, I'm not wearing a slave collar. Why did that man speak of 'buying' me from you?"

Jezzil could feel the heat in his face, and could not meet her eyes. He searched for words, but there were none.

Thia reached out and took hold of his arm. He was surprised at the strength of her grasp. "Jezzil," she said, her voice holding impatience, almost anger, something he'd never heard from her before. "Tell me. I have been shut away from the world, but now I am out in it, part of it, and I must learn its ways, lest I come to harm from ignorance. You are the only person who knows my secret. I have trusted you, and you have trusted me. Now tell me."

Jezzil took a deep breath, shook his head. "It is not easy to speak of such things," he said, unable to meet her eyes. "We of the Chonao Brotherhood are told not to even think of them, and if we do, we must enact a penance on our flesh."

"I am no longer in the temple, and you no longer answer to your Brothers," she said, an edge in her voice. "We must survive. I must survive. Soon now I will be on my own. I need to learn."

"That woman..." Jezzil said. "She was...a whore."

"Whore..." she repeated the unfamiliar word softly. "And what is that?"

"A woman who sells her body -- her womanhood -- to any man who cares to pay the price. That man who was with her was her pimp. He sells her services, collects the money from the men who, who..." Jezzil shook his head and trailed off.

"I see," she said, and, glancing up, Jezzil could tell that she did, indeed, comprehend. "And there are many such women in towns and cities?"

Jezzil nodded. "And sometimes, young men. Boys."

Thia shook her head. "I had no idea...and that is how they earn their keep?"

"Yes. Hardly a pleasant existence, I would think," Jezzil muttered, still unable to meet her eyes. A thought struck him. "What did you mean when you said you would soon be on your own?"

She hesitated, gave him a sideways glance as they walked on. Jezzil kept his gaze on her, but he did not push, only waited silently.

Finally, she said, "Do not tell, but I must leave the Shekk in a few days, when we reach Q'Kal."

"Why? How?"

She answered the second question first. "I shall wait until we camp near the city, then slip away, leaving no trace of where I am going. I'll find someplace to live, some useful work to do. There must be work for someone who is willing..." her voice was not quite steady as she trailed off.

"Why?"

"I can't endanger the Shekk and his family. As long as I am with them, I make them targets for the Priests. They have been kind to me. I cannot let them be harmed."

Jezzil nodded. "I shall miss you, Sister Thia."

"And I you, Brother Jezzil. But there is no help for it."

They walked on together, until they were close to the wagons. Thia turned to the Chonao, her dark eyes intent above her veil. "Please, I am trusting you. Don't tell anyone."

"I swear," he said quietly. "I am pen jav dal, remember?"

* * *

In the mountains of Amaran, winter still reigned. The black peaks and desolate rocky passes wore mantles of shimmering white snow and blue-tinged ice. The cold was a tangible presence. It rode with him, walked with him, lived with him, and clung to him like the lover he had never had.

He had traded in his scarlet robe for a deerskin shirt and leggings with the fur worn inside, plus a hooded fur cloak and mittens, but he was still chilled much of the time. Only when the sun shone brightly at midday, or when he stopped for the night at a hostel or crofter's hut, did he truly feel warm and comfortable. His shaven pate still marked him for who he was, so he was always given the best seat in the house, the one closest to the fire.

The crofters and innkeepers must have thought him mad, traveling by horseback alone in these barren, winter-locked mountains. But they kept their opinions, if any, to themselves and never even looked at him directly, so greatly did they fear him. For a High Priest of Boq'urak to be traveling so far from the twin ziggurats without an entourage and armed escort was unheard of -- but nobody challenged him. Even the robbers who infested the heights left him alone. They were all too frightened of the One he served.

How ironic that is, Varn thought, derisively. I am traveling without the permission of my Order, much less their blessing. If any of these robbers were to kill me, there would be no reprisal for my death. Why should the Council enact punishment for the death of one of their own who is now disgraced? One who defied the orders of the Council to search for a missing Novice they all firmly believe is dead?

Oh, they had searched for Thia, searched for months. But the girl had vanished into the blizzard as thoroughly as a single snowflake vanished into a snowbank. In vain had the High Priests invoked the god, asking him to reveal Thia's whereabouts. Boq'urak had remained silent.

At last they had concluded that she must be dead, that she'd gotten lost in the blizzard and wandered off the road. Her body might be found come spring, partially thawed and gnawed by predators. Or, more likely, she had fallen into some crevice in the rocks and would never be found.

Varn was the only one who refused to accept the decree of the Council. He had stubbornly maintained that Thia lived, that she had escaped, and that she must be tracked and brought back to

the Twin Ziggurats so she could atone for her sin against the god.

He had no concrete reason for his belief, just a growing conviction that he must search for Thia. So when word had come to Verang that an unseasonable early spring thaw had cleared the mountain passes, he had filled a saddlebag with provisions and some clothing, taken all the money he could lay his hands on from his brother priests' secret stashes, then saddled a horse and ridden out before dawn one morning a tenday ago.

Since leaving Verang, he'd spent each day in the saddle, chilled but resolute, determined to succeed in his quest.

Now, as his mount picked his way along the downslope of the last pass leading out of the Amaranian heights, Varn realized that the ice and snow surrounding him was not piled quite as high. The sun was beating down on the hood of his bearskin cloak, and he was actually warm enough to push it back in order to feel it on his face and his naked scalp. A few minutes later, he dared to slide off his furred mittens.

Three hours later, the trail he was following paralleled a narrow rivulet of stream, and the water was actually flowing. Varn halted his mount and swung down, his nearly empty waterskin in hand.

Leaving his horse to stand, tethered to the spiky branch of a conifer, Varn picked his way across the wet rocks until he could crouch on a small, flat, tongue of stone to fill his waterskin. Before him lay an icy section of the cliff, black rock shadowed from the sun.

After so many days riding through a completely frozen landscape, the rush of flowing water was like a benediction. Trying to keep his hands from touching the icy current, he lowered the waterskin into the stream. As it slowly filled, he looked across the little rivulet to the ice-rimed cliff wall, and beheld his own reflection. It had been years since he had seen himself; mirrors were a symbol of vanity, and not allowed by the Order.

Varn stared at himself, fascinated. He looked very different as a man than he had as a boy.

As he stared, time seemed to slow, to stop around him. The real world receded, grew distant. His face began to change.

At the same moment, he felt the touch of the god within his body. Varn had been Incarnate three times, and recognized the sensation of having his body mass shift and alter when Boq'urak touched it.

His face...it was now overlaid with the face of the god. His eyes were his no longer, but Boq'urak's huge, round, lidless orbs. He was not truly Incarnate, for no tentacles had sprouted, his suddenly dry mouth had not actually changed shape, but there was no denying the presence of Boq'urak within him, the stamp of Boq'urak lying like a brand across his own unfamiliar features.

He managed to move his lips. "Lord," he said. "Command thy servant."

The voice spoke. Was it solely in his mind, or was it actual sound? Varn could not tell. My servant, it said. My faithful servant.

Varn felt a tremendous surge of gratitude and affirmation. He was doing the right thing! His god had said so!

"Lord," he said. "I left the Order behind to go in search of the Novice, Thia. My brethren did not understand why I did that. I am as Outcast as she is, now."

They will understand when you return to them, the voice said. You will be honored for your faith. Nothing moves save by My hand.

He nodded. "Thank you, Lord. You want me to find her, and capture her. That is Your will?"

It is my will. She has witnessed the Rite of Incarnation. She has denied Me. She must pay for her impiety. Capture her, and give her to Me. Perform the Rite with her.

Varn swallowed, as his throat suddenly seemed to close up. Thia...so warm, so alive, lying dead before him? "Must she pay with her life, Lord?" he ventured. "Surely she can be brought back to the way. She is...she is so young."

She will be Mine.

Varn nodded. "I will obey, Lord."

Without warning, the external world returned with a rush. The waterskin slipped from his numb fingers, and he pitched forward, his arms going up to the elbows in the stream's frigid embrace. Master Varn gasped, groping for his waterskin. By the time he found it and hoisted it out of the

stream, then looked back up, the sun had gone behind a cloud. The High Priest could no longer see himself in the icy surface of the black rock.

Memories of Thia assailed him as he stood and went over to fasten the waterskin to his saddle, then mounted his horse. Thia as a child, looking admiringly up at him, her huge dark eyes filled with trust. Thia as a girl, gawky and coltish, her intelligence setting her apart from the rest of the postulants. Thia as a Novice, her body beneath the shapeless habit ripe with a woman's curves, a woman's fire...

Varn's mouth tightened. She was not for him. Boq'urak had Spoken. She would go to the god, and he would be but the vessel that contained the god's essence. It would not be his hands that stroked Thia's nakedness. It would not be his body that mounted her.

Hot resentment flickered. Boq'urak has spoken. Very well. He will take her body, and her life. But before I relinquish myself to Him, I will take some reward for myself. An embrace. A kiss. I will tell her I love her, and hear her speak of her love for me. And then we shall share a kiss. Boq'urak said I was His faithful servant. Surely he will not begrudge me one kiss...

* * *

Six days after their stopover at the village of Coquillan, the caravan was camped in a large meadow just outside Q'Kal. Thia struggled through the last meal she spent with the old Shekk and his daughters, wishing all the while that she could openly thank them for their kindness and say farewell. She reminded herself fiercely that her actions were for their own good, but in the past months, they had become dear to her, and it was hard to know that she would never see them again.

After supper, as the sun was setting in a splash of sullen crimson, she put on all her clothing, layering it on so she would not have to carry it. Lastly, she pulled on her dullest, most nondescript tunic and skirt, then laced on her stout boots. She had no bag, only her shawl, to serve as a pack. Quickly she arranged her few belongings in the center -- the arm-bangles and necklaces the Shekk had bestowed upon her, the few coins she'd managed to hoard, and a small parcel of bread, dried fruit and cheese, then brought the corners together and tied them into a pack that could be slung across her back.

Then, slipping through the evening shadows, Thia stole away from the familiar wagon, feeling tears threaten. She blinked them back, concentrating only on moving quickly, and staying unseen.

She kept to the underbrush until she was out of sight of the caravan, then, resolutely, she squared her shoulders and struck out on the hard-beaten road that led into Q'Kal.

The caravan had camped on a hill overlooking the city, and as it grew darker, she saw the lights spring up before her as the lamplighters made their rounds. Q'Kal was a large city, far bigger than any she had seen before.

Thia swallowed, fighting down her fear, and forced herself to keep walking swiftly. She had no idea of where she might be able to obtain lodging, or food, and she was terrified that someone would mistake her for a whore because she was alone and friendless. Since Jezzil had first told her about whoring as a way for a woman to earn her living, she'd eavesdropped with far greater attention to the rough talk of the guardsmen as they approached the city. The way they talked about whores frightened her -- as though they were not women at all, only vessels for their seed, bodies for them to manhandle.

She tightened her modesty veil, determined not to let anything but her eyes show. According to what she'd seen, whores went unveiled, so she hoped her veil would keep her from being accosted.

For a while she'd considered dressing like a boy. Her hair was still barely long enough to touch her ears and collar, and she was slender enough, with small breasts. But since coming to stay with the Shekk, and having more to eat, she would have had to bind her breasts painfully in order to appear sufficiently flat-chested. Her voice was a problem; too high-pitched. And, most importantly, she had not spent enough time in the company of men or boys to emulate them. Thia had reluctantly abandoned the notion.

After weeks with the caravan, she was accustomed to long marches. She lengthened her stride a bit, falling into the mindless rhythm of walking, determined to get into Q'Kal before the city gates were closed for the night.

She concentrated on moving swiftly and surely, trying determinedly not to think about where she would sleep, how she would live, what would happen. Let the future worry about itself, the

present is where we live, she thought, remembering an old Amaranian proverb.

Hoofbeats sounded behind her on the road. Thia's heart bounded in her chest. Could the Shekk have missed her?

Quickly, she scuttled to the side of the road, scrambled up the bank, and then pushed her way into the brush, feeling greenbriers catch her clothing and flesh.

Dropping to her hands and knees, she wormed her way into a thicket, then peered out cautiously.

A rider was approaching, sure enough, a rider who was astride a horse that moved as smoothly and quietly as a shadow. Thia tensed. It couldn't be...could it? There are many grey horses...

Just as the horseman came abreast of her hiding place, the grey halted, standing obediently in the middle of the road. Thia heard the rider's voice. "Thia? I know you are there. Come out."

She blinked in astonishment, then wriggled forward, losing more skin and snagging her veil so thoroughly that she had to remove it to untangle it. "Jezzil?" she whispered, as she struggled with the thin fabric, trying not to tear it.

"Yes..."

Finally the veil came free, and she hastily fixed it in place, then slid down the bank with her small bundle of food and her few possessions bumping along beside her.

Falar whickered as she caught the familiar scent. "What are you doing here, Brother Jezzil?" Thia asked, as she walked up to pat the mare's neck.

"I came looking for you tonight, and you were gone," his voice reached her. The moon would rise late, and she could not make out his features, only see his form silhouetted against the sky. "You left without saying farewell."

Thia bit her lip, hesitated, then blurted, "Forgive me. I couldn't bear to. I was afraid..."

"Afraid of what?"

"Afraid of everything. But mostly afraid that if I tried to bid you farewell, I would lose the will to go. And I must go," she said, fiercely. "I'm endangering the Shekk and his daughters -- perhaps even

the whole caravan! -- by my very presence. I had to get away."

He did not answer, but dismounted smoothly from Falar's back, then walked over to her. Try as she might, she could not discern his features save as a pale blur. "I know," he said. "I do understand. But...I could not stay with the caravan, I found, when you were gone. I had to come after you."

She shook her head dazedly. "Wh...why?"

"Because, Sister Thia, I understand you. I trust you. And I cannot see you come to harm because you are alone in a strange city." His hand moved to his side, then she heard the clink of coins as he jingled them. "I asked for my payout, and left."

"You've left your job?" Thia could scarcely believe it.

"Yes. We'll go to Q'Kal together. You'll be safer that way. And I..." he hesitated, then chuckled slightly, one of the first signs of amusement she'd ever detected in him. "And I will have someone to talk to, someone who understands."

Thia's mind raced like a herd of startled cattle. "You want to stay with me? For us to...live together?"

He took a step towards her. "Fear not, I mean no disrespect, Sister. I speak only with respect and friendship. I believe we could...help...each other."

She backed away a step, hesitated. "You are telling the truth," she muttered, thinking furiously. "I know you are."

"I would never lie to you," Jezzil said.

"You had better not," Thia said dryly.

The movement of his head reminded her of Falar's when she pricked up her ears and gazed warily into the distance. "Aside from the fact that lying is a sin," he said, "and I have enough sin burdening my soul to last me for a dozen lifetimes, what did you mean by that?"

She took a deep breath. "I can tell when someone is lying," she said. "Always."

He did not speak for a moment, then, when he did, his words were slow, thoughtful. "I...see."

How do you do that? Can you read faces, eyes, that well?"

"I don't know how I do it," she said. "I just can. I don't need to see faces, or eyes."

He made a sound, half amused, half skeptical. Thia flushed. "I can prove it," she said. "Tell me three things from your past, make one of them a lie. I cannot see your face in this darkness."

"You don't have to prove --"

"Just do it."

Jezzil was silent for a moment, then he said, in slow, deliberate tones, "I abandoned my brothers to die in a fire. I have never known a woman. I slew a monster in a moat."

Thia laughed harshly. "You think to trick me," she said. "All of those things are the truth."

Now it was Jezzil's turn to take a step backward. "How do you do it? Magic?"

"I don't know. I just can," she replied. "I have always been able to do it."

"Can you do other magic?"

"No," she said, then she remembered that he'd known where she was, even when she was hidden. "Can you?"

"I...I..." he stammered for a moment, then must have remembered who he was talking to, and said simply, "yes."

"Let me think for a moment," Thia said. Folding her arms across her chest, she paced back and forth across the road, thinking. It would be good to have someone to talk to, she mused. But...he is a man! From what the High Sister told us, even men who are well-intentioned cannot control themselves. There were stories that even the High Priests succumbed to fleshly temptations in Verang at times...

The thought of the High Priests reminded her that they might be trying to trace her, follow her trail. But they are looking for a young woman alone, she reminded herself. Not a woman who shares a hearth with a man.

She glanced back at him over her shoulder, heard an impatient sound from Falar, then heard her paw the roadway. Jezzil spoke to her, his voice holding unmistakable authority, and the mare

stood still.

If Jezzil were with me, no one could break in and harm me while I slept, Thia thought. No priest, no drunken bruiser looking for a whore. Jezzil is a warrior. And I must sleep sometime...

Her heart rose a bit within her as she realized she'd made her decision. Her steps swift and sure, she walked back to him. "Let us try it," she said. "I am willing."

He nodded and she heard relief and pleasure in his voice. "Good," he said. "On to Q'Kal, then." He swung up on Falar, then reached down a hand. "Hand me your bundle,"

She gave it to him and he quickly lashed it to one of the ties on the saddle. He reached his hand down again. "Now you."

Thia looked up at him. "Me? Ride with you?"

"It grows late," he said. "We don't want the city gates to close before we can get there."

After a few abortive tries, he rode Falar over by the bank, and Thia was able to climb up, then slide on behind him. She perched uneasily on Falar's round rump, feeling the surge of the strong muscles between her thighs, through her bunched-up skirts.

"Hold onto me," Jezzil directed. "We must hurry a bit."

Thia leaned forward and grabbed his belt.

He must have given some signal, for Falar's hindquarters bunched, then they were heading down the road at a dizzying pace. Thia had never gone so fast!

She found that she was clinging, not to Jezzil's belt, but had wrapped her arms around his body, hiding her face against his back. Her nostrils were full of the smell of oiled leather, and the edges of the plates in his armor dug into the skin of her forehead, cheeks and chin.

Falar's hoofbeats sounded like miniature thunder as she galloped, and Thia struggled to hang on, to balance. She clamped her legs tightly about the mare's flanks.

She heard Jezzil shout, "Stop that! Do you want her to pitch us off?" But even before his warning, she'd felt the muscles of the mare's rump tighten like a drawn bowstring. Hastily, she forced herself to loosen the muscles of her calves.

The cantle of the saddle dug into her thighs and groin, the plates from Jezzil's armor scored

her flesh, the night rushed past her so fast that she grew dizzy and her head reeled.

And yet Thia had never felt so alive, so free. She heard a sound, realized it was coming from inside her, bubbling up like clear water from a mountain spring.

It was laughter. Pure, joyous laughter.

CHAPTER FIVE - EREGARD

Eregard Livon Willom q'Injaad, third son of King Agivir of Pela, stood with his brothers on the wall-walk of the ancient fortress that enclosed much of the capital city of Minoma.

The ramparts of the old fortress stood high above the city that had outgrown their limits two centuries ago. The fortress itself had crumbled, as had the castle it guarded. But the outer protective wall remained, enclosing the royal palace Agivir's grandsire had built, along with the Old City.

Eregard leaned on the rampart and sighed as he looked down at the prosperous, bustling harbor town. It was a beautiful vista, and the autumn air was as clear and tangy as a fine Pelanese vintage. The Prince could easily make out the blue-green waters of the Narrow Sea beyond Minoma's sheltered bay. So many ships rode at anchor their spars and masts resembled the forests from whence they'd come.

If I concentrate on the view, the Prince thought, I won't have to listen to Salesin gloat about wedding Lady Ulandra. I can just let his voice blur into the whisper of the wind, and the cries of the sea birds. I will not allow myself to envision my brother screaming as he plunges down from these ramparts to the street below...

Salesin, Crown Prince of Pela, Viceroy of Kata, noticed his younger brother's preoccupation with the view. "Eregard! Don't look so sour, this is good news!"

Eregard nodded. "Indeed, brother," he said softly. "Excellent."

"You weren't even listening!" Salesin accused. "Hear me, baby brother! Father says that if I produce an heir within a year, he'll consider relinquishing the crown. He wants to be free to spend more time with Mother." The Heir's tone betrayed his contempt for a King who would let a woman -- even his Queen, and the Princes' mother -- influence him. "What d'you think of that, little brother?"

Eregard was royal, and he'd learned to control his features before he'd learned to straddle a horse. Royals did not betray their inner thoughts or emotions...not to friends, and most certainly not to enemies. So his expression when he turned to face his brother was neutral, conveying only polite interest. "I think Mother thrives on company, and we should all spend more time with her."

Salesin stared at his brother for a moment, then threw back his handsome head and laughed, long and loud. "Where did you learn to dissemble so well, youngster? In one of your everlasting books?"

Eregard smiled thinly. "Where else, brother? Books are no substitute for your fleshpots, of a certain, but they do teach a few minor lessons."

Salesin's grin broadened, losing all semblance of good humor, until his teeth were bared wolfishly. "Remind me to take you along to some of my haunts, brother. You could use a few lessons in learning to be a man...if it's not already too late, that is. You haven't been baring your backside to Lord Malgar and his mincing bunch, have you?"

Despite his control, Eregard felt himself flush hotly, and knew that his brother had not missed that. He shook his head, but held his tongue. Don't let him bait you. He always wins, and he never stops. Push him, and you will regret it...

As the brothers bristled at each other, Prince Adranan, whom both had forgotten, stepped between them. "Here, now. Let's have none of that. Mother wouldn't like it."

Salesin's lip curled. "Adranan, try not to be any stupider than you can help. Who cares what Mother would like?"

Eregard looked at his brothers, then shook his head inwardly. Did our mother cuckold the

King? How can we be siblings? We are nothing alike!

Agivir son's were all young, but any resemblance between them ended there. At twenty-seven, Crown Prince Salesin was tall, lean and disturbingly handsome. His men jokingly called him "The Demon Lover," in homage to both his looks and his cold-blooded prowess with women. The Prince had dark, saturnine features and gleaming black hair with a pronounced widow's peak. A short beard and moustache framed his thin lips. His eyes were pale brown, almost the color of amber, startling in his dark countenance.

Prince Adranan was two years younger. He was also dark, but he was built like a wine-cask, tall with broad shoulders and a gut that betrayed his fondness for ale and rich foods. Despite his bulk he was a formidable fighter, an excellent shot and an even more expert swordsman. His good-natured smile was gap-toothed; he'd had two of his front teeth knocked out in a brawl during one of his incognito tavern-crawls in Minoma, and refused to wear his false ivory teeth except during State occasions.

Nineteen year old Eregard was a full head shorter than his brothers. He had impeccable taste and always dressed in the latest fashion, but his elegant clothing did little to improve his unprepossessing exterior. Pale, freckled skin, lank, mouse-brown hair, and eyes that were an indeterminate shade between blue and grey made him easy to overlook. The spectacles he wore for reading either dangled on a ribbon around his neck, or were pushed up onto the top of his head. He was as heavy as Adranan, but without the underlying muscle. His belly bulged over his fine, tooled belt.

Salesin stared intently into his youngest brother's eyes, then, suddenly, he laughed. "Oh, you should see yourself, baby brother. If looks were weapons, I'd be choking on my own lifeblood right now. Watch yourself, Eregard. You just...watch yourself."

Rage bubbled in Eregard, and he couldn't disguise his anger. He longed to draw his sword and bury the point in Salesin's throat. Or...there was always the rampart. Up and over, yes...

But there was no point in trying. Salesin was much stronger, an experienced fighter. He was also a master swordsman, while Eregard was barely beyond the basics.

Besides, Adranan wouldn't let him do it, even supposing he could get the best of the Heir in a physical tussle. Eregard drew a slow, deep breath. Control. You must learn control. Salesin will be King, remember. Already he wields almost as much power as Father. Kill him and you commit treason.

Aloud he said, "You go too far, brother. But for Adranan's sake, I'll say no more."

The second-in-waiting for the throne of Pela clapped him on the back. "There's the lad! Salesin, what say you? Peace between you?"

The Crown Prince did not reply, but he shrugged, and Eregard knew that was all the apology he was likely to get. Anger stirred in him again, but he repressed it.

"Just wait until I'm King," Salesin said. "There'll be no more buy-offs or ceding of land to avoid trouble. Any country that dares look askance at Pela will face war, all-out war. Father used to be a force to reckon with, but in his old age, he's grown as spineless as a jellyfish."

Eregard bit his lip until it stung fiercely, but he did not rise to Salesin's bait, knowing that's what his brother wanted.

Luckily for Eregard, a distraction was approaching at a brisk pace. A group of ladies-in-waiting out for their daily constitutional were almost upon them, so the three Princes fell silent. As each Lady drew even with them, she sank down in a rustle of satin brocade and Severian lace, curtsying deeply.

Eregard gave each of them a nod and a polite smile. Adranan had a grin, a guffaw, and something personal to say to each, sending many scuttling away, blushing and giggling. Salesin gave each lady a brief, cool stare -- even those whom Eregard knew he'd bedded.

Following behind the ladies-in-waiting came a gaggle of barefoot serving boys and girls, carrying palm fans, shawls, pomander balls, boxes of sweets, parasols, and squirming lap-dogs.

Eregard regarded the colorful display, wishing for a moment that he could be one of those boys, with no care in the world except to carry my lady's lapdog or parasol. If I were a servant, she

would be so far above me that I would not even dare to think of her, he thought. I could have followed her all the day long, listened to her voice, and been happy in her presence. I would have been spared the torture of hope.

The prince turned away from the crowd to gaze back over the ramparts at Minoma. The sun had gone behind a cloud; the sea no longer sparkled. Directly below him he could see the dark green tree-lined paths of the King's menagerie. Commoner and noble alike strolled along the paths, gazing at the rare animals in their spacious cages. Faintly, he heard a cry from one of the wild desert cats, a snarl that deepened into a full-throated roar.

Adranan poked him with an elbow and pointed. "Look," he said. "King's messengers, two of them. Odds are they've come straight up from the port, with news from the mainland."

Eregard watched as the two riders approached, seeing they were urging their horses onward with whip and spur. Their mounts clattered up the cobblestoned street, running all-out. Passersby scattered to get out of their way as they recognized the significance of the official scarlet tunics banded with black.

As though the sun's disappearance were a signal, the wind picked up, reminding them this was autumn, and winter was scant weeks away. A chill gust made Eregard shiver as it buffeted him.

Salesin swore as his cloak snapped out behind him. "Thrice-damned wind!" he muttered. "I'm going in before I catch my death. Besides, I need to see what message they brought."

Good riddance, Eregard thought. Despite the cold, he waited, shivering, until his brother was long gone. Adranan stood beside him. Only when Eregard bade his brother farewell did the middle Prince speak.

"Listen, Eregard," he said, his normally jovial features twisted with concern. "Don't let Salesin bait you. He's...he can be...cruel."

"That's putting it mildly," Eregard said.

"He has spies everywhere. Plot against him -- or even think about plotting against him -- and you'll find yourself exiled. Father may well abdicate in his favor."

"And would that be good for Pela?"

Adranan smiled ruefully. "Depends on your point of view. It would fill up the dungeons with political prisoners, thus providing jobs for many additional gaolers. And on the mainland, those outspoken Katan grumblers would learn to guard their tongues and watch what they print. No more outrageous political cartoons or broadsides. Salesin would make short work out of suppressing any hint of rebellion."

"True," Eregard agreed dourly.

"I care about you, little brother," Adranan said. "Heed my warning. Don't cross him."

Sound advice. Eregard thought. He managed to smile at his brother. "Adranan the Peacemaker. Why couldn't you have been First-born?"

Adranan smiled. "Being Heir is not my idea of a good life. I'm content to be the King's Arm. I'm not good at intrigue."

"Unfortunately, Salesin excels at it," Eregard observed bitterly.

"Yes he does. And I don't want to lose my favorite brother," Adranan said. "So control your temper, Eregard. There are eyes and ears everywhere."

"Sound advice, brother," Eregard agreed. "I thank you for it."

"I'm going down to the Golden Sail for a pint," Adranan said. "Join me?"

Eregard shook his head. "No, thanks. I should be getting back. I was going to visit Mother before supper."

Adranan nodded, then headed out to meet his personal guard where they stood patiently waiting.

Moments later, Eregard, clutching his cloak around him, hurried down the stairs. A small contingent of soldiers, his personal guard, awaited him at the bottom of the steps leading down from the ramparts.

Eregard nodded brusquely at the sergeant, then he started down the weathered, oft-mended steps. When he reached the street level, the prince headed back towards the royal palace. Flanked by his guard, Eregard walked down the oft-repaired streets, automatically avoiding the slimy gutters

running down the middle of them. Smells warred with each other: the stench from the gutters, a pungent reek from an outhouse, the warm scent of bread and ale, the sharp yeasty stink of horse piss, the sweet fragrance from a flower-seller's cart, and the mouth-watering fragrance of gamebird pie.

Minoma's Old Town was old indeed, far older than the royal palace. It was at least as old as the massive wall. The houses were bluestone and weathered wood, with occasional newer structures of half-timbering and white-washed stucco.

Shops lined the streets, interspersed with residences. A goldsmith's shop, with a beautifully kept exterior, perched uncomfortably next to an old, low-ceilinged tavern, rowdy and full of sailors even at this early hour. A wool-merchant's shop presented splashes of color from the dyed hanks of yarn, and a sail-mender's shop was doing a brisk business.

Eregard strode along, head down, and the sergeant of the guard forged ahead, making sure his path was clear and that no knife or gun-wielding assassins lurked in the alleys. The Prince's thoughts were as bleak and cold as the autumn clouds that continued to block the sun.

If Father abdicates in favor of Salesin, what will happen to me? I'll be here, stuck at court, having to watch the two of them together. I'll have to watch him treat her badly, for Salesin treats none of his women well, and to him a highborn Lady has the same furnishings down below as a tavern wench --

The thought was so distressing that he forced himself into considering something else, a subject he normally detested -- politics.

What if he decides that the Chonao Reidai...what's his name? Kerezau, that's it, what if he decides that Kerezau is too powerful for Pela to fight? What if he tries for an alliance with that barbarian, instead?

Bleakly, Eregard wondered if Kerezau had any daughters. If he did, that was bad. Adranan was a formidable fighter. He could lead troops. Adranan was valuable. Whilst he, Eregard, was useful only as a potential pawn in a ruler's marriage game.

Scowling, Eregard kicked a loose cobblestone on the edge of a dank pothole, sending it skittering into a narrow, greasy little alleyway. He glanced over at the sergeant. "Notify the street

warden to fix that spot."

"Yes, your Highness."

The Prince lengthened his stride, pulling his cloak tight around him as a chill gust whipped down the streets. A touch of winter's breath, he thought. The wind suited his mood, matched the cold desolation growing within his heart. Soon I won't even be able to think of her without committing treason...

His dark thoughts accompanied him the rest of the way home, dogging his steps like a relentless beggar. The walk from the old fortress wall to the royal palace was not long, but it was all uphill, and Eregard was not in the best of shape. The Prince was panting by the time he reached the gates and was bowed through them.

Dismissing his personal guard, he started up the raked gravel toward the entrance. The palace consisted of one large square central building, with three smaller wings on each side and at the rear. It was built solidly of pale grey stone, with red tiles on its roofs lending a touch of cheery color against the leaden skies.

Soldiers drilled in the courtyard as Eregard walked by. Absently, the Prince returned the Captain of the Guard's salute. Reaching the broad, sweeping staircase that led up to the palace, the Prince plodded up the wide steps.

He was halfway up when some sixth sense made him look up -- and then he saw her. She was evidently just back from her own constitutional, and, as he watched, Lady Ulandra's slender form stepped through the Palace entrance and vanished.

Eregard's steps lengthened until he was taking the steps two and three at a time. Part of his mind shouted at him to slow down, as befitted royal dignity, but he redoubled his efforts.

The Prince burst through the doors and was rewarded by the sight of the Lady Ulandra, carrying her small dog, just ahead of him in the entrance hall with its black and white marble pavement. Her maid, laden with shawls and a lapdog, was just disappearing through the door towards the east wing of the palace.

She's alone! Eregard realized. At the sound of his rapid footsteps, she turned, startled, her

hands raised to remove her small, stylish hat.

The Prince halted his undignified rush, then just stood there, staring at her, at a loss for something to say. Color washed the Lady's pale cheeks, and she hastily dropped into a deep curtsy. "Your Highness!"

"Lady Ulandra," the Prince said. He walked over to her and held out his hand to help her rise. He felt a thrill throughout his entire body as her fingers met his; he had never touched her before.

Lady Ulandra q'Jinasii was small and slender, with pale, delicate features and thick, flaxen hair that glimmered pale as crystal in the dimness of the hall. Her brows and lashes were light, too, something Eregard had never noticed before. Suddenly he realized that for formal occasions she must use cosmetics to darken them, and rouge to color her cheeks.

Her eyes were light blue, as clear as a winter sky, and often as distant.

But today, as she stood looking up at Eregard, there was nothing distant about them. She was smiling, her small, even teeth echoing her modest pearl necklace.

Her walking dress was a color that Eregard had seen her wear before, the dusky hue of a blue rose.

Eregard forced himself to relinquish her hand, then, realizing that she was waiting for him to speak, he cast about for something -- anything! -- to say.

"It's turning cooler, my Lady. I am afraid winter is just around the corner."

She nodded. "Yes, your Highness. When I left this morning it was very pleasant, but now it almost seems that a storm is brewing."

"That's what Salesin said," Eregard said, hating himself for stooping to bring his brother's name into the conversation. But he wanted to watch her features when she heard her betrothed's name. Does she love him?

An expression flicked across her features, then was gone. Wariness, apprehension, even. Certainly not warmth. Eregard's heart beat fast. Stop it. It's impossible, and you know it.

She dropped her gaze. "The Crown Prince is, as always, perceptive," Ulandra said. "The weatherwatchers are predicting snows in the mountains, and rain in Minoma by midnight, your

Highness."

Noticing that Ulandra's small, shaggy dog was squirming in her grasp, Eregard reached over to cautiously pat the creature's head. The dog eyed him warily, but, used to being fussed over, tolerated the caress. "Poor little fellow," Eregard said. "Always having to put up with strangers petting him. What's his name?"

One part of his mind was shouting that he should give her leave to go, that keeping her talking was an invitation to scandal. But he was drunk on being so close to her, close enough to smell her sachet, close enough to touch her, if he but dared.

She gave a breathy laugh. "You'll laugh if I tell you, your Highness. His name is Wolf. But it's actually an apt name, for he thinks he's the size of the King's mastiffs."

Eregard chuckled. Ulandra bent over and deposited Wolf on the gleaming marble floor, letting him sniff at an urn filled with lush blossoms from the King's conservatory. I should let her go...but what if we never meet again?

He pointed at the small book that protruded from the top of her reticule. "Poetry, Lady?"

She laughed a little and colored. "Yes, your Highness. I adore Rimbala. He's so..." she hesitated, casting about for words.

"Passionate?" Eregard suggested.

Her blush deepened, and she dropped her eyes. "Yes, I suppose that is the correct word, your Highness. His words, they make my heart beat faster. Do they affect you so, your Highness?"

With all his being he longed to hear his name on her lips, but court etiquette forbade such informality. He smiled at her. "Yes, they do, my lady." He hesitated, then added, "I have set some of Rimbala's most passionate verses to music. Would you like me to play for you some time?"

Immediately he knew he'd erred, been too familiar. Lady Ulandra did not look up as she whispered, "Perhaps, your Highness. Perhaps I might go along when you visit your mother the Queen, and we could both hear your artistry, my Prince."

Eregard knew he'd been rebuffed with exquisite delicacy. He admired the Lady's virtue, even as he sighed inwardly. Glancing up at the clock in the wide hallway, he saw that they had been talking

long enough to raise eyebrows. I must let her go.

He nodded formally at her. "Lady Ulandra, you often walk at this time of day?"

"Yes, your Highness, often."

Eregard inclined his head slightly, first to her, then, jokingly, to Wolf. "Then I shall hope that our paths may cross again, and soon. It would be a pleasure to have such excellent company on my daily constitutional."

Ulandra blushed becomingly and sank into a deep curtsy. "You do us too much honor, your Highness. But Wolf and I thank you."

Turning and walking away from her was one of the hardest things Eregard had done in his short life, but he knew it was the right thing to do. He was tempted to turn back and wave, but royal dignity would not permit such a common gesture.

The Prince made his way back to his apartments in the west wing of the palace, alternating between despair and elation. He had never before spoken to Lady Ulandra alone, and that was enough to set his heart leaping. But what if this was the only time? Remembering the faint perfume of her sachet, his head swam.

When he reached his bedchamber, he gestured impatiently at his manservant and the guard. "Leave me!"

They bowed themselves out, and Eregard sank onto a sofa to brood.

The Prince's apartments were cozily cluttered and a bit shabby. He never entertained there, so comfort was his main concern. The bed boasted only a small fabric canopy, and bookshelves occupied every wall. The royal arms were carved into the footboard of the bed, but the rest of the furniture was unadorned. Chairs and sofas were overstuffed and comfortable, with mirrored candelabras providing light for reading at night.

After a few minutes the Prince opened a chest and removed a stringed balankala. He fiddled with it for a few moments, tuning it awkwardly, then began to strum a plaintive melody.

Words...what words?

He glanced down at the sheet music he'd begun scribbling yesterday. Ulandra, not an easy

name to rhyme, 'tis true... After a few minutes of adding in and crossing out, the Prince and began to sing in a trained, resonant baritone:

"The world is hard, the world is cruel

It treats me as a lowly fool

I cannot have my own true love

Aside I am unfairly..."

He paused. "Shoved?" he ventured, finally.

No! It rhymes, but 'tis an inelegant word.

After trying "moved," and finding that it was completely wrong, the Prince abandoned the first verse for the second:

"The world treats me like a clown...

'Twere better if I were struck down

If I can't have my destined love

By lightning bolts shot from above."

That's better, he thought. After a moment's reflection he scratched out the word "destined" and substituted "one true."

Now for the third verse, which was only partly completed:

"The world is so unfair to me

I cannot hold her..."

Eregard frowned. On my knee? He shook his head. No! Think!

"The world is so unfair to me

I cannot hold her tenderly

I cannot kiss the girl I love

I'm sure we'd fit --"

Like hand in glove? he wondered, then shook his head. For a moment he had a wild impulse to hurl the balankal across the room. But it was an old instrument, and a gift from his mother. Eregard set it down carefully, then just sat, head in his hands.

What am I going to do?

Minutes later, he was roused from his wretched musings when he heard the scuff of a foot, then a discreet cough. "Your Highness?"

Eregard did not turn his head to speak to his manservant, not wanting Regen to see his eyes. "I wanted to be alone," he said coldly. "Therefore, if you've disturbed me, Regen, it must be important."

"Aye, your Highness," the servant said. "It is. Your Father the King has asked to see you immediately. He's in the conservatory, my Prince."

Eregard nodded. "I'll be along directly," he said. "As soon as I've made myself presentable. Go ahead and tell my father I am coming, Regen."

The man bowed. "Yes, your Highness."

Eregard hastily splashed water from the ewer onto his face, then ran a comb through his shoulder-length hair. Quickly he changed his padded leather outer-jerkin for a padded satin one, and buckled a gold-buckled belt around his chubby middle.

A quick glance in the fine Ventanian mirror that hung opposite his bed showed him that he was ready. Eregard quickly left the room.

He threaded his way through the corridors, and down several stairways, then more corridors, until he reached the rear, north, wing. The conservatory was built as an extension on the back of this wing. Eregard saw his father walking alone at the end of the glass-walled annex. The guards at the doors opened them, and formally bowed him through.

Eregard stepped into the conservatory, smelling the heady scents of exotic blossoms and rich wet soil. Humid warmth surrounded him as he walked down the shallow steps and headed for his father. Urns of plants and trees were everywhere, interspersed with immaculately tended banks of hothouse blooms. The floor was of green marble, so the plants and flowers seemed to have sprouted from the stone pavement.

The King, hearing the footsteps, straightened up from a tub of blooming alandeors, and waited for his son to join him.

Agivir Cosomiso Invictos q'Injaad III was a man who had once been tall, broad-shouldered and imposing in his battle armor. There were traces still of that man in the King's craggy features and painfully straight carriage. But his body had sagged and thickened from years of overindulgence, his lank hair, what was left of it, was gray, and his beard was sparse and untidy. His gaze, once so direct and unflinching, had a tendency to wander. His eyesight was failing, so he wore a quizzing glass around his neck on a golden chain.

He wore no crown, no sign of his rank except for a pendant which bore the Great Seal of Pela -- a sea serpent, rampant, silhouetted against the rising sun.

Eregard walked over to his father and, since this was an informal meeting, bowed deeply rather than knelt. "Sire, you sent for me?"

Agivir smiled at his youngest son. "I did. I have something to discuss with you, then, after we have had our talk, I thought you might wish to accompany me to your mother's apartments to visit with her."

Eregard nodded. "I was planning on visiting Mother this afternoon."

"Good. Adranan comes every week, but you are the most faithful, my boy. Your mother the Queen is mindful of it, my son."

"How fares she today, my father?"

Agivir sighed. "The weakness grows worse, day by day. Her hands tremble, and she has pain in her --" the King gestured vaguely at his midsection.

Eregard had been hearing much the same report for the past two years, but it still gave him a

pang to hear that his mother did no better. "I shall bring my balankala and play to her until she falls asleep tonight," he promised.

"Good, good," Agivir beckoned to his son, and the two royals began strolling along the paths of the conservatory. Eregard wondered why his father wished to see him, but he held his tongue. Agivir was the kind of man who would get to the meat of the matter in his own way, at his own pace.

"Did you see the messengers?" Agivir asked, finally.

"Yes I did, Sire," he said. "I am assuming they had just landed off one of the ships?"

Agivir nodded. "Yes, my son. They brought...disturbing... news."

"Tell me, Sire," Eregard said. "News of the unrest on the mainland? Or news of the Chonao invasion force?"

Agivir halted and sniffed the sweet-sour fragrance of a blossoming orcjha vine. "Both, actually," he said. "The news is not encouraging, and not nearly as detailed as I need."

"What of the Chonao Reidai, Kerezau?" Eregard asked.

"We learned today that Kerezau took the island of Taenareth a month ago," Agivir said, lapsing into the formal "we" and sounding almost as if he were quoting from the formal dispatch. "Our intelligence sources tell us that the Reidai is currently negotiating with the independent trading and fishing fleets of the Meptalith Islands to gain passage to the West."

Eregard shook his head. "The Meptalith will never grant them passage, sire. They have always refused it to us, and to Amaran, also. The only ones who dare those waters are the Amaranian pirates."

Agivir ran his fingers through his thinning grey beard. "I would not be too sure of that, my son. Kerezau wields an impressive battle force. The Meptalith may want him occupied with us, rather than them. An alliance is certainly...possible."

A sudden thought occurred to the Prince. "Father," Eregard said, slipping into the most familiar form of address, "does the Reidai have any daughters?"

Agivir shook his head. "Our intelligence sources say his first marriage was childless, but that

he has managed to get a son off his new wife. Why do you ask?"

Eregard shrugged, relieved. "Nothing. Just...curiosity." He glanced at his father sharply. "What you have told me is worrisome, Sire. If the Meptalith allied with the Reidai, they would provide the ships to transport Kerezau's troops. That could be very bad for Pela and Kata."

The King nodded. "Indeed so. I doubt they would attempt an assault on Pela; we are too well defended, here, and the Royal Navy could make sure they landed few troops. Our island coasts are well patrolled. But Kata is a frontier colony. The coasts there..." The King shook his head. "Our Pelanese troops are spread thin, and the colonial militia is too ill-trained and untrustworthy to make an effective deterrent."

"If the Meptalith ships carried the Redai's army to the coast, they could march north to Amaran, or south to Kata," Eregard said slowly, thinking aloud. "Winter is almost here. If they are on the move now, they would most likely march south. Within a few weeks, the snows will close the mountain passes of Amaran."

His father smiled grimly and nodded. "Good analysis, my son. Yes, if they make an alliance with Meptalith, they will almost certainly march south, to Kata, once they cross the Narrow Sea. If the Meptalith and Chonao allied, Amaran would not be the best target for an invasion. Our colony would."

"Bloodthirsty as the Amaranian pirates are, they would not let their homeland be invaded without a fight. They may be barbarians, but they look upon us as infidels. Attacking Amaran would start a holy war," Eregard said.

"Yes, and Amaran has historically proven impossible to invade..." Agivir trailed off.

"Those cursed mountain passes," Eregard agreed. "And, of course Amaranians claim their god protects them." The Prince hesitated, conscious of a prickle of unease. "Superstition, of course."

"Boq'urak's Chosen," Agivir muttered. "That's what they call themselves."

"Do you think that Kata might ally with the Redai against Pela?" Eregard asked. "Some Katans are fomenting insurrection against the mother country, or so say the rumors."

"So say the rumors," Agivir agreed. "Those two scouts who came in by ship this afternoon spoke of unrest throughout Kata. Ever since I made Salesin Viceroy of the colony, there have been

rumblings. Too much taxation, unfair tariffs, always they complain. Nothing overt, mind you. No actual attacks. Boys throwing rocks at the royal governor's carriage. Speeches and broadsides."

Eregard shrugged. "Boys and broadsides. So?"

"But boys reflect the attitudes of their elders. A growing number of Katans are listening to a few revolutionary hotheads, or so they say. They have sent delegations, and each delegation makes wilder demands! This last one had the gall to demand autonomy! When I laughed at them, one of them actually dared to voice hints of rebellion if Pela does not allow them --" Agivir shook his head, visibly controlling his anger. "Well. Suffice it to say that Kata grows above itself."

"Assuredly," Eregard said. "Autonomy? The idea is ridiculous."

"There's one leader in particular whose name is mentioned repeatedly: a fellow named Rufen Castio."

"Have him arrested and brought here in chains," Eregard said. "Salesin is Viceroy. Let him deal with this Castio, as he dealt with that impudent firebrand Petro Tomlia last month. Salesin will enjoy it. He'll make a production of Castio's execution, and such a public spectacle will put a quick stop to this Colonial nonsense, mark my words, father." The Prince considered for a moment. "How far has the unrest spread? Who are this Castio's followers and associates?"

"Those questions bring me to why I called you here today, my son," Agivir said slowly. "The truth is, I don't know. And with the current situation, it is difficult to know whom to trust..."

Agivir trailed off and fell silent, then busied himself pinching faded blooms off a lorapel bush. Eregard stared at him. He's talking about the power struggle between him and Salesin. Father doesn't know who is loyal to him, and who is backing my brother in his plans to depose the King. Father obviously does not want to abdicate. Salesin is trying to force him out...

Eregard felt another flare of anger at his brother. Father is a good Monarch, just and merciful. Why does my brother have to be like this?

"I understand, Father," he said, after a long moment. "I know the...situation." Unbidden, thoughts of Ulandra rose in his mind, and he forced himself to look at his father, his King. Bitterness

tinged his voice. "I know the situation and I hate it. I wish there was something I could do."

Agivir gazed at his son for a moment, and Eregard saw compassion and love in his eyes. He put a hand on the Prince's shoulder. "I know that, my son," he said. "And that is why I am about to ask to you to do me a service. These days, there are so few I can trust. So few councillors, and even fewer of our military leaders. The royal governors Salesin has chosen for the Katan provinces are his choices, and I know them only a little. My generals, my admirals, those who remember me from the old days, when we fought together for Pela...their numbers are growing thin. We are none of us young and fit for voyaging."

Eregard stared at his father questioningly. "Voyaging?"

"Yes, my son. I want you to travel to Kata, and be my eyes and ears there. Go incognito, as a merchant. Meet the Katans. Talk to them in taverns, up and down the coast. Go to public gatherings. Listen to the rantings of this Rufen Castio if you can find him. If the seeds of revolution are borne on the winds, I want to know. But tell no one of what you find -- that information is for my hearing only. Do you understand?"

Eregard's heart was hammering with excitement. A secret mission! Traveling in disguise! Here was his chance for adventure, to be like one of the heroes in the stories he loved.

His father was regarding him intently. "This will be a hardship for you, my son," he said. "It is a six-day voyage to Kata, if the winds are kind."

"I'm a good sailor, Sire," Eregard said.

His father smiled. "Of course, you are a true Pelanese. But this trip will be aboard a merchant ship, not our royal yacht."

Eregard found the notion of a few privations romantic. He smiled at his father. "I shall assume the guise of a merchant, a wine merchant."

His father considered this, then shook his head. "Wiser, I think, my son, for you to allow your manservant to pose as the wine merchant, whilst you travel as his clerk and servant."

Eregard blinked. "A servant? But..." he thought for a moment. "What you say makes sense, Sire," he said. "No one would believe in a wealthy wine merchant as young as I am."

Agivir nodded. "My thinking exactly, my son. There will be hardship in this mission. Think carefully about this before you agree. In a few short weeks it will be winter, and sea travel will be curtailed. If storms sweep down from the north, you may not be able to return until spring. You will miss the Festival Season...and your brother's wedding."

Eregard stopped short and stood staring at his father, barely managing to keep his expression from betraying his shock. He knows! How can this be? I never said a word to a living soul...

The King's eyes were tired and bloodshot, but filled with great wisdom and compassion. Eregard swallowed, feeling love for his father, and admiration. He is a great man, a great ruler. Salesin is not fit to empty his chamber pot.

Dropping to one knee, Eregard bowed his head. "Sire, anything I can do, I will. I swear that I will discover the truth and reveal it only to you. And," he looked up, "Father, I thank you."

King Agivir nodded, and reached out to lay a hand on his son's head as if in benediction. "Just stay safe, my son, and come back to me. Come back when you can." The King straightened his shoulders. "And now, let us go to see your mother. She will want to bid you farewell."

Eregard nodded silently. His throat was so tight he could not trust himself to speak.

* * *

Three days later, traveling incognito and accompanied only by his manservant, Regen, Prince Eregard left Pela behind. He traveled aboard the Saucy Lass, a two-master with a figurehead of a scantily clad girl sporting a lascivious leer and a wink. Stashed in the hold of the ship was a cargo of fine golden Pelanese sherry Agivir had supplied, a cargo that "belonged" to Master Regen, the wealthy wine merchant.

At first it had made Regen uncomfortable to be dressed far better than his Prince, and to have Eregard wait on him, but the Prince had been adamant that they must keep up their roles even in private, so he could practice.

The Prince found himself actually enjoying playing the role of a humble clark and valet. Even the scurrying of the rats and the bites of the insects that were an inevitable part of below-decks life did

not dampen his enthusiasm. This was indeed a great adventure!

The distance between Minoma and the coast of Kata was a bit more than 15 leagues. The Lass headed due east, into the Straits of Dara.

On the second day of the voyage, Eregard went for a stroll around the deck. This was the farthest out to sea he'd ever been, and it was strange not to be able to sight land in any direction. The water here was the deep blue-green of the true ocean, different from the warmer waters in Minoma's harbor and the southern Pelanese coast.

The Prince stood leaning against the railing, watching the sailors swarming up and down the twin masts as they put on more sail. The breeze was chilly and brisk, and they were moving at a good five knots, he estimated -- excellent for a heavily laden cargo vessel.

He heard voices raised in song, and, almost against his will, found himself humming along with the crew's ribald chantey:

*I got a beauty so fine in my bed
We're bound for the promised land!
Hair down her back, but there none on her head
We're bound for the promised land!*

And then actually singing along with the chorus:

*Haul up her dresses
Haul down her stockings-ho!
Haul in your sweetheart dear
We're bound for the promised land!
I got a beauty whose eyes are the best
We're bound for the promised land!
The right one points east and the left one points west
We're bound for the promised land!*

Haul up her dresses

Haul down her stockings-ho!

Haul in your sweetheart dear

We're bound for the promised land!

I got a beauty who's queen of the land

We're bound for the promised land!

I'm lucky she loves me, as mean as I am

We're bound for the promised land!

Haul up her dresses

Haul down her stockings-ho!

Haul in your sweetheart dear

We're bound for the promised land!

Eregard found himself smiling as the song ended. He stared out across the white-capped waters, feeling better than he had in a long time. It was a relief to be free of court intrigues, of Salesin's needle-bladed gibes and even -- Eregard hated to admit it, but it was the truth -- the knowledge that Lady Ulandra could be just around the corner.

Strange, he mused. A year ago, and I had no idea she even existed. And now, just a scant year later, she is the linchpin of my life. The Prince smiled faintly, liking that image. He'd have to work it into a song sometime.

His smile faded and he sighed heavily. At least now I won't have to stand there and watch her wed my brother. I don't think I could do that.

Lady Ulandra was the daughter of one of Pela's foremost bishops, and she had led a very sheltered life, mostly attending schools within cloister walls, taught by priestesses who had retired from the world. And then, when she'd turned seventeen, her father had brought her to court. Eregard wasn't sure exactly when he'd fallen in love with her. But she'd aroused his protective instincts immediately, with her big blue eyes and innocent gaze.

Though the Prince could be rowdy enough with lower-class females, women of high rank tended to intimidate him. Thus Eregard watched Ulandra, watched her covertly for months. He saw that she was gentle, and virtuous, and that she went daily to the Chapel of the Goddess for prayer and meditation. She liked romantic poetry, and children, and animals. There was no vice in her, no cruelty, no shadow of sin.

Compared to his mother's Ladies in Waiting, with their neverending sly intrigues and bedroom adventures, Ulandra was a candidate for sainthood. One spring morning, Prince Eregard had dreamed of the Lady Ulandra, and when he awoke he realized, to his horror, that he had fallen in love with his brother's betrothed.

The Prince had tried to fight his emotions, but how does one fall out of love? He had occasion to wonder that many times over the long spring and summer months, torturing himself with long-distance glimpses of her. Eregard found himself inventing impossible scenarios where Salesin was killed, and Adranan had found another, and Ulandra was free.

Standing by the Lass's railing, Eregard thought, By the time I see her again, she will be a married woman. It is time to put her out of your life, out of your heart. Time to concentrate on helping Father.

A sudden thought occurred to him. Did father send me away to save me from Salesin? Is it possible my brother is plotting my death? Eregard shook his head, but he had to admit it was possible. Plots within plots!

The ship gave a violent lurch as a sudden blast of wind caught her. Eregard had to grab the rail. Jolted out of his reverie, he looked up to see dark clouds boiling up out of the north, racing towards them.

"Storm canvas, lads!" the Captain shouted. "Smartly now!"

Sailors were frantically rolling the bigger sails, and rigging the smaller, stouter sails. The Prince turned as he heard rapid footsteps, and just managed to get out of the way of one of the other passengers, Dame Alendar, as the heavysset matron headed purposefully toward the rail, hand clapped over her mouth.

After making sure the woman wasn't going to fall over the side as she heaved, Eregard left her to her misery, grateful for his own cast-iron stomach. He stood gazing at the oncoming storm, seeing the bruise-colored clouds lit from within by lightning. The first faint boom of thunder reached his ears.

"You passengers!" shouted the Mate, pointing at Eregard and the Dame, who was finished with her upchucking, "Get below!"

Eregard nodded, and offered his arm to the shaky Dame, who clung to it gratefully.

By the time he reached the small cabin he shared with Regen, the Lass was rolling and wallowing like a sow in labor, every timber creaking in protest. Regen, who had done a stint in the Royal Navy during his youth, shook his head as the Prince lurched into the cabin and managed to fling himself on the small trundle bed allotted to him for the voyage.

"I don't like the feel of this, your Highness," the manservant said. "Feels like it's blowing up for a real tempest, if I'm not mistaken."

"Don't call me your Highness," Eregard chided, grabbing the sides of the bed as the Lass heaved again. "But you're right, Master Regen. Masses of clouds as dark as the inside of a cask, shot through with lightning. It was traveling faster than the fleetest racehorse in father's stable."

It was now growing so dark that Regen had to light the ship's lantern, which swung wildly to and fro, casting monstrous shadows. The older man's expression was grave. "From what direction, your..." he paused as Eregard gave him a stern glance, and amended, "from what direction came the storm, my lad?"

"From the north. The Captain was calling for storm canvas when I came below."

"North...these storm winds will drive us off-course, for certain. At least we've cleared the coast and have open water to maneuver in, but this is not good. South of us lie the Karithe Islands, the lair of some of the worst of the Southern pirates."

"But they lie many leagues away!" the Prince said. "Surely no tempest could drive us so far off course."

"You are most likely correct, Eregard," Regen said, but his unease was palpable.

The storm continued throughout the day and well into the night. Eregard and Regen occasionally ventured out into the companionway, only to be driven back by the sheets of rain that poured through the edges of the hatches and down the companionway ladder. The wind shrieked, the timbers groaned, and the dripping of the water was enough to drive a man mad, Eregard thought, as he lay, damp and chilled, on his trundle bed. He tried to sleep, but it was too noisy, so he lay, staring at the swinging shadows cast by the lamp.

Finally the wild tossing of the ship abated, and he fell into an uneasy doze, to awaken to the sound of the cabin door closing. Regen was gone, and the porthole showed early sunlight coming in from the East.

Eregard hastily straightened his clothes, picked a few adventurous vermin out of his hair, then went up on deck. The sun was just clearing a bank of dissipating clouds, and the whole world seemed as clean and bright as a newly washed sheet.

After pissing discreetly off the stern, into the glassy-smooth water, he headed forward. Regen was standing on the other side of the ship, speaking with the First Mate. He glanced around at the gently rolling sea, and saw, to the east, the humped silhouette of an island. Turning further south, he made out another. He hurried across the deck toward Regen, only to have the older man peremptorily wave him away.

For a moment Eregard was taken aback by this temerity on the part of his servant, but after a second he stepped back. Stay in your role, he reminded himself.

Finally, Regen turned away from his talk with the First Mate, and headed toward Eregard. The Prince noted the lines of strain and worry on the manservant's face, and took a deep breath. "What chances, Master Regen?" he asked.

"They have determined our position, and it is as I feared last night," Regen said grimly. "We have been driven off-course to the Karithe Islands. We are putting on all possible sail to try and get free before we are sighted by those cutthroats."

Eregard stood staring at the distant islands. "If we can see them, they can see us, is that what you're saying?" he asked, forcing the words past a sudden tightening of his throat.

Regen nodded. "It is possible. After such a tempest, the pirate strongholds will certainly have their lookouts stationed in high places, scanning the sea for any unlucky vessels such as ours. But..." he glanced west, then south, "we are, after all, a deal smaller than the islands. A ship is an easy thing to miss, and we are far away. It may be we can --"

"Ahoy, look to the sou'east!" a sudden shout interrupted him. "A signal!"

Eregard and Regen ran over to the opposite rail and stared at the island. A plume of smoke was rising into the clear morning sky, dark and foreboding.

Regen groaned something that might have been a curse, or a prayer. "The saints shield us," he muttered. "It's a pirate lookout, sure enough. And, look!" He pointed to a plume of thick, rising smoke. "They've spotted us!"