

EVIL ARISES

ROLAND OF THE HIGH CRAGS BOOK 1



B.R. STATEHAM

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PROLOGUE



THE MOONLIGHT STREAMING THROUGH THE NARROW SLIT OF A WINDOW IS STRONG tonight. Its eerie, silvery light filled with mysteries yet to be discovered, and the ghostly whispers of voices yet to be heard. And peace. A breath of quiet, still peace that I have not felt for quite some time.

I have been in this cell for oh so long. Years. Decades. Perhaps centuries. . . I cannot say.

But it's time, brother.

Time for me to leave the confining space of this narrow dungeon cell. Time to elude my captors, and again take up the sword and shield. The fight will continue. What was. . . will be again. The promise of futures lost perhaps ready to be born again. There is no escaping the cycle. Years of solitude, of captivity, have only made me stronger.

Aye, brother. . .my body is old and frail. White grows my hair now. The wrinkles of age on my face are too numerous to count. My bones creak and groan every time I stir from my bed. But the soul, brother . . . the soul within this ancient casket of flesh and bone remains strong! And for as long as my soul lives. . .

How long I have been in this dungeon cell, I cannot say. I gave up counting the days and years long ago. Suffice it to say, it has been at least one lifetime. Perhaps two. This narrow slit deep in the bowels of some ancient fortress long forgotten, its walls made of stone streaked with a rare metal that limits my wizardry powers, has counted with me many summers and winters passing.

Patiently have I waited for this day. I endured. I survived. I fought back the pain of my captor's torments. I fought the long hours of unbelievable silence that pushed me close to the edge of the abyss called insanity. For years, I heard not the sound of a human voice. Yet I endured in this cell of infinite solitude.

I gather strength standing in the light of a full moon. Now, in my old age, it is the white light of a full moon that soothes the troubled waters of my soul and infuses me with a sublime, almost sensual feeling of strength hard to describe.

Years ago, while still a young man, I would never have admitted such a truth. My training, my religious order, would have frowned upon these words and would have forced me to recant. But not now, faithful servant. Not after all these years of abandonment and solitude.

Know you, pilgrim. I am, or at least at one time long, long ago, a Bretan monk. A Bretan warrior-monk. I wear still the yellow robes of that ancient order with deep humility and love. Even though . . . even though in the eyes of my kind, both brothers and sisters of the order, I am an apostate. A feared and loathed disbeliever who has taken up the sword against his faith. Against the teachings of the Bretan.

They will tell you, my Bretan brothers and sisters that it was I who brought this Great Evil among us. It was I who, when given the chance to destroy this Great Evil long before she became what she is today, failed in my faith and allowed her to live. To not only live, Pilgrim, but to thrive! To grow in her strength and powers of the Netherworld through the training and technique of a Bretan wizard.

She is, indeed, a formidable power. Her command of the Netherworld magic is beyond comparison. She lives in both worlds at the same time. Both here in the Middle Kingdom, where all our souls—still wrapped in these caskets of flesh and blood—reside, and in the World of the Dead as well. The Netherworld. She is aware of both worlds and interacts in both dimensions all at the same time. No mortal wizard or witch before her has ever accomplished such a feat.

How many have died because of her? How many empires have fallen? How many loving families ripped asunder? Millions. Hundreds of millions. And still, She reigns over the many. Because of her, a great imbalance permeates

throughout the Great Cycle around which both the Netherworld and the Middle Kingdom revolve. An imbalance that must be corrected. Must be corrected if this universe, as we know it, is to remain intact and operate like the great mechanism it is.

But she is, Pilgrim, not the She whom I raised. She is a different soul. A She from some far distant Past who, when the opportunity was offered to her, stole the one whom I raised with love and tenderness and patience, and imprisoned her.

Aye, brother. . . aye. It is something beyond knowing, beyond belief, that which I scribble hurriedly on this parchment. A she from a different past, you say? How can this be? What Dark Magic is being laid bare here? How could someone from the past, someone long since dead, return to the Now and replace the living? But it is so, Pilgrim. It is so. And it falls upon my shoulders to rectify this Great Schism and bring back the Laws of Order and Tranquility from the Rules of Chaos and Darkness.

It begins tonight, my brother. Tonight. . . when the full moon hurls its first bright beams of pure light through the bars of this narrow dungeon cell. When the shaft of soft, silvery white light touches the stone floor, I will step into its sweet embrace, and I will. . . I will. . .

But before this happens. . . before the struggle begins anew, I will hurriedly scribble a few lines of what took place before. I will write a short history of the struggle with the forces of Chaos and those entities who reside in the Netherworld.

I am Bretan, brother. Once known as an honorable warrior-monk and wizard. I am Roland. Known as Roland of the High Crag.

This is my story.

CHAPTER 1



The devout know the terrible truth. Evil cannot be destroyed.

— FROM THE BOOK OF ST. ALBANS

HOLDING A LARGE BURNING TORCH HELD OVER MY HEAD AND SLIGHTLY IN FRONT of me, I slowly moved up the stone steps of the monastery's ancient East Tower, disregarding the frigid winter's grip whistling through the tower's massive stone walls in some somber summoning of the dead. Outside, a winter storm screamed and moaned and howled in rage. Snow—in vast clouds of white fury so thick, one could be buried from nape to toe in a matter of moments—would soon add another four or five feet of snow to the already prodigious amount filled the narrow valley below the monastery.

Winters in these mountains are deadly. Neither man nor beast dared to leave their warm hovels or protected caves when such a storm slipped over the ice-capped mountain tops and sank down into the valley. Even here, in this ancient Bretan monastery built on the side of a towering cliff—clinging to the hard granite walls of the cliff, like some ancient monster refusing to die—the ravages of the storm outside could be heard clearly.

But I was not ascending the spiraling stone steps in the East Tower to observe the storm. Another dread compelled me to leave my cubicle, warm and comfortable with a brazier filled with glowing red coals for a fire. The mass of blankets and coarse cotton sheets that softened the hardness of the cold slab I

had been sleeping on moments earlier—a cold, stone slab like that all Bretan monks slept on in their cubicles here in the monastery—nevertheless had felt warm and luxuriant to me.

For you, Pilgrim, the idea of sleeping on hard stone only marginally softened with blankets and a thin pad, may seem barbaric as you read these words sitting in the comfort of your favorite chair beside a burning fireplace. But for a warrior-monk like myself, sleeping quarters, which I had only moments earlier occupied, was a luxury rarely experienced by me. It had been years since I had last slept in this monastery. The premonition that stirred me out of my deep sleep, compelled me to dress and find my way to the East Tower, suggested I might never have the opportunity offered to me again.

In the clinging darkness of the tower, the oldest bastion of strength built in the Bretan monastery called The Knave, the feeling of approaching evil pulled me out of my slumber and sent me here. Above my head, a large burning torch hissed and sputtered, glowing embers into the darkness, yet creating a large enough bubble of illumination that enveloped me like protective coat of armor. Together, the torch and the bubble of light slowly ascended upward toward the deserted topmost chamber.

In my chest, I felt the stirring. So faint, I told myself I might be imagining it. But no, Pilgrim. I was not imagining it. Far away, some great Evil was stirring. A powerful force of dark malice a Bretan warrior-monk and wizard such as myself could not dismiss. All my life in my Bretan training, the teachings of this ancient order compelled me to confront Evil whenever its viper's head revealed itself from out of the darkness. For years I roamed the snowy crags of the High Kandris and dwelled among the clans of the foothills, placing myself in front of those too weak, or too old, or too young to stand before Evil themselves. That is the way of a warrior-monk. A warrior-monk of any religious order. Their calling, their sworn sacred oath, compels them to protect the weak and the helpless from those who wish to prey upon them.

But this Evil, Pilgrim. This stirring of dark fury awakening itself in some distant land felt like no other Evil I had ever encountered. My wizard's Inner Eye sensed a power of immense strength. A fury based not of this world—this

world of the living. But instead, I felt the threads of otherworldliness, of the Netherworld, entwined into this fury.

A specter of Evil escaping from the Netherworld and immersing itself into the land of the living? A vile creature of immense power. Such a force would be cataclysmic in nature for both humankind and dragon-kind. If my fears were true, this creature of the other world had to be found and destroyed as quickly as possible.

At last, I stepped onto the wooden floor of the upper tower's chambers and paused. The head of the stairwell was a long, but narrow alcove used now for storing heavy crates filled with whatever flotsam a massive monastery as large as The Knave needed to store. But the greater half of the floor was walled off from the stairwell by heavy timbers. A large, partially oval-shaped door of ancient oak usually sealed off the rest of the floor from the curious and the foolish. But now, as I stood with torch in hand, I saw the heavy door was partially open. From within the large room on the other side of the wall, I saw the distinctive flickering light of torches such as mine cutting through the room's darkness.

And in the dust that had gathered for generations, lying on the floor where I now stood, I saw the distinct clutter of footprints—three sets of prints in total—informing me I was not the only one to make this solemn journey in the dead of night. At least three people were standing in the room on the other side of the open door.

I felt their invisible auras burning brightly in the invisible spectrum and recognized them instantly. Clovis, the monastery's eldest Magi and abbot of the monastery. Malinitrix, the monastery's Master of Arms and Keeper of the Faith. And a younger, brighter aura. That of a recently sanctified warrior-monk by the name of Golido of the Golden Hills. Without hesitation, I ducked underneath the rounded entrance of the open door and stepped into the large room to join my fellow Bretan monks.

It seemed as if the abbot, master of arms, and the young warrior-monk had been expecting me. All three held torches such as the one I held over their heads. All three nodded silent greetings to me as I stepped into the room. Clovis, in a

heavy robe of deep yellow trimmed in dark blue and belted around his waist with a blue-and-silver sash, smiled faintly as he nodded in my direction.

Malinitrix was dressed in the regalia of a typical, but simple Bretan warrior-monk. A half coat of fine chain mail underneath a heavy yellow full length surcoat. Leather trousers with fur-lined boots on his feet. Around his waist was a wide belt of thick leather needed to hold the typical Breton forged straight sword. Golida, the youngest member of this troika, dressed very similarly as the master of arms.

“Roland, I knew you would come. In your face, I see the same concerns we have. A powerful force journeys toward the High Kanris. A force does not bode well for those who are misfortunate enough to stand in its way as it moves through the night.”

The abbot’s voice was soft yet filled with resonance. The voice of a man in full mastery of his mind and body. A voice of a seasoned warrior. A seasoned general. Once, years back, this man and his monastery, protected me and hid me from those who wished to destroy me. Another time. Another dark moment for anyone who claimed to be Bretan.

But what I felt in my soul was a danger far, far greater than any I had ever felt stirring in me before. This danger was so intense, so powerful. It could mean only one thing. Old enemies had risen from the grave and were now gathering their forces to descend on us. Descend on not just we of the Bretan faith, but on all of Mankind. As I gazed at the faces of each man standing around me, I could see they, too, felt the same.

“We have not seen their kind this close to the High Kanris in generations,” Clovis a strong voice filled with worry. “The dragon clan, our ancient foe, has decided to gather again under the banners of a strong leader. Their desire, of course, is to fulfill the dragon prophecy.”

“Who, Blessed Father?” Golida asked, his young face of untested youth glowing in the flickering torchlight.

“Clan Hartooth,” I said, frowning. “The First Clan.”

The man-child—for, in truth, Golida was but a young warrior yet to be sent out into the Middle World, this land of the living we humans currently occupied.

He had just completed his training here in The Knave. He was a promising, skilled warrior-monk. But he had yet to face his first life-and-death battle with the creatures of the dark who inhabited this realm.

“I thought the Hartooth had been destroyed long ago,” Golida whispered, growing pale as he glanced first at the abbot, then at me. “You mean they still exist?”

“Yes, my son,” the abbot replied. “In growing numbers. Like a living plague, they have decided to come out of their ancestral lands and consume all who stand in their way. Dragon clan or human kingdom, it does not matter. I fear they are marching toward the High Kanris. The last bastion of humanity.”

“To defeat us and make us into servants and slaves?”

“No, Golida,” Malinitrix growled like a bear as his dark eyes lifted and stared at me. “To fulfill prophecy, as Roland has said. To destroy us all.”

Golida’s eyes widened. What little color left in his face, drained away even further. More ghost than human, he stared at the monastery’s abbot in despair.

Clovis continued to speak. “We feel their growing strength. We are aware of their desires. We must prepare. Each of us knows our duty. But first, before we can truly plan, we must know of their strengths. Their intentions. And if any, their potential weaknesses.”

The eyes of the three monks fell on me. My wizard’s Inner Eye feeling each of their auras. Each had raging emotions within their chests they could barely contain. Anger. Fear. Rage. Hate. And loss. Infinite loss of what was to come. Especially the raw pain of genuine loss as they stared at me.

“Roland,” Clovis addressed me. “You are our most celebrated warrior-monk. You are also our most powerful wizard. What few of your kind is left to the Bretan are scattered far and wide across the High Kanris. On your shoulders must rest this responsibility. We must know our enemy. We must confront this Evil. We must gain time in order to rally our strength. You, my son, must find us a way to fulfill all these requirements.”

“I understand, Blessed Father. I will leave just as soon as the storm breaks.”

A wave of immense pain swept across the vibrant, but invisible aura of the powerful Bretan abbot and warrior. He knew what he was asking me to do. He

knew what my ultimate fate would be. But it had to be done.

I smiled. Unexpectedly.

This surprised both Malinitrix and Golida. They, too, understood what my fate would ultimately be. They knew my mission was a journey toward death. What challenges were waiting for me to confront that no man—not even a wizard of some modest renown as I—could withstand. The Hartooth were coming. The First Clan. Their military prowess and Dark Magic legendary. They were, as tradition dictated, supposedly invincible.

“*“What will come, will come,”*” I quoted an old Bretan saying, still smiling.

The Blessed Father smiled weakly. Stepping forward, he placed a calloused, dry hand on my shoulder and squeezed it fondly.

“You have always been the quiet rebel within our ranks, Roland. You have questioned almost every tenet we Bretan have professed as true. Challenged almost every master and teacher whom you have encountered. Others in our ranks have looked upon you with suspicion. Are you a true Bretan monk? Or someone who chants the mantras, but believes none?

But I have never doubted you, my son. Your service to our cause has never been doubted by me. Your commitment to our cause is unflagging. I fear for you, my son. What lies before you is filled with terrors and dangers incomprehensible to any of us. But I also know this. If there is any Bretan monk who could face the impossible and survive, it is you. Go with my blessing, my son. Confront the ancient enemy and defeat them. Survive, Roland. Survive and return to us. Our fight is just beginning.”

Clovis smiled sadly, and then, withdrawing his hand from my shoulder, stepped around me and quietly left the room. The two Bretan warriors stepped up, laid hands on my shoulders, smiled, and silently departed as well. Alone in the large room, the rage of the storm clearly audible through the stout stone walls, the arctic cold of the room gripping me more firmly with its cold fingers, I was left alone with nothing but my own thoughts to keep me company.

War was coming. War of unimaginable destruction and death. And Evil. An old, ancient Evil whom the gods, both human and dragon, foretold would arise from the dim memories of both species. An ancient Evil with bloody fangs and

the stench of death wrapped around its hideous body like some Cloak of Invisibility. A prophecy no human nor dragon would be able to turn aside or defeat.

What was I to do? How could I, a monk and warrior, trained in the arts of Bretan magic, supposed to defeat this abomination? Prophecy which clearly foretold no magic of human or dragon could possibly stand before it with any glimmer of hope in defeating it. This Evil was older than the first human. Older than the first dragon. All these years, it had lain dormant. Biding its time. Waiting for the right moment to lift itself up out of the Darkness and fulfill its prophecy. Humanity would perish. Dragonkind would reign over this land from pole to pole. And if you believed in the prophecies, there was nothing. . . *nothing*. . . powerful enough to defeat it.

Nothing, Pilgrim.

If you truly believed in the prophecies.

Which, silently acknowledging it to myself, I did not.

But we would see. Ultimately, the test would come. Were the prophecies true? Or did yet a glimmer of Hope still beat in the hearts of those who were trained to defy Evil in all its forms.

CHAPTER 2



ONE YEAR LATER. . .

War is a terrible spectacle to behold

— FROM THE BOOK OF ST. ALBANS

THE DEATH OF A CITY IS A GRIM AND TERRIBLE SPECTACLE TO BEHOLD. TERRIBLE knowing all your efforts to save it were for naught. The thundering crash of masonry. The searing heat of ravaging fires hungrily consuming the city. The billowing smoke filled with terrible smells.

But worst of all, the cries of the dying. Innocent victims caught up mercilessly in a quest for conquest that could only mean, for them, either death or the cold iron shackles of slavery. And through the smoke, the ghastly beauty of a phalanx of marching dragons.

Bristling death.

Gigantic porcupines of spear-carrying infantry. The Clan Hartooth were the masters of a battlefield. In one hand, they carried vicious steel-tipped pikes twelve feet long, lowered and flashing like thousands of diamonds through the smoke. In their other hand were their distinctive clan dragon shields. Each clan had their own unique shields. Clan colors, with their clan motifs, all could be plainly seen on their lozenge-shaped shields. They are made of wood and leather. The leather came from the carcasses of their fire-breathing Winged Beasties, making them extremely difficult to cut through. The shafts of wood which composed the dragon pike were made of Hack wood. A musky, aromatic wood

almost impossible to break and incapable of burning. One could smell a phalanx of pike approaching long before it was seen if the wind was right.

Yes.

There was a precision and unity in the way dragon pike arranged themselves in their traditional checkerboard formations. They seemed to flow like the waters of an unstoppable flood across a broken and confused field. Watching them approach through the flames and smoke of the dying city was a surreal fascination. Especially so when eighteen thousand pike were marching straight toward you.

But pike usually never entered a battle alone. They were only half of the dual threat the enemy brought to bear against those they wish to destroy. Imagine Winged Beasties, the long-necked, bat-winged, fire-breathing flying dragons of ancient lore, with their Great Dragon bowmen riding in their saddles, filling the skies above the battlefield. From the saddles of their terrible mounts, dragon riders assail the enemy in front of the advancing infantry with clouds of deadly crossbow bolts. Whistling death from above pins down a hapless foe into a defensive formation which that protects them from the skies. But not from the assault of advancing infantry.

With the mailed fist of dragon pike commanding the ground, coupled with the inspired terror of Winged Beasties and their riders controlling the skies, one could understand how the dragon dominated mankind on the battlefield. For a thousand years, the armies of the human kingdoms—kingdoms that once filled the forest and plains below the High Kanris like grains of sand on a tropical beach, tried to defeat the dragon foe. All failed. All the kingdoms of man were swept away in the process.

But on this day, standing with bow in hand and looking over the stone ramparts of the last castle of the dragon Clan Anktooth, I had to stop and openly admire the precision and the malevolent grandeur in which the ancestral enemy of humanity made war.

Above me, I heard the fire-breathing roar of Winged Beasties on the attack. Looking up, I recognized the dark, mustard yellow and green Winged Beastie called *Uaala*—“Dark Warrior” in Great Dragon tongue, along with his master

swirling around above the castle walls. The Beasties' master was a dragon warrior who called himself Uccmoth, hailing from the Clan Hartooth. He was Captain of the Guards for Baron Hartooth, his ancestral liege. But there was also the cardinal-red *Upahil*. . . "Daemon Kind", and its master Ussal, also from the Clan Hartooth. Two renowned warriors, blood kin to the ancient First Clan of dragonkind, leading three-hundred Winged Beasties in the final assault on the breached walls of the last city of the House of Anktooth.

The city was in its death throes.

Flames leapt into the sky from all parts of the city. Thick black smoke swirled in angry updrafts into the morning sky. Before me, in the open plains stretching out beyond the city, six months of carnage lay in ruins. The bodies of dead Great Wings, the giant hawklike birds human warriors from the High Kanris rode into battle, littered the field. Along with the bodies of hundreds of warriors, both dragon and human. Smashed siege engines, water-filled trenches, and all the flotsam a long siege creates lay scattered around the battlefield like discarded toys.

But it was the screams of the dying which affected me the most. The Hartooth were plunging through the gaps in the thick city walls, burning and pillaging with a dragon's fury. It was evident the baron planned to raze the entire city and take no captives. So the innocent, the old, and the young, both human and dragon, were put to the sword with ruthless intensity.

I stood on a portion of the castle keep's outer walls—a small castle in the heart of the burning city—knowing the battle was lost. For almost a year, the few Great Wings, and the warriors who rallied to the call of the dragon house of Anktooth, fought valiantly to keep the skies above the city of Ank free from Winged Beasties. But for every Great Wing, there had been six of the magnificent, flame-throwing winged dragons. For every human or dragon warrior who fought underneath the blue and gold banners of the House of Anktooth, the Baron Hartooth had ten dragons loyal to his banners of maroon and gray. It was a lost cause from the beginning, and all who heeded the pleas of the House of Anktooth knew it.

Rarely did human and dragon fight underneath the same banner against a

common enemy. Rarely did humans and their Great Wings descend into the rolling hills and thick forests below the lofty crags of their mountains. For the most part, humans and dragons were ancestral enemies whose hatred for each other went as far back as either species could remember. But the House of Anktooth, the dragon lords who held the kingdom in the rolling foothills just below one of the few mountain passes that led up into the High Kanris, had over the centuries, forged a somewhat neutral stance with mankind. This noble house had the most contact with the high-country kingdoms of man. For centuries, the Anktooth fought humans and their Great Wings whenever a mountain kingdom lord decided to mount a military incursion into the foothills and plains. It was this house, as was the custom, that provided dragon warlords with troops and expertise whenever a dragon barony wished to test his skills against Great Wings and humans. But between the conflicts, it was the House of Anktooth who quietly tried to set up some kind of communication between ancestral enemies.

I was familiar with the Anktooth. Baron Ahnkar Anktooth was an old and cagey leader who appreciated the fighting abilities of humans and Great Wings. More importantly, the baron admired the artifacts and goods humans created. He was one of the rare dragon lords who thought riches could come by expanding commerce and building trade agreements between human and dragon kingdoms.

When word arrived that the Clan Hartooth had invaded Anktooth lands, I mounted my favorite Great Wing and hurried to their aid. For almost a year, I fought alongside dragon and humans in repelling the forces of the maroon-and-gray-hued warriors of the First Clan. My Great Wing, who called himself Cedric, and I led the small number of Great Wings against the Winged Beasties. We arouse from the upper crenelated towers of the fortress walls and stone keep every dawn to face the winged dragons and their dragon riders. Sometimes, we would take to the skies and fight four or five times a day. But with each sortie, warriors and Great Wings would be missing by nightfall. But now, the last of the Anktooth strongholds was falling. Those of us who fought for a year to stymie the baron's plans had severely mauled his mighty army. We failed in our efforts. Only hours remained for the once mighty House of Anktooth. Yet, I was determined to fight to the finish.

Others, however, had plans of their own for me. As dragon pike began to assault the castle keep's walls, and as I threw what few bowmen I could find into an ad hoc formation for a defense, the rough, dry hand of a dragon warrior loyal to Baron Anktooth gripped me firmly and pulled me to one side.

"You are the human they call Roland of the High Crag? The one who rides the Great Wing named Cedric, yes? You will come with me."

The din of battle and the spray of crossbow bolts whizzing through the air around our heads created an almost unbearable cacophony. Yet, I heard every word the old warrior said, and I could not protest. The guardsman, whom I recognized as the Captain of the Guards for the baron's private entourage, was already pushing his way through the thick maelstrom of the battle and heading back to the keep itself.

I paused for a moment, sending two arrow shafts swiftly into the throats of a couple of pike men, and then hurried after the dragon captain. Interestingly, as I was dodging the rain of crossbow bolts hurtling through the air with my shield, I noticed several of the baron's guardsmen pulling selected human and dragon warriors from the final fray and sending them back into the castle itself. *It would be a grim last stand*, I thought as I slid through the narrow slit of a partially opened stone passageway the dragon captain held open for me.

The old Clan Mauk guardsman—Clan Mauk, because of the green-and-yellow pebbled skin and three rows of horns on the top of his head—thrust a badly smoking torch toward me, holding one of his own high over his head in the process, and without uttering a word, turned and began leading me up a winding set of dust-covered stone stairs. Clan Mauk dragons, for centuries, had been loyal followers of the Anktooth, serving the more ancient clan faithfully and without hesitation. They, like the Anktooth, were soon to be no more once the Hartooth assault on the castle was completed.

The stairwell, barely large enough for a dragon to slip through, was filled with cobwebs and carpets of dust. Obviously, this hidden passage had not been used for centuries, and as to where it led, I could not begin to imagine. But after a few moments of swift ascent, we suddenly entered a cold and barren aviary once used to house Winged Beasties, but long since abandoned.

As I entered the wide expanse of empty stone floor, my eyes fell on a small group of figures standing in the middle of the room. Guardsmen loyal to the old baron stood close to him, holding burning and hissing torches. Beside the baron was a dragon mercenary captain whom I recognized, and one human mercenary also known by me.

The dragon mercenary of the Clan Horak was a renowned renegade who called no clan's baron his ancestral liege. He was the leader of fifty warriors and their Winged Beasties, and his reputation was that of a warrior who sold his services to the highest bidder. Only the color of gold held sway over him. I could not trust this creature who called himself Dagan Horak. But it appeared the old Baron Anktooth did.

The human mercenary was a captain of thirty Great Wings. His reputation, like that of the Horak captain, was anything but honorable. Behind a face many regarded as the most handsome in all the land lay a heart as merciless and calculating as that of a viper. He was a skilled courtier, an accomplished diplomat, a superb leader of men, and a deadly swordsman. He called himself Helgar Longhair after his golden hair. The same color of gold found in wheat ready to be harvested. His locks fell to his shoulders, creating a stunning effect for any hapless soul he gazed upon his visage. I trusted the human even less than I did the dragon. But neither interested me nearly as much as the small form standing close to the baron.

She was a female dragon child dressed in the finest of silk in the green and gold of the House of Anktooth. Perhaps five in age, she was a tiny, delicate creature standing between the three warriors. Her reptilian eyes, with their blue vertical-shaped pupils in dull gray eyeballs, stared up at me in wondrous awe. I confess, I stared with awe at her as well. There had been rumors, of course, during the year's siege of such a creature existing. Yet no one had observed her. Only whispers of her presence circulated among us when we rested our weary bones during the night. But to believe a Pearl Princess actually lived within the walls of Ank was too much to accept. Until now.

She was a Pearl Princess. Her pebbled skin was the color of a dull off-white and the circle of tiny horns, no bigger than the tip of a small finger, encircling

her head, were like startling white pearls. Unlike the dull tan or yellow horns which decorated the skulls of King Dragons in various configurations, the horns of a legendary Pearl Princess were as white as the finest porcelain and of the same texture as pearls. Fabled Pearl Princesses were legendary in their exotic beauty among dragonkind. They held an almost mystical power for the dragon. They were reputed to be able to see into, and predict, the future. It had been, as the legends said, a Pearl Princess who first drove the ancestors of the King Dragons from out of the steaming swamps of the Southern Seas and made them compete against humans. A hundred generations later, it had been a different such creature who preached of warring against all of mankind and dominating them.

It was said that the Hartooth were destined to be the rulers over all of the dragon baronies because only from the ranks of the Hartooth were Pearl Princesses sired. Baron Hartooth's troops were even now beginning to pillage the castle we stood in. Dimly, I heard the clash of steel against steel and the shouting of men in battle from somewhere beneath me. The noise was heard by those standing around the tiny princess as well.

"My liege, we must hurry!" the mercenary Winged Beastie captain hissed, turning to look at the old baron. "In moments, the enemy will be upon us. Let me take the child. With my troops, I promise to deliver her to safety."

"Give her to me, my lord," Helgar Longhair growled, an oily smile creasing his handsome face as he patted the child on the head. "I shall take her into the High Kanris. No Winged Beastie will be able to follow. No one will find her until it is time."

The old and grizzled baron listened to each speak before slowly shaking his head no. His dark slits for eyes lifted and settled onto my visage, and he gave a slight nod to me as he spoke.

"This is the one whom I have told you about. He is of the Bretan Brotherhood. He has been here since the beginning, leading man and dragon into battle fearlessly, never tiring of his desire to beat the forces of the Hartooth. He is the one whom I will entrust my grandchild to. No other."

"Bah!" exclaimed the human, turning fiercely burning brown eyes toward

me and balling his hands into fists. “There is no such thing as the Bretan Brotherhood. That vile heresy was stamped out over a hundred years ago in the High Kanris. This warrior is an impostor, I tell you! Why won’t you believe me, my lord?”

I said nothing. I admitted nothing. But with narrowed eyes, I watched the old baron’s face intently. Even as the noise of battle approached, my full attention was on the old warrior. I too, wondered why he called me something long since dead.

“I know, Helgar Longhair, of what I speak. He is who I say he is, and that is all you need to know.”

“But my liege. . .” Dagan Horak began, stopping in mid-sentence when the old baron lifted a hand up in a gesture demanding silence.

“We waste time with words, captains. And time I have little to spare. Roland of the High Crag, approach me.”

I stepped closer to the old baron as he knelt to one knee and gently enveloped the small child into his arms for one last embrace. Kissing her on the forehead, he looked into her beautiful blue eyes for a few heartbeats and then nodded in silence. Rising, he gently pushed her away from him. She ran to me, instantly clutching at the leather of my leggings. I felt her tiny body press against my leg, and I felt her shaking in terror. Instinctively, I lowered a hand and gently placed it against her pale cheek. One tiny child’s hands grabbed mine and held on for dear life, her fragile soul radiating, like a burning forge, waves of fear and terror at what might come next. Squeezing her hand gently, trying to convey in my touch the feeling that all would be well, my spirit filled with a desire to protect this innocent life from those who wished to harm her.

“She is called Ursala, and she is my last surviving heir,” the old warrior began, controlling his voice evenly. Yet one could hear the aching pain of being separated from a part of his life in his words. “She is also the youngest daughter of Baron Hartooth. Being the daughter of the most powerful baron of all dragonkind, and a Pearl Princess at the same time, makes her immeasurably important to my enemies. But I am determined to save her and stop the baron. You and your brotherhood must help me.

You are to take her, young warrior. You and your fabulous Great Wing are to ride high into the mountains beyond. Hide her, Roland of the High Crag. Hide her and protect her for as long as you can. If I survive this night, if I can rally the Clan Anktooth and our cousin clans, perhaps in a year or two, I will have gathered enough strength to challenge the Hartooth and stop this madness.”

“Bah, you cannot stop him,” the yellow and blue pebble-skinned Dagan Horak hissed, turning and walking two steps away before whirling around angrily to glare at the old baron. “Even as his troops assault your castle, my lord, the Hartooth are spreading like a disease across three separate kingdoms. The Clans Ahknak, Kaboo, and Ghagh are all toppling even as we speak. By this time tomorrow, the First Clan will have quadrupled their holdings and Baron Hartooth will command close to a half million troops!”

“My lord,” the golden-haired human began soothingly with the voice of the diplomat’s suave assurance. “My spies have informed me the enemy is negotiating a treaty with the Clan Hue. It is said a huge shipment of gold—more gold than any human or dragon has ever seen gathered in one place—is the bribe the baron is paying the Hue to remain neutral. Without the ancestral enemy of the Hartooth to thwart their plans, the baron will sweep across the northern landscape like a plague.

At the same time, he has issued a decree proclaiming he will pay a king’s ransom for any paladin Winged Beastie and his warrior to come and fight under his banner. Hundreds are answering that call, my lord. His wealth is unlimited. His power grows with each passing hour. His armies are commanded by renowned dragon generals. With no power able to stand before him, how can you trust this charlatan with the fate of your grandchild?”

“I am aware of all you tell me,” the Baron Anktooth growled, nodding in acknowledgment, “I understand the hour is bleak and there seems to be little hope. But my decision stands. This warrior will take the child and he will care for her for as long as it takes for me to raise an opposing army. The Hartooth can be destroyed. But we must continue to fight and not allow overwhelming odds make us falter!”

The old baron took a step closer to me, touched the child again with one

hand, and looked up into my eyes.

“Below the castle are catacombs, Bretan. Miles and miles of underground catacombs. I have selected a few to follow me into the subterranean vaults in an attempt to escape. I have released all others from their oaths. They are free to abandon the City of Ank and save themselves. But from you, warrior, I ask you to do something that could easily make you the most hated individual in all of humankind. I ask you to take the child and become her tutor. Teach her the ways of the trained Bretan mind. Teach her how to control her terrible powers. With the two of you standing together to face the First Clan’s terrible wrath, hope may yet exist the prophecies of the Dark Lords might be broken and cast aside. Take the child. Summon your Great Wing and flee. Save her, warrior. She is the only hope this world has in stopping the First Clan and their madness. Without her as a rallying point, man and dragon will die by the millions!”

He turned, and with a firm step that which belied his advanced years, bellowed for the dragon and human mercenaries to follow him. Sweeping out of the aviary and down a second hidden passage, the child and I stood in this empty place almost engulfed in blackness. Only the torch in my hand held the dark shadows at bay. But just before the entourage left, Helgar Longhair paused at the entrance of the passage and turned to stare long and hard at me. As if making a silent vow, I saw him nod his head, and then disappear into the inky depths of the passage one second before the stones slid heavily across the cold granite floor.

Holding the torch above me, I half-turned and found myself surprised to see the battle-hardened, weather-lined face of the Clan Mauk dragon standing directly behind me.

“Listen carefully, human. Time, we do not have,” the captain of the baron’s guards hissed softly and just loud enough for me to hear. “My lord is to be betrayed tonight. He is to lead the few still loyal to him through the catacombs. But he knows there is a trap waiting for him. Death probably awaits him, and he knows it. Yet he must make the appearance as if he is unaware of the trap and continue along with his original plan. His death might guarantee the safety of his grandchild. He will gladly give his to save her.

“My job is to take my *Upasha*, my old friend, and flee to the south while you take the princess and enter the High Kanris. I am to accomplish what my lord wishes to accomplish. I am to find dragon barons who fear the Hartooth and, like us, wish to destroy him. It will be a year’s worth of effort to find even a minuscule amount for such a task. The Hartooth’s gold speaks with a persuasive tongue, human. I am not hopeful there will be enough strength to defeat him. Still, we must try.”

“Why does the Hartooth war against the Anktooth? I know of no such dragon prophecy which foresaw the destruction of your lord’s clan.”

“You know little about the dragon’s heart, warrior. You cannot believe the howl of our blood in its lust to make war. This lust for destruction and blood letting runs the deepest and most fiercely in the Clan Hartooth. It has been our curse for thousands of years. Many dragon clans have come to resist it, to change their ways and become more—how do you humans say it?—civilized? Yes. Civilized.

But not the First Clan. They desire to rule the world. They were the first to wage war on humans and dragonkind both. They are ruthless, unrelenting, and without any form of honor. And Baron Hartooth is the ultimate example of his clan. He will stop at nothing in his attempts to eradicate human kingdoms and dominate all of dragonkind.

“In my lord’s clan, Baron Hartooth saw a potential ally to the mountain kingdoms of the High Kanris. A dragon ally who might persuade other dragon clans to join in our fight against him. He could not let that happen. Eradication of the Anktooth is his solution to the problem. Unbelievably, even though I have fought you and your kind all my life, I have taken my master’s words to heart and find myself wishing to forge a bond of friendship with humans. Humans and dragons, together, might create the weapon that could thwart the First Clan’s lust for destruction. Only time will tell.”

“Why me, Ankor? Why did your master pick me to save the child?”

Just the barest hint of a smile cracked Ankor Mauk’s green and yellow pebble-skinned face. But there was this glint in the old three-horned warrior’s eyes which was unmistakable.

“Let us just say my master listens to all voices, human. He knows you by reputation and by experience. More importantly, he knows what you truly are. That is why you were picked.”

“I am to protect her for how long nobody knows,” I echoed, half turning to peer into the aviary’s darkness and the approaching din of battle which now seemed almost upon us. “And what then? How shall we contact each other?”

Two angry crossbow bolts flew across the room some yards away from us and glanced noisily off the stone walls. The scream of a dying man cut through the darkness of the room. The dying creature from out of the dim gloom, staggered back, clutching his throat with both hands as hot blood poured from his grasp and spilled down his chest. Sagging to his knees, he fell forward and was dead before he hit the floor.

Hurriedly, I bent down and threw the child up into the old guard’s arms and lifted a finger to my lips.

“Shhhh! Say nothing and stand close to me!” I hissed as I reached around to the small leather pouch on my waist and opened it quickly.

Ankor Mauk, holding little Ursala, moved very close to me as I whirled a thin, semi-transparent cloth around us and enveloped all of us from head to foot. Just as the last fold of the cloak covered us, the aviary was over run by hundreds of dragon warriors of the Clan Hartooth, bloody swords drawn and crossbows at the ready. The maroon and gray skinned Hartooth filled the vast expanse of the empty aviary and began feverishly searching for us everywhere.

Half-glancing to my right, I saw the wide eyes of an amazed young Pearl Princess staring at me. I had to grin and wink. Even the hardened soul of Ankor Mauk seemed startled as we stood in the middle of hundreds of Clan Hartooth, utterly unseen.

“Cloak of Invisibility,” I softly whispered, touching my lips with a finger to ask for their silence. “Move with me slowly and make no sound.”

“They are not here, my lord!” a clansman shouted loudly, stepping into torchlight and glaring into the darkness directly in front of us at someone unseen.

“Keep searching,” a voice from out of the darkness growled back. A voice so deep and menacing, it made me stop in my tracks and turn to see the owner of

such a sound.

Seconds later, the figure of a young, but incredibly tall dragon warrior stepped into the light of the many burning torches, hands on his waist and looking left and right as he walked toward us. He was a head taller than his clansman, with wider shoulders, and dressed in chain mail which covered his entire body. Strapped over his back was the standard lozenge-shield of a Hartooth clansman, while around his waist was a finely crafted curved dragon scimitar so favored by dragons. Covering his chain mail was dark maroon-and-gray silk livery with the Clan Hartooth coat of arms, that of a flying Winged Beastie with flames roaring from its mouth and with its front claws raised toward an unseen foe, stitched in silver wire adorning his right shoulder.

“They cannot have escaped. My spies tell me they have not left the castle yet. Find them! I want the body of this human warrior lying at my feet before nightfall. I want my father’s daughter brought to me alive before I leave tonight.”

The warrior was huge and impressive as he stood right beside us as he bellowed out his commands. I stood only inches away from his back and marveled at the creature’s size. Never before had I seen such a dragon specimen. I started to say something but caught myself just in time. But Ankor Mauk’s grunt of disgust almost killed us.

It was more like a snort, a quirky passage of air through the flat nose that of a dragon only a dragon can make, uttered barely loud enough for me to hear. But it was enough to make the tall prince turn suddenly directly toward me, eyes darting back and forth rapidly to find the source of the noise.

“Did anyone hear that?!” the creature shouted, his head darting back and forth as one of his hands dropped to the pommel of his scimitar. “Did we not hear this human creature was a magician? A wizard? Search this room again and be more attentive! They are here, I tell you! They are here!”

One step closer to me, and I would have had to drive the dagger in my hand straight into the creature’s heart. He was so close to me, I could feel his hot breath caressing my face. The aroma of a King Dragon is that like of a musty house. It makes one’s nose twitch. Those who have had little or no contact with

King Dragons have this desire to sneeze repeatedly and violently in their presence. But I controlled my urges and held my breath while gripping the cold steel firmly in hand.

In hindsight, I should have thrust the blade into the creature's heart then and there. Much death and hardship would have been alleviated if I had. But I am of the Bretan. We are not assassins. Much as I deeply felt I should harm him, I could not.

The clansmen almost tore the aviary walls to pieces as they again searched for the three of us. But we dodged and side-stepped around those who came too close and somehow remained undetected. Eventually, after a half hour of intense scrutiny, the warrior angrily ordered his clansmen to tear apart the castle stone by stone if they had to in order to find us. We waited until all the warriors left the stones of the aviary, plunging the place into total darkness in the process, before I removed the cloak and turned to face the warrior and child.

"That was Baron Hartooth's bastard son," Ankor Mauk said. "His name is Aukmar, and by all accounts, he is a fiend. The baron intends to make him his heir and successor. But in order to do that, he must find little Ursala and dispose of her."

"Then we shall make sure he does not find her," I answered, grinning wickedly as I lifted the surprisingly light dragon child into my arms. "Come to the aviary's entrances. We must call our mounts and be away from here. And before we leave, you must tell me where we shall join forces one year hence."

"Aye, in one year I hope to have raised an army to join you, human. But I fear my efforts will be thwarted. And what kind of force will you have to join us? Will humans in the High Kanris unite to fight the First Clan?"

I shrugged and conceded his point. It would be difficult to take into the High Kanris, a dragon child, much less a Pearl Princess, and keep out of harm's way. No dragon—neither King Dragon nor Winged Beastie—, had been allowed among the snow-capped peaks of the High Kanris in over a thousand years. To be seen with me might place the child in as much jeopardy as if she would have faced staying among her kind.

"I make no promises, Ankor Mauk. Armies I may not muster in your aid, but

there will be a few, like me, who see the dangers of allowing the Hartooth uniting the dragon baronies under his clan's colors. There is a saying we humans have, 'The enemy of my enemy is my friend.' Once we might have been enemies. But now we face a common foe. A foe who will destroy us all if we do not find a way to forget old hatreds and suspicions and take a united stand."

"Hmm, well said," nodded the Clan Mauk warrior, stepping out into the growing twilight of a descending night and looking up and off to his left. "One year from now, Roland of the High Crag, you will meet me at the top of Skullcap. Keep the princess safe and away from harm, warrior. We will unite our forces there, and we will ride together to face the baron and his bastard siring."

I looked to the left and saw the breathtaking image of an emerald-green Winged Beastie, with incredibly bright yellow bat-like wings, falling out of the growing darkness straight for our stone perch. Like a hurtling meteor, it flashed past two circling Hartooth Winged Beasties and their masters, who were circling like vultures around the burning castle. A third Hartooth Winged Beastie and his rider turned steeply to their right in an effort to intercept Ankor's *Upasha*, but the ancient monster let loose such a fiery tongue of searing flame, the First Clansman's beast and rider flailed its wings and tail mightily in an effort to save themselves.

"Fare thee well, human. Remember, in one year!"

The Clan Mauk warrior stepped out onto the long pencil of stone, which jutted out from the side of the aviary like a stone lance embedded into the castle's turret and ran for all his worth before leaping out into the vast expanse of empty air. I shouted out in alarm, realizing that he was leaping to his death, but just as I shouted, a massive green body with yellow wings swept across my vision and I saw Ankor Mauk leap onto *Upasha's* saddle—all in the blinking of an eye. My shout of alarm turned into a shout of amazement and glee at beholding such audacity. I found it hard to believe an old King Dragon like Ankor Mauk was capable of such agility. Never before had I heard of such a feat, and my opinion of the Clan Mauk rose considerably.

Below, shouts from the Hartooth filled the air, soon followed by a barrage of crossbow bolts. We had been discovered. I grinned and lifted the wooden whistle

to my lips and blew the long and silent musical notes only my Cedric would hear before again wrapping the Cloak of Invisibility around Ursula and me.

“Come child, we must leave quietly. Lay your head on my shoulder and sleep. We have a long ride ahead of us.”

CHAPTER 3



***Innocence may mask the face of Evil
Only the True Heart
Will be able to love the one and resist the other.***

— FROM THE BOOK OF ST. ALBANS

THE JAGGED PEAKS OF THE HIGH KANRIS MOUNTAINS RISE FROM THE PLAINS AND forests into the sky with little warning. A steep shield wall of hard stone suddenly appears in the distance as one rides across the rolling plains. The wall soars five thousand feet in a steep vertical angle into the odd blue-white colored sky. No matter how many times I leave the Kanris and return, catching the first glimpse of the rugged, towering face of the wall and observing the snow-capped peaks glistening in the sun always takes the breath from me.

Behind the shield wall are the Kanris mountains. To be more precise, a series of mountain ranges, perhaps fifty different mountain ranges in all, twist and turn like a den of snakes, make up the Kanris. I have traveled far and wide in this world and have seen much. From the swamps of the southern hemisphere, the fabled ancestral home of King Dragons and Winged Beasties, to the fabled Garanges mountains of the Far North, I have laid eyes upon many wonders. In the Garanges, it is said the gods live in splendid solitude, having won their war against man and deciding to withdraw from worldly concerns. Legends say that just before they withdrew, still smoldering from the rude abuse they had received

from their young and arrogant creation, the gods decided to punish man for his insolence by creating their eternal tormentor and nemesis. So, from the fevered and unhealthy swamps of the southern hemisphere, the gods breathed life into dragon forms called King Dragons. For King Dragons to ride the skies and terrorize land dwellers, the gods gave them Winged Beasties.

Yes, I have seen the lonely and haunting beauty of the Garanges. And I find myself believing the stories about gods living in their cloud-filled heights. But Pilgrim, there is nothing like the breathtaking rugged beauty or the magnificent panorama of snow-capped splendor as one finds in the High Kanris. To ride a Great Wing freely through the steep-walled valleys and underneath the towering spires rising to the heavens is to know a bliss of sublime elegance. Strapped tightly in the saddle of a Great Wing as it rides on the buffeting winds and updrafts found among and below the peaks, one can see for leagues across mountainous ranges so rugged and so inaccessible, much of it has yet to be explored. Many of its valleys are still carpeted in ancient forests with leafy canopies in myriad shades of green and gold. There are mountain streams filled with a type of trout that measures as long as a man's longest stride. On a clear, bright day, where no clouds mar the blue heavens, one can, in the distance, see small specks of wild Great Wings, in a rainbow splash of colors, whirling around as they hunt or simply wing from one rocky perch to another.

It was into these beautiful peaks and rugged valleys, as the legends go, that the god Shu'zhin guided the last survivors of man to safety from the onslaught of King Dragons and Winged Beasties. It was this god, this outcast from the pantheon of eternal gods, who first took wet clay and formed an image of himself, breathing the Breath of Life into it. This First Man became our ancestor, and, like his creator, this man became the curious seeker, the constant questioner, whom the older and wiser gods found to be so much of a nuisance.

Shu'zhin, called The Seeker, was an outcast in the eyes of The Immortals because of his constant search for forbidden knowledge. It was Shu'zhin, as my childhood teachers and masters oft told me as a young boy, who defied the older gods—the older gods who wished to see mankind destroyed. But after the Great Onslaught that marked the first clash between human and dragon, Shu'zhin led

the few hardy human survivors into the High Kanris. Here, hidden deep in almost impassable crevices and narrow mountain trails, man found refuge from the plains surrounding the Kanris and from the hordes of King Dragons. It was here in the High Kanris where Shu'zhin angered the gods even more by creating the feathered opposite to the scaled hide and bat-winged creature known as a Winged Beastie. It was here where he took a Farrell Hawk, a small bird of the Farrell mountains, and used it as the basic shape from which he molded a Great Wing.

Aside from the Farrell Hawk, Shu'zhin gave the Great Wing the sharp-hooked beak from another in the hawk family. The ability to expand the beak is a weapon used with devastating effectiveness by a Great Wing. Razor-sharp talons from the dreaded Mountain Kral, an enormous eagle that rides the powerful currents in all of the mountainous regions, were also transplanted by Shu'zhin into this new creature. He gave it the ability to twist and turn in flight, and the ability to fly almost as high as the highest of mountain peaks found in any range on the planet.

But more importantly, he gave it an implacable dislike for Winged Beasties. Great Wings can out-turn and climb higher than Winged Beasties. Short, powerful wings give the Great Wing the power to burst into short dashes of unbelievable speed. Their heavier mass gives them the ability to fold their wings back and roll into a dive and plummet from the heavens like a stone.

That is not to say the serpent-necked monster is, in any way, inferior to that of a Great Wing. A Winged Beastie, riding on its enormous bat-shaped wings, can ride the winds of the forest or the mountains for hours on end, soaring across the landscape with a terrible grandeur so frightening, yet utterly hypnotic to behold. Because of their light build and enormous wings, they can remain aloft far longer than any Great Wing. Therefore, they can cover far more territory than a war bird.

Furthermore, the front paws of the scaled fire-breather are equipped with talons as razor-sharp as those found on a war bird. In the blink of an eye, they can rip to shreds any creature unfortunate enough to be caught by one. And never forget the Beasties' most terrible weapon—the breath of fire. Tongues of

blue-white flame bellow out from their mouths in a terrible fury. The fire can travel for more than thirty feet in a searing torch so hot even iron weapons melt if exposed to it for too long of a time.

Put all these abilities together into the body of an old, experienced fire-breather—a creature, by the way, every bit as intelligent and intuitive as a Great Wing—and you have a formidable opponent who should never to be taken lightly. Add an old and experienced dragon rider to the set, and you have a combination of foe who, as a collective species, have known martial success for over two thousand years.

Yet, Winged Beasties find it difficult to fly in the High Kanris. Much of the higher regions of the Kanris they cannot sail to at all. King Dragons likewise find the mountains unsettling. To King Dragons, evil spirits and evil gods live among the rocky peaks and windswept crevices. Dragonkind have good reasons to feel this way. Only twice, since man left the plains below and ascended into the mountains, have dragons attempted to breach the shield wall and invade. Each time they tried they were met with a stunning defeat. Defeat inflicted on them by a foe many times their inferior in numbers. Defeat so telling in each defeat the few survivors who escaped returned to their clans with incredible stories of mayhem and carnage.

In the upper regions of the valley leading into the High Kanris, the Kingdom of the Vik reside. In the lower regions of the valley, where the valley opened out into the sweeping grasslands below the shield wall, one could find the lands of the Anktooth.

Now, the House of Anktooth was no more and the lands that belonged to that ancient clan now belonged to the Hartooth. There, consolidating his power and licking his wounds, Baron Hartooth's army was regaining strength for the next assault.

The Great Rift Valley was one of only four major entrances in which dragon and Winged Beasties could ascend the heights. The other three entrances were hundreds of leagues away, with one being another rift valley which opened out onto the Black Tharassian Sea. The Hogar Marches lay to the north a good 700 leagues, and in those 700 leagues, there were no fewer than ten King Dragon

baronies standing in the Hartooth's path. To the south lay the winding, narrow gorge called The Spirit Way, which was actually a very steep crack in the shield wall that ran for leagues into the Kanris. Each side of the gorge is a sheer rock wall perpendicular to the gorges' floor. Raging down from the mountain was a massive river of incredible power and fury, fed by a monstrous waterfall towered over the river by more than a thousand feet.

The Spirit Way was called such because of the constant spray from the falls, which danced and whirled around eerily. And because of the roar of the falling water. The noise was deafening, the moving mist thick and clammy to one's skin. The winding path carved out of one wall of the gorge was so narrow, a human warrior could scarcely traverse it. It was just wide enough for someone to slowly and carefully ascend up the gorge. Yet, one wrong move on the slippery moss-covered rocks, and the hapless would fall for a long time before he met his death on the rocks below. As it was, it would have been an almost impossible task for a dragon on foot to ascend the gorge. And for an army of dragons, the task was unthinkable. But even that path was guarded. The people who called the gorge The Spirit Way were said to be magicians and elves. They were neither human nor dragon, but a separate race altogether and practiced the arts of dark magic. It was oft said that those who entered this strange fog never emerged from it again. But often, the mangled and torn bodies of the dead would be glimpsed in the vicious whitewater rapids downriver some leagues from the opening. Not even humans ventured into the territory so renowned in its fabled evils.

Of the four entrances into the High Kanris, I was sure the very last choice the Hartooth would select would be The Spirit Way. Dragons were even more superstitious than humans. The idea of entering The Spirit Way and facing all the black magic therein would be the only thing that would terrify a dragon heart.

What had to be done—and done quickly—was to warn the Kingdom of Vik of their approaching hour of despair. King Olaf and his people, I knew well. Big men, with long locks of gold or black hair; their women all astonishing beauties and their men incredibly gifted with both physical strength and artistic talent. The Vik had guarded the Great Rift Valley for a thousand years, knew well the

Clan Anktooth and the Clan Hartooth, and felt confident in their strength. Their favorite weapons were huge, two-handed broadswords and a battle-axe half the size of a man. Wielded by a skilled warrior, either weapon could eviscerate dragon or Winged Beastie if either ventured too close.

The upper end of the valley was guarded by two massive stone keeps as the first line of defense, each housing fifty Great Wings and their riders, with each keep carved out of giant slabs of native stone which towered over the valley floor. Day and night, twenty or more Great Wings floated over the upper end of the valley on patrol, ever alert for dragon and Winged Beastie sorties. The Great Wings were tested regularly, for young dragons, freshly matriculated through the dragon rituals of becoming adults and warriors—along with their newly acquired Winged Beasties—were required to do combat in the air above the valley against human opponents.

The third line of defense was the massive walls and many towers of the city of Odar's Lair. It was the capital of King Olaf's kingdom and a great bastion of strength. The city had three sets of walls, with the inner wall being the highest and strongest. The outer wall was short and thick, made of solid stone, with a very wide and deep moat in front of it. The outer wall was five leagues out from the city, and it ran from one side of the narrowing rift valley to the other. Only one massive gate allowed entrance, and it was flanked by two huge, round stone towers whose upper floors consisted of Great Wing aviaries. For every five hundred strides, a somewhat smaller stone tower rose from the low wall. Each tower was garrisoned by a company of swordsmen and a company of bowmen, with each company numbering three-hundred men.

Between the outer wall and the second wall were the many farm fields and orchards which fed the city. But halfway between the two walls, and on either side of the wide, stone-paved road that cut through the valley and ran to the center of Odar's Lair, were two large towers, again massive aviaries housing Great Wings and their warriors. The Vik were very skilled riders of Great Wings, and their trained war birds were considered the best in all the Kanris. They had to be, since they met Winged Beastie and dragon almost on a daily basis in ritual single combats.

The second wall was somewhat higher than the first. And considerably thicker. It, too, ran from one side of the valley to the other. No moat sat in front of this wall, but a series of stone monoliths with protruding iron spikes rose in front of it for the entire length of the valley floor. Again, dotting the wall were towers housing companies of swordsmen and bowmen, with only a single gate breaching this wall as well. Between the second wall and the city's walls were several small villages, more farmlands, and two large, fortified military camps, where King Olaf's army based itself.

The last wall was the one which enclosed the city itself. Odar's Lair sat in one corner of the very narrow portion of the upper reaches of the valley. Here, the valley became the entry point to a set of different mountain valleys, which went higher and higher into the Kanris and were themselves the entry points into more valleys. The Great Rift Valley was a very long conduit, with the lower end wide and opening out into the hills and plains of the vast grasslands below the mountains. But the upper end of the valley was considerably narrower and rugged. In one naturally craggy niche, the Vik built their ancestral city.

Odar's Lair was a city of heavy stone walls, twisting narrow stone streets, and many towers. A wall some forty feet high and twenty feet thick encircled the city. Several gates, fortresses themselves, broke the smooth outline of the walls. Banners, both large and small, and always colorful and bright, floated in the wind over the walls and from the many city towers. The city, although designed to be a bastion of strength from dragon invasion, was massive to behold and gave a feeling of immense power.

Yet, it was far from being a cold and grim place. It always warmed my heart when I journeyed to it. The Vik were people who loved life. Laughter and a love for the finer things in life were woven into their very soul.

It was here where I wished to hurry, to give warning of what was about to descend upon them. But here, I could not go with the young Pearl Princess by my side. And here, I could not go until I first found a way to dislodge the three Great Wings and their masters who were following us into the High Kanris.

For two days since the fall of the City of Ank, the child and I rode Cedric, a Great Wing of six strides tall, black as the blackest of coal with red trim around

his eyes and talons, into the heights behind the shield wall. He was the first Great Wing of my flock whom I trained to face Winged Beasties. He was by far the most experienced of my war birds. At night, we would rest on some inaccessible rocky pinnacle barely large enough for a Great Wing, a human, and a dragon child to occupy at the same time. We made a cold camp, not wanting the flickering light of even a small campfire to give our position away to those who might be looking for us. And I knew we would be followed. I trusted not the mercenary, Helgar Longhair, nor did I trust Dagan Horak. Nor could I shake away the possibility that Baron Hartooth was aware his young Pearl Princess might be whisked away from his ever-expanding clutches by someone like me. All three figures could easily hire human mercenaries to follow us into the High Kanris to either kill us or remove the princess from my grasp. Either way, I could not chance leaving the princess with someone who was not prepared to defend her to the death. Nor would I travel to Odar's Lair with her. At the same time, I felt the weight of responsibility to warn the Vik of the approaching forces of the First Clan pressing me down with each passing hour. Baron Hartooth's troops would attack the Vik as soon as he could marshal his forces. The longer the Vik were left unprepared, the more terrible the fight would be.

But to make matters worse, on the second day of our journey, Cedric warned me that we were being shadowed by three Great Wings. There is something of a telepathic bond between a rider and his Great Wing. That power is enhanced and further increased if one becomes a member of the Bretan Brotherhood. There is no reading or sending of thoughts. But there is an enhanced sensing of emotions. Both Great Wing, King Dragon, and Winged Beasties' minds I can sense and, in some fashion, influence. It was how I quickly picked up on my mount's concern when he first glimpsed our trackers at midday. It was on the same day, and at the same moment, I was first made aware of the powers a Pearl Princess might possess.

"They do not come for me so much as they come to see where we go," she said to me as we came to rest on the second day. "Others, many others, are to follow soon."

These were the first words she had spoken to us since leaving the dying city.

As we sat hunched close together in the dead of the night, with heavy cloaks thrown over us to protect us from the night's bitter winds, her soft, fragile voice lifted to our ears between bites of the beef jerky she held between her hands. I was surprised at hearing her tiny little voice. Even Cedric turned from his perch to look inquisitively at me. Grinning, I nodded, reached out with a hand, and pulled the heavy cloak more firmly around her shoulders.

"Yes, that would make sense, little one. Three riders would not be enough to take you from Cedric and me."

The large war bird, as if to concur with my words, shifted his wings and changed his stance and chortled deep in his throat. The child, turning to look up at the Great Wing, smiled and then let out a small laugh herself.

"He agrees with you, you know," she said. "But he'd just as soon fly into their camp tonight and steal their food and bring it back to us."

I smiled again at her words. Old and experienced as Cedric was, there were times when I sensed his impatience with me in not immediately seeking to engage our enemies.

"I like your thoughts, priest," she spoke again, her dark reptilian eyes looking up into mine with an eerie depth I found almost hypnotic. "You are so unlike those of my kind. Sometimes, I feel a . . . a softness. . . in you. Like today, when we rode over that field of wildflowers. I heard your thoughts, and I felt your emotions. Your thoughts were warm and pleased to see flowers this late in the season. That made me feel warm, too. I like flowers."

Earlier today, just before noon, after we had turned up a twisting valley no one inhabited, we soared over a bend in a mountain river that cut through the heart of the valley. In the middle of the bend was a wide sandy knoll, and in that sandy soil, thousands of yellow and blue wildflowers covered the ground. I remembered leaning from my saddle to catch a better look at them. It was indeed a beautiful sight.

"Why do you call me a priest, child? I worship no particular god or goddess."

"I sense your desire to protect the weak and heal the sick. Only the Priests of Ishthas feel the same way. Or, at least, only the ones who have good hearts feel

that way. So you must be a priest. But I do wish you were a magician so that I could eat a Frik. I am so hungry for a juicy Frik.”

A Frik was a dragon pastry, very sweet and tangy at the same time. Dragon children loved to eat it. As for myself, I could not tolerate the sweetness. The sticky, gooey substance and the tangy sweetness left a bad aftertaste on my tongue. But, grinning, I decided to see if I could make her smile again.

“Ah, but little princess, I am a magician! Watch carefully my hands while I say the magic words. Alabraham. . . alabrehaalashazar!”

I moved my left hand over a fist for my right hand when I said the first word, and then the right hand over my left fist with the second word. And when I said ‘alashazar!’ I unfolded both hands, palms up, to reveal what appeared to be nothing but empty hands.

“Ah, and I thought I was going to eat a Frik!” exclaimed the child, genuine disappointment in her eyes.

I heard Cedric chuckle behind me. Great Wings do have a sense of humor, much like humans. I grinned as well.

“But child, what is this at your feet, steaming hot and in a stone bowl?” I said, pointing a finger toward her tiny feet.

And indeed, at her feet was a large stone bowl of steaming hot Frik, thick and juicy and smelling of cinnamon and sugar. Ursala looked at the bowl and her face lit up with a light of a hundred suns. The childish joy on her face and in her eyes was enough to warm my heart for a hundred nights.

“You are a magician!” she cried out, bending down for the bowl and reaching for it with tiny little dragon claws. “Ohhh! You are a magician!”

Cedric and I watched her consume the sticky pastry with a dragon’s relish. Her joy in eating the delicacy was total. In seconds, it was gone, and she was licking the sweetness off her hands, a smile on her lips, when she suddenly jumped to her feet and threw her arms around my neck, and kissed me on my cheek with reptilian lips. This human gesture was so sudden and so unexpected, I found myself speechless. I became even more speechless when she stepped back and spoke to me in that tiny child’s voice again.

“No harm will come to us while we are in the human city, grandfather. Their

king admires you and your kind and will not allow any harm to come to you or to me. And you are right, he must be quickly warned of my father's plans. We should go as soon as the light comes."

I could find no words to say in response. I was perplexed by the way she so easily understood my concerns for King Olaf and the people of the Vik. But more than that, I found myself completely taken aback that she called me "grandfather."

I felt her emotions when she said the word. They were those of a child who was in the presence of a blood relative. She indeed looked upon me as a blood relative, even though I was human, and she was a dragon. For a few moments, I blinked in silent amazement until, at last, I could answer.

"Sleep, child. Sleep close to Cedric. He will keep you warm. Tomorrow, when the light first kisses the peaks above us, we will ride to Odar's Lair."

She was only a child. But a child gifted with the ability of telepathy far more complex than mine. She could sense the future as well. But she was only a child. And the child in her made her stick her thumb in her mouth, as human children do when they are extremely tired, and nod her head. Turning, she towed the heavy cloak over the stones behind her and walked to where the Great Wing sat. Cedric, being almost as human as I, knew what to do. He lifted one wing up slightly and waited for the child to lie down close to him. Then he lowered the wing and gently nudged the Pearl Princess even closer.

She would be safe and warm and would sleep the deep sleep of the innocent. I, on the other hand, would be deep in my thoughts, huddled in my heavy cloak, as the cold winds howled even stronger through the night.

CHAPTER 4



*In any conflict, it is always the young,
And the innocent,
Who suffer the most.*

— FROM THE BOOK OF ST. ALBANS

WE ARRIVED AT ODAR'S LAIR IN THE EARLY HOURS JUST BEFORE DAWN. WE HID ourselves during the day choosing this hour to arrive, knowing the fewest number of curious eyes would see the hooded child at my side. Of course, we were still challenged by Great Wings and their riders. One does not approach a great city without being challenged, especially if a great city such as this lies strategically at the mouth of the High Kanris itself.

Warriors wearing the livery of the royal house demanded to know our purpose in the city. Night or day, in the fiercest of storms or in the coldest of nights, Great Wings and their riders cover the skies above Odar's Lair in a blanket of protection.

Keeping the princess close to me, making sure she remained hidden underneath the heavy hooded cloak, I dispatched a servant with news I had to deliver to King Olaf immediately. Yet, even as I stood on the windswept tower, I could not help but feel as if eyes were closely watching our every move.

Olaf's palace was a white marble cube five floors tall with four massive marble rectangular turrets at each of its four corners. The southwest turret

housed the royal aviaries used by the private flocks of Olaf's royal family were kept, while the other three turrets housed the palace guards. It was, as were all the buildings in the city, designed to be both a fortress in times of war and yet beautiful at the same time. Beautiful statuary, carved by master artisans, lined the gardened pathways. Above each door, one would find the flowery script of Vik inscriptions. They were old Vik folk sayings—homilies blessing the building itself and all those who occupied it. The palace complex of manicured gardens, reflective ponds, and small outbuildings sat on a rugged acropolis in the center of the city. The city, and the palace in the bright moonlight, took the child's breath away when she saw it for the first time.

We were ushered into a small, but lavish set of private rooms the king usually allowed me to occupy whenever I visited. Guards were posted in front of the doors, at my request, to further protect our privacy. Removing the cloak from the child, I knelt down and smiled into her face.

"For the moment we are safe, little princess. But we cannot tarry here too long. We must leave as soon as we can."

"I'm very sleepy, grandfather. May I go to bed now?"

"Not yet. We first must see the king before sleeping tonight."

"I am so tired," she sighed, her eyelids so heavy. "They are not ready, you know. They know nothing of grandfather's troubles."

I folded her into my arms and stood up. She laid her head on my shoulder and was almost asleep as I walked to the closed glass doors which led out onto the palace balcony. The balcony was high in one portion of the city's royal palace. Below the balcony railings was a panoramic view of the city, glowing in the soft light of the bright moon. Staring down at the sleeping city, I knew the child's words rang true. The people of Vik were completely unaware of what was about to come.

"The man you do not like, the man with the long yellow hair? He is already here. He is somewhere close by, and he does not sleep well. He is having very bad dreams."

Helgar Longhair in Odar's Lair? What of Baron Anktooth, and those he was trying to whisk away through the catacombs? What of Dagan Horak?

“You know when others are near you?”

“Yes,” she mumbled, almost asleep.

“You can hear their thoughts and know what they dream?”

“Yes, grandfather. Please stop talking and let me sleep.”

I smiled and held the child in my arms as she slept. I started to lay her down on a huge, freshly made bed with chocolate-brown satin sheets and seemingly hundreds of pillows. It had been days since either one of us had slept in a bed, and this one was quite inviting. Every bone and tissue in my body ached for a full night’s rest in such a luxury. Four days had passed since the fall of the Anktooth. Exhaustion was compelling me to close my eyes and sleep. I felt very tempted to lie down beside the child, but a soft knock on the large oak doors of the rooms made me pause. One of the king’s personal attendants hurriedly opened a door and informed me Olaf would see me now.

I entered the small receiving room, where Olaf awaited me with a few of his trusted lieutenants. The child’s head lay on my shoulder, her tiny body completely relaxed as she slept in my arms. Bending my head as best as I could toward the king, I noticed all were looking more at the tiny form in my arms than at me.

“What’s this? You bring us a gift in the middle of the night?” Olaf, looking as if he had hurriedly dressed hurriedly after rising from a deep sleep, rumbled pleasantly as he lifted an eyebrow in curiosity. “I thank you, Roland. But certainly, this could have waited until the morrow.”

“The only gift I bring you, my king, is terrible news. The Anktooth have been overrun and destroyed. The entire barony is aflame and the city of Ank burns. I come to warn you. The Hartooth sweep across the country like a plague of locust. As soon as they consolidate their hold on the lands of the Anktooth, they plan to come here.”

The humored congeniality in Olaf’s smiling face vanished and a stern expression of war replaced it. He twisted to look at one of the chain mail-clad warriors standing just behind him.

“Dagger, send an *uhlan* of our best bowmen eastward immediately. Magdar, awake Count Bujold and Count Viratis. Tell them to hurry to the palace. And

reinforce the First Wall with three additional companies of bowmen!”

He stood and nodded at me before walking to a large round table in the center of the room, laden with rolls upon rolls of maps.

“Now tell me, Bretan, what have you seen and what do you carry in your arms?”

“Four days ago, the hordes of the Hartooth overcame the defenses of the city. Baron Anktooth was forced to flee, but before he did, he entrusted his grandchild to my care.”

“This is a dragon child? The grandchild of the Anktooth?” Olaf grunted, indicating the slumbering bundle in my arms with a sheathed dagger.

“More than just his grandchild, my lord,” I answered, carefully pulling down the hood that hid her pearl-white complexion view from prying eyes. “She is a Pearl Princess and the daughter of Baron Hartooth.”

One of Olaf’s remaining aides sucked in his breath in disbelief while another began to unsheathe his sword. But a steady hand from the king halted the movement. Olaf, for his part, stared for some moments at the child, and then looked into my eyes with genuine confusion clearly visible on his face.

“Certainly, you understand what you do is madness. A dragon princess here in the High Kanris? A Pearl Princess of the First Clan, no less, being protected by a religious outlaw? The Bretan are hounded and hunted throughout the high country as it is, and only a few havens remain for your brethren to find refuge. But a Bretan warrior-monk protecting a Pearl Princess? There will be no situation anywhere in the high country where you and the child might find seclusion and safety. Worse, those who wish to destroy the Bretan will now have an even more compelling reason to do so. No Bretan follower will be safe now. Even here, in my own kingdom, it will be impossible to shield you for long.”

“I ask no favors, Olaf. We leave as soon as the child awakens. But I made a promise to the child’s grandfather. I will protect her while the Clan Anktooth tries to find friends among the dragon baronies. The Hartooth are marching to war. But this time, they bring fire and sword to both human and dragons. As he attacked the Anktooth, he attacked others as well. All have fallen before his armies. He grows in power and is determined to complete what his ancestors

pledged to do centuries ago. He plans to unify all of dragonkind. And then he plans to destroy mankind.”

I continued to tell him all I knew. I told him of the yearlong siege of the Anktooth and the final days before the fall of Ank. I told him about Dagan Horak and the human, Helgar Longhair. When I cited the human mercenary, I saw a momentary reaction flash across the royal visage. But what I did not tell him was the power of prescience that the child possessed.

I saw little need to tell Olaf everything. He was a nobleman with more troubles than he wished to face. To burden him further with the news the Pearl Princess could see into a man’s mind and possibly foretell the future would be more than a mere mortal could handle.

“So my cousin actually fought in a losing cause, did he?” the bearded king rumbled as he scowled down at a map lying on the table. “Are you sure he did not betray the Clan Anktooth in the process?”

I opened my mouth to inform the king of his cousin’s presence in the city, but I felt the soft tug of a child’s hand on my tunic. It was a gesture only I was privy to, but it was enough. I said nothing as I patted the child on the back tenderly with a free hand.

“God’s blood!” the king exclaimed, throwing a sheathed dagger angrily onto the map table as he turned to stride away. “I knew of the Hartooth and their siege of the Anktooth! I knew of your presence there to aid the dragon baron. A move, mind you, that made you few friends here in this city. But I did not know my cousin’s company of Great Wings was there, nor did I know the Hartooth was marching against other dragons! So tell me, why did I not know the entire story? Where were my spies among the dragon baronies? And where in Blue Hades is Count Viratis and Count Bujold!”

The last sentence was a bellow of rage he vented at the top of his lungs. Loud enough to stir my supposedly sleeping Ursala. She did stir in my arms, she was not asleep. I was about to say something when a door to the anteroom was quickly opened and a servant came running in, hurriedly kneeling to one knee in front of Olaf.

“My lord! Count Bujold has just arrived at the palace, but we cannot find

Count Viratis! His palace is empty!”

“Empty? What do you mean empty?”

“Empty, sire! No count, nor his family, and no one to be found in the palace whatsoever! Gone, sire. They are all gone!”

“Sire!” a second voice shouted, a different servant who wore a panic-struck expression as he came running into the room. “Beacon fires from the First Wall have been observed! A large gaggle of Winged Beasties have been seen! And in the distance are reports of an approaching dragon army!”

“A dragon army? But how did we not . . .” said the gray-bearded face of a small, but powerfully built warrior dressed in the colors of the House of Bujold as he entered the presence of the king.

The blue-eyed, blond-haired king looked first at the arriving count, then at his aides, before turning to look at me.

“Viratis! He was in charge of gathering information on our enemies as well as being in charge of the realm’s diplomatic needs. He has betrayed us!”

“Sire, Viratis changed the guard’s unit that manned the First Wall’s gate keep! If he has betrayed us, it could mean warriors loyal to him will hand the gate over to the enemy!” Count Bujold shouted as he turned and began running for the door. “I will rouse the First King’s Lancers and send them immediately!”

And so it came to pass that only days after the Barony of Anktooth fell, the Kingdom of Vik found itself under siege. Count Viratis indeed had betrayed his king and people, and for an incredible amount of gold, arranged to have the gate-keep of the First Wall opened, thereby inviting in the one hundred Winged Beasties and their riders who stormed it that first night. By dawn of the second day, sixty thousand dragon pike and swordsmen flooded the farm country between the First and Second Wall. And in the skies overhead, almost three hundred Winged Beasties and their riders soared over the lands, challenging any and all Great Wings to battle.

By midday of the third day, after more of the enemy’s infantry arrived, along with five hundred more Wing Beasties, the Vik king found me and pulled me to one side, a look of grim finality on his usually handsome face.

“Old friend, the hour grows worse for my kingdom. I have received word the

Hartooth are using Winged Beasties to fly in even more infantry each day. We are already outnumbered two to one, and the odds increase against us with each passing hour.”

“What of the other kingdoms?” I asked, thinking help would be coming soon from the kingdoms higher up in the Kanris. “Can we hold until they arrive?”

“They have not the numbers we need to counter such a force, my friend. I have sent word to the Kingdom of Valois and the Kingdom of the Ming. But even if they sent all they had, maybe a thousand Great Wings might arrive. It will be days before help of any magnitude arrives. Our spies high in the mountains above us have seen an unending cloud of fire-breathers winging their way toward us. By week’s end, the Hartooth will be able to throw up as many as 1,800 winged beasts against my eight hundred Great Wings.”

It was impossible to believe. In a thousand years, no dragon had ever launched such a massive assault on any human or dragon kingdom. The largest army I had ever heard of, or seen assembled, was the one the Hartooth threw against Baron Anktooth. That alone, I knew, would require the yearly supply of gold an entire kingdom might produce. But an army of 60,000 infantry and as many as 1,800 Winged Beasties? From where was the First Clan finding such wealth?

“Roland, you must take the Pearl Princess out of the city this hour while I have enough Great Wings to command. I can cover your escape. Take her high into the mountains where no Winged Beastie can fly. Save yourself and the child.”

“I cannot abandon you and your people,” I said quietly, sensing the rightness in the king’s words, but reluctant to flee from this fight. “It was you and your city who stepped forward brought succor to any Bretan who came into your domain. You gave us sanctuary. I cannot leave you now in the hour of your need.”

The king smiled and laid a chain mailed hand on my shoulder fondly. We had been friends for years. Long before he became a king, we knew each other as children. As youth, we hunted the wild Thakk higher up in the crags and sang lusty songs over stout ale at night in many of the city’s infamous taverns. To

know I would leave him while he stood in such perilous need made my soul weep in grief.

“You must, Roland. The child may be the key, as Baron Anktooth suggests. Her living presence might rally dragon baronies against Hartooth. But it will take more than just a few dragons to defeat them. It will take both dragon and humans to complete such a task. And there is where you become so vital to this cause. You know dragon ways far more than any person I am know. You know what makes the human heart work. This child alone cannot raise the army needed to stand and defy our enemies. The combination of the two of you, as allies, will be the formula needed to accomplish that goal.

The decision has been made. No arguments. This afternoon, just as the first bell after lunch rings, I will launch an aerial assault on the dragon camp. As we lift off, you and the princess will arise on your Cedric. But when we turn to head to the enemy’s position, you and the two riders who will be attached to your little troop will turn toward the mouth of the Four Passes. We will cover your escape. Fly high and fast, and don’t look back, my friend. Don’t look back!”

He did not wait for me to protest further. He left me alone and to my own counsel. Deeply concerned for my old friend, I made my way to the topmost level of the palace aviary and looked toward the east. The view of the entire valley lay before me, sweeping out for almost its entire length. And what I saw was appalling to behold. The valley tilted upward in elevation as one entered the valley from the foothills below.

It was the widest at the lowest elevation and narrowed considerably until it ran into the rocky fac of the mountains itself. The Four Passes were literally four different mountain valleys joined together, not far from the walls of Odar’s Lair. This end of the valley was not more than two leagues in width, and the forest-covered walls of the Kanris lifted straight into the sky on either side of the city. Rugged rocks and steep forests covered the mountains, with peaks so high, no winged fire-breathing monster would be able to fly over. Once anyone fleeing from the dragon entered the Kanris, no dragon would be able to follow.

But escape I was not thinking as I gazed out over the city and the valley in front of me. In the distance, I could see great flocks of Winged Beasties, in

layers stacked one atop the other, darkening the distant horizon. Again, like the year's siege of Anktooth, black smoke in a dozen or more rising columns smeared the horizon with a grisly statement. Squinting and throwing a hand up to shield my eyes from the glaring sun, I thought I could see dark masses of dragon infantry, with a thousand banners of the First Clan's colors, marching in formations toward the city. I saw hundreds of Great Wings, more of the great war birds than I had ever seen concentrated in one area, floating almost motionlessly in the skies above the valley. They sailed over the Second Wall, moving back and forth lazily, in dozens of diamond formations, with four birds to a diamond. On each of the birds were Vik bowmen. Bowmen who had trained all their lives to fight dragon riders and their fire-breathers.

Looking down at the city and at the city's massive gray stone walls, I was impressed with the number of Vik ax and swordsmen, along with more bowmen, who stood waiting. Vik war-axes against dragon pike. Vik bowmen, using the double-curved wood and horn bow so familiar to humans and so shunned by dragonkind, pitted against the equally deadly, but slower-firing dragon crossbows.

I found myself wondering. Even with the odds so stacked against them, did the Vik have a chance to hold the Hartooth at bay until help arrived? For a thousand years, humans faced insurmountable numbers of dragons and survived. What were the odds in this coming fight? If Olaf and his people could hold out for two months or more, might not the other mountain kingdoms send enough forces to defeat the Hartooth? Could the Kingdom of Vik survive the next two months?

Another thought crossed my mind. Just how large were the Hartooth armies? And more importantly, where and how did the First Clan find and acquire so much gold? Did gold in the amounts needed for thousands of warriors come by natural means? Or, as I found myself somewhat hesitant to think about, was dragon wizardry being used?

Augh! Dragon wizardry was the stuff of myths and legends. Much like the myths and legends of the wizardry used by the Bretan Brotherhood and other brotherhoods of wizards which supposedly roamed the Kanris. Unlike human

kingdoms here in the Kanris who, for reasons yet to be fully understood, turned against the arts of wizards and magic, dragonkind revered these arts. If there were dragon wizards, who among them had the power to conjure up tons upon tons of gold?

“Ahummp, Master Roland?”

I turned and found myself facing the mirror image of two exact countenances. Both were blue-eyed with golden manes. Both were barely old enough to pull a bow in battle or ride their first Great Wing. Neither was old enough to experience the tug of the razor across their faces for the first time. And both had the familiar resemblance of a much younger King Olaf. I smiled as I recognized them immediately. Gawain and Gawaith, the sons of Olaf’s only sister and the only males left in Olaf Vicsson’s royal family.

“My lord Roland, the king asks that you prepare yourself and the child as quickly as possible,” Gawain . . . or was it Gawaith? . . . said, smiling at me at the same moment as his brother.

“And he bade us to give you this, my lord,” the other . . . Gawaith or Gawain? . . . uttered.

He handed me a sealed royal envelope addressed to me in Olaf’s hand. I noticed both lads were dressed in chain mail and the royal livery of the Vik—the royal colors worn when riding war birds into battle. I smiled and opened the envelope.

My oldest friend,

Before you stand my nephews, Gawain and Gawaith. I know you, my old friend. You have already surmised what request I am about to ask of you.

The coming fight looms just ahead for my people and I have dire fears of its outcome. I may not be able to save my people from destruction.

But I can save these two young ruffians. As you know, my wife and I are childless. The heir to my throne comes from my sister’s side of the family—these

two untested, but invincible young nephews of mine.

I ask you to take them with you. I ask you to be their teacher. Show them how to survive in this cruel world. Guide them and instruct them on how to be both warrior and poet. Both healer and leader of men.

Do not shield them from dangers, for in the next few months, that will be an impossible task. But do teach them to become much like you. I tell you truly, my Roland. I have never met a finer warrior, nor a truer friend than the one I find in you. If you could but teach my nephews to be half the man you are, I know they will become the best of men.

Do this for me, dear Roland, in remembrance of me . . .

Tears fell from my eyes, and I found myself fighting to keep from openly weeping. It took me a moment or two to speak, not wanting to do so if my voice failed, when I looked up and into the boys' bright and eager faces.

"You are aware of whom we ride to protect? Of the hardships and dangers we will face?" I asked them.

Both grinned and nodded. I smiled at their eagerness, which was like a fresh breath of air, blowing the gloom and despair from my soul.

I sent them off to mount their war birds. But when they disappeared from view, I again turned to look out over the city and the valley. And this time, I did shed tears. I would never again see the grinning face of my old friend. Nor would I take pleasure in walking the winding narrow streets of this old city and enjoy listening to the banter of its happy people.

I could not see the future, as the dragons claimed all Pearl Princesses could clearly see. But I could feel the growing despair within me. The Old World was changing. Changing into something new and different. Such change demanded a

terrible price to be paid. A price paid in blood.

CHAPTER 5



*If Evil has no pity and shows no mercy,
Then you, the believer, should be magnanimous as well as merciful.
If Evil is cruel and unjust,
Then you, child, should be the one to demand justice and exhibit
gentleness*

— FROM THE BOOK OF ST. ALBANS

AS OLAF'S WARRIORS AND GREAT WINGS GATHERED FOR THE ASSAULT, I TURNED and looked at my own magnificent beast. Cedric was a black beauty who hailed from the rugged Huygens Range in the far west of the Kanris. Years ago, I stumbled into the Huygens and found this creature. Often, it is said, a natural bond can exist between a wild Great Wing and a human. Such was the case between me and Cedric. Our first serendipitous meeting forged a lifelong friendship. He was not a bird I rode in servitude. Our relationship was more like a partnership. Bretan monks, as I have said, are taught to sense the emotions of others. Over the years, our relationship had only grown. The beast knows he can come and go as he wishes. He is free to choose. Fortune had smiled down on me in that, in all these years fighting the dragon and evil, the black war bird had chosen to stand with me in every battle I fought.

But as I turned and looked at the gathering clouds of war in the distance, I knew this day would have us face almost impossible odds.

“We have been together for years, my friend. Faced many dangers,” I said in a soft voice as I stood scratching the black feathers of Cedric’s hawk-like head. “But today, we must fly as if we were young again. We must fly as swiftly as never before. Only speed will save the young princess this day. What say you, my old friend. Can we do it?”

Cedric’s dark hawk eyes stared at me for a heartbeat or two before softly nudging me with his dark orange-yellow hooked beak. The soft push of the beak against me etched a grin across my lips. My great steed understood exactly what was needed. Around me, the Great Wings of Gawaith and Gawain, smaller birds still young in their maturation, along with a third Great Wing, milled about along with sixty other great war birds which were to rise from the palace battlements at the appropriate time. The third Great Wing was an older bird trained to be a carrier bird. Strapped tightly over her back was a heavy-looking set of leather bags, which were the provisions for our journey.

On the rooftops of every tower in the city, more birds were being prepared as warriors checked their weapons and their leather in preparation the coming flight. Great attention was given to the leather of their birds, along with the bird itself, by the more experienced warriors. There was tense electricity in the air all too familiar to me. There was a dryness of the mouth and a clamminess in one’s hands. The telltale signs that a battle was about to commence.

Looking at Gawaith and Gawain, already strapped tightly in the saddles of their steeds, I could see they were trying desperately to be as brave and confident as those around us. But they were just children. In truth, not that much older than the Pearl Princess. They had no idea what was about to happen.

The child I carefully strapped into the saddle we would share. I decided to have her sit in front of me, where, when the time came, I could further protect her with one of the infamous lozenge-shaped, dragon-scaled shields I had removed from a foe years earlier. I planned not to wield my bow, but to protect the child and rely on Cedric’s great speed. Yet, I had a bad feeling my careful plans were already unraveling. In the east, a gray mist and low dark clouds

promised a heavy rain was near at hand. In the grayness were a vast number of brightly colored Winged Beasties. It was a sight not heretofore seen by human eyes. So many fire-breathers with their incredibly large leathery wings and sinuous-necked viper's heads careening through the sky in a boiling mass of rainbow colors. Each fire-breather's scaled hide was a unique combination of colors. Winged Beasties came in various shades of blues, greens, yellows, and browns. Whatever their body colors were, their enormous leather-covered wings would be a different color altogether. So one might see a dark blue Beastie with blood-red wings.

The most famous Beastie among dragonkind was an untamed fire-breather they called *Uuhirt*. . . "Wild Heart" in translation. It was said the male monster was sixteen strides long with a triple horned tail. He was colored a bright orange with brilliant green wings.

On the ground, a Winged Beastie could be ten strides long. A stride was perhaps three feet in length, so a fire-breather could be more than thirty feet in length. When young, Winged Beasties were foul-tempered, vicious animals that required an incredibly resolute mind and nerves of steel to dominate. When they reached maturity, and after working with their dragonmaster after years of warfare and hardships, there was no creature on the planet more cunning. Nor one more fearless and determined in battle. An old dragon rider, with his old Winged Beastie as his partner, made a formidable set of foes. Blend an army of experienced riders and beasts together—no mean feat in itself since fire-breathers were renowned for their desire to be solitary—and an unprepared enemy would find they would be confronting an implacable foe.

There seemed to be thousands of Winged Beasties riding the winds above the valley. They seemed to be drifting back and forth over that portion of the valley they already controlled, as if they were waiting for something. As if they knew what was about to happen. Narrowing my eyes, I wondered if, perhaps, they knew I had the princess with me, and we were about to flee. Seeing them milling about, and strangely—not using their superior numbers to press the attack onto the Vik—I felt uneasy. Something was amiss. The dragons' actions were out of character.

Instinctively, I turned to gaze at the child and frowned. It was as if she knew I was troubled, for she threw the hood of her cloak from her head and looked at me with eyes filled with pain. It has been said that dragons do not shed tears, for they cannot cry. But I am here as witness to testify that dragons do cry. Ursala's eyes were filled with tears, and they ran freely down her pearl-white, pebble-skinned cheeks.

"What is wrong, child. You feel ill?"

"Grandfather, I am filled with pain. Many will die today. So many. I hear all their voices in my head, and it hurts so much. And I hear other voices, too. Others sitting near us who want to see us dead."

I glanced at the many around us. Many were openly staring in wonder at the visage of the young princess. They had never before seen a dragon child, much less a legendary Pearl Princess. Even as they prepared their mounts for the coming flight, they kept glancing at the child with mingled wonder and suspicion in their eyes. Yet, two warriors hurriedly averted their eyes the moment they saw me glance in their direction. They were older warriors, hardened veterans, riding war birds of much skill and experience.

Frowning, I patted the child on her leg and walked over to stand between the birds Gawain and Gawaith controlled. Both blond-maned imps grinned in pleasure as they leaned down to hear my words.

"We have much to concern ourselves with today, lads. But not just from the dragons. There may be an attempt on the princess's life from our own kind."

Gawain and Gawaith glanced at each other, smiles no longer on their faces and the color draining from their complexions. Since the time they had taken their first toddler's steps, they'd had a bow in their hands and were excellent archers. As the nephews of King Olaf, I knew their training in weapons would have been the best. They had been trained to fight the dragon. They were prepared to ride into battle and kill for the first time. But the idea of killing one of their own kind was clearly something they had never considered.

"Master, are you sure?" one said.

"Point them out to us, sire. We will make sure no harm comes to the princess," the other chimed in.

I smiled. They were indeed the nephews of Olaf. Still smiling, I shook my head and half-turned to look at the others around us.

“I know not who, lads. But when we lift off, I want you to fly your mounts just above and on either side of mine. Keep your head and eyes roving the skies. And be prepared for the attack to come from Great Wings or fire-breathers.”

They both nodded and reached for their bows at the same time. I nodded and moved back to my Great Wing and quickly mount mounted my old friend. Firmly gripping the dragon shield in one hand, I slid it across the body of the child. She was whimpering in her distress, a sound which tore at the strings of my heart, as she leaned her small body back to rest against mine.

At the appointed hour, just as a number of church bells began to ring throughout the city, the birds of Odar's Lair leapt into the growing dark overcast in one mass of plumage and beating wings. The sight of almost seven hundred Great Wings filling the skies in unison made the town's citizens lift up a hearty roaring cheer. From rooftops and walls, hundreds of folks within the city cheered and waved us on. The sight of so many trained Great Wings and their riders leaping into the skies brought a desperately needed ray of hope to the city and into the hearts of the many riders and birds as well.

I looked to my right and left and grinned to see the birds of the twins gaining altitude precisely in the formation I asked them to take. Through the first thin layer of the lowering clouds we flew in perfect unison. Great Wings, much like their fire-breathing counterparts, come in a number of different colors. Brown and tan are the predominant colors. But the full range of the rainbow can be found in their plumage. Many birds come splotched and streaked with two or more additional colors. My own bird was as black as ink on most of his body. But here and there were streaks of red. Each bird had their own unique markings. I found myself turning to look at two black beauties with matching yellow markings across the wings, which suggested they might have been hatchlings from the same brood. They belonged to the warriors who aroused my suspicions a few moments earlier. These warriors were riding in the perfect attack position just a few strides above my head. One swift turn, and they could be down upon us in a heartbeat.

Angrily, I tore my eyes from the black steeds and looked down the valley and at the host of Winged Beasties. They rode the winds in perfect contentment, unconcerned by the large host of Great Wings bearing down on them. This was not the typical reaction of dragonkind when Great Wings met fire-breathers. One could not allow the other to fly in the same sky unchallenged. It was as if nature herself took a hand in making both beasts so despise the other. War bird and fire-breather naturally sought each other out to engage in a fight to the death. To do otherwise was unnatural for either beast. I, therefore, found myself astounded to see the great host of Winged Beasties not straining every muscle fiber in their bodies in an effort to rush through the heavens and plunge into the midst of the smaller pack of Great Wings.

And then, almost too late, I realized why things were not what they appeared to be. It was a trap! We were riding into a trap! I looked up high above our heads at the thick mass of dark clouds and realized that at any moment, hundreds of fire-breathers would be plunging straight at us, their bat wings swept back to attain more speed, with their riders leaning far forward and lying almost prone on the necks of their beasts in an effort to lessen the wind resistance of their plunging steeds. We had to leave now, without hesitating, and without worrying about the black Great Wings above us if we were to escape this day unscathed.

Above and behind me, Gawain and Gawaith were riding their steeds and diligently moving their heads around to peer at the potential enemies above and behind them. They would not be aware of my suddenly wheeling Cedric to my left to begin the swift dash for the entrance to The Four Passes.

“Grandfather, hurry! They come!” the child screamed, sitting up in the saddle and turning to look at me with the eyes of a terrified child.

“Child, can you hear the thoughts of our two young wards, Gawain and Gawaith?” I yelled back over the sound of beating wings. “Yes? Then tell them to look down and follow us!”

I gripped the child firmly and pulled her close to me, raising the heavy shield to protect her and barked a command toward my bird’s bright, red-plumed head. Immediately, the giant war bird turned on a thought and pivoted on his left wing, the sudden change of direction so immediate and so violent that, if we had not

been strapped into the high-back saddle used for just such riding, both the child and I would have been hurled into an empty sky. But, thankfully, we were firmly strapped in and tightly did I hold onto the child. Cedric straightened out into level flight, he lifted his beaked head and let out a screech—his own war cry—I was so familiar with whenever fire-breathers were near. He began stroking the wind with his powerful wings.

Above us, I caught a terrifying glimpse of fire-breathers, hundreds of them, coming out the clouds in a deluge of reptilian monsters, their riders unleashing a black cloud of crossbow bolts aimed at the massed plumage of Great Wings below them. Gripping the child firmly and leaning far forward, I used my body to protect her. I slid the oddly shaped dragon shield over my body just as twenty crossbow bolts slammed into the shield all at the same time! Twisting somewhat in my leaning position to look back at our pursuers, I was not surprised to see four great monsters pulling out of their plunging dives, their great leathery wings trying to catch enough air to change their direction and continue their pursuit of us.

Looking back toward the city, I counted three cream-colored Great Wings, each with different markings, racing toward us as fast as their wings could take them. Behind them were the two black-plumed war birds I had noted earlier, and still behind them were the smaller mounts of Gawain and Gawaith flying for all their worth in their efforts to catch up. But it was what was above us and behind them all which drew my fullest attention. Two great fire-breathers, one a chocolate brown with tan wings and the other a light blue with almost pale yellow wings, were diving with great speed at a steep angle not toward the child and I, but toward the narrow gap entrance of The Four Passes. They were hurling through the dark clouds at great speed, and it was apparent they could reach the gap before we could.

“Fly, old warrior, fly!” I screamed over the whistling wind and the beating of mighty wings. “Hold nothing back, Cedric!”

Turning again to look back at our pursuers, I looked for the nephews of Olaf and hoped they still lived. To my joyous surprise, my eyes saw a fantastic aerial battle raging in the distance! The black war birds, who I thought might be our

assassins, caught up with the cream-colored Great Wings who were in hot pursuit after us and dove recklessly into their midst, their riders' bows spitting out whistling death! The birds Gawain and Gawaith rode plunged into the battle as well. In just the throb of one heartbeat, a mass of multicolored plumage twisted and darted in a vicious aerial battle.

And, just as suddenly as it began, it ended. Two cream-colored Great Wings began slowly dropping toward the earth below, both birds and riders lifeless, their souls already journeying over the Great Divide. The third cream-colored bird twisted to one side and plunged into a cloud, disappearing in the blink of an eye.

The twin black war birds swung around and began racing back toward Odar's Lair, their riders waving farewell to Gawain and Gawaith just before disappearing into the growing mist. The blond twins waved a return salute before their birds lunged forward and began racing toward us. I threw a gloved fist into the air and gave out a joyous yell! But then my attention turned back to the hurtling monsters above us. Watching them closely, I tried to estimate who would arrive first. But I realized it did not matter. I was not just protecting the female dragon child—I also had been entrusted with the care and protection of King Olaf's nephews. Cedric might reach the gap before the Winged Beasties arrived to block it, but they would, in their fury, surely take their wrath out on the youngsters behind me.

I yelled for my old friend to slow down. The Great Wing reacted immediately. His short, but powerful wings stretched out and remained motionless as we slowed precipitously. He began riding the afternoon currents, gulping in great amounts of air in the process to regain his strength. In a matter of seconds, Gawain and Gawaith's birds slid into formation on either side of me, the eyes of the boys wide with surprise as they gaped at me in disbelief. Above us, the two great flying monsters flashed over our heads and turned steeply in different directions, barring our path into the gap leading to the passes.

Believe not a fire-breather is slow, nor cannot turn in midair with almost the same adroitness as a Great Wing. In carrying out a sprint of four furlongs or fewer, a Winged Beastie will even beat a Great Wing. An experienced fire-

breather will compensate for a war bird's turning prowess by using its experience to anticipate the Great Wing's next move. But more importantly, never forget what man fears most from Winged Beasties. The searing heat and long flaming tongues of fire a fire-breather hurls at his foes are images straight out of nightmares. The heat is that of an erupting volcano, and the tongues of flame can reach out for more than ten strides to its target. And should a Beastie's flame fully hit its target, there is nothing made by man nor dragon's hand which can withstand it.

Nothing. Except magic.

Powerful wizards have been known to build invisible shields around their persons and withstand the mightiest attacks of a Beastie's fiery wrath. But there were limitations. All magic has limitations. To withstand the great heat and flame taxes a wizard's mind greatly. Magic as practiced by the great mountain wizards within the Kanris is mentally and physically exhausting. The greater the magic, the greater the resulting exhaustion. No wizard I was familiar with had ever faced two Winged Beasties at once. Nevertheless, I was confident, even though I had never attempted it before, in creating the Invisible Shield incantation. But how strong would my magic be, and for how long could I keep projecting it? If I shaped the shield in a certain configuration, the flames of the two fire-breathers would hit and deflect almost directly back to the sources from whence they came. To be consumed by their own wrath would be too much for even monsters to accept. They would hurl themselves to either side, momentarily opening the way into the gap and the Four Passes.

The route of our escape was arduous and dangerous. We would immediately fly as high as many birds could ever attempt into the rarefied air of the high country. No Winged Beastie would follow.

I bent forward and touched my cheek to the child's cheek, speaking softly.

"You know what we must do?"

"Yes, grandfather." she replied quickly, her voice trembling with fear.

"You are afraid?"

"Yes, grandfather. Very much so!"

"Ha! So am I, child! So am I!" I laughed, squeezing her gently with the arm I

had wrapped around her waist. “But hang on, little princess. Cling to me as tightly as you can!”

To ride war birds into battle requires riders to immediately recognize a certain number of hand commands a flight leader, or *uhlan* commander, will give his fellow riders. I gave the twins the command to “attack in line formation.” Without hesitation they wheeled their birds around and took up the desired positions directly behind Cedric. Once that happened, I sat up and faced the waiting fire-breathers and their riders and closed my eyes and took a deep breath. In a loud voice I gave forth the incantation.

*By the powers of the olden gods, I call for the use of Wueden's Great
Shield
so that, in his holy name, I may wield
A mighty blow against the foes of darkness and light!*

Ah, if the incantation works and the power is given, there is this indescribable electric surge of electricity through a wizard's body. And I felt it!. Power surged through me with a hot fury, concentrating in the fingertips of my right hand. Lifting the hand, I aimed it toward the waiting Beasties. Without waiting for a command, Cedric folded his wings back and lowered his head. Like a stone, we dropped in altitude, gaining a massive amount of speed. With a quick adjustment of his wings and tail feathers, the wily old war bird lifted his head and we were hurtling toward our foes with a ferocious velocity.

The two fire-breathers reacted immediately. They lunged forward, each winged dragon extending its long snakelike necks and sliding the strange transparent second eyelids over their eyes to protect them from their own flames. At the same time, we all saw them swell their girths as they sucked in a deep amount of air. With a thunderous blast, they exhaled blue and white jets of flame straight toward us!The physical blow of the combined flames hitting the Invisible Shield almost ripped me out of the saddle. It was a stunning blow. I felt the unbelievable white heat in front of us begin to wear away the magic. I clenched teeth together and concentrated on maintaining the shield's shape. The

roar of the dragons' breath and the heat of their flames filled the air around us. I began to physically shake from the effort of maintaining the incantation. I knew not for how long I could hold it. The breath of the dragons was incredibly hot. Their breath blew onto the unseen shield with the strength of a mountain gale.

And then, suddenly, there was nothing! Silence filled the sky around us, and I could not feel the close presence of the dragons.

Surprised, I opened my eyes and looked in front of us. The giant boulders that marked the narrow gap and the entrance to the passes swept past us. Confused, I turned and looked toward our rear. Behind Gawaith's bird, I saw one of the Winged Beasties, seared a charcoal black from his own flames, slam into one of the many boulders below us, and then lifelessly ricochet off several others as it fell to the earth below.

The other Beastie and its rider were not to be seen. Relieved, I turned in my saddle and relaxed, and was immediately hit by a wall of pure and complete exhaustion. Slumping forward, unable to catch myself, I felt the hands of the tiny dragon child grip me.

"Grandfather!" she screamed as she held onto me, pushing me back into a sitting position. "You're hurt!"

I tried to grin, but even that was too much energy to expend. With eyelids which felt like lead weights, I tried to stay awake long enough to explain. But the overwhelming desire to sleep was claiming my very mind. I tried to speak but could not find the strength to do so. Yet just before I pitched forward into blackness, I heard her tiny voice far in the back of my dulled brain.

"Sleep, grandfather, sleep. All is well."

CHAPTER 6



One act of mercy lifts from the heart three acts of regret, child.

If you believe.

If you strive to live the Bretan Way—and if you believe God is merciful.

One gesture of kindness dispensed to those who have never experienced kindness,

Brings God and his Infinite bliss closer to you.

— FROM THE BOOK OF ST. ALBANS

I AWOKE FROM A DEEP SLUMBER. I KNEW IT HAD BEEN A DEEP SLEEP, FOR EVERY muscle and joint in my body throbbed with pain. But the pain was bearable. What was not bearable was the unrelenting desire to eat gnawing at me. I was famished.

The moment I opened my eyes, I smelled a strong aroma of onions being cooked in a pan filled with a juicy slab of meat. A wonderful aroma so real and so fresh, my mouth watered, and my stomach seemed to be doing somersaults in anticipation. Onions, herbs, and fresh meat were being fried in a giant iron pan over a blazing fire. An unmistakable pleasure one never forgets after experiencing it for the first time.

With the smell wafting across the room, I opened my eyes and looked up into the rough wooden beams and thatched roofs of a large peasant hut. Though feeling very weak, nevertheless the corners of my mouth pulled back in a grin as I took a deep breath.

I knew where we were. I knew we were far from the searching eyes of our enemies. It was safe for me to rest for a few moments more. Cedric, that wonderfully intelligent partner of mine, knew where safety would be found in our flight from Odar's Lair. He had unerringly flown here without any prompting.

The hut was lit by the soft light of several dozen candles and from the blazing fireplace. From somewhere behind me, I heard the pleasant noise of a man humming to himself. The smile on my lips widened. I recognized the voice and dearly wanted to greet him. But I was far too weak to speak. I closed my eyes and fell back to sleep.

I must have dozed off, for the next time I gazed up at the thatched roof of the hut, the soft light of candles had been replaced by a grayish late afternoon light. The crash of thunder and the prattle of harsh rain rattled the hut. On a roughly hewn wooden stool beside my bed sat a very old man with a long gray beard. His hair fell well past his shoulders. It was well-groomed and almost glowed in the soft light filling the hut's interior. He was dressed in the plain clothing of a forest dweller. Just a simple home-spun cotton shirt and rough leather pants. The man's brown eyes were bright and cheerful, with many laugh lines around their edges. What little face was visible through the beard showed a dark healthy tan. Seeing I was awake, he grunted and lifted his head to look at someone who was apparently near him.

"Woman, this wild man we knew long ago has returned to the living. No worse for wear, I might add."

His was a deep voice filled with power and vitality. Just hearing the man's voice made me smile with pleasure. I knew the ancient one. I knew who he was talking to. And I was genuinely happy to see both of them.

"Roland?" the familiar voice of the old man's wife chortled from behind my head. "You awake? Good! I suspect you have been a very mischievous child of

late. Father and I wish to hear all about it.”

It was Brogan Runyan and his wife Tomasa. Two people who had been in my life for as long as I could remember. My surrogate parents, mentors, even my teachers. The two ancient people who lived their daily lives in the deep forest a dozen leagues higher in the mountain range called the Tantors, a set of peaks and crags some two days’ hard ride by Great Wings from Odar’s Lair.

“The children? The birds?” I stammered, just remembering my charges and beginning to panic.

Brogan’s powerful hand settled onto my shoulder and pushed me back into the plain sheets. There was a smile on his lips as he shook his head gently. I found myself relaxing again. All was safe.

“They sleep for the moment, boy. These twins of yours, they have the energy of ten men. And this dragon child, Roland. She is a delight! You have much to tell us, I know. I feel it may be a tale we may not want to hear. The life-force around us is a stir with misgivings. Much has happened as of late.”

“Bah, you old fool!” the man’s wife chortled again, coming into view with the round, beaming face of a woman who was still very beautiful after all these years. Kicking a wooden stool to the bed, she sat down beside her husband with a soup bowl in her hands and lifted a wooden spoon up to me. The spoon was filled with chunks of garden vegetables and white Thakk meat.

“You will eat this now, Roland of the High Crags. And do not make a face at it or I will thrash you with this very spoon!” she said with a mocking voice of severity but breaking into another radiant smile just as soon as the words left her lips.

It was Thakk Peasant Soup, and as a child living in this hunt, how I hated to eat all its many vegetables. But the hot fluids, the crunch of the vegetables, and the delicious meat I now weakly consumed tasted like the nectar of the gods. In my weakened state, I could feel the hot broth sliding down my throat. It spread its soothing warmth throughout every fiber of my being. With each spoonful, I felt strength returning to me, realizing I was ravishingly hungry.

“Laddie,” Brogan began, lifting a suspicious eyebrow with a sparkle in his ancient eyes, “I suspect you conjured up one whopping piece of wizardry to be

this hungry. Come, out with it. Tell us everything. We've been waiting for three days for you to open your eyes."

"Three days!" I whispered, pushing the last spoon of soup away, then struggling to rise. "It can't be. We must leave. We must be on our way."

Brogan's rough hands pulled me up to a sitting position on the bed and Tomasa slid a heavy blanket across my shoulders. But there was no getting out of bed. The effort to just sit up almost made me collapse into the sheets in sheer exhaustion.

"You will be going nowhere for the next week, my fine young friend," Tomasa informed me in her sternest motherly tone. "Weather has set in for a while, anyway. You need your strength to return, and the children in the next room cannot ride through the storms in their condition. So here, you will all stay until the storms have passed."

Brogan's rumbling chuckle in response made me smile once more. Hearing Tomasa's soft but commanding voice and feeling the old man's presence again was an elixir for my soul. I was feeling my body beginning to recharge again. I felt as if I no longer had the weight of the world sitting on my shoulders.

"Father," I said, strong enough to open only one eye to look at the old man. "The world as we know it is about to be cast into the fires of a new forge. What will emerge cannot be foreseen."

The old man, the greatest of the living Bretan wizards, found his ancient briar pipe and began packing it slowly with tobacco. There was a thoughtful look on his dark craggy face as he lit the pipe.

"A change, you say? Well then, perhaps the wife and I will be forced to buy new clothes! But let me hear your tale, son, before I pack a week's provisions and walk to King's Island to shop."

There was a deep, long rumble of thunder that sounded as if the deluge was increasing in its downpour. It was the time of the year for these kinds of storms. They rolled down from the peaks above, covering entire valleys and usually lasting a week or more of pounding rain before blowing away. To travel in the saddle of a Great Wing or Winged Beastie was close to impossible. To trek through the winding forest and mountain trails in such tempests was unthinkable.

Mountain streams would turn into raging rivers and there was always the threat of mudslides cascading down from the mountains, wiping out the tenuous paths so painstakingly carved into them by the few peasants who lived in this valley.

We would be safe here for at least a week. But it was time we could ill afford to lose. In order to get my charges to safety, we had to travel many leagues yet. The longer we tarried, the more we gave the Hartooth opportunities to find us.

A sigh escaped my lips. There was nothing to do but, in a still terribly weak voice, tell the whole story to the two people I loved the most in the world.



I awoke again, surprised to realize I had fallen asleep. The house was mostly dark, except for the dim light of one single candle I knew Tomasa would have burning in the middle of a stone table in the center of the hut. Wizards in the Kanris are not fond of the dark. Even old and incredibly skilled wizards like Brogan and Tomasa. My eyes adjusted and the soft light of the candle burning soothed me. Outside, the rain continued to pound on the thatch roof. But here in this comfortable soft bed, it was safe, warm, and dry. Yet, frowning, I realized it felt somehow constricted as well. I could not move one arm without feeling something soft and warm rub against it.

Turning my head, I found the sleeping form of Ursala lying atop my arm, the covers of the bed almost hiding her completely from view. In her mouth was the thumb of her right hand and on her face was the look of a sleeping child completely oblivious to the world. A surge of emotion welled up within me, an emotion I was not familiar with. Despite its newness, it felt strangely pleasurable.

Smiling, I used my free hand to pull the covers over her just a little more, and then I rolled around to face her. The warmth of her tiny body felt good, and I started to fall asleep again with her still sleeping on my right arm. In her aura, my wizard's Inner Eye felt the gentleness and quiet belief she felt safe sleeping by my side. And her child-like belief in believing I would keep her safe, in turn, filled me with a father's sense of wellbeing.

I would keep her safe, I vowed, for as long as I could draw breath and stand on my feet.



How long I slept, I do not know. But when I awoke, the child was no longer in bed with me and the sounds of a lively household filled my ears. I threw the blankets off me as I slowly rolled out of bed. Cautiously, I rose to my feet for the first time in days. Surprisingly, I found myself feeling quite strong and refreshed.

“Good,” Tomasa smiled at me, looking over her shoulder at me as she continued working, preparing some kind of bread. “Right on time, I might add. You should never make fun of my Thakk Soup, Roland. Medicine is medicine. But it does not have to taste like brackish water.”

I grinned, nodded, and walked over to her to grip her shoulders with both hands as I kissed her on the top of her lovely head. Tomasa Runyan, Queen of the Bretan Wizards, was almost two hundred years old. But much of her youth’s beauty remained.

“Thank you, my son.” she replied, patting my hand with a hand covered in cake flour. “I will always accept such gestures of affection anytime from you. Now, if you are wondering where everyone is, I will tell you. There is a break between storms at the moment. Father has taken the children out and they are fishing in one of the bigger ponds. A big pan of fish and some fresh bread sounds delicious for tonight’s meal. Don’t you think?”

It was amazing to think this older woman, who held her beauty with grace and feminine charm, was once as powerful a wizard as her craggy-faced, bearded husband had been in his prime. Both professed to no longer delve into the powers of magic and wizardry. I had, however, my suspicions. A wizard never truly gives up his or her talents. The woman I have always looked upon as being my adoptive mother still could conjure up a trick or two. Another reason why I wished to stop here for a short time as we fled into the High Kanris. Her counsel would be invaluable to me.

“I feel your concerns, my son, for the child you protect. And your concerns

for the twins, no less,” she said softly, half-turning with sparkling eyes to look up at me as she continued making her bread. “Peering into the future is always so cloudy. So murky and unclear. Even the child, as powerful as her gifts are, does not see the future with the clarity you think she does. Remember that Roland. No matter how powerful the magic is, magic cannot predict the distant future. There are too many variables, too many minds and computations, too many threads of the past and the potential future which makes such endeavors useless.”

“Yet, I would wish for some guidance, mother, as to what to do next. The Evil that is lifting its ugly head is powerful. But it is only one of my concerns. I have others. And one that gives me greatest concern of all. ”She smiled sadly, nodding her head as if she already knew what I was about to say. “There are humans, many humans, within the mountains who are quite willing to take the baron’s gold and do the baron’s bidding. Remember what St. Albans said; *‘From within come the worst fears.’* Yes. We must be aware of our human enemies more so than our dragon ones.”

I grinned in appreciation as I looked at her. The woman’s mind was as clear and astute as ever. If I remained silent, I knew she would voice ideas that might turn out to be quite useful.

“This Clan Mauk warrior, this Captain of Baron Anktooth’s guards. Do you think he will raise an army?”

“I know not,” I answered, half-turning to listen as the first rumble of the next approaching downpour rattled across the forested valley. “The wealth the Hartooth controls is unbelievable. Warriors by the hundreds are flocking to the baron’s banners every day. The mailed fist he used before the walls of Odar’s Lair was beyond comparison. For all I know, the city has fallen, and the dragon clans now control the valley.”

She frowned and shook her head, continuing to knead the bread dough. Her facial expression changed as she worked, showing great concern and worry. Her face told me everything. Olaf still lived, and Odar’s Lair yet resisted the baron’s forces.

“Dragon strength continues to grow before the Second Wall in the valley. Yet

strangely, there has been a decline in the number of fire-breathers. Why this has taken place concerns father and I greatly. It cannot be a good sign, we fear. We have sent word to several kingdoms, asking old friends in many noble houses to send help to King Olaf. Some squadrons of Great Wings have descended into the valley to augment the king's forces. The Second Wall holds, for the moment, but the situation is desperate."

"Beasties fled from the battle?"

"They did not flee," Tomasa answered, shaking her head and frowning. "Our sources tell us they were withdrawn. Close to five hundred Beasties pulled from above the skies of the valley and sent elsewhere."

I found myself frowning as well. What dark subterfuge did this portend? Had dragonkind found a new way to enter the High Kanris? Perhaps an unknown, and therefore unguarded, path into the high country? Such a prospect frightened me the most, as it frightened all who lived in these wonderfully rugged and forested peaks.

"Father and I agree. There are three key elements that must be done before we can confront the Hartooth," Mother began with a resolve her voice I found comforting. "First, you must continue on your mission. Take the child to wherever you feel she will be safer and recruit warriors to come to her aid. You know the kingdoms, my son, and the noble houses that control them. No kingdom will officially come to the aid of a dragon clan, no matter how noble the deed may be. For over a thousand years, humans have fought the dragon. We, here in the Kanris, have fought to keep this tiny toehold of safety devoid of the dragon's touch. So expect no great assistance from any powerful kingdom within the high country."

She threw the dough into pans, and then took the pans and moved them across the cobblestone floor of the comfortable hut—flooring her husband had installed in the hovel years ago to replace the straw and packed-clay floors most peasant huts were built on. She then slid the pans into a small stone kiln built into the side of the large fireplace which dominated almost an entire wall of the hut. In seconds, the smell of fresh bread wafted into my nostrils and my mouth watered.

“As for a human army, my son, you are the perfect choice to find and recruit one. Your knowledge of the mountain kingdoms, your reputation as a warrior, your proven loyalty—, all are the ingredients to bring hundreds to your call.”

“Hundreds willing to fight for such a cause do not make an army, mother.”

“Aye. But it is a beginning, Roland. Begin with small accomplishments and build for greater ones. Your reputation as a warrior is known among the dragon baronies. A combined force could be built with you at the head and with the tiny princess as its rallying point.”

I was perplexed somewhat, and it must have shown in my face, for Tomasa, gazing up at me, smiled and shook her head.

“I know what troubles you, Roland. How is it that the dragon knows more of you as a wizard than your own kind? The answer to that, I know not. But they know more of the few of us who walk in the quiet places than our own do. Dragons are afraid of wizards, my son. Much as they are, deep in their hearts, afraid of Pearl Princesses who have the power to read minds and see vaguely into the future.”

“So the child is in danger from dragons as well as humans.”

“Aye, sadly,” nodded the graying beauty in front of me, her eyes clouding with concern for tiny Ursala. “Pearl Princesses have, in the past, been the ones who profoundly affected dragonkind. There has always been a price to pay whenever one comes into this world.”

I nodded. I knew it was so. Which made the desire to protect the child swell even stronger in my heart.

“But how do I meld a force of humans and dragons together that will fight as one? It has never been done before. Not, at least, on the scale we will need to confront our enemies. And in building this army, how do I protect the child at the same time?”

Tomasa began drying her hands with the apron around her waist just as I heard the cries of the dragon child laughing in glee, along with the hollering of two young boys filling the air just outside the hut. Mother and I both smiled as we heard the happiness in their voices. But we both smiled sadly, for we knew such carefree thoughts would soon be gone and may not return for a long, long

time.

“Ah,” the woman sighed, shaking her head as she turned to look at me. “This world constantly filled with war is not kind to the innocent, my son. That is why we of the brotherhood and sisterhood were created. We are the ones who are supposed to protect the innocent and the weak.”

“We are so few,” I said almost in a whisper. “And our numbers grow smaller with each passing year. Especially so since the Dark Terror almost destroyed all of us two years ago.”

The Dark Terror was a span of two years when terror and hysteria gripped the hearts and souls of the peasantry in the high country. The fear of the dragon’s Dark Magic slipping into the High Kanris like some plague was, in itself, a vicious and murderous sickness. It made almost every human insane in the lust to find and destroy wizardry. The witch hunts, the hundreds of people burned at the stake—or drawn and quartered—were like a black malaise that made once-sane minds go senseless with fear and terror.

Wizardry in the High Kanris was systematically hunted down with the intent to be eradicated from memory. That any of us survived was miraculous.

“Yes, the Dark Terror,” my adoptive mother mused, her voice trailing as if she was deep in thought. “Your father and I have always suspected an outside force, some evil of powerful dimensions, was the source for this insanity. I wonder now if perhaps the Hartooth were involved. And what a wonderfully diabolical plan it was, mind you! Destroy as many, if not all, human wizards, and would not their ride to conquest be easier? Humph! This is the third task I mentioned earlier—finding this power within the high country who aids our enemies. We must destroy it before the tide turns against us. That is the chore father and I have decided to accomplish. We will come out of retirement to do it. The first two tasks belong to you, my son, and only to you. Protect the child and build an army. No other can accomplish these tasks. The third quest belongs to your father and me. We are the ones who will dispose of this evil. You can be assured of that!”

The door to the house burst open and four figures stood in the doorway just as the rain began pouring outside. All four of them were caked in mud from their

head to their toe, with the princess being the muddiest of all. They were all laughing hysterically, including the princess, their smiles cracking the dried mud that coated their faces. In the old man's hands was a mass of large mountain trout. In the boys' hands were two tiny fish barely large enough to fit in a man's palm. In the child's tiny hands was the largest trout I had ever seen. Half as large as the child itself, it was almost more than she could carry.

"Woman! We four are home from the fields and we bring supper with us!" Brogan yelled, holding up the string of fish with unmistakable flair.

"See, grandfather? See what I caught?" Ursala called to me in glee, running across the cobblestones half-carrying, half-dragging the giant fish with her. "I caught it! With my own line!"

"See this wooden spoon!" Tomasa shouted yet grinning as she raised a big spoon over her head and began shaking it. "I will crack all of your heads if you get my kitchen splattered with mud! Now off with you, outside, and take those filthy clothes off and don some fresh ones. And you, dear husband. Clean those fish so I might prepare them for tonight's meal—now, dear husband! Before I throw something at you!"

I began laughing at the spectacle before me as I bent to one knee in order to look at Ursala's catch. She, too, was laughing, and she lifted the fish up for a moment, and then dropped it to the floor in order to free her hands, which she then threw around my neck. Like the child she was, she kissed me with her muddy face on my cheek and giggled gleefully as I returned the kiss. Mud and all.



One week after our arrival, the rain stopped, and the skies cleared. The boys and I saddled our birds, and, to my surprise, the large pack bird I had last seen far behind us in our escape from the city was with us. All our provisions were intact. As I lifted the many leather bags up to tie them down again on the pack bird's back, another surprise awaited me. Gold coins, freshly minted and fully weighted, filled four heavy bags. A king's ransom. I turned and looked at the

nephews of Olaf for an explanation.

Sheepishly, both shrugged, hemmed, and hawed. And then Gawain took it on himself to explain.

“My lord, our uncle knew you would not take money. So he swore us to secrecy until we were well away from danger. He knows the hardships he has placed upon you with our presence. He knows you must fight the dragon with an army. So he insisted on providing the funds you will need to build such a force.”

“And sire,” Gawaith quickly threw in, his face blushing. “He bade us to tell you that if more gold was needed, we are to approach his cousin, King Alfred of Belliphon, with your needs. The king owes a longstanding debt to our uncle and he will not refuse whatever you ask.”

I lifted a suspicious eyebrow at the two of them as I pulled tight the straps of Cedric’s saddle. I said nothing and let the two stew for a moment in front of me. I turned to look at them both, putting my hands on my hips in the process.

“Hmm, is this to happen every time?” I asked in a dubious voice .

“What, sire?” Gawain stammered, color draining from his handsome face as he quickly glanced at his brother, then back at me.

“Have we angered you, sire?” the other chimed in, his color likewise draining as he gulped in fear.

“This,” I said, waving a hand from one to the other and sounding very severe. “This ritual if one speaks, the other must say something, too. Are we to put up with this for as long as we are together?”

Both burst into wide grins at the same time. Color flushed back into their complexions and relief shone in their eyes. They were not in trouble and now recognized my playful mocking. Glancing at each other, their grins widened still. Turning to look at me again, both heads went up and down in the affirmative.

“Yes, sire. We have been this way since birth!”

“And probably will continue after we die. . . uh, maybe.”

Lifting my head, I laughed. Laughed long and with much pleasure at the way the two answered. Turning, I lifted a grinning Ursula into the saddle and strapped her down tightly before I climbed into it myself. The boys hurried to their mounts and strapped themselves in. After waving to the dear old couple, we

leapt into the skies and turned west.

West by north. Deep into the wildest regions of the High Kanris. To a place I knew had been long forgotten by the living. A place so ancient the single stone keep, and its surrounding heavy stone walls were covered in tough mountain lichen in tenacious carpets of light green. There, we would find safety. There, in a sliver of mountains which actually were not a part of the High Kanris, would be a place where an army of Winged Beasties and Great Wings might come into being. There, in a valley called The Edge of the World, we would find sanctuary.

The Edge of the World.

A forbidding place. Held by many, both man and dragon, to be haunted and filled with evil spirits. The mountains protecting it were far smaller than the shield wall of the Kanris where, at its base, the range jutted far into the northern steppes like a misshapen, crooked finger.

Our sanctuary. . . and only three months away, if we rode our birds mercilessly. Longer in duration, if those who hunted us forced us to divert from our path and compelled us to take a more tortuous, but safer route.

I wished to enter the valley called The Edge of the World long before the first Winter storm made traveling almost impossible for man or beast. Yet, I knew we would not. Somewhere between here and The Edge of the World, I had to find shelter for the child and the twins. A place far from those who, even now, were fervently searching the high country with grim desires to destroy us all.

CHAPTER 7



***Beware of Evil in all its disguises
For it does not always come with a sword in hand
And wearing the dragon's form.***

— FROM THE BOOK OF ST. ALBANS

TWO DAYS AFTER LEAVING THE SANCTUARY OF THE PEASANT'S HUT AND THE OLD wizards who inhabited it, I led our small party high into a second mountain valley. Our birds, drifting lazily on the stiff and powerful updrafts that were found where one valley joins another, scanned the skies with their sharp eyes for any possible trouble. But the skies were crisp and clear. Except for two gaggles of wild Great Wings we observed circling a mountain peak in the distance, we were alone in this grand wilderness.

Ursala, sitting in the saddle in front of me, was a curious child. She observed everything around us with a child's perspective of innocence and wonder. And she wished to talk. Talk and laugh at the silly jokes we told each other. Watching her laugh made me smile and laugh in kind. At night, sitting around a blazing campfire, the twins would begin to act like the children they were. They made every attempt to entertain the small princess with their antics. In those days fleeing from Odar's Lair, I grew fond of all three children. Gawaith and Gawain,

blond, blue-eyed, and quite athletic by nature, were always energetic, optimistic, and willing to take on any trial or hardship with a panache I found invigorating to behold. Nothing seemed beyond their willingness. They put themselves in charge of hunting and preparing the evening meals. And they performed these chores without once complaining.

During quieter times, after the princess fell asleep and was tucked safely underneath Cedric's wing, I began instructing the boys on the Ways of the Bretan Warrior. I began by teaching them the six *katas* of an exercise called The Silent Crane. An exercise designed to build the lungs and hand-eye coordination. The Silent Crane is a deceptive, yet arduous exercise. It involves sweeping movements with the arms and stretches every muscle in the body. All of its movements are done in slow motion. When one moved properly, the concentration needed to complete each *kata* taxes both the mental and physical to the extreme.

Gawaith and Gawain absorbed the six movements with amazing clarity. Late at night, we would step through each *kata* in unison—the three of us looking as if we were mirrored reflections moving at the same time. It became a required ritual. The boys would complain if we, for some reason, missed our nightly exercises together.

But to be frank, it was little Ursala with whom we all fell in love. A child is a child. Be it man or dragon, there is a certain innocence and naiveté all children possess. The princess was but a small child. A small child with incredible powers living in a cruel world seemingly bent on destroying her. Within her, using my Mind's Eye, as all wizards are trained to do, I could sense her latent Netherworld powers. No combination of wizards could match her raw, but untrained energy. Like all true Pearl Princesses, I could sense her gift to communicate with the dead. At night, as she slept close to me, I would feel her mind drifting into my consciousness. On a few rare occasions, I caught glimpses of the dragon's Netherworld. I felt the harshness, the clawing humidity so incredibly suffocating to withstand. And I heard the screaming voices of the Four Sisters. Shrill, wailing voices. . . the very essence of madness itself screaming off in the distance. Faintly audible to my Inner Ear, but for some

reason, restrained from coming closer and invading my soul with their horrific nightmares.

Yes. Tiny Ursala was a Pearl Princess. She had the same power all her sisters had possessed. I knew she was potentially far more dangerous than her four previous incarnations and far more powerful than any wizard I knew. Her power had to be channeled in the proper direction. Her power was so immense, she alone, could change the course of our world when she had fully matured. The child in her could not grasp the power she naturally controlled—that alone made her quite dangerous.

Her grandfather's willingness to allow me to train her in the ways of Bretan wizardry was a twist in the prophecies of old. Ancient prophecies foretold of a Fifth Sister, a fifth Pearl Princess being born. With her coming, the Hartooth would rise. Rise and unite all of dragonkind, destroying mankind once and for all.

The Hartooth were on the march. The Fifth Sister was but a child assigned to me to tutor and care for. As I watched her playing with the boys, I found myself in a Herculean struggle with my conscience. My Bretan training, and the oaths I swore to faithfully follow in the monastery when I became a warrior-wizard, told me what my religious path should be. I knew I should have eliminated this portion of the prophecy with a swift stroke of my sword. To kill the Fifth Sister before she attained adulthood was to destroy dragonkind prophecy. Destroying dragon prophecy meant assuring the survival of all of mankind. I knew the immensity of dangers I placed myself in, along with all those whom I knew and loved, by not doing my duty. But I could not bring myself to kill a child. I could not look upon tiny Ursala and see the terrible fury a Pearl Princess, grown to adulthood, might potentially render. She was but a child. A young child as innocent as a soul could be in this cruel and harsh world. And I had her within my grasp. Might I, as her old grandfather expressed, be able to mold her mind and train her to control her powers and resist the seductions of the Netherworld's Dark Lords?

To use the powers of a Pearl Princess against the Dark Lords—the very gods of the dragons—was something never foretold in any prophecy. Already, the

prophecy had been altered with the child being at my side. The Fifth Princess was to come, to be born into the ancient Hartooth, and all of dragonkind would tremble. When she came of age, the Hartooth would send her to the Nunnery of Hagnoor, where the powerful witches of the nunnery would teach her the ways of their dark gods. When fully trained, she would, standing beside Baron Hartooth, call for a Holy War against all of mankind.

Her clan did not possess her. Nor, if I had my way, would the Nuns of Hagnoor. I planned to whisk her away to The End of the World and teach her our Bretan ways. I would bring in other Bretan wizards to assist in her training. If the gods whom mankind prayed to so deemed it, I would turn the very powers of the Dark Lords against those grim gods themselves. I would destroy the prophecies that foretold dragonkind would ultimately destroy all of mankind.

No. I could not harm the child. During the coldness of the mountain's lonely nights, as we sat huddled , shivering, close to a campfire, she would come to me and snuggle deeply into my arms. We would sit for hours, her and the twins, conversing about many things. More times than not, she would be the one doing most of the talking and we would barely be able to put a word or two in. In her was this innocence, and this well of kindness, which was deep and sincere. Her gentleness warmed our hearts. Her acts of kindness and her humor made us smile in delight. She was as close to the twins as she was to me. They constantly played together. The moments were rare when they could act like children. She would gather wildflowers and decorate the long, flowing blond manes of each of the twins with them. They would patiently allow her to twist and turn their golden hair into whatever puzzles she chose. I could see in the eyes and in the gestures the boys used toward her that they felt for her as I did.

No.

Prophecy or not, the princess would not be harmed if we had anything to say about it.



“Master, where do we ride? Where do we go to find a place of safety?” Gawain

said on the second night of our journey up from the peasant's hut. "Where can we find a place to hide the princess if we stay in the Kanris?"

"Shhhhh!" hissed Gawain's brother, hitting his brother soundly on the shoulder with a piece of kindling he was about to throw into the fire. "Have you gone mad? How can you question a warrior-monk? Especially one such as our master? Even our uncle would not ask such a stupid question!"

"Ouch!" Gawain grunted from the blow, glaring angrily at his brother before turning to look at me. "I meant no disrespect, Master. I am only curious. No dragon has ever been allowed this deep into the high country. If anyone heard we had the princess, every warrior in every kingdom would be looking for us."

Even Gawaith reluctantly nodded at this, turning to look at me with a question in his eyes. Both twins were blunt and honest and hid nothing from view. In many ways, they were still children. But children who knew the ways of the High Kanris and knew what it meant if we were caught with the child at our side.

"We will not stay in the high country much longer. We stay here for a few days more only because I need to begin the process of recruiting an army. It is not only that we must protect the child, mind you. But we must also help in building an army strong enough to fight the Hartooth. For that, we need Great Wings and their riders. And we need to find those who would be willing to fight Hartooth pike."

"You have allies who might help us?" Gawaith said this time, his voice sounding eager and hopeful.

Gawain slapped his brother hard on his shoulder, repaying his brother for the earlier blow to him as he lifted a finger to his lips.

"Shhhhh! Are you mad, brother? Surely the master has a plan!"

"Ouch!" winced Gawaith, glaring at his brother and thinking seriously of reaching for a heavier piece of wood to use against his brother.

I smiled and lifted a stick up to gently place it on Gawaith's right elbow, restraining him from further retaliation.

"At the far end of this valley, a day's journey from here, is a village called Fyodor's Crossing. The village, this valley, is a haven for free peasantry. The

farmers and woodsmen who live there call no man their lord. Nor give allegiance to any king. Anywhere else, they would be considered outlaws and heretics. They are an independent, strong-willed lot. They are also absolutely fearless in battle and, to a man, they handle the peasant's longbow like no other. We, my two young friends, begin building our army by recruiting bowmen. The best bowmen in all of the Kanris!"

"But Master—" Gawain began.

Thump!

"Ouch! You hit me again, brother!"

"Boys," I chided sternly, frowning, but my eyes smiling with amusement at the two cut-ups. "Three day's ride from Fyodor's Landing is a small walled city called Parian."

"I've heard of that place!" Gawaith exclaimed, his eyes widening with excitement. "Uncle told us about Parian. It's supposed to be a city filled with mercenaries and thieves. We're going to take the princess to Parian?"

"We are not. We will journey close to the city's walls, and I will enter the city on foot. There is a person I know there, a mercenary captain of Great Wings, who might be interested in fighting the Hartooth."

Both boys nodded. But a cloud of concern spread like a summer storm across Gawaith's face.

"Master, we will have bowmen and we will have Great Wings. But what about pike men? Only dragon pike can stand against dragon pike."

Yes.

So it was said. Only dragon pike could stand against dragon pike. Proven again and again on the battlefield. No human army ever stood before such an army, supported by hordes of fire-breathing Winged Beasties filling the air over their heads, and held long enough to stop the dragon onslaught. Not once had a human army faced a dragon foe with the equivalent of a dragon's pike in their hand. Humans fought with long swords, battle-axes, and to some extent, with the Peasant's Bow. And since mankind had arrived in the hill country and forests encircling the High Kanris, no pitched battle had been fought pitting man against dragon.

What if an army were raised where both dragon and man stood in infantry phalanxes, armed like our enemies? Could humans be trained to wield the dragon's long pike as adroitly as a dragon? What if an army could be created by combining pike, long sword, ax, and bow. . . and with Great Wings to command? Could it challenge the might of dragon legends?

What if such an army relied on hundreds of deadly archers to reach out toward the approaching dragon and blunt their deadly advance? The Peasant's Bow was an invention coming into the hands of man only after they arrived in the high country. Made of yew or birch, and as tall as a fully grown man, the graceful weapon was powerful enough to run an arrow through four inches of solid oak at two hundred yards. If an army threw out lines of bowman, fast and light of foot, and retreated behind standing infantry when the dragon came too close, might things be different on the field of battle?

Such an army had never been seen by either foe. Was it possible to train man and dragon to stand shoulder to shoulder and face a common enemy? Was it possible to find the bowmen needed to blunt the walls of advancing dragon pike? Were there enough Great Wings and Winged Beasties willing to join forces and face the Hartooth?

I knew not.

Smiling, I nodded and threw some kindling into the fire.

"North of the Kanris is a dragon clan called the Marouth. The Marouth sits between two small human kingdoms. The Kingdom of the Sven and the Kingdom of the Magyars. They and the Marouth, have off and on, been at peace with each other for almost fifty years. They have even fought side by side against dragons and humans who threatened them.

The three of them, I am sure, might be willing to join us if I can convince them it would be in their best interest. But before we get there, we must first journey to Fyodor's Crossing. Now, the two of you, let us get our training out of the way so we can get some sleep. We have a long trip ahead of us tomorrow."

CHAPTER 8



***The most dangerous evil of all is the Evil of Seduction;
It comes in the form of pure Beauty or in the glitter of
Infinite Riches.
Beware, pilgrim! Beware!***

— FROM THE BOOK OF ST. ALBANS

TO BECOME A WIZARD WITHIN THE RANKS OF THE BRETAN BROTHERHOOD, ONE must first become a warrior-monk. Years of monastic training, traveling by foot from one monastery to the other to learn that particular monastery's specialty, and then devoting hours upon hours of practice and prayer, makes the monk both weary and humble at the same time. Weary, in that the training starts long before the first rays of the morning warm the eastern sky and ends long after the sun sets behind the ranges of the Kanris.

One becomes humble through the arduous training. A monk soon learns through the teachings of his masters that life is a complex and intricate theater in which the gods sometimes intervene and participate. A monk is constantly reminded by all of his tutors the one undeniable truth. All life is sacred. Even the dragon is, in our teachings, just one expression of God's radiance. Unlike the other religious orders which fill the Kanris and the border kingdoms who believe in multiple gods, we Bretans believe there is only one God. A God who may come in many different shapes, and many different forms, to fit the needs of his

children. But no matter in what form the Divine disguised Himself, still there was only one true God. His name can be formed in a thousand different tongues. He can be described in a myriad of ways. But from him comes all life. From him comes goodness and light, the counterbalance to the dark forces that come out of the chaos of the Netherworld.

We believe even the dragon is just one facet of God's power. And because of our beliefs, a blood-crazed pogrom swept through the Kanris several years back and almost destroyed the Bretan order completely. News swept throughout the high country weeks before the killing began that the Bretan had made a secret pact with the dragon. Rumors flew from kingdom to kingdom, claiming Bretan monks openly assisted the dragon in torturing humans. The rumors increased in their vilification. Riots broke out in cities where there were large congregations of Bretan faithful. Churches and cathedrals were ravaged. A form of spontaneous madness gripped the masses. In the blinking of an eye, the hunt for any and all who claimed loyalty to the Bretan began.

Few survived.

Our religious order was the first to be created during the long trek mankind undertook to flee from the dragon. From the Bretan first came the concept of warrior-monks. Monks trained to become extremely dedicated warriors. Our vows pledged us to defend humanity from the ravages of the dragon. We were the first to build monasteries, each with a specialty in the arts of war, or philosophy, and dedicated to train the warrior-monks. We were the first to confront the dragon the moment they attempted to enter the High Kanris. For a millennium or more, we Bretan stood at the very front of the battle in the defense of mankind. Sadly, for all our efforts, our brothers and sisters turned against us and hunted us down like animals.

Warrior-monks, of any religious order, usually do not survive for any lengthy duration in the Outer World. By their very calling, they face, many times, overwhelming odds and place themselves in dire situations a mere mortal could never endure. But for those rare individuals, those incredible few who do survive, the Elders of the Order select the candidates to begin training as wizards.

Those selected are required to train for years in order to master the powerful arts of wizardry. The power of the Netherworld is an ominous and terrible power to behold. Not all warrior-monks can master these arts. Many die in the process of trying to.

We Bretan were the first to discover within the souls of humans the rare gift of seeing into the Netherworld. Controlling the Netherworld through the art of wizardry was our gift to mankind. Wizardry powerful enough to counter the fabled dark magic of the dragon. Possibly even the dark powers of the Five Sisters. We explored and honed this newly discovered power. We were the first to understand the diabolical narcotic, the latent seduction, that can be found in the practicing of wizardry.

The practice of wizardry is a naturally addictive force. A force which, if not carefully controlled and constantly made aware of, can suddenly reach up and seize control of a wizard's soul and hurl him into the chaos of the Netherworld. A madness descends over the soul of the wizard. A veil of insanity grips and squeezes a wizard's mind—a veil that cannot be broken. No wizard who succumbs to the darkness ever returns. Their souls are lost forever, and they become a danger of monstrous proportions to all living creatures.

I reveal these secrets about my order, about wizardry in general, in an effort to explain why the other religious orders united in one common cause and attempted to destroy everything that was Bretan. There were four major religious orders of the High Kanris: the Lotharians, the Gregorians, the Niscians, and the Rogarians. All sent their warrior-monks, and trained assassins, and their very valuable wizard-warriors to hunt the Bretan down. Within the high country, their hunt was devastatingly successful. Only five of our twenty monasteries survived the onslaught. Only two monasteries remained in the high country—in the Kingdom of the Hus, a kingdom found hugging the northern Shield Wall of the High Kanris. They the royal family of old King Edmund Hus protected our order with the strength of a mailed fist. The king was a devout follower of the Bretan Way. As was his entire family. Bretan monks and nuns, and those who chose to live faithfully the Bretan Way, found refuge in his kingdom amid the dark storm of religious genocide.

In the foothill kingdoms found in the forests and plains below the shield wall, the pogrom of killing did not extend nearly as far, or as fervently, as it did in the high country. In the foothill kingdoms, a few of our lesser monasteries still existed and most of our followers find it safe to practice their religion. Still, those who despised the Bretan hunted our own. Especially our warrior-monks and wizards. The Order of the Rogarians was especially committed to eliminating the Bretan. Fear of humans being controlled and manipulated by the dragon, as proclaimed from the pulpits of the Rogarians' largest cathedrals and country churches alike, constantly keeps the pogrom alive. Over the years I have been forced to confront both the warrior-monks of the Rogarians, and at least on two occasions, their warrior-wizards. In each encounter my skills, along with a large streak of divine luck, tipped the confrontations in my favor.

My name is known among the Rogarians, as it is with all the other religious orders. I am, thanks to my reputation, a monk who is regarded with animosity to all who follow the paths of these respective religions. Large amounts of gold are offered for my head. So large in fact, whenever I travel in the high country, I usually travel in disguise. I reveal my true identity only when some crisis forces me to defend the weak and innocent from unjust wrath.

I have no illusions of greatness. I do not brag about my skills. I seek not to confront and challenge in so much as my vows permit me. I am aware of what Fate has in store for me. I cannot flee, nor alter that which is already foreordained. Nor do I wish to. I am a Bretan warrior-wizard. I know how my end will come.

And I am content.



For several days, we rode above the empty forested valleys of the High Kanris in solitude. Only flocks of wild Great Wings caught our attention occasionally. For the rest of the trip, only steep-walled mountains capped in snow and miles upon miles of unending forests spread out before us. Carefully, I steered my small entourage away from all human inhabitation. At night, we made camp deep in

the blankets of the darkest forests to hide our presence from any night-stalkers. Finally, just as the sun was at its highest point in the heavens on the sixth day of our journey, I landed Cedric in a clearing, telling the children to be silent and on guard. Fyodor's Crossing was but a short distance away. Yet I could feel the presence of danger hanging like a shroud over our heads. Sternly warning all three children to remain with Cedric and remain hidden, I slipped into the deep forest.

Like a hunter closing in on his prey, I skirted the edge of the forest clearing that contained small mountain village. I moved slowly, making no sound, and constantly stopping to examine the dark shadows of the forest itself. Long years as both warrior-monk, and as wizard-warrior, told me something was amiss in these woods and in the peasants' enclave before me. The woods, normally filled at this time of the day with the active noise of the living creatures it contained, was as silent as a grave. With my Inner Eye, I could feel a sense of dread coming from the creatures who were hiding. A sense of fear—not from me, but from some unseen force ahead of me.

Pilgrim, you must be aware that life vibrates with a frequency all its own. Like bells cast in delicate porcelain, each living creature, each plant, each tree, has their own unique frequency any trained wizard can identify. These vibrations change ever so slightly with every new emotion that sweeps through their respective souls. Like the slow change of colors from light pink to dark red, depending on the emotion, each creature will reveal its feelings. Each emotion having its own unique color. From the birds and animals hiding in their nests and lairs and nests, I could sense a feeling of imminent threat hanging over their heads. This danger seemed to be only a few yards away in front of me.

Around me the forest was stifling hot and absolutely still. And even though it was just a little past the middle of the day, hardly any of the sun's light found its way through the forest thick canopy. In my right hand I held the curved, single-edged blade of a dragon's scimitar. Unlike the heavy, two-handed long blades humans preferred, I fought with this ancient dragon's blade. Long and slender, the oddly bronze-colored blade curved with a hypnotic grace which belied its deadliness. The blade was not made of bronze, even though it had this almost

luminescent glow radiating from it. Down each curved side of the blade were ancient runic inscriptions. A dragon script so ancient and obscure, it had long since been forgotten. No one knew what it said. No one knew how old the weapon was. None had ever seen steel as sharp, as light, and as odd in color.

It was my weapon of choice—a prize I possessed when, early in my career, I plucked it from the dying hand of a dragon paladin who challenged me to a duel. I had been but a youth, only fresh from being released by my masters into the Outer World. I had no intention of fighting such a renowned dragon paladin like Magar of the Marouth. But our destinies and the River of Time brought us together on that fateful night so long ago.

Dragon paladins, like warrior-monks of any religious order, were the most skilled warriors the dragon had in their arsenal. They were the masters of dragon martial arts. Trained and tested through years of hardship and war, rising to a level of proficiency that, ultimately, made them ascend out of the traditional confines of normal clan-warriors and rise into the rarefied ranks of dragon champions.

Magar of the Marouth was such a warrior. Old. Hardened. Cagey. This paladin was as skilled as any warrior-monk hoped he might become. He had fought and won every duel, never declining a challenge from either dragon or human. Countless were the stories of how he had bested in swordplay the finest warrior-monks from all the major religious orders. But in a small peasant village called Daggan's Hole, far to the north in the Kingdom of the Sven, on a night filled with a hard driving rain and a fierce wind, this old dragon challenged me to a duel. And I, the headstrong youth I was, could not find a way to decline.

It was a memorable fight. I, with my long blade, a gift from my master from the Xanthan Monastery, fought and defeated Magar of the Marouth. Old and cagey as he was, in his fifty-sixth stroke, he lowered his guard for only a heartbeat. But it was enough. My blade's double-edge steel slipped underneath his ancient scimitar and found his heart. He died with a smile on his face. A strange, unnerving, and enigmatic smile. From his last few seconds left in the Outer World, my Inner Eye sensed a flood of relief sweep across his soul. His final gesture was to stretch out the hand holding the ancient blade and hand it to

me. I took it from him just before he left this world to journey to the Other Side.

Stepping back from the warrior, weapon in hand, I had this gnawing feeling something profound and prophetic had just taken place. Magar of the Marouth had never made such a mistake before. Old perhaps he was , he was still a powerful dragon and skilled beyond belief in the use of the sword. As I stared at his corpse, something made me look down at the blade. To my amazement, I saw the dark runic lettering move and change shape across the blade. As I watched, my Inner Eye had this nebulous sense that the inanimate blade was far from being inanimate. For a moment, I felt the vibrations of life, of something strange and alien in my hand, but something nevertheless alive and powerful. The feeling was only for the briefest of moments. But it was such an unusual and distinctly unnerving sensation, I have never forgotten it.

My reputation as a swordsman was made on that rainswept night. With the bronze colored blade in hand, others came to test my skills. Dragons from many different clans ached to take the blade from me. They came, both young and old, to challenge me. Human warriors, especially warrior-monks from the other religious orders, sought me out as well. I could not deny the challengers. I found myself becoming more the recluse from those within the Outer World. Years later, I realized why Magar of the Marouth, in his fifty-sixth stroke with the blade, lowered his guard and paid for it with his life. He had become tired. He had become disillusioned. This odd scimitar, this strange blade, was a curse to the one who wielded it. As long as the one who owned it lived, he became a lightning rod. The blade would be the magnet and swordsmen, both dragon and man, would be drawn to it. For the swordsman who wielded it, there would be no peace, as he was forced to accept all challengers. Only death would release him from the curse.

Through the forest, I moved the curved blade in hand, knowing I was walking into some terrible encounter. I was a wizard-warrior. Even more importantly, I was a Bretan monk sworn to defend the weak, the innocent, the old, and the poor. I could not deny nor decline any opportunity to confront Evil. Ahead of me was an enclave of Bretan followers who, if my Inner Eye was reading the situation correctly, were in need of a champion. I had no choice. My

destiny was clearly written.

Close to the edge of the clearing, the first vibrations of Rogarian wizardry came to me. Wizardry, when practiced by whatever religious order, comes with its own feel as well. A Niscian feels as different from a Lotharian in his mastery of magic as the taste of sugar differs from that of salt. Ahead of me, I could feel the presence of two Rogarian wizards in hiding. Powerful wizards who, if using their powers in unison, would be more than a match to my own talents. They were desperately trying to mask their presence from me, but they were only partially successful.

At the edge of the forest, I stood close to the trunk of an ancient oak and gazed out across the sunlit clearing in front of me. The sun was bright, making me squint as I carefully surveyed the rough-hewn log walls of the hamlet's outer defenses. From the walls, no peasant stood on guard. From within the open gates, no movement could be seen by the hamlet's inhabitants. Looking to my right, I saw no one in the fields of crops or long rows of vegetables usually maintained by a bevy of peasants hoeing and weeding. Gazing back to the walls of the hamlet, I wondered how many, other than the two Rogarian magicians waiting for me, I might find within the hamlet's confines.

But something very strange happened. The first true example of little Ursala's startling powers was revealed to me that day. As I stood in the dark shadows of the forest's edge and observed the hamlet closely, I became aware of something deep down in my conscience beginning to stir. It felt like sand moving with a soft whisper across glass. Amazingly, I felt the presence of tiny Ursala a moment before her voice began speaking to me within my mind.

Grandfather, be careful! There are eight very mean people waiting for you inside! Two more mean men are riding their Great Wings just above you! They all want to hurt you. Hurt you, but not kill you. They want to find me as well.

Startled, I stepped back deeper into the shadows of the forest and half-turned to see if perhaps the child had slipped up behind me. Her soft child's voice was so clear in my mind! It was as if she was standing beside me.

Child, where are you?

Here, grandfather. Where you left us.

Astonished, I paused for a moment. I had left the princess and the twins three miles back in a part of the forest I knew hardly anyone traversed. I had also left Cedric there as well. Between my old Great Wing and the boys who were skilled bowmen, young as they were, but each possessing a deadly skill with the bow, I knew little Ursala would be safe. Yet, within my skull I could actually hear the child breathing. I felt her extreme anxiety for my safety. When she spoke, her words were as clear in my mind and ears as if I held her in my arms.

Grandfather, the two of those waiting for you in the village have the same kind of power you have when I am around you. They control the dark powers almost as well as you do. They wish to hurt you, but to take you alive. Someone has paid them a large amount of gold to bring you back to them. I am afraid, grandfather.

I grinned softly and nodded. She was still a child. A powerful child with an unbelievable ability to control the dark powers, but still a child. She should be scared.

Ursala, dear. Is Cedric close by?

Yes, grandfather. I am standing beside him.

Good. I have a plan which requires you to tell him what I am about to tell you. Can you do this for me?

Yes, grandfather.

Nodding again, I quickly outlined to her what to say to Cedric.

One hour later, I emerged from out of the tree line, scimitar hidden in its plain sheath underneath the light cotton robe I wore over my chain mail and walked directly out into the open for all to see.

Immediately my Inner Eye felt two distinctive vibrations. First, the collective mass of pent-up rage and fear emanating from the village's inhabitants slammed into my mind like a fist hurled in furious anger. Almost nine hundred souls were confined in some large building within the walls of the hamlet and apparently sealed in a fashion that allowed them no way to escape. I knew what edifice confined them. Just to the right of the hamlet's central commons was a large storage building the peasants used to store surplus grains.

The second Inner Eye emanation I felt were the sudden, sharp, and

surprisingly clumsy mental probes the two Rogarian magicians threw toward me. There was nothing subtle in their technique. Crudely, their probes slammed into my mind and made me wince in discomfort. With each probe, I felt the presence of supreme confidence. They were smug in their belief I would fall to them with little resistance. They were already anticipating what they would do with the rather large reward promised to them.

I brazenly walked through the stockade's large open gate. Fyodor's Crossing is a simple hamlet tightly arranged in a sphere. The double thick stockade walls of stout tree trunks run in a perfect circle around the hamlet. Circumnavigating the outer stockade walls was a deep trench filled with various devices which would hinder an assault from an invading force. Two streets, aimed in the four prime directions, were the main entrances into the village. They ran down the very center of the village, intersecting at the village's central square. Within the walls, approximately nine hundred souls lived and worked in peace and tranquility.

Until now.

No soul ran to greet me. No child played in the yards or ran laughing and playing in the unpaved streets. No signs of wives and grandparents working within the homes, preparing the mid-morning meals. All was quiet. Nothing stirred.

As I moved down the main street to the village square, I found myself smiling. In their arrogance, the Rogarian magicians did not feel the mental screen I slid into place to partially cover my Inner Eye. Concentrating, I used the Inner Eye to search the exterior of the large building being used to imprison the village's inhabitants. It did not take long. The large double doors on either side of the buildings were roped tightly shut. Smiling, yet hiding my efforts from the Rogarians, I used wizardry to slash the ropes away from the doors just as I came to a halt in the middle of the village square.

"Well, so this is the famous Bretan wizard, Roland of the High Crag," a dry, sardonic voice exclaimed loudly from some hidden point to my right.

"Aye, brother," a second voice to my left concurred just as sarcastically. "What a marvel of foolishness this heretic exhibits. He senses our trap and walks

straight into it, thinking he is going to defeat us.”

I smiled, looking first to my right and then to my left slowly. Behind me, two Imperial Rogarian swordsmen stepped into view, swords drawn and held down to their right sides at the ready. More swordsmen, the best the Imperial Rogarian court could produce, stepped into view to my right and left. And finally, stepping away from behind two large trees rising regally from the center of the commons, the Rogarian wizards appeared.

I recognized both of them. Vamot of Mons and Iaegor of Lincoln. Vamot, the shorter one, stood on my right and smiled at me with a look of a cat who was playing cruel tricks on his intended victim. He had shaggy brown hair fell to his shoulders and possessed a nose which that was far too large for his face. Nonetheless, his reputation as a wizard was impressive. His reputation as a warrior was less so. But one which could not be discounted. He had survived the years of wandering as a warrior-monk. That alone was enough to confirm the man was skilled in the use of his weapons.

Iaegor of Lincoln was the more dangerous wizard. His reputation as a wizard was marked with a streak of cruelty and perfidy that bordered on the definition of one about to be consumed by the dark powers. Yet, his Rogarian brothers continued to hold him in high esteem. Of all the religious orders, the Rogarians were by far the most unbending and unforgiving of all. Their creed, known as *The Righteous Path to God*, was absolute and unyielding. Their version of God was the only one, and they tolerated very little in that version’s variation.

Even as narrow-minded and self-righteous as the Rogarians were, Iaegor’s fondness for torture and cruelty should have sent spasms of alarm throughout their order. Tall, thin—almost gaunt from being too much the ascetic—Iaegor stood with a stern look on his angular face, his arms folded across his chest. It was oft mentioned he had been, while he was a warrior-monk before his training in the arts of wizardry, the best swordsman their order had ever trained. No one had stood before him and survived.

“You come, heretic, to surrender and accept your God-decreed punishment meekly? Or do you come to challenge us and defy God’s will?”

Iaegor’s voice was strong, yet soft. Almost pleasing to hear, yet somehow

filled with a sense of danger. It was a voice one could not ever forget.

“I come to free the inhabitants of this village from their captors. I come seeking anyone who will join with me and fight the rising tide of the dragon.”

“You come here with an abomination by your side, heretic!” Vamot hissed angrily, taking a step forward and raising a curled fist half way to his chest. “Where is this dragon creature? Hand her over to us, and your death will be far less painful.”

I smiled. Within me, the Inner Eye told me my plan was already working. Only a few moments were needed to make it obvious to everyone.

“Tell me, my friends,” I began, speaking with a casual ease and not sounding in the least bit worried. “How come you to know I would be here, in this village, at this hour, on this particular day?”

“God knows your path even before you do, Bretan. He reveals it to those who are devoted to him,” the gaunt creature answered solemnly. “Which is why you should kneel and accept your punishment with gladness and gratitude. God wishes to forgive you, heretic. But only if you accept his will.”

The smile continued to linger on my lips. But I found myself pondering. How did these wizards know I was coming to Fyodor’s Crossing? How did they know days before I knew, and thus having the time to come and prepare this elaborate trap? How did they know I had the dragon princess close to me?

A look of cruel pleasure drifted across Vamot’s face just before he glanced at his comrade. Even an amused shadow played momentarily across the gaunt creature’s face before being quickly suppressed.

Ah, they had felt my concern and quickly understood the reasons for it. They were indeed well-trained magicians.

“There is no place you and your abomination can go without others knowing about it. Wherever you go, Roland of the High Crag, there will be someone waiting for you to complete God’s will. Why, my son, would you even think of delaying the inevitable?”

“There will be no delays, my brother!” Vamot hissed, grinning evilly. “He dies now!”

I lifted a hand, index finger raised. I shook my finger back and forth in a

gesture of restraint. Both the smaller and the taller Rogarians were caught by surprise. Both were summoning their powers to hurl at me as the six Rogarian swordsmen took a step closer to apprehend me. But all stopped with my simple gesture.

A most curious thing happened. From out of the empty blue sky fell a Rogarian rider's helmet. The round helmet, enameled in a deep aqua blue with two gold feathers sticking up in a "V" at the front of the helmet, hit the dirt in front of me, bouncing twice, and then rolling to one side before coming to a halt. Startled, swordsmen and wizards watched in amazement. Vamot grunted and then looked up. And screamed out a warning just as the massive body of a dead Great Wing and his rider drove into the ground at a tremendous velocity.

There was a thunderous crash. A swift gust of wind and blowing dust engulfed us all. Several Rogarian swordsmen leapt to one side in a bid to save themselves from being crushed. From above and behind me came the blood-curdling scream of an enraged Great Wing. Cedric's war cry filled the air and pandemonium broke out around me!

With a flurry of massive wings breaking his rapid descent, the black and red Great Wing swooped in and plucked from the ground an unlucky Rogarian swordsman. With one powerful, deadly talon, he picked up the terrified human as easily as a child might lift a doll to its bosom. But there was no affection in the way Cedric treated the swordsman. Hurling the screaming creature to one side, the Rogarian flew perhaps thirty feet through the air before hitting the side of a building and sliding to the ground in a bloody heap of broken bones and bleeding wounds.

"Kill him!" Iaeor screamed, using a long and twisted finger to point at me just before his other hand swept his Cloak of Invisibility around him.

When a wizard hides himself in a Cloak of Invisibility, he is gone. No power, either in the Outer World or in the Netherworld, can find someone hiding in such a device. The gaunt wizard disappeared and did not show himself again.

Vamot, on the other hand, had other thoughts. A straight-sword appeared in his hands, and he leapt toward me just as the five remaining swordsmen did the same. From underneath my cloak I withdrew the dragon scimitar and unsheathed

it quickly. One guard, quicker than the others, reached me first. He tried to slash my head off with a sweeping blow, but I ducked and slid my blade deep into his right shoulder, his sword arm, just where that part of his movable armor hinged with his warrior's metal cuirass. I wished not to kill anyone this day. Only to wound and incapacitate.

But Vamot wanted to kill. I could feel his bloodlust and anger coursing through his soul as he flew through the air toward me. Turning, I faced the oncoming wizard just as the four remaining guards reached me. Or, I should say, the two remaining guards. For as I parried, the blows of the three of them, two arrows sizzled past my ears within inches of my head and with a loud *thud* drove deep into the sword arms of two of the swordsmen.

A Rogarian swordsman screamed a terrified warning as he frantically pointed upward. From out of the sky hurled another gigantic form, creating a huge wave of wind and dark feathers of a Great Wing swirling around in the air. The second Great Wing and its rider, both ripped to bloody pieces, hit the ground with a tremendous crash, almost crushing the flying Rogarian wizard in the process. The dead Great Wing missed the wizard only by the narrowest of margins, forcing the Rogarian to leap to one side and roll into the dirt. Leaping to his feet, he whirled, raised his sword to charge at me again, just as the villagers who had been sealed up in the grain bin roared in anger in a collective voice and came storming down the street armed with bows, pitchforks, and spears.

Vamot, turning to glare at the crowd, returned his gaze toward me and waved off the attacking guards at the same time. A look of simmering hatred filled his pudgy face. But he was no fool. He knew this trap had failed. I could sense his desire to cut me to pieces. I could also sense the conflict surging within him on whether to withdraw from the fray or save the swordsmen from the wrath of the oncoming villagers.

Practicality won out. Stretching forward a free hand, he snapped his fingers and the remaining swordsmen disappeared. With one last look of pure hatred thrown in my direction, Vamot threw his Cloak of Invisibility around him and disappeared as well.

There was a flurry of wings and a stout wind as three Great Wings landed

close to me. In the saddles of their birds were Gawaith and Gawain, bows in hand and arrows notched and ready. Both were watching the incoming crowd with concern, but a soft word on my part made them lessen the tension on their bowstrings.

In the saddle of Cedric sat the princess. Her tiny face gazed at me with a deep look of fear. She quickly unstrapped herself from the saddle just as the giant bird bent down to allow her to dismount safely. Running toward me with her arms outstretched, she threw herself into my arms. Wrapping her arms around me, she hugged me with a sense of immense relief coming from her soul.

Feeling the fear and the sense of immense affection and concern for my safety radiating from her, I found myself incapable of being angry. All three had disobeyed my instructions. All were to remain hidden and were not to reveal themselves until I came for them. All three had done just the opposite. Worse, with the princess strapped into Cedric's saddle, it had been my Great Wing who attacked and killed the two Great Wings and their riders floating in the skies above. Her tiny life had been placed in immediate danger. A well-placed arrow or the sweep of a powerful talon from the opposing Great Wings, and all would have been lost.

The strength in her arms around my neck squeezed me, and from the welling of genuine relief and joy at seeing me alive radiating like a warm fire from her soul, forced me to smile again. Today would not be the day I would be angry with the three imps. There would be other days for that. But not today.

CHAPTER 9



***In the heart of a True Believer,
One finds the weapons to confront the Darkness.
Love, Faith, Trust. These are weapons
Far stronger than mere steel or raging fire.***

— FROM THE BOOK OF ST. ALBANS

LATE IN THE NIGHT AFTER OUR ENCOUNTER WITH THE ROGARIAN WIZARDS I SAT resting in a chair close to a large stone fireplace, a tankard of warm buttery ale in one hand, in the village's only inn. The inn's main hall was deserted except for me and one other person. The other person being a villager named Eggar of Fyodor.

Eggar was a giant of a man with incredibly bushy eyebrows and shoulders the size of boulders. His hair was long and pulled back in a braided ponytail. It had once been coal black, but now streaks of gray ran through it. His thick beard was equally streaked with white. The grayness in his hair and beard bespoke his qualities of endurance and patience. The light in the man's dark eyes bespoke a deep intelligence. Eggar of Fyodor was the man whom I had wanted to see. Old and cunning, this giant of a man was also the best bowman I had ever encountered.

He sat in a chair similar to mine, with a tankard of ale in his hand. We both enjoyed the dying tongues of flames still playing across a burning log in the

fireplace. Earlier in the day, soon after the Rogarians fled and after we cleared the village of the dead, a spontaneous celebration broke out. Food was prepared and tankards of ale were opened. Villagers from miles around came to celebrate their deliverance from bondage. I, the young twins, and even the dragon princess were hoisted onto the shoulders of cheering villagers and paraded around the entire village. Others came to celebrate and gawk openly at little Ursala. For many in this part of the Kanris, the princess was the first dragon they had ever seen. They stood with their mouths open and their eyes wide and gazed upon the child in speechless wonder.

The child was superb in the way she handled the crowd. She was soft and gentle, and carried herself with grace and humility. She handled the crowd like someone twenty years older than herself. I could feel her emotions in my heart, never straying too far from her, and felt a kindness and tolerance simply unheard of coming from a dragon. Dozens of villagers asked her questions, and many just wanted to touch her. A dragon's skin is rough and pebbly and almost reptilian to the touch. They come in colors, with two colors arranged in various configurations across the skin. A Hartooth dragon, for instance, would be maroon and gray in some kind of alternate groupings across its pebbly skin. A Marouth would be maroon and light blue. Each individual would have his own combination and arrangement of patterns, easily identifying one from the other.

But Ursala was not the typical dragon princess. She was one of the fabled Five Sisters. She was, like the four sisters who came before her so long ago, all white in color. With her skin not as dry or rough as a normal dragon's skin would be. In truth, her skin felt much like the skin of a human. Which made her, for the peasant crowd surrounding her, even more of a spectacle to behold.

She tolerated the crowd's questions, even playfully bantering with them in word games, and delighted her audience with her graciousness. Her gentleness and kindness went a long way toward accomplishing the goals I had in mind for this village.

The behemoth beside me stirred in his chair, emerging from his solitude at last as he tilted his head toward me.

"Let me understand what you are asking me, monk. You want to recruit

bowmen to fight the dragon clan called the Hartooth in a war we cannot win. Am I correct in repeating your words?"

I grinned. Obviously, the huge bowman had had too much ale.

"I said we have a strong possibility of being defeated—yes. If we cannot recruit others, both human and dragon, to join us."

Eggar grunted and nodded and looked at me with huge brown eyes.

"Humans and dragons, fighting shoulder to shoulder, against the Hartooth. Roland, I have known you for years. I have even fought beside you in a couple of battles. Only the gods can remember the number of times this village and I have hidden you from those who wished to harm you when you were wounded and in need of sanctuary. And how many times have we nursed you back to health after acquiring some grievous wound? As is, admittedly, our duty, since we are a Bretan congregation.

But Roland, dear friend, I must ask you—are you insane? Humans and dragons, together, in an army to fight Clan Hartooth? And if I heard you correctly, Clan Hartooth is ordained in prophecy to rise and lead all of dragonkind against mankind in the ultimate war? A war to destroy all mankind? By the blood of the gods, Roland!"

My grin widened for, at that moment, I knew the man and his village were going to join our cause. I could feel it coming from his soul. The audacity of the idea, the sheer magnitude of the endeavor, and even the apparent hopelessness of attempting such a fight was too much for the rugged bowman to resist. The people who inhabited this village and this valley were, by definition, outlaws and outcasts from all the kingdoms within the Kanris. The people here were refugees who had fled from the oppression of lords and masters and wandered through the high country in search of freedom and safety. Over the years, I had guided a number of such hardy souls to this valley, and on several occasions, helped defend it from those who wished to destroy it. They were a fiercely independent people. A hardy people well used to hardships and defying the odds arrayed against them. They had no love for anyone, neither dragon nor man, who wished to impose their will over others. And when it came to the use of the bow, they were unmatched.

Eggar mumbled to himself as he stirred in his chair. Taking a long pull from his tankard, he wiped his beard with the back of his sleeve and ruefully glanced at me through his shaggy eyebrows. Frowning, he turned to look in the opposite direction and mumbled to himself again. Clearing his throat, he took a deep breath and let it out slowly before turning to gaze at me.

“I cannot promise more than four, possibly five hundred men. Winter is approaching, and some men will have to be left behind after the harvests to hunt during the winter months and to protect our families. And none of us can leave before the harvests are in.”

I nodded, pleased, as I handed the giant a rather large leather purse filled with gold.

“There is enough there to pay for two years’ service for a thousand men. Perhaps, as your five hundred march to our rendezvous, you might, from the other valleys, find others wishing to join.”

“Bah! I won’t vouch for other valley men in their bowman ship, monk. The men in the next valley to the north of us are not bad. They are better with the warrior’s ax than with the bow. Still, you might be right. Gold has a way of making one think they can defy the gods and get away with it. Hmm, we’ll see.”

Yes. We’ll see. The army I had in mind had its first recruits in place. Mountain bowmen, at least five hundred strong, already was a formidable force. The bow was a peasant’s weapon, and thus generally frowned upon by the nobles within the Kanris. True, it was the short double-curved horn bow in the hands of a rider of Great Wings which kept the dragon and their Winged Beasties from entering the Kanris. But the peasant’s longbow was as tall as a grown man and unwieldy from the saddle of a Great Wing. But used as an infantry unit, standing side by side with other bowmen, a rain of arrows coming from men such as this one sitting across from me had the potential of blunting, if not outright destroying, the enemy’s forces.

My idea of the army required to defeat the Hartooth in open battle called for the use of many bows. Eggar of Fyodor was just the man I needed to find, recruit, and train good bowmen. For some minutes, we talked about when and how to use bowmen in a battle against a great dragon army. The bearded

woodsman had an astute mind and a keen sense of tactics. Peasant or not, to live free in the Kanris meant one had to know the ways of war. Eggar was old and wily because he had survived many a fight. Instinctively, he understood military tactics. As I knew he would. He would, I was sure, become a great general if such an opportunity was ever offered to him.

Late into the night, we talked. Yet, just as we were about to retire to our beds, the woodsman looked at me and made an intriguing comment.

“Those who came to capture you, old friend, were here for a week waiting for your arrival. They knew you were coming. I even heard the small Rogarian monk say to the taller one their master knew exactly where you were at any given moment and was following your every move. How can this be?”

A sigh escaped my lips. I knew the answer. Actually, the answer was so obvious, I was surprised it had taken so long for me to see it. It truly was a mystery quickly solved. The true mystery I wrestled with was how to thwart the Netherworld forces from harvesting thoughts from my mind.

“The child has the power to tap into the Netherworld at will, Eggar. She is the most powerful mind I have ever encountered. She walks in both realities at the same time, somehow knowing how to separate the two with a natural ease. Yet as powerful as she is, she is only a child. A child whose mind has not been trained. She is like a gigantic mirror who reflects back to the rest of the world all the images her mind perceives. I feel her presence in my mind regularly. It is an unconscious presence. She really doesn’t know she’s there most of the time. But while in my mind, she hears my thoughts and accidentally transmits them out into the Netherworld in a loud voice.”

“So your enemy knows where you are because of the child?”

I nodded. Ursala had no idea she was leading wizards and magicians straight to us. She had no idea her power was so strong, she was hearing the deepest secrets kept in the darkest recesses of the minds with whoever she was close to. Until she was properly trained by skilled Bretan wizards to control and mask her powerful mind, she would constantly be the burning flame that attracted all the deadly denizens of the Netherworld right to us.

“Ah, then how do you propose to turn this disadvantage into an advantage?”

the cunning old bowmen mused quietly, lifting a thick eyebrow up as a playful grin spread across his lips underneath his beard. "I know you, you old monk. You have lived as long as you have, being what you are, because of your wits more so than your magician's powers. You see possibilities where others only see calamity. I know you're brewing up some kind of plan to turn this disadvantage into some kind of triumph."

Again, I nodded. And smiled in pleasure. Eggar of Fyodor was a man after my own heart. Of all the mortals I have met while inhabiting this world, this old bowman with his flashing eyes and sharp wit was the one who knew me like a brother.

"A burning beacon works both ways, Eggar," I began, speaking very softly so no prying mind might hear us. "If her mind draws evil from out of the Netherworld to destroy us, it also can direct me to the source which directs all to its will. I do not believe in prophecy, old friend. I do not believe in the tales of dragon and human gods warring with each other, with dragon gods finally winning out and destroying all of humanity. But I do believe there is a source, a powerful wizard, who controls much of the Netherworld as well as the minds and hearts of those in this world. It is he who is using ancient prophecies and legends for his own personal gain."

For several years past, I have, in the most silent of moments, in my deepest inner strolls through the madness of the Netherworld, felt a brooding presence looming in the distance. A maleficent presence that wished not to be revealed. But one who flirted occasionally into my consciousness for a moment or two before quickly disappearing. It was as if it wished to remain hidden from full view, but wanted me to know it was there, looming like a black mirage far into the Netherworld darkness. It seemed to be waiting. Waiting for something, or some event, that would finally release it and allowing it to come out and complete its vile, corrupt purpose. Several times over the past few years, this indefinable presence would reveal itself with a blatant arrogance to me, easily countering all my efforts to pull it closer to my Mind's Eye to identify it. And then, like a sudden late evening breeze, it would just blow away and disappear.

My instincts re telling me this same malignant presence deep in the recesses

of my mind is the source of all our woes. But it is a ghost whose powers far exceed mine. How to bring it out into the harsh light of full awareness, and how to ultimately defeat it, are the tasks with which I now wrestled.

The rumble of amusement from deep within the bowman's chest brought me out of my reverie.

"Blasphemy from a Bretan monk. Roland, you do not believe in the gods? You do not believe in prophecy? Yet, you strive to be the perfect Bretan cleric. Ah, Roland. This is why I enjoy your company so much. You are such a labyrinth of confusing thoughts and opposing religious ideas, I find it impossible to not be interested."

I smiled and nodded. To one who was not as well-versed in the Bretan Way as Eggar of Fyodor's Crossing, my words would have indeed sounded like blasphemy. But they were not, and my old friend recognized that truth.

We Bretan believe in the power prophecy has over the human mind. We understand there are forces in the Outer Realm and in the Netherworld which act mysteriously and might even be construed as something akin to prophecy. But in the end, we do not believe in prophecy. We do not believe God works in predicting the future in vague and nebulous phrases, which could be taken to mean any number of different interpretations. We Bretan believe God is mysterious, powerful, and complex to behold. We know his will and his love ripples across the surface of a still lake, vibrating back and forth within the souls of each living creature. We accept the idea that he is the Before and the After. He was here before time began and he will be here after it ends. We believe he has no desire, or interest, in delving into prophecy. When he is ready to reveal his will, he will do so at the appropriate time. Therefore, there is no reason to create prophetic visions.

"I can see why you are so well-loved by the Rogarians," Eggar cracked sarcastically, rumbling again in amusement as he came slowly to his feet. "And I can see why the Lotharians see you as the heretic they claim you are. Old friend, you have the entire world lined up against you in your quest to save the child. How can you believe that, in the end, this quest of yours will have a happy conclusion?"

Coming to my feet, I said nothing as I looked into my old friend's clear eyes. A look of sadness, yet pride reflected back. Pride not in himself and what he agreed to do. But pride in what I had consigned myself to complete.

"Aye, I understand. A monk of your caliber does not worry about the journey's end so much as he does about the journey itself. It is in the effort of the journey, not its end, where the true meaning of Life becomes clear. Roland, my old and dear friend, I wish you well. I pray that I will again be afforded the joy of seeing you among us in the months to come."

We embraced, the strength and warmth of this giant's soul engulfing me with a sense of brotherly love almost overpowering me. In truth, my eyes filled with tears and threatened to spill down my cheeks. Yet somehow, I kept my emotions in check.

I did not know in what shape the journey's end would be. In some respects, it did not matter. All I knew was I was a Bretan monk. I swore to face and confront Evil wherever and whenever I found it. I also knew, for years, a dark presence was growing in power within the Netherworld and seeping into the Outer Realm. This power was somehow linked to both me and to the dragon child.

I also knew I had given my word. I had promised the child's grandfather I would do everything in my power to protect the child from harm, and to teach her the Bretan Way in controlling her immense powers. In giving this promise, I knew I automatically set myself up to defy all the many legends and prophecies that had foretold the gloomy future. I knew my fate. I would become a hunted monk. A hated monk, to most of humanity. A perceived heretic whose only just reward should be a horrible and painful death.

My destiny had been written in stone. There was no turning back.

So be it.

CHAPTER 10



Make no judgment of others

Upon first glance, my child. Our world is harsh and cruel,

And to survive, the weak must appear strong and

The strong must appear invincible.

Only Time will eventually remove the veils of deceit

And reveal the True Soul.

— FROM THE BOOK OF ST. ALBANS

THE DEN OF INIQUITY CALLED PARIAN COULD EASILY BE SEEN FROM OUR vantage point on a high mountain ridge overlooking a pristine, but rugged mountain valley. The ghastly pile of rubble and stone sat, like a vulture surveying his domain, atop a rocky sliver of grey stone which protruded up from the valley floor for five hundred feet or more. The city seemed to be hanging onto the very edges of this rock with a precarious and tenuous hold. One had the impression of a man clinging desperately to the edge of a cliff and knowing his strength was waning. Only moments separated him from clinging to the mountain side and falling into oblivion.

There was only one way to enter the city. One had to be flown in on the back of a Great Wing. No roads from the valley floor led up the towering sliver of

rock. No trails were carved into its sides for people to climb. The only way to enter was to be flown in. The person who, generations earlier, founded the city convinced its unsavory inhabitants it was the one thing that would save them in case one mountain kingdom, or another ever decided to launch an attack against it. No land-based army would ever reach the city, and the number of Great Wings needed to carry the war to the city's streets in some form of decisive numbers were far too great for any one kingdom to amass.

The outcome of its precarious location was that Parian not only survived, prospered. The entire top of the butte was covered with badly built buildings and short, ugly aviary towers. Underneath the city, its inhabitants carved out vast caverns which were open and accessible to Great Wings. In these caverns, more buildings were built. Parian, as it sat before us now in the distance, could boast of housing eight thousand souls. Eight thousand villains of every description within its rambling walls and crudely built structures. A city of sin and deceit known throughout the high country. Yet, a city no mountain kingdom seemed ready to destroy.

In truth, there was a need for a Parian. Almost inaccessible, and far removed from the normal trade routes and mountain passes used by the mountain kingdoms, the city was known for its mercenary bands, assassins, cutthroats, and spies who were, in truth, a resource. A valuable resource. It was also a twofold resource. First, Parian was a magnet for the criminal and the condemned. This magnetic attraction naturally removed the troublesome from many nearby kingdoms. Better to allow Parian to exist and allow the outlaws to flee to it than to have those who preferred the outlaw's life to remain in the kingdoms.

Secondly, the city became a valued tool for a monarch in need of surreptitious machinery. If a king needed a skilled assassin, he knew where he could find one. If he needed a trained and experienced spy, he knew where his gold could purchase one. If he needed to augment his military might with a wing of mercenary Great Wings, he knew where they might be found. Sadly, one could not be a ruler of a kingdom and not use the services Parian provided. Because of this harsh reality, the city was eternal.

The four of us stood on the rocky ledge of a small mountain peak and looked

down and off into the distance toward the city. A cloud of black dots could be seen rising and falling above the city's towers. Parian, as a city, had constant Great Wing traffic coming and going at all times of the day and night. It had to haul in all its food and all its drinking water from the surrounding valley. Farmers found the city a most lucrative terminus for their goods, and so they traveled for miles to enter the valley to sell their crops. Parian was a beehive of constant motion, forever on the move, never resting, and never sleeping.

"Grandfather, I am afraid," Ursala's tiny voice spoke, her large dragon eyes glued to the distant city before us. "There are many people there who know you are coming. Much like the ones we fought against at Fyodor's Crossing. I feel the presence of three wizards. Wizards whose hearts beat with the desire to capture and torture you. And there are others, grandfather. Others who are old and experienced with the sword. They, too, await your arrival."

Warrior-monks from the other orders came to Parian to await my arrival. Again, whatever evil presence in the Netherworld watched us through the Mind's Eye of the child, it knew we would journey here long before I knew.

"Master," Gawain's voice, filled with worry, lifted into the late afternoon air. "It seems as if all our enemies know you will soon enter the city. Even a wizard of your skills cannot stand long before such odds. Would it not make sense to leave this place? Leave and perhaps vex those who know of our coming?"

In Gawaith's handsome face, I saw the same look as that filling his brother's. Even tiny Ursala understood what Gawain suggested. We should be fleeing from our foes. Putting leagues upon leagues of distance between us and those who wished to harm us. Enough distance that even the child's powerful mind could not broadcast our location for those using wizardry to locate us.

But there were reasons why we journeyed to Parian. There were two overriding necessities to be found here, which could not be found anywhere else in the high country. To build an army, I needed recruits. Even more critically, to build the army I dreamed of required leaders who had experience fighting alongside dragons as well as facing them as enemies. I needed warriors who would fight a common foe. I needed commanders whom I knew had the experience to lead such men. I needed commanders whom I could trust. And as

strange as it may sound, I knew I could find both in this city of brigands perched on that distant rocky butte.

“I shall return by the second hour after dusk tomorrow night. Have the birds ready and all of you strapped in your saddles upon my return. We will need to flee quickly from this valley, and so all of you must be ready. Under no circumstances are any of you to follow me. Is that understood?”

All three children nodded, their faces pale with fear and worry, their souls bravely trying to contain their terrors and act like the brave warriors they wanted to be. I smiled at them all, gripping each fondly by the arm and squeezing them gently before taking my leave. I would have comforted them further with tender promises, but my heart was utterly filled with affection for the three. I could not trust myself to remain the stoic monk they so cherished.

I did not fly to Parian. Nor did I even venture to approach the city from the air. I walked through the valley’s forests, down narrow dirt roads used by the local farmers to bring their crops to market. The roads were dry and hot and without a soul traveling on them. The forests I passed through were filled with wild game and colorful birds who seemed not too unworried about my presence. Halfway to the city, some distance from the power of Ursala’s mind, I disguised myself as a common woodsman without the use of any magic incantations. There was a reason why I waited so long before disguising myself.

Magic is a fearsome power that can strike awe and terror into the hearts of common mortals. But it also has its weaknesses. One of its weaknesses is that its powers diminish with distance. The farther one physically travels from the magic’s source, the less the magic’s effects on someone or something. There is a strange duality of opposites in magic. On one hand, the power one feels and sees in the Outer Realm weakens and disappears when enough physical space separates one from the magical source. On the other hand, magic can let you glimpse the future which might happen, or to venture back into the past. If a wizard is not careful, the madness which can drive him to insanity is due to the ability to see into the Netherworld.

A wizard can, if he is foolish, see far into the future and view all the possible combinations of events that might. . . or might not . . . become the future. This

ability, more than anything, has led wizards into a Dark Wormhole, the mind's trap, which drives a sane master into the unforgiving shadowy world of the insane.

One can talk to the dead if they so choose. But that too, is a trap. The dead who fill the Netherworld can come and go with or without your permission. They are, in reality, both in the Netherworld and in the Outer Realm. Many of these restless souls wander from the world of the dead to this world of the living, and then back, as if they are in search of something they have lost. A wizard with the gift of talking to the dead can converse with the mighty and the common, with kings and heroes, or with farmers and merchants. Fabled heroes of legends are usually the choice of those who enter the Dark Wormhole. But in doing so, they find themselves trapped in a labyrinth too complex to escape.

There is an enticing seductiveness in conversing with the famous and the legendary, which is, in itself, a trap. The more one talks to the dead, the more a sense of hate and a pulsating lust for revenge fills the wizard's heart. The dead cry out for revenge. They demand justice! And so, the wizard becomes their tool for revenge.

Even in their death the dead can lie. They can distort the truth. Their cries for revenge and justice, more so than not, are cries usually to punish those who live in the Outer Realms unjustly. Too late, the wizard realizes his wrath and fury have been used by twisted and tormented souls. In this world, the innocent and the weak suffer because the dead cannot bear to live in the Netherworld. The horror a wizard experiences when he realizes he has been the weapon of unjust revenge is more than he can handle. The wizard who has entered the Dark Wormhole has now become a Berserker. A killing machine bent on destruction. A most dangerous creature. An abomination which, all the religious orders agree, has to be found and destroyed with all possible haste.

But I wander from what I wish to convey. I mentioned that magic diminishes with distance. Little Ursala's mind was the most powerful I had ever encountered. I suspected that once her powers were honed and refined, much as a jeweler will polish the rough diamond to perfection, her powers would reach out far beyond any wizard's capability. For now, her powers had a range—and

thankfully, a limited range. Within three miles of her mind, she radiated in the Netherworld like a shining beacon glowing with a radiating light that could illuminate the blackest of nights. Yet, four miles from her presence, her light dimmed greatly. Five miles, and her presence left me entirely.

Five miles and beyond, her mind could not reach into mine. I waited until I had this distance between us before I donned the disguise, knowing her mind would not see this. If she knew not my disguise, then perhaps I would be able to slip into Parian and see the person who drew me here.

Of course, I was only partially correct. Disguising myself from the child's natural curiosity might buy me time while I was in Parian. But I would not be able to stay long. I mentioned earlier that all living things have their own radiating light glowing in the Outer Realm and in the Netherworld. My own light was tainted with the glow of a Bretan wizard. There were ways in wizardry to disguise and diffuse this emanation, making it difficult to be located. But other than dying, there was no way to completely extinguish it. So I would enter Parian radiating in the Netherworld my presence. The wizards waiting for my arrival would sense my presence and begin the search to find me. I would sense their presence as well. It would be a game of hide and seek, with the hunter and the prey both sensing each other's close proximity.

A physical disguise would buy me a brief period of anonymity. The Bretan techniques I used to diffuse my wizard's glow in the Netherworld would give me a few more precious hours of freedom. But inevitably, if I dallied too long in the city, my enemies would find me. I had at best, perhaps a day, no more than two, within the city before the wizards of the other sects pooled their powers to enlarge their search. In that brief period of time, I had to find the two people who might be willing to join our cause, persuade them to do so, and escape from the city without being challenged.

It was an impossible task. I knew it to be impossible, certainly foolish, and filled with potential deadly pitfalls. Perhaps it was insane even to try. But to find and enlist the aid of the mercenary captain who called himself Jojin Bok was reason enough to tempt fate.

Jojin Bok. Tall, with wide shoulders tapering down to narrow hips, with the

long legs and easy gait of a rider of Great Wing. He preferred to wear his coal black hair at shoulder length, curled and perfumed. He liked fine clothes, fine wines, and the luxurious life of wealth and power. He could recite volumes of poetry, both epic and romantic. He was a skilled musician on at least three instruments. With a flashing smile of sheer bravado, and the charm and grace of a skilled courtier, Jojin Bok was never without feminine company when he so desired. Yet, men also admired him for his elegant manners and sharp wit.

He was good with the sword. He was excellent in the handling of the short double-curved horn bow preferred by riders. But I have seen others better. What separated him from his peers was his instinctual skill in leading Great Wings and their riders in aerial combat. There was no one better than Jojin when it came to commanding Great Wings.

Jojin had the instinctive skills of a natural leader. Men respected him for his wit and grace in court, but more so when it came to battle and riding the magnificent war birds of the High Kanris. His ability to soothe and coax Great Wings into doing his will was exceptional to behold. His skills with Great Wings exceeded those of many warrior-monks I knew.

He commanded a host of seventy Great Wings the last I heard and called Parian his home base. His talents, along with those of his men, were in constant demand. As I was gently deposited on one of the city's public landing towers by a rider and his bird, I hoped I would find the mercenary momentarily unemployed.

"Bok? The crazy man? Yes, I know where he is," a street vendor said, nodding. He was selling thick slices of hot beef jerky on a street corner filled with a festive crowd. He took my money and handed me a stick full of meat and assorted vegetables before pointing to the city's large square. "The fool openly defied the Baron Hieu by refusing a contract for services. Then he had the bad luck of insulting Mulin Pah in the warlord's palace!

You'll find Jojin Bok in the warlord's dungeons right about now. He's to be executed at high noon tomorrow. The whole countryside has come to watch the spectacle. It's even rumored the Rogarian Cardinal of Larassa, Cardinal Malfin, is coming. Imagine that! Jojin's enemies now include a Rogarian cardinal!"

I smiled and nodded before turning away and blending into the heavy crowd. Within me, I let out a silent groan. The town had swelled to twice its normal size in population. Crowds coming to see the execution of a well-known mercenary were bad enough. But the news of a high dignitary of the Rogarian order coming to observe the execution was the signature of a master's touch in setting the perfect trap. Blending into the city's festive crowd would be easy for me. But so, too, for the dozen or more warrior-monks and warrior-wizards bent on finding and capturing me. Arresting Bok and having him thrown into prison, would force my hand and compel me to reveal myself. And when I did, warrior-monks and wizard-warriors would descend on me with a howling vengeance.

This sea of iniquity was controlled by two powerful warlords. One was Baron Hieu, once a baron within the Shiu Kingdom and fifteenth in line to the Shiu throne. He, at one time, was the head of one of the Shiu's richest and most powerful noble families. But no longer. His family had been wiped out, his lands and riches confiscated. A bounty had been placed on his head, said to be over ten thousand pieces of gold, when the King of the Shiu found out the baron wished to eliminate those who stood in front of him for the kingdom's crown. This removal in mass of royal heirs also included the then-sitting Shiu king. The king took umbrage to the plot and ordered the entire Hieu family line to be wiped out. Only the baron escaped. Somehow escaping and fleeing to Parian, he brought with him a large fortune, and soon made himself a very powerful figure in the city.

The second warlord who controlled a good half of the city was a foul creature who called himself Mulin Pah. Pah was a murderer, a thief, and completely without morals or conscience. He was also a charismatic leader who not only knew how to command men in battle, but who also had the talent of making vast amounts of wealth. His wealth flowed freely and generously to those who followed him. It was said he was into every known vice that could be found in the city, taking a certain percentage of each from the top. It was also said he controlled a network of opium dens scattered across the high country. His income from these endeavors were supposed to surpass the total wealth of the five wealthiest kingdoms in the High Kanris. I knew not if this was true. But I

did know Mulin Pah was a very wealthy man. And very ruthless.

To hear of Jojin Bok's defiance to both warlords did not surprise me. The rider had his strengths and his weaknesses. If Jojin had a weakness it would be in his predilection to be too honest and too blunt with those with whom he wished not to associate. I, for one, admired the man for being honest and blunt. Yet there were times, and situations, where honesty and openness must be tempered with a healthy dose of caution. Silence, sometimes, is the best course of action when one's blunt tongue might be too dangerous to operate. To hear Jojin did not find a diplomatic way in refusing a contract for services from Pah and the baron came as no shock to me.

What was shocking to hear was the curly-haired rider of Great Wings had been thrown into the dungeons of Mulin Pah's castle. The captain and leader of seventy Great Wings was a formidable force to reckon with in a city the size of Parian. To face the wrath of men and birds over the arrest of their leader seemed foolhardy, even for the likes of the baron and Mulin Pah. It did not make sense to me as I was jostled and repeatedly bumped into by many within the heavy crowd filling the streets.

Fortunately, I did not feel the close presence of wizards in the crowd. As I made my way across the large city square and passed the numerous water fountains and gardens which dotted the plaza itself, I discreetly searched for their presence and readily found them. Like bonfires burning fiercely in the night air, they were scattered all across the city. And they stirred. They could sense me as well. But so far, the techniques taught to me by my masters in the art of disguising my aura were working. It would not take long, however, for that to change.

Time was a luxury I did not have. Somehow, I had to find a way to lift Jojin Bok out of his bondage and whisk him to safety.

CHAPTER 11



***It is as foolish to be filled with suspicion in regard to men's hearts,
As it is to believe all men are more honorable and trustworthy than
any of the Dragons we will encounter.***

— FROM THE BOOK OF ST. ALBANS

PARIAN IS A CITY OF MOSTLY RUBBLE AND GLOOMY TOWERS, FILLED WITH ALL flavors and shades of humanity's miscreants. In the center of this wolf's den is an inn and hostelry called The Inn of Many Delights. It is a well-built establishment, three floors high, with a large open-aired atrium in the center of the building. The atrium is spacious, with a garden, and fountains, and flower beds filled with vibrant floral designs.

The atrium is the most popular gathering site for just about everyone in the city. Here, the tavern's patrons sit comfortably around tables and drink ale or consume their meals in relative peace and tranquility. Here the power brokers within the city come with their prospective clients to broker their deals. Because of this quiet setting here would be the one place I knew I might find much-needed information concerning Jojin Bok.

The owner of the inn was a shrewd, hawk-eyed businessman by the name of Fabio of Paulino. Thin, with a sharp hook nose, gaunt and growing bald, the man looked far from the image one normally thought of as an innkeeper. However, he had a keen business mind and a memory capable of remembering the tiniest of

details in all of his transactions. His business interests ranged far and wide, some legal and some not, which he personally handled from behind the veil of being a simple innkeeper. Few knew of his vast knowledge of the city and its nefarious underpinnings. Fewer still would believe he was a Bretan follower, a devout follower, working in the service of a reclusive warrior-wizard Bretan monk.

Sitting down at an empty table in the inner courtyard, still in the disguise of a simple woodsman, I waited for one of the dozen or so comely maids to approach me with a large tankard of ale and a freshly baked loaf of bread, and a bowl of honey. The bread was the inn's specialty, along with a certain brand of wine, and both increased the inn's already impressive clientele. Smiling into the young girl's plain face, I pushed an odd-looking coin toward her with one finger.

"I understand the inn's owner is a collector of rare coins. Would you ask him to look at this?"

"The master is a busy man, sir. He will gladly look at it and return it to you. Are you staying here in the inn?"

"Yes. But please ask him to look at it now. Tell him a woodsman from Paulino has come a long way to find him."

She picked up the old, half-moon-shaped heavy silver with its strange writings on both sides and stared at it curiously for a moment before hurrying away. Smiling, I took my time, and sliced several pieces of warm bread from the loaf with a small knife and began dipping them into the small bowl of honey. As I consumed the bread and sipped on the strong brew, my eyes roamed across the courtyard as casually as any newcomer to the inn might do. The courtyard was almost barren of patrons. But one table just a few feet away was occupied by four obvious Great Wing riders. Each was dressed in the simple rough leather of riding apparel so favored by such. Each armed with the plain iron-bladed short sword so preferred by those who hailed from this part of the northern High Kanris. Stitched onto their leather jackets were the twin black snakes twisted around each other like a rope, their mouths open, revealing sharp fangs, and red eyes staring at the world with a challenging menace. The livery of those who rode for the House of Hamal.

All four looked dour and ill-tempered as they worked on their tankards.

Something recently had upset them. I waited patiently and kept my senses attuned to them. Sooner or later, one of them would break the dark cloud of silence. What they might say could be of interest.

I did not have to wait long.

“I tell you, this is a bad business. Jojin to have his head chopped off in the public square on trumped-up charges. Here we sit working for the man who gave the death warrant.”

“And well-deserved, I say!” a second rider angrily hissed, turning to look at the first rider with a look of dark rage written on his rough features. “When the House of Hamal hired all of Jojin’s riders away from him, what did you expect? If he had agreed to the Hamal’s wishes, we all would be leagues away from here by now. But he refused. We, like fools, decided to remain loyal to him.”

“And look where that loyalty got us,” a third rider mumbled sarcastically, waving an inebriated hand elegantly in the air. “We were told we could join our leader on the executioner’s block or we could be employed by our gracious benefactor. Honor and duty and a warrior’s death, or life and gold and knowing we have betrayed someone who believed in us. Hmm, decisions, decisions. Life is filled with decisions.”

A look of genuine pain passed across the fourth rider’s face as he glanced up from his brew and stared at the rider who had just spoken.

“Bah!” the second warrior hissed, whipping around to look at the last speaker hotly. “Bandor, you never can keep your tongue from wagging when you’re drunk. Someday, it’s going to get you killed.”

“Like possibly today, old friend?” the one called Bandor smirked, lifting an eyebrow up curiously and staring at the first rider.

“Possibly!” the first answered, starting to rise from his chair.

The one called Bandor began rising as well, reaching for his sheathed iron blade. The remaining two riders looked at each other and shook their heads in disgust. It was obvious no one was going to die today, here in the courtyard. There would be a fight, a display of swordsmanship between two friends, but this was an act that had been played out between the two over and over again.

Yet, no sword was drawn. Instead, streaming into the courtyard came the

innkeeper, his hands clasped in front of him, his face beaming with a light of joy and delight. Behind him, a trail of five waitresses, each bearing a simple brass tray filled with bottles of wine, bowls of fruit, and bread and slices of dried meat, followed him like a serpent's tail.

"Gentlemen! I am so honored you are here to partake in this momentous affair!" the thin innkeeper's voice boomed with impressive strength. "Last summer's wines have finally been bottled for consumption. And we need to find four hearty connoisseurs such as yourselves to taste and judge. Your assistance in this delicate matter will be most welcomed. Drink! Drink! Eat and taste each bottle to your heart's content. And it's free, good friends. Free! Just follow these lovely maidens into our tasting rooms and you may drink yourself to oblivion."

Swords were sheathed. The four looked at each other in a collective alcoholic daze, and then grinned and nodded. Quickly, they were whisked out of the courtyard with the aid of the laughing and giggling maidens, each grabbing an arm of a rider and pulling him toward some distant door.

Their departure brought quiet solitude into the courtyard. Fabio's thin frame kept his back to me until maidens and riders completely disappeared before he turned to stare in my direction. There was, in one hand, the half-moon shaped silver coin and a frown replacing the delight and mirth which only moments before had been on his lips. For some seconds, he simply stared before stirring. Approaching me, he lifted the coin in front of him for me to see.

"Rare is the find of a Targian half-moon shekel, woodsman. Even more so from someone who hails from the small village of Paulino."

The hook-nosed innkeeper had no idea whom he addressed. My disguise was fooling him completely. In all the years I knew this man he nevertheless did not see through my disguise and see the man beneath.

"Many things of rarity come from Paulino, Master Fabio," I said softly.

A flash of recognition not of me through my disguise, but that of a secret phrase learned years ago identifying the speaker as the monk called Roland, momentarily lit up his eyes. But the innkeeper had a keen mind. More had to be said in a certain way before he would lower his guard.

To be an agent of the Bretan, working so deeply, away from the nearest

enclave of the faithful, and especially so in a city such as Parian, meant one had to be extremely cautious . . . and suspicious . . . of any chance meeting. After all, followers of the Bretan were hunted still in the High Kanris.

“To find a treasure such as this means one has to walk the paths usually not taken . . .”

This phrase, “paths usually not taken,” was an oft-quoted mantra of the Bretan. And in that mantra, there was a certain phrase which had to follow.

“. . . and down those paths the seeker may find a peace to fill his soul,” I finished.

Fabio of Paulino sucked in a short breath of surprise, then looked over one shoulder at the emptiness engulfing us. Assured only he and I occupied the courtyard, he pulled a chair back and sat down.

“Foul are the ways of those who live in this city, warrior. And safety will not be found if you linger for too long.”

“My thanks to you for your warning, friend. I am afraid foul times come for all of us in the high country.”

“Aye, now that the House of Decidius has taken the throne of Rogaria. I am afraid all of the high country will be plunged into hell’s infernos.”

With the ruling family of Rogaria deposed and the House of Decidius sitting on the throne was terrible news indeed. The Kingdom of Rogaria, the most powerful in all the High Kanris, was forever at war with someone. From the throne sprang the Rogarian brand of religion, that sect so devout and so rigid in its absolutes, and so determined to rid the foul taint of all things Bretan. It was bad enough when the House of Flavius ruled Rogaria. Stern, unyielding, and committed to their faith, the House of Flavius was the driving force which created the pogrom to wipe clean from the high country the Bretan. The House of Decidius became the Flavian favorite in leading the genocide. Decidian males occupied most of the Rogarian sect’s high positions. Decidian generals led Rogarian armies.

Apparently, such high honors were not enough. They coveted the throne itself. And in Rogarian royal politics, there was only one way this could be achieved. The House of Flavius no longer existed.

“The Decidians are throwing gold around as if it’s nothing more than grains of wheat,” Fabio said. “They are hiring every warrior, every mercenary, and every armorer and swordsmith they can find. Every Great Wing rider they can purchase has been swept into their ranks. They even offered Jojin Bok a king’s fortune if he agreed to lead his men and wear the Imperial livery.”

“But he refused?”

“Aye and suffered for it. He told the Rogarian Cardinal Malfin he would rather be a simple peasant in some far-off woods than have anything to do with Rogarian blue. You can imagine how that comment was received by his eminence.”

Rogarians were known for the deep pigments of a peculiar blue they so cherished. Vivid and rich in color, it almost had a sheen to it. Anything relating to the imperial throne was of that odd shade. When the imperial troops marched into battle, the sight was stunning to behold. Now, with the House of Decidius on the throne, the blue would be trimmed with silver.

“And what have you heard of their plans, friend? Why this massing of power?” I asked.

The innkeeper took a deep breath, the frown on his face deepening, and again checked to see if anyone had settled into a table near us before answering.

“War. News came to us, pilgrim, of a dragon clan who call themselves the Hartooth attacking the Kingdom of the Vik. The Vik are far to the east of us and are one of the ancient Keepers of the Gates. It is said the Hartooth are mighty, and some say they are one of the ancient First Clans of Dragonkind. This, I cannot say for sure. But I do know this. The Vik have asked for help in defending the entrance they have guarded since our ancestors first entered the High Kanris. The kingdoms surrounding the Vik have complied. Warriors hurry to their defense.

The last I heard, their capital was under siege, yet they still resisted. It is the patriotic duty for all riders of Great Wings to come to the aid of the Vik. All who are not employed by the House of Decidius have complied. All except one.”

I nodded, understanding the implication. The arrival of the Hartooth at the gates of the Vik, and the aftershocks of their arrival vibrating throughout the

high country, presented a grave threat to one and all. But it also presented a rare opportunity. One that, for some, could not be overlooked.

“The House of Decidius has decided to expand Rogarian territory by force of arms.” Fabio of Paulino sighed, shaking his head. “The Kingdom of Niscia and the Kingdom of the Quinn are both facing a Rogarian invasion. It is only a question of time before those two kingdoms fall. But it won’t stop there. The Decidians are interested in a number of different kingdoms and apparently are wealthy enough to conduct an extensive war of acquisition. The rumor is they plan to acquire the entire Great Valley as their own.”

In the heart of the High Kanris was a long, wide valley floor, hundreds of miles in width, which wound its way past various mountain ranges. Rivers fed the valley floor with abundant water. Here the high country found its most fertile lands. And its gold and silver mines.

Six of the high country’s largest kingdoms resided in the Great Valley. The Rogarians controlled the northern part of the valley floor and several high mountain valley floors which joined the Great Valley. The Niscians, the Quinn, and three other kingdoms also claimed portions of the Great Valley as their own.

“So now the Quinn and the Niscians must rally their forces to counter the threat. But they do so without the aid of their allies,” I commented, understanding the reasoning behind the House of Decidius’s motives. “Most of the warriors have flown to aid the Vik. Too late to return in large numbers to help either the Quinn or the Niscians.”

“And with the gold being thrown about so carelessly, there are no mercenaries to be hired. Jojin’s men deserted him in the blink of an eye when a Rogarian priest approached them with freshly minted gold coins. When he no longer had his men and birds to command, the cardinal brokered an agreement with Mulin Pah to have Jojin arrested. He is to be executed tomorrow at high noon. He, and another prisoner they brought in late last night. An old Niscian monk by the name of Alvus Fairhands.”

Something cold, something dry, something wicked filled my soul like some foul desert wind. My fingers tingled, my mouth suddenly was dry, and as I stared at the innkeeper, I could no longer hear him speaking. I could see his lips

moving. But I heard no sound.

I now truly understood the terrible power of the Netherworld creature that seemed bent on destroying us.

How could anyone know of Alvus Fairhands? Even I, in the closest moments when I was around the child, forced myself not to think of this old man's name. And yet, he had been arrested and hurried to Parian in order to give his life for something he knew nothing about. Anger swept through my soul like a raging conflagration. I rolled a hand into a fist and hit the table softly.

I knew why the old Niscian had been arrested. I knew why he was hurriedly brought to Parian to face his execution. That maleficent force in the night, that vague presence of Evil lingering in the distance, had read my mind long before I had my first encounter with the tiny Ursala! This abomination was aware of my thoughts, my fears. My innermost feelings even as I experienced them for the first time.

It was I, not the child, who was telling this distant Master of the Dark Powers our every move and thought. This diabolical Master of the Netherworld read the many convoluted currents found in the River of Time. Read the dark currents and manipulated the many perturbations for his own advantage. This would be no mere mortal, no dark wizard dragon who worked in the back reaches of the Netherworld. This entity had the power of the Dark Lords themselves. More power than even the Five Sisters.

Suddenly, like a cruel slap of a mailed fist across my face, I knew, deep within my soul, that this nameless opponent had been present in my mind just below the plain of consciousness for all these many years. Here, in my mind. Hearing my thoughts. Sensing all that happened. And, like a master of puppets, pulling the many strings which became the fabric of my life.

This creature had been manipulating me for years down paths I might not have otherwise chosen. It was his subtle influence that had convinced me to hurry to the aid of old Baron Anktooth. It was his delicate power that had given me the urge to accept the old baron's charge of protecting the little princess from harm. And now, at this moment as I sat in the courtyard, it was his efforts which brought me to Parian. Had drawn me here, like the flickering flame of a candle

lures the moth to its fiery demise.

“Pilgrim, your face drains of color. Are you ill? Shall I summon a physician?”

“Nay, not a physician,” I growled, controlling the anger in me as I glared at the innkeeper. “But, old friend, I will have need of your services before this night is finished. I am afraid the task I gave you so long ago to complete has come to its end. You must leave tonight and never return.”

Fabio of Paulino grunted in surprise, leaned forward to peer for the first time intently into my face, and then nearly let out a shout of mingled surprise and joy.

“Roland! Praise the lord! You have come!”

“Quietly!” I hissed, lifting a finger to my lips. “Our enemies have filled this evil din with their warrior-monks and their spies. It is not safe for you or any of your loved ones to remain in the city. You must hurry them off to safety, along with yourself, no later than by the supper hour. Is that understood?”

The Bretan nodded and said nothing as I outlined to him my immediate needs. It was a detailed list I gave him, a list for varied and sundry items not usually asked for, nor easily obtained. But the innkeeper waited until I finished and firmly came to his feet, nodding his head.

“It will be done, lord. Down to the last detail.”

I nodded in kind, coming to my feet. Claspings the man firmly by his arm, I squeezed gently before letting go.

This would be the last time I would lay eyes on Fabio of Paulino. His long years of service, living here in Parian, had been invaluable to me and our Bretan brothers. We had saved hundreds of lives, thanks to the information he passed on to us. More importantly, our brethren had been kept up to date on what took place among the various kingdoms within this part of the High Kanris, all due to the elaborate spy network Fabio built from the profits of his various businesses.

“Go in God’s peace, brother,” I said softly, giving him the Bretan benediction to a true follower. “May you and yours walk forever in God’s grace and peace.”

“And may that peace come to you as well, brother,” came his measured response.

We parted, and never saw each other again in this world. Heavy was my

heart as I entered the street and left the Inn of the Many Delights. Already a terrible price had been paid to thwart the Dark Powers who were uniting in the shadows to carry out some grim deed. I feared, as I left the inn and moved through the crowded narrow streets, an ever more horrendous price was yet to be paid before this ordeal came to its natural end.

CHAPTER 12



*What is seen is only a disguise;
What is heard is merely the soft echo of what should be said.
Our world is the shadow of what truly is real.
Our perceptions, pilgrim, often lead us astray.
Therefore, trust not your senses. Put trust in your heart
To find the True Path.*

— FROM THE BOOK OF ST. ALBANS

PEACE UNTO YOU, BROTHERS AND SISTERS. SETTLE YOUR MIND AND FREE IT OF its conundrums, for I hear your thoughts and feel your inner turmoil. Who, you ask, is this Alvus Fairhands? And why would an old Niscian monk be of such importance to my quest?

And why would I so willingly stay in the city of thieves after realizing just how elaborate and finely tuned the trap set for me had been constructed? More to the matter, how was I to combat a Master of the Dark Powers who could see into the future and play the moving, but fibrous chords of time itself? A mere wizard, a mortal man such as myself, confronting the powers of the Dark Lords? Why was I not instantly hurled into oblivion?

Let a calmness soothe your troubled soul. Answers I shall attempt to give to all your questions. Answers to some of them I may have. But there are questions unlimited to which, as of yet, I cannot answer. I, too, live in a web of questions

and confusion. There is still much I cannot fathom. But to those questions that I can answer, I freely do so and without reservation.

The first to be answered. Who was this monk called Alvus Fairhands and why was he so important? Aye, an astute question. One goes to the very core of my fight with the Dark Powers. And to answer it simply, this Niscian monk was a Null Stone. A Null Stone, in any fight against forces of magic, is a weapon of incalculable worth.

Ah, but now you grow more confused. What, you ask, is a Null Stone? The answer also is quite simple. A Null Stone is a human—or a dragon, for that matter—who is not affected by wizardry power. In fact, a true Null Stone has the unconscious ability to utterly turn off a wizard's power completely. Any manifestation of power from the Netherworld into the Outer Realm, the world in which I currently live, becomes automatically null and void in the presence of a Null Stone.

The Great Giver, in creating the entire multitude of universes that populate the Outer Realms and the Netherworld, decrees that all which is created must be balanced. No one entity or power can be created which does not have a natural counterweight to keep it in harmony with the rest of nature. If one looks at the world around us, we can see this divine decree working all the time. Herbivores graze in the wild in large numbers. If their numbers become too large, nature is thrown out of balance. Ergo, predators were created to prey upon the grass eaters. A natural check to balance the equation.

Sometimes, the predators become larger in number than can be sustainable. So the Divine Will creates a counterbalance to prey upon the predator. Think of all our worlds as linked together in the maze of a gigantic spider's web. Everything within each world is equally connected to each other within that web. Pluck but one tiny strand of the web, and the whole web resonates with a vibration. What harms one strand ultimately harms the whole. Nothing is done in isolation.

So, pilgrim, if wizards exist who can control and manipulate the Dark Powers of the Netherworld, there must be a counterbalance. There must be something in Nature that is impervious to the Netherworld. That something is

called a Null Stone.

Alvus Fairhands was a Null Stone. He also happened to be the only living warrior-monk allowed to retire from his religious vows. I knew of no other monk of such stature, given that warrior-monks are not supposed to retire. Monks such as these warrior-monks are designed to be weapons. Weapons to be used against that which has been judged evil within their religious orders. A true weapon is used until it breaks. Or, in the case of warrior-monks, until they meet their ultimate nemesis and fall in combat.

In contrast, Alvus Fairhands was allowed to retire from his warrior's duties. He was allowed to leave the Niscian Order and retire to a small farm not far from Parian. The reasons why he was allowed to do so are very complex to discuss. Let it just be said it had, in large measure, something to do with his Null Stone abilities and his unmatched skills in the martial arts.

I was familiar with the old man as I had spent two years living with him, learning his Wolf's Stance fighting style. This form of hand-to-hand combat consists of a circular motion style, which anticipates and forces an opponent to lunge into an attack while standing awkwardly and off-balance. Once this happens, much as a wolf reacts when its prey tries to attack or to escape in an off-balance stance, the fighting wolf lunges for the kill swiftly and without mercy.

My two years living and studying with this wiry old man were two of the most pleasant years of my life. Even though he was Niscian, and I was Bretan, it did not matter to either of us. Old and wise in the world and its ways, Fairhands had long since risen above religious dogma that branded one religious order "good" and another "bad."

Of course, I studied with the old man long before I was chosen to learn the Wizard's Way. I knew nothing of my potential abilities as a Bretan wizard when I lived with him. But years later, after my training as a wizard was complete, I became aware of the old man's abilities. And quickly recognized how invaluable they might someday be in case I needed assistance in combating a truly powerful Dark Power.

I thought of Alvus Fairhands as a source to help me guide and train the

young Ursala the moment I set eyes on her. Not only to train her but help train the boys in becoming true warriors. Ursala's powers would be severely curtailed, if not voided completely, while around the old man. If momentarily voided while standing close to the old man, the Evil from Afar would not be able to read our thoughts and know of our plans. Thus, a tool was available to perhaps ultimately defeat this creature. A tool I planned to recruit.

Now, you understand my astonishment and consternation on hearing the news the old man was to be executed alongside Jojin Bok. The Dark Power residing in the distance, who knew all of my intentions, saw the advantage I might obtain if the old man agreed to assist in the training of the child. Such was a threat this Evil would not allow. A threat, if properly handled, might somehow be the beginning tool which might lead up to the Dark Power's ultimate demise.

But the old Niscian warrior-monk's existence also offered a possible reward to the unseen menace. This creature knew I would come to the rescue of Jojin Bok. To be assured I would reveal myself, why not destroy Alvus Fairhands as well? To this Evil, two potential allies I desperately needed at my side would be the driving force that would compel me to make a fatal error.

We—this unseen menace and I—played a dangerous game of chess. Move and countermove. “Check!”, and eventually, “Checkmate!” He was the player with the white pieces and the ability to make the first move. I was the player with the black pieces, and therefore had to react—to second-guess—his every move. It was a situation I did not relish. It was a situation I knew had to change if there was to be any hope of protecting little Ursala and stopping the onslaught of the Hartooth.

Ah, but now you ask, did I not already have a way to rescue the two and make my escape? Did I not have a Cloak of Invisibility? Why not just do that? Make my way to the dungeons of Mulin Pah's castle and rescue Jojin Bok and Alvus Fairhands.

Pilgrim, does it not seem apparent that this is exactly what the Dark Power anticipated me doing? Where most of the warrior-monks, as skilled as I in the martial arts and in swordsmanship, would be waiting for me? Where the most powerful of the wizard-warriors would be waiting for my reappearance?

To hide yourself in a Cloak of Invisibility is to remove your aura from both the Outer Realm and from the Netherworld. Remember when I revealed all living things had their own special aura about them, glowing like a torch, both in the Netherworld and in this world? And remember, I said as I entered this city, I could disguise my aura and confuse my foes for a short period of time? Disappearing into a Cloak of Invisibility would quickly inform my opponents of my intentions. But there is a disadvantage in using the cloak. If I am hidden from all within and without the Netherworld, they are equally hidden from me. I could use the cloak and slip unseen into the dungeons. But uncloaking myself would find me standing in the midst of my enemies.

At the moment, there were too many skilled foes in the city for me to contend with. Sooner or later, they were going to find me. In order to rescue the Great Wing rider and the old Niscian monk, I had to come up with a plan to make the odds against me a little more palatable.



Throughout the rest of the day and all of the first night in Parian, I played a dangerous game of Netherworld hide-and-seek with my pursuers. My presence in the city was all too obvious to them. But my exact location eluded them. Many times, dressed in the disguise of a simple woodsman, I passed within an arm's reach of one warrior-monk after another, easily recognizing them. Two of the best Rogarian warrior-monks were in the city, as were three of the best Lotharian warriors. Yet, my disguise was enough to hide me while I moved through the heavy crowds gathering in the city's one large central plaza.

It was not the warrior-monks who concerned me. I knew my disguise would conceal me from them, for I had practiced wearing such disguises time and again as I made my way into a Rogarian or Lotharian city in efforts to rescue Bretan followers from dire peril. A good disguise is not just the donning of different apparel and wearing the powder and grease of an actor. A truly effective disguise is for one to act the part of whom their disguise takes on. The mannerisms, the vernacular of the disguise's speech, the very way they carry themselves as they

walk down a road, or a plaza filled with people, all are parts needing to fit the whole in a good disguise.

Warrior-monks were not my concern. The three wizard-warriors in the city were ever foremost on my mind. One, Vamont of Mons, was still smarting from our recent encounter in Fyodor's Crossing, and he pulsed with a blind rage for revenge. I could easily sense his burning rage and felt him lingering within the walls of Mulin Pah's castle. Undoubtedly, he believed I would be foolish enough to use magic in some way in an effort to rescue the rider and the Niscian from their chains.

The other two wizards, both Lotharians, moved within the city from one end to the next in some kind of searching pattern. Although I recognized their auras as Lotharians, I knew neither of them. I had no way of knowing how powerful they were until our paths crossed. This worried me. Not knowing the strengths or the weaknesses of one's opponent brings a certain uncertainty to any combat. At the moment, the stakes were too high for a chance encounter with a far superior opponent to hinder my plans. At all costs, I felt I had to stay away from the unknown Lotharians.

During the first day and all through the night, I moved and slipped between the searching eyes of my would-be captors. Late in the early morning hours of the second day, while the city slept, I found the various items I asked Fabio, the inn keeper to supply, and I hurriedly concocted them into the desired ingredients I needed to aid me in my plans. By time the sun's hot face showed itself rising over the mountain peaks, all was ready.

Perhaps I should paint a portrait of the city of Parian and how I was going to use the city itself as an ally for my plans. As I have said, this city of thieves was a badly constructed series of buildings and streets sitting on a high plateau inaccessible from the valley below. None of the buildings were more than four floors high, with only eight or nine landing towers and aviaries a few floors higher scattered about the city. In the center of the city was a wide plaza maybe two hundred yards by one hundred fifty yards in width. Down each long side of the blue-and-red tiled plaza, a series of rectangular stone boxes had been built to contain flower beds and even a few fountains. Between the gardens, those who

traveled to the city from afar by Great Wings were allowed to set up small tents, or kiosks, for business.

On my arrival, the city's population grew in numbers as the approach of the public beheadings became more of a reality. The general air of the city was that of a summer's festival, with p. People mingled in the plaza and throughout the city in ever-growing numbers. For a city whose reputation was that of the most sinful in all the High Kanris, nevertheless merchants and artisans could live a very prosperous life here. Farmers, catering to this city high in the air over a naturally fertile valley, equally did well in selling their crops.

The plaza was the heart of the city. Shopkeepers and produce merchants set up their wares in the plaza and conducted a brisk business. Bordering the northern edge of the plaza was Fabio of Paulino's Inn of Many Delights. Mulin Pah's ill-designed palace, with its twenty white marble pillars lining its front façade, occupied almost three full city blocks and walled in the eastern side of the plaza. At the north and south ends of the building were the simple stone landing towers and aviaries for Pah's Great Wings. It was large enough to contain most of the warlord's henchmen. It was also rumored to have at least six levels of dungeons. It was, without question, the largest building in the city.

The Wart Hog's Inn bordered the southern edge of the plaza. The inn was three floors high and occupied half a city block, with its front sidewalk wide and deep enough to have, in the summer months when it was possible, an open-aired restaurant. The west edge of the plaza was the smaller palace of the baron. Nowhere near the massive size as Mulin Pah's. It was, however, a better designed fortress, offering the defenders ample opportunities to fire down into the plaza without exposing themselves to return fire.

A block south and west of The Wart Hog's Inn was a four-storied wooden landing tower and aviary. It belonged to Mulin Pah and was used by the second tier of warriors he kept within the city as reinforcements. It was ill-kept, unpainted, and badly in need of repair. It housed twenty birds, with their riders occupying the ground floor in a simple barracks arrangement. It was, for my needs, the perfect torch in my plans to bring the light of freedom to Jojin Bok and Alvus Fairhands.

The plan was simple. Good plans with a high degree for success usually are quite simple. This one was aimed directly at the city's weakest point.

The one thing which terrified the inhabitants of Parian is fire. A fire in a city that hangs by its fingernails on the rounded ledge of a high plateau above a wide mountain valley is potentially its death sentence. Moreover, most of the city was made of wood. A commodity found in abundance in the valley below. But few of Parian's wooden buildings were well-maintained. Of course, in a city where thieves ran by competing warlords, the concept of a trained fire brigade, or even a trained force of warriors to patrol the streets at night to maintain law and order, was nonexistent. If a large enough fire erupted quite suddenly and rapidly spread, it would be catastrophic.

A very large conflagration would send the city's inhabitants into blind hysteria. A great flood of raw emotion would lift up from the city. As any wizard will tell you, if you are within a city where all of its people are very agitated over some major disaster or crisis, the explosion of raw energy momentarily blinds the Inner Eye of a wizard. Mass hysteria is a potent emotion compressed in a very narrow confine of space. So powerful, it can be used as a weapon of immeasurable worth.

Part one of my plans was to create the fiery diversion I needed, which would make the entire city react violently and emotionally. In that window of opportunity, I would move to complete part two of the plan. Part two called for me to enter the palace of Mulin Pah unseen and undetected.

Part three of my plan called for me to take hostages and exchange the hostages for Jojin Bok and Alvus Fairhands. And what two figures would be important enough to defy all the wizard-warriors and warrior-monks if I ordered them to lay down their arms?

Of course.

Malfin Decidius, the Rogarian Cardinal and the city's most powerful warlord, Mulin Pah. If I could pluck them from out of their cocoon of safety, surrounded by their assorted personal bodyguards and henchmen, even the wizard Vamont of Mons would be forced to restrain himself and allow the prisoner exchange to be completed.

A simple plan. Just three parts, with parts one and two being the easiest to attain. Ah, but would it not be pleasant if such plans were truly so simple!

CHAPTER 13



The heart of a true warrior

***Fears not Evil. For the heart of a true
warrior is shielded from Evil's malevolence
By God's own hand.***

— FROM THE BOOK OF ST. ALBANS

ON THE APPROACHING HOUR OF THE HERALDED EXECUTIONS, WITH THE SUN HIGH in a pure blue sky and not a breath of air stirring, I hid myself from all prying eyes by living amidst Great Wings. In the wooden landing tower just two blocks away from the plaza, I found such a haven. Scaling the outer wall of the tower, none of Mulin Pah's warriors sleeping in their cots heard me enter. Nor did the birds, usually ever-alert for intruders into their nesting areas, raise an alarm.

Great Wings and I have long had a mutual respect for each other. I have always been able to approach the giant birds and feel an instant camaraderie with them. And since these magnificent creatures are usually connected to humans by some empathetic link, it did not take me long in convincing them to help me in my quest.

Above the city, I counted forty Great Wings and their riders soaring lazily in the mountain thermal updrafts in slow, wide circles. I could sense their heightened emotions. They were anticipating my arrival on my magnificent Cedric and were prepared to challenge me. Smiling, I turned my attention toward

the plaza.

From the third floor of the aviary, I could just make out a portion of the crowded plaza. Musicians and vendors of all kinds were moving through the throng, playing their instruments and selling their wares. The crowd was amazingly large and restive. I could sense their growing anticipation as the hour of the executions approached. Below me in the streets, people hurried down the narrow stone avenue, eager to arrive on time. The emotive portrait of the city was that of a crowd gathering for a carnival. There were no obvious signs of danger, or the anticipation of danger, within the crowd. It was exactly what I wanted the crowd to feel moments before the first conflagration erupted into terrifying reality.

At ten minutes before the noon hour, I saw two long lines of the warlord's palace guards plowing their way through the heavy crowd. Between the heavily armed guards were the two condemned men, their hands bound behind them, their feet manacled with heavy chains. Behind the guards marched six drummers wearing the livery of Mulin Pah, their drums beating the slow pulse of a funeral dirge. The heads of the condemned were down, the long hair of Jojin Bok hiding his face completely from view, while the white/gray long mane of the Niscian monk was pulled back and rolled up in the traditional knot Niscian warrior-monks wore going into battle. I found myself pleased to see this gesture of defiance from the old man. It assured me there was still life, still a defiant heart beating in the old man's chest. In no way had he given up. Nor would he, facing even the imminent certainty of death before him.

The first inferno began with a whimper. On the far side of the plaza a lone , thin ribbon of smoke began to rise from the rooftops of The Inn of Many Delights. Fabio of Paulino had followed my instructions faithfully. The Bretan voiced no concerns over the idea of burning to the ground his lucrative inn. After following my instructions to the letter, I felt his presence, and the presence of his entire family, lifting from the inn and disappearing into oblivion. They would be far from Parian before the fires consumed the inn down to its very foundations. Faintly in the still air I thought I heard the first stirring of voices rising in alarm. The ribbon of smoke thickened and became a grayish white color

before suddenly darkening to a black pillar of rising destruction filled with flames. There was a soft rumble of an explosion and I saw pieces of stone walls and heavy wooden rafters flying through the air. Flames, towering into the sky, seemed to lift from the very earth underneath the inn, engulfing it completely!

The whimper of concern from the crowd changed to screams of terror as the crowd turned and began running in panic. Nodding my satisfaction, I hurried to strap myself into a makeshift riding harness slung underneath the neck of one of the larger birds. No sooner had I gripped myself firmly into the harness when, from below, and underneath the first-floor barracks of the warriors, came a small rumble. The wooden beams of the tower shook, and billowing smoke lifted into the air.

At that moment I yelled, and the Great Wing, a beautiful female of yellow with bright green wings, leapt into the sky with a powerful bound. The other Great Wings followed immediately. The entire flock began climbing steeply and swiftly into the air. Looking down and behind me, I saw the first orange glow of flames as the warriors within the barracks ran from the tower in haste, with some of them running and trying to don their boots at the same time. With a wolfish rush of gnawing hunger, the tower lit up like a gigantic burning torch. People fled down the streets on either side of the tower, yelling in dismay and scrambling like a fleeing herd of buffalo down the smaller side streets and alleys.

The twenty Great Wings bolted from the burning aviary and turned sharply to the east. In a riot of flapping wings and angry screeching, they raced toward the warlord's palace. The gaggle of terrified birds swept over the central roof of the palace, barely five feet above its flat surface.

Leaping from my harness, I sailed through the air and landed on the roof close to one of the many rooftop exits that led into the palace itself. Swiftly, I covered the open space to a heavy wooden door. Thankfully, it was unlocked, as I suspected it would be, since many dignitaries lifted from and landed on this section of the palace on a daily basis.

Entering the palace, I was confident I arrived unnoticed. The collective aura of the entire city was that of an entity gripped in powerful hysteria and panic. So powerful was the collective emotion of the city, I was positive the Inner Eye of

all the wizards within the palace and the city were momentarily blinded. Quickly I quickly threw the Cloak of Invisibility over me and hurried down the steep set of stairs to the uppermost floor of the palace.

Throughout the palace, there was a great clamor of shouting warriors and the screams of terrified women. From outside, the crowd's noise was just as loud, but was beginning to change. Instead of a howling, panic-stricken mob eager to escape danger, I sensed now men with cooler heads and firm determination beginning to take control. The crowd's aura was changing. An desire to turn and fight the raging infernos began taking hold. As I hurried down a wide marble hall and passed warriors and servants of Mulin Pah running in several directions at once, a part of me was relieved the city's town folk were turning toward the fire with a fervent desire growing in their hearts to saving their city. I wished to harm as few people as possible in saving Jojin Bok and Alvus Fairhands. I knew the great risks I accepted in concocting the potions that would burn fiercely for a long time. Burning even more fiercely once water was hurled into its flames. A tinge of regret touched my heart for this decision I made. But limited were my options in this matter.

I disregarded the Inner Eye within and concentrated on finding Mulin Pah and the Rogarian cardinal. I wished to capture them and have them under my control long before the many warrior-monks and the three warrior-wizards realized these conflagrations were no accidents, but a planned ruse to divert their attentions elsewhere.

I hurried to the royal apartments of Mulin Pah. The warlord's private apartments covered half the palace's third floor. Lavish and luxurious to behold, filled with treasures from all parts of the high country, the warlord's tastes for the finer things in life were impressive to behold.

I found most of the rooms empty. The section of rooms for his concubines looked as if they had been ransacked by marauding thieves. The inner living quarters of the warlord himself had overturned tables and chairs, with goblets of wine spilled across the carpeted floors. The apartment seemed deserted. But to one side, I heard voices talking excitedly.

Doors leading out to the wide expanse of the balconies that which covered

the palace's third-floor facade were wide open. Several of the warlord's private guards stood just inside the apartment, guarding the doors and the rooms from any unwanted intruders. On the balcony itself, I counted five more bodyguards, Mulin Pah himself, and the dark, blue-robed figure wearing the odd white three-cornered hat of a Rogarian cardinal.

I did not hesitate. With a sweep of my hand I threw the Cloak of Invisibility from me as I stepped between the two guards attending the rooms. My sudden appearance startled both, making them take a half step back. It was a motion which was their undoing.

A swift blow to the throat of one warrior with the extended blade of my hand, followed by a sharp edge of the other hand across the base of the warrior's neck as he bent over in agony, dropped the hapless soul to the floor.

The second fell just as rapidly as I used a foot to break the warrior's right leg just above the kneecap. As the man fell screaming in pain, I pulled from his sheath the straight blade of his iron sword and stepped out onto the balcony in one fluid motion.

As the second screaming warrior clattered to the floor, the dark face of Mulin Pah turned and stared back into his apartments. His five guards turned as well and started to step toward their fallen comrade. All stopped in their tracks suddenly. Amazement clearly written across their faces. I stood behind Cardinal Malfin, one hand gripping the cardinal's left hand behind his back and high above its natural motion, while my other hand, gripping the iron sword firmly, held a sharp edge of the blade gently against the cardinal's throat.

"Greetings, brethren," I said with a calm, friendly voice as a smile played across my lips. "We meet again, Mulin Pah. And cardinal, I seem to recollect you said our next encounter would involve much pain and much pleading for one's life. How perceptive you were, noble prelate!"

Several of the warlord's guards unsheathed their swords and took a step toward me. But the cutting edge of the sword pressed against the Rogarian's neck brought a thin ribbon of blood to begin oozing down the prelate's neck.

Pah, throwing up both of his hands in front of him, restrained his guards, but glared at me with the murderous look of a viper.

“How do you expect to leave this city alive, Bretan?” the small, dark-complexioned warlord hissed, clenching hands into fists. “Warrior-monks are scattered throughout the city and in this palace. Soon, you will be surrounded by hundreds who may be as good with the sword as you. There is no escape!”

Malfin Decidius whimpered in pain. He was a man of advanced age, plump and prosperous within his religious trappings, and comfortable in his power as one of the ruling elites within the Rogarian Order. We had a long history of confronting each other. His zealotry in rooting out Bretan evil was legendary. Hundreds of innocent lives had been put to the fiery death of a heretic being burned at the stake, with many of those lives being as innocent as the next. Not even Bretan in their religious preference.

“Cardinal, tell the warlord the promise I gave to you if, by some chance, we should meet again.”

I removed the sword from his throat but held it close to my side. One swift motion and the round shaped prelate would be eviscerated. The prelate knew me well. He made no move to escape. Gulping, his complexion was as pale as a ghost, he put his free hand to his throat to stem the blood seeping down his neck and did as he was told.

“The Bretan promised to feed my entrails to the carrion birds. Be wary, Mulin Pah! The man is like a demon with the sword. He can cut us all down in the blinking of an eye and long before any of your men could react in time. Give him what he wants and be done with it!”

From the balcony, The Inn of Many Delights roared and crackled in a furious inferno. Thick clouds of smoke rose in a furious pace into the cloudless sky. Even from this distance, we all felt the burning fury beating on our cheeks. So hot were the flames, several smaller buildings close to the inferno were beginning to smolder. If a concerted, organized effort was not soon launched to contain the fire and preserve the other buildings, the city was doomed.

I smiled and nodded toward the inferno before I spoke.

“I give you leave for you and the cardinal, and your city, to continue living,

Mulin Pah. In exchange, you will deliver to me Jojin Bok and Alvus Fairhands. Alive and unchained. You will also have two Great Wings, your best mounts, waiting for us on the roof above.”

I saw the immediate impulse to deny my request darken the ’s eyes. Malfin Decidius saw it as well.

“Fool! Do as he says! This is but a minor victory for him. Consider the calamity if we all die here on this balcony and Parian is burnt to the ground! Give him his two minions and be done with it!”

The dark brown eyes of the warlord burned with a hatred, both for me and for the Rogarian equally, but he turned and nodded to one of his guards. A half hour rolled by as we stood on the balcony and watched the fires begin to spread from one building to the next with a dazzling display of a searing hunger only an out-of-control conflagration could bring. In that half hour, I allowed more of the warlord’s guards to leave so they might take charge in fighting the infernos burning to the north and south of the palace.

As we waited, I expected to see the face of Vamont of Mons at any moment. Several Lotharian warrior-monks whom I knew, and even respected as honored opponents, entered the warlord’s apartments and exchanged polite greetings with me. But they made no effort to move in any threatening way. Not with a sword in my hand, and a Rogarian cardinal between me and them. They, like the Rogarian cardinal, accepted the situation as it appeared and simply waited. The absence of the Rogarian wizard, however, worried me.

I could sense his presence close—very close—to me. But I could not exactly pinpoint his location. Smiling, knowing the trickery the Rogarian wizard was noted to exhibit, I leaned forward and whispered something in the cardinal’s ear. The elderly prelate’s face drained of color, but he nodded and spoke in a firm voice.

“Vamot! I, Cardinal Malfin, order you to cease and desist in all of your efforts to rescue me! Reveal yourself, so this fiend might allow us all to live to see the morrow!”

There was a stirring just behind two of the warlord’s guards. The curly-haired, dark-eyed form of the Rogarian wizard stepped out of the darkness of the

warlord's inner apartments, a glaring scowl of pure hatred on his face, with his hands holding a powerful horn bow with arrow notched to the bowstring.

"Bretan, soon you will feel the just hand of the lord on you. And I will be the one who will administer his wrath."

Vamot spoke with an amazing control of his emotions. An admirable trait in any wizard, and I nodded in admiration at the effort it took for him to be in such control.

"If it is so written, so shall my fate be," I answered in a friendly voice, a smile on my face. "But what mortal knows the true meaning found in the Book of Fates?"

The standing warrior-monks of the Lotharian Order silently nodded in agreement and peered with curious intent into the hatred filling the room coming from Vamont's soul. I could sense their perplexity. All was not what it appeared to be. From their souls I could sense a feeling of caution and doubt beginning to eat away their inner resolve.

Good, I thought to myself. Perhaps, in time, a warrior-monk or two might question and demand answers. And in the end? Who knew? I might, in the near or far future, find an ally willing to join the ranks of the heretical Bretan.

A door within the apartments was thrown open and a large contingent of men moved rapidly through the deserted apartments behind us. In the midst of them were the figures of Jojin Bok and the Niscian monk. Bruised and badly treated, both were without chains. They were hustled to the balcony where we stood, their eyes falling upon me and filling with surprise. And then, not unexpectedly, a sardonic little grin spread across the Great Wing rider's handsome face.

"Well, it's about time you arrived, monk. I was beginning to worry."

I refrained from laughing, glad to look upon the rider's smiling face. The mercenary captain of Great Wings was his typical sarcastic self with his dry wit and blunt talk. I relished every encounter I had with the man. As I was relishing this moment even now.

"And greetings to you, old friend. It is good to see you again. And to you, Master Fairhands. My soul delights in seeing you still living among us in the Outer Realms."

There was a twinkle in the old man's clear eyes and a lopsided grin on his old lips. But the small man, rubbing one raw-skinned wrist gently, nodded and eyed his once-captors before looking back in my direction.

"I should have known it would have been something of your doing, Roland, to create such an abrupt change of heart in our captors. And pray tell, what is our next move?"

I told them as we hurried to the roof of the palace. There, as demanded, we found two young and saddled Great Wings. On one sat the weapons and accouterments which belonged to Jojin, neatly strapped to the saddle. One swift bound, and the dark-haired, dark-eyed rider found his sword and pulled it from its sheath before turning to walk toward Mulin Pah.

"Really, old friend. I cannot leave my gracious host without taking some kind of memento. An ear perhaps? Maybe his nose? Just some little trinket so he can remember me and remember this day."

No. I have promised their safety, Jojin. But I promise, soon there will be a calling to account and defend all their transgressions. You will have your opportunity then to voice your concerns."

Jojin Bok, irritated, cut the air in front of the dark warlord with several short strokes. But he touched no one, nor made any attempt to threaten anyone. In his eyes, and in his heart, was an immense hatred and anger aimed at Mulin Pah. It was obvious to one and all standing on the roof the warlord now faced a very determined—and very deadly—adversary who was about to be released into the wild. It was a danger that did not escape the warlord's attention.

"We have performed our part of the agreement, monk. Now release us as you have promised."

"Leave, Mulin Pah. Hurry to your city and save it. The fires grow brighter and stronger. A moment longer, and you may not have a city to rule."

The dark warlord glanced at the cardinal, then at the burning city surrounding his palace. He quickly turned and hurried below without uttering another word. The only ones remaining on the roof were myself, the cardinal, Vamont of Mons, and a few warrior-monks of the Lotharian order, along with the two men I came to rescue.

“Master Fairhands, once you took me to a small stream where we fished all day and talked of poetry and fine wines. Remember that day?”

“Aye, I do. As if it was but yesterday.”

“Lead our friend to that place and wait for my coming. I will join you shortly.”

The elder Niscian monk, his long hair still tied into a bun at the back of his head, eyed me curiously for a moment and then eyed those standing before me. Strangely, he chuckled in amusement before turning and leaping into the saddle of one of the young birds.

Jojin looked as if he was going to protest. But the silent motion of the old Niscian waving him toward the saddle of the other bird sealed the warrior’s lips. Both waved to me just before their birds lifted gracefully from the roof top and began climbing into the air. For a few moments, I watched until I was sure they were well clear of the city’s walls and free of those who might want to follow them into the mountain valley below. Assured they were free of their captors, I reacted quickly.

With one powerful shove of my hand, I hurled the fat cardinal into the startled arms of the Rogarian wizard. With the same motion of hand a small ball of silver I had prepared for just this occasion I threw onto the roof top swiftly. There was a loud bang, a bright light, and a puff of thick smoke. So bright was the flash of light, so loud the bang, and so profuse the smoke, that everyone on the roof stepped back and covered their faces instinctively with an arm. Just the response I expected.

With a powerful jump I leapt from the edge of the palace roof and sailed into the air above the city streets, my arms extended as if I were a diver leaping from a high cliff into deep water. Just as the arc of my jump reached its high point, I rolled over onto my back, throwing the Cloak of Invisibility around me at the same time.

In the blink of an eye I was gone. Invisible from anyone within the Outer Realm or the Netherworld.

CHAPTER 14



To Trust and Love

*In a world filled with such violence as ours
Requires us to have some measure
Of Faith.
Even though, for many of us, this Faith
May reap untold heartaches.*

— FROM THE BOOK OF ST. ALBANS

TWO DAYS AFTER ESCAPING FROM PARIAN, THE SIX OF US SAT AROUND A LARGE fire burning brightly and well fed. Unafraid we were from being seen by searching eyes since we were deep in a cave hewn from the side of a large bluff overlooking a river. Our enemies combed the woods in large numbers hunting for us. A hundred or more of Mulin Pah's Great Wings and their riders fanned out across the high mountain valleys and rode the winds, waiting for us to make an appearance. We were forced to fly our birds at night and only under the cover of an overcast sky thick enough to obscure the moon's light.

Our flight from the city of thieves had not taken us far. Hiding in caverns and waiting for the warlord's men to divert their search patterns to a different mountain valley was our only choice. So, on this night, we sat warming

ourselves in front of a large fire and waited for the propitious time to continue our journey.

Even in the summer the nights in the High Kanris become quite chilly. There is nothing like the feeling of comfort from a well-built fire with kindling from the hardwood Balak tree to make the fire burn fiercely. Balak wood burns with a bright light and an intense heat and yet without much smoke. In each of our hands was a sharpened stick, heavily laden with the white meat of freshly roasted fish. Gawaith and Gawain sat on their haunches ravishing their meals. They were youths who simply could not eat enough and be satisfied. Yet they were strong and healthy and growing by leaps and bounds. Already, the two had grown at least an inch taller and were ten pounds heavier. Their baby fat was turning into hard muscle. Their fair skins were being tanned and weathered by the primitive living conditions we continually found ourselves in. Their frames were filling out with the promise both would soon be and soon, tall Vik warriors hardened and prepared to meet any challenge.

If, that is, the Dark Powers would give them time enough to reach maturity. Eyeing them through the fire, watching them eat, my heart grew heavy. I wanted them to live. I wanted them to grow up to become the warriors and the leaders the Vik would need. But I feared the luxury of time was not on our side. Their destinies were tied to mine. My destiny appeared to be written in a book with very few blank pages remaining.

My attention turned to tiny Ursala. She, too, had grown before my eyes. No longer the tiny, almost brittle, doll-like dragon princess she first appeared, she too was tanning and filling out. Her dragon's skin was still the dark white as all Pearl Princess were, but it was not the whiteness of an albino. As I have mentioned earlier, the normal dragon's skin is pigmented in two contrasting colors. These colors identified their clans. But a Pearl Princess is all white. Her skin is much softer. Her eyes are of an azure blue of such purity, they can be quite hypnotic.

But still, she was a tiny child. Years remained ahead of her before she would approach maturity. She needed years of training to reign in and control her powers. She needed years of guidance in learning how to handle and command

both dragon and man. She needed, more than anything, to first be just a normal child. A child with the freedom to laugh, play, and do silly childish things just for the fun of it.

But our Fates were tied together. The luxury of a normal childhood was not to be her fate. She, like the boys, would live a short duration in this world if she remained close to me.

Such was my conundrum. I had been selected to train her, to mold her mind, to give her the tools to control the Dark Powers. Yet I also was also the one who was to help build the forces would challenge the Hartooth and the prophecies of doom as promised by the Dark Lords. How could I do both? How could I possibly build an army in a year's time and yet find the time to train Ursala properly?

The answer, I knew well, was obvious. There was no way two such demanding goals, each requiring dedication and devotion to complete, could be accomplished. Not in a year's time. Perhaps not even in ten years' time. Therefore, something had to be done, a plan devised, that would give us the time to do both. A plan had to be devised, and that plan had to be sufficient enough to promise tiny Ursala and the boys would have the time to grow into adulthood.

My attention turned to the two men sitting on my right. The Niscian monk and the Great Wing mercenary both were to play key roles in my vision. To build an army of dragons and men, fighting side by side, I needed men whom I could trust and who would lead contingents of each. The boyish-faced Jojin Bok was a leader of men, a master tactician when handling Great Wings, and, more importantly, someone who inspired others to follow him implicitly. As he sat close to the fire, with the old monk to his left, eating his fish with as much relish as the boys were, in the fire light he did not look inspirational. His captors in Mulin Pah's dungeons had not been kind to him. The welts and cuts of abuse on his person indicated that he, and the old man, had suffered extensive torture while in chains.

But I knew Jojin Bok. He would physically heal. His spirit would soar again. His desire to exact revenge against those who had tortured him would make him become an even more inspired leader. The herbs and salves I prepared to heal

their wounds were working. All I had to do was inspire him to join us in our cause. To join the quest of a mad, and quite possibly soon-to-be-deemed as a heretical Bretan monk. Along with a living, breathing renegade Pearl Princess, as well as an old Niscian monk and two blond haired children of Vic royalty in our bid to overthrow the Dark Lords and their minions, the legendary First Clan.

The elderly Niscian warrior-monk was crucial to me if my plans were to succeed. I needed a teacher—an experienced teacher who was a master of both martial arts and the more traditional arts of philosophy and mind control. Not only would he help me train Ursala, but he would also teach the lads the way of a true warrior in those times I might not be present. And more importantly, he was someone who would not be affected by the subtle trickery of those who played with the Dark Powers.

The ancient monk was a true Null Stone. Time and again, the Dark Powers tried to blunt and defeat the Niscian's abilities to resist so effortlessly their seemingly invincible strength. With each effort the Dark Powers failed. With each effort, the Niscian's ancient sword found its mark, and another dragon wizard, or tool of the Dark Powers, hurried his soul over into the Netherworld. Alvus Fairhands's continued presence would greatly impede, if not negate, the ability of the Dark Power from Afar—that entity I had long felt lurking in the distant shadows—from anticipating our plans and reading our thoughts.

“So, Roland. Let me consider this insane plan of yours one more time,” Jojin's voice lifted into the cavern's air, filled with a sense of absurdity. “You want me to hurry off into the high country somewhere, find riders willing to ride alongside dragons riding Winged Beasties, and fight the very gods themselves. Is that what I heard? Did I leave anything out?”

I felt a smile sweep across my lips. The irreverence in the mercenary's voice was something of a joy to hear. The rider and I had been friends for a very long time. We had fought together. Campaigned together. Bled together in desperate encounters with the dragon and bandaged each other around campfires such as this. Desperate times, when two people share the same dangers, have a tendency to make one's soul bond with the other.

I heard the tone in his voice. Glancing at the children, I saw in their eyes and

felt in their hearts their beliefs the handsome warrior was mocking me. Their young hearts were convinced the warrior thought I was a fool for even suggesting such a course of action.

In reality, I already knew the man's answer. The only thing yet remaining left to do was for him to vent his feelings. I, therefore, only nodded my head in response to his question and continued eating my fish.

"Ah, just like that. Ride off into the sunset and find . . .oh, say . . . four or five hundred riders willing to throw tradition and a thousand years of hostility toward the dragon out the window. Find five hundred riders willing to face excommunication from their religious orders, their cities, their families, and come ride for you. Ride for you in a war, mind you, which sounds as if it has already been lost long before the first engagement has taken place."

Indeed, so it seemed. I could not debate the warrior's logic. Fight the prophecies of the Dark Lords? Believe in the idea one simple Bretan wizard-warrior could defy a thousand-year-old prophecy that stated a Fifth Pearl Princess would be born into the Clan Hartooth, and this child would grow up to lead all of dragonkind and annihilate all of mankind? Actually believe that warriors from the high country and the hill country kingdoms at the base of the Kanris would join with dragon forces to battle against a common foe?

I said nothing but continued eating the fish before me. But I had a grin on my face. As, I noticed, did the old Niscian. Jojin, for his part, stared in disbelief at the two of us and then, in frustration, threw up his hands and glanced at the children.

"Look at this! Two princes from the Kingdom of the Vik setting beside a dragon Pearl Princess. Every religious order and every king in the high country will be, and already are, mind you, hunting you all down like game animals in a private hunting park. Now you propose to me a scheme that, at its best, sounds suicidal. At worst, incomprehensible! What rider of Great Wings in their right mind would even consider such a proposition?"

Alvus Fairhands lowered his skewer of fish, finished chewing on a portion before swallowing and clearing his throat, and tilted his head toward Jojin as he spoke.

“Why do you make so much noise, child? You know you are going to help the madman. As I am. What other choice have we? Now pass me that flask of water and be so kind as to not shout while you are talking. My ears are old, and my patience wears thin.”

Huge grins of mirth swept across the children’s faces at the same time. The moment the old Niscian landed in camp, the boys and little Ursala instantly took a liking to the ancient curmudgeon. Ursala commented to me earlier in the day the old monk felt “odd.” But odd in a pleasing way. I agreed. I too felt the same way for the old man.

“Bah!” Jojin exploded in exasperation while reaching for the leather flask of water and heaving it toward the Niscian. “Insane. That’s what we are. Insane.”

Grimly, he began picking at his skewer, flecking off tiny portions and chewing on them. Yet I felt his soul and could sense he was already thinking where he might go and whom he might find to recruit. A few more minutes rolled by, and he offered us his thoughts.

“Two months hard riding south of here is a small kingdom called Keltus. The Kelts breed a Great Wing almost as strong and as fast as the Vik’s. As warriors, they are some of the best. But their numbers are few.”

“What makes you think they would be willing to fight alongside dragons to stop a dragon prophecy?” the ancient warrior-monk asked, lifting a shaggy gray eyebrow as he continued eating his fish.

“Because they are just as insane as we are. Not one of their warriors has seen a dragon. Not ever. Not for over a thousand years. They’ve been holed up in their valley for a long time. Quarantined, if you will, from the rest of the high country. They really have no traditions or preconceived notions concerning the dragon.”

“Why would Kanris kingdoms want to quarantine the Kelts, my boy? Is there something you are not telling us? Something perhaps Roland should know?”

I smiled. Alvus Fairhands was old and wise. He was no wizard and had not the wizardry power of reading another’s emotions. But his mind was quick enough to realize something had to be amiss for an entire kingdom to be quarantined from the rest of the High Kanris.

Jojin glared at the old Niscian, and then glanced at me pensively. A sheepish grin spread across his lips. Yes, there was something about the Kelts we all needed to know. I already knew. I was quite familiar with the inhabitants of this strange kingdom.

“They are different,” Jojin said. “They think a little differently than the rest of us. In this ancient hostility we have with the dragon, they have this quaint idea the dragon started out as the victims in man’s aggression. They think all the organized religions mankind worships are designed to keep the dragon as aggressors. They sneer at the thought of any organized religion. Openly scoff at anyone who might follow a religious faith. They can become, shall we say, rather obnoxious in their views.”

“Ah!” Alvus Fairhands grunted, nodding in understanding as he pointed the sharp end of his skewer toward the Great Wing rider. “Now I understand why you admire them so much. An agnostic who admires a whole kingdom of agnostics!”

“They are good people,” I interjected, looking at the two of them. “They can be quite irritating in their views on religion, it is true. But they have been isolated from the rest of mankind for so long, others have grown suspicious of them. And they, in their own

stubborn way, have refused to make any effort to reach out and establish contact with anyone. Which makes them, in my opinion, just the kind of recruits we need in this war.”

“Ah, but if they believe the dragon are actually the victims in this ancient war, will they not face a moral conflict in coming to our aid, Roland? An agnostic dies just as well as a true believer when facing the dragon. Will these particular agnostics be willing to fight? That is the question.”

“Yes, they will,” Jojin Bok answered firmly. “Doubt as you might what the Kelt would do facing the dragon, but one thing no one should doubt. They are, and have been, as Roland has in all his years as a Bretan monk, the enemy to any creature who preys upon the weak. If convinced the Hartooth are the aggressors and need to be stopped, there is a good chance they will join our cause.”

“And you are the man, old friend, who is just the one to convince them,” I

said to Jojin, nodding. "It is a hard and dangerous journey ahead of you, Jojin. Evil may lift its ugly face at any moment in your journey. I am sure it will try to stop you from completing this task. But it is one which that has to be completed."

The curly-haired Great Wing rider nodded and frowned. He was well-aware of the difficulties. But they did not concern him. Something else weighed upon his mind.

"Two months to ride to the Kelts. A month or more to convince their king to join us. If I should be so lucky. By that time, it will be winter and impossible to travel through the high country. When spring comes, and if I have the numbers you ask for, it will take almost all summer to complete the return journey. There is no way this can be completed before the end of summer. There is no way we would join you in time before you marched against the Hartooth."

I smiled and shrugged. I already suspected as much. When one plans for war, one must plan for both the unexpected and the unwanted. Delays were an integral part of warfare. Integral and inevitable.

"The return journey will be fraught with danger," I answered quietly, absently drawing circles in the sand with the sharp-pointed stick in my hand. "I am positive the Rogarians, and others will field a force and try to stop you. Better, perhaps, to find and rendezvous with our old friend, Eggar of Fyodor's Crossing. He is recruiting bowmen, and perhaps others, who will join our cause. He will welcome you. Together, as a combined force, your odds of eventually returning increases dramatically."

"What?" Jojin growled, scowling. "That sly old bastard still lives? The gods indeed have a wicked sense of humor. Still, it will be good to share a glass of ale with that bearded giant. Although, Roland, where I might find him, and when, will be a challenge."

"As life always is," I answered quietly.

"An old Niscian prophet by the name of Noches once said," the ancient monk began, mimicking the crackling voice of the very old as he winked at the children, "*One should expect the difficult to be done immediately, the improbable to be done a week or two later. The impossible to take a little*

longer.’”

“Ha!” snorted Jojin derisively, slapping his knee in a mock gesture of mirth. “Niscian humor!”

The children howled with laughter. Laughed so hard tears ran down their cheeks. The sound of their laughter was quite refreshing to my ears. I had not heard such for well over a year. I felt their joy welling up like a great tide from their souls. And it felt good.



For a week we lived in the caverns, our Great Wings tucked away deep within the bottomless pits, coming out at night to hunt and returning long before the first rays of sunlight painted the high mountain peaks. By day, well-hidden from view, we watched our foes sailing up and down the mountain valley on their war birds, searching for us. But they soon became predictable. By late afternoon, they would be done with their searching. In truth, Great Wing riders preferred not to ride their giant birds during the night hours. In the night, the large hunting hawks sought their prey. As large as a man, swift and deadly when they struck, the chance of being hunted by a Mountain Hawk was all too real.

Gaggles of wild Great Wings also fed during the night. Unlike the lone hunter of a Mountain Hawk, Great Wings preferred to hunt in the company of others, with six or seven giant birds hunting together. Cunning birds, working as a team, they would find their prey and herd them to a clearing spot and then pounce with a deadly ferocity. The real concern for a rider who rode the night's winds was the fear of becoming the hunted by a gaggle, or murder, of wild Great Wings. True, the nature of a Great Wing was to have a natural affinity for man. But a man riding a single Great Wing in the hunting territory of wild Great Wings was a different matter.

The Niscian eagerly accepted his role as teacher and mentor, as well as trusted advisor to me, and he immediately began a difficult regimen in the art of the sword with the twins. In the early morning hours, just after the lads and I finished our morning exercises, he hustled them off to a small clearing beside the

flowing river and began teaching them the Niscian warrior-monk's arts. It soon became obvious this eighty-year-old monk was still quite proficient, and quite deadly, in handling a blade of cold steel.

Of course, Gawaith and Gawain completely immersed themselves in the training. The harder the old man pushed, the wider the grins on the twins' faces increased. They had already been taught a rudimentary technique in handling the sword. But a Niscian warrior-monk's technique was amazingly remarkably complex and technical. It required speed, dexterity, and a certain form of ruthlessness—all the qualities the twins had in abundance. It was a pleasure watching them learn. It was also a pleasure seeing the commitment, and the sense of being a productive human again, return to the old man's eyes and gait.

Even my sarcastic Great Wing mercenary voiced his admiration watching the old man. Once, with the two of us standing almost knee-deep in the mountain stream, fishing for our evening meal, we watched tutor and students working. Alvus Fairhands made a move which required him to twist his torso to one side at a ninety degree angle, yet lunge straight forward for a killing blow, at the same time. It was quite something to see the old man move in such a way.

"He's good," Jojin remarked.

"Yes, very good. Someday, when he starts training the lads in his Wolf's Stance hand-to-hand combat, you should watch."

"Hmm," Jojin mumbled, his eyebrows knitting together thoughtfully, watching the Niscian for another moment before looking at me. "Could you beat him? That is, if all things were equal and each of you faced the other in the prime of your careers. Could you beat him?"

I stood up, a large, speckled trout in my hands, and tossed the wiggling fish onto the riverbank. Turning, I looked again at the old man and smiled before I looked back at Jojin.

"We'll never know. Niscian warrior-monks use a technique called The Lure and The Trap. It's a one-weapon swordsmanship, requiring a heavy use of body action and even acrobatics. They leap and roll and attack from all angles. Most disconcerting to a traditional swordsman."

"And your brethren? What technique do they use? It seems Niscian and

Bretan art forms are very similar.”

I nodded, my smile widening. Jojin Bok was a very observant mercenary.

“First, there were Bretan, my friend. When our ancestors were herded here into the high country, fleeing from the onslaught of the dragon, it was the Bretan Order that replaced the old religions. It was our order that created the first warrior-monks. Soon afterward, a small contingent of monks decided to split from our order and start their own. From that split came the Niscian Order.

We Bretan and the Niscians are blood kin. Brothers, in many respects, with the Bretan being the older brother and the Niscian being the rebellious younger one. We are more alike than not. So it should come as no surprise their warrior techniques are very similar to ours.”

He nodded, furrowed his eyebrows together again.

“But could you beat him? In a duel. All things being equal.”

My grin widened. He was not going to let go of this until I gave him some kind of answer.

“No. At his best, he would be a quarter-second faster in hand speed. Years back, when he was still an active monk and I but fresh out of the monastery, I lived with him for two years. I became the student, and he became the master. We would take wooden training swords and practice sparring with each other. I never could get the advantage over him. Nor could he over me. But remember, when I trained with him, he was well into his sixties in age. Think of how great he must have been when he was in his twenties.”

“By the blood of the gods!” the curly haired rider whispered in astonishment, turning to look at the old man. “You, Roland, are the fastest man I’ve ever seen with a sword. You, and that dragon’s scimitar of yours, make me stand in awe when you work together! But to think someone once lived who could be faster, who could match you stroke for stroke, is too much to comprehend.”

“There were two others back in Parian who are just as fast as I, old friend. There are others as well. No man stands alone on a mountain pinnacle without others wishing to push him off. I may be adequate with the sword. But there are others, many others, who are better.”

“Ha!” snorted Jojin snorted derisively, turning to look at me with disbelief on

his handsome face. “Bretan humor. Bad Bretan humor, I might add.”

Chuckling to myself, I bent down and returned to gather our evening meal. Later that night, when all had retired to their bedding around the smoldering embers of the fire, with little Ursala sleeping by my side, we experienced the first unnerving, ethereal encounter with the Four Sisters.

CHAPTER 15



Evil does not come into our hearts

Like a roaring beast filled with terror and horror.

No, true Evil

***Comes like a softly spoken whisper or a gentle caress from someone
we trust.***

— FROM THE BOOK OF ST. ALBANS

IN THAT TWILIGHT TIME WHICH COMES BETWEEN DEEP SLEEP AND THAT DREAM-like time when we are almost awake, is when the Four Sisters usually inflict themselves upon mortal souls. They come into the Outer Realms softly, almost without making a noise, like the first gentle caress of cool air one feels after enduring the stifling heat of a hot afternoon. But this gentle touch of grateful repose, so enticing and so welcomed, is deceiving. It is the first manifestation of an approaching summer's storm. A storm with terrible winds and furious lightning. A storm promising destruction and terror for those lying helplessly before it.

So too are the Four Sisters when they decide to invade the Outer Realms. Their unwelcome presence enters this realm from the Netherworld through a door left open and unguarded from out of the mind of little Ursala. This door, left ajar, occurs when the child falls ill with a fever and chills. Earlier in the day, she ate wild grapes from a vine. Far too many grapes. She suffered with a

terrible stomachache, a fever, and chills. All throughout the afternoon I held her close to me and cooled her heated forehead with cold mountain-stream water. The child became weak yet remained in good spirits. Through the day she wanted me to hold her as a father would hold his sick child, and I found myself falling even further into the father image. I found it pleasing, and therefore kept her close to me.

That night, I tucked her into warm blankets beside my bedding and waited for her to finally drop off to sleep before I slept. The others, especially the boys, worried as they were over Ursala's fever, could not remain vigilant. But the training imposed upon them by their new tutor was physically taxing. Neither could remain vigilant and watch over their adopted younger sister for long. Gawain and Gawaith were asleep almost the moment their heads touched the Great Wing saddles we used for pillows. Jojin fell into dreamland almost as fast as the twins. Only the old Niscian and I remained awake for some time, softly talking about old times and about what might lie before us in the near future. Soon, the old man fell asleep and I, being the last awake, drifted off as well.

I remembered hearing, as if far in the distance, the howling of wolves. I remembered the sensation of motion. Of moving through darkness. And I remembered the sensation of smell. The smell of an ancient swamp, the aroma of decaying plant mass and stagnant waters, stifling heat and humidity. So much heat and humidity I could feel every pore in my body beginning to ooze with sweat.

I found it difficult to breathe. It was a conscious effort to move my chest and lungs with each breath. And with each labored breath, a growing sense of panic seemed to gain strength somewhere deep within the back reaches of my mind.

It was a dream . . . and it was not. It was real, and yet, no matter how hard I tried, I could not wake myself from this nightmare.

I felt the presence of four dragon females close to me. Close to me but remaining unseen and unwilling to reveal themselves. I could sense their presence, sense their primordial hatred of me and their desire and murderous lust to reach out and tear my heart out of my chest. Yet they could not . . . were afraid to attempt it. . . and this infuriated them further.

Wolves howled a hot , foul breeze filled with decaying things filled the cavern. And I heard, finally, their voices. Screeching, twisted souls speaking . . . and a child's voice answering. Ursala's voice.

"You must destroy him! He is your enemy."

"I will not. He will protect me from harm. He is grandfather."

"But sister, you cannot abandon us! The Master will not allow you to alter his plans. You must do his bidding."

"I will not. The Master is a bad spirit. A spirit who has no kindness in him. He is so different from grandfather. Different from all whom I have met. The Master means to destroy us all!"

"Sister! Not so loud! He will hear us and become very displeased!"

"He is too far away now. I hear the hum of his thoughts but cannot hear what they say. So he is too far away to know you have broken your promise to him and came into this world without his permission."

"But we come to save you, sister. To save you from the thing whom you call grandfather. And from that thing he carries at his side. You must abandon this man-thing, child! He will destroy you!"

"He will not. Grandfather loves me. And I love grandfather."

"Sister, you cannot love a man-thing. And especially the one who carries Helvingshar!"

"Aaaiiieee! The man-thing moves! His powers are strong!"

With all my strength, I forced myself to rise up from this grip of Dark Power and open my eyes. Staggering to my feet, I reached for the curved blade of the dragon scimitar hanging from my belt. As soon as my fingers curled around its ancient pommel, I heard the voices of dragon females lift into a horrifying scream of pain and anguish.

"Aaaiiieee! He comes to kill you, sister, as he came to kill us all and forced us to flee into the Netherworld! Stop him, sister! Stop him before it is too late!"

It took an incredible effort to pull the scimitar from its plain wooden and leather sheath. My heart was pounding, and I felt the blood in my veins pulsing with each beat with such force, I was sure I would suffer a stroke. I blinked several times trying to focus my eyes. The cavern and its inhabitants were a

mass of blurs and dark shadows. Four images moved, constantly circling me, infinitely faster than I could ever hope to move. I knew they were the unbodied spirits of the Four Sisters. Knew there was no way I could ever move fast enough to catch them.

And then, from out of my blurred vision came the clear image of Ursala stepping toward me and putting her tiny hand on my sword arm. There was no look of sickness in her eyes. But there was a look of concern, a concern I could feel for me and my condition, and far from any fear for her own safety. With great effort, I moved my head to look down at her.

“Grandfather, do not strain yourself so. This is only a vivid dream we share together. Nothing more. It is only my sisters come to talk. This is not real, and no one is in danger. Rest, grandfather. Put Helvinghar back to bed. It will not be needed tonight.”

It was her image. It was her voice. But it was an older—far older—Ursala talking to me. Her voice was soft and measured and filled with a calm assurance far beyond her tender years.

A thought floated across my consciousness. Was I talking to the present Ursala? Or was this an Ursala from the future, or from the past, giving me assurance? In the Netherworld, it was possible to talk to your alternate soul. A soul from the future. Or from the distant past. Manifestations of your soul which might or might not become true. It was this possibility just another factor which could drive a wizard to madness.

In my hand, the dragon’s scimitar vibrated with a life and power all its own. Forcing my head to turn, I gazed at the blade. It glowed a bright bronze. It seemed to be illuminating the entire cavern. And strangely, the lettering down the curved sides of the blade glowed as well. But they glowed a grayish-blue . . . and moved. Ancient dragon script danced before my eyes. I felt the power of the blade, felt it crying out at me to say something, to give it permission to act. I felt the emotion of it asking me to release it, to give it permission to wreak a terrible revenge on evil itself. I heard a strange dragon tongue in my mind, the words unknown to me, but the emotions painted in the words I understood completely. If I said something, a certain incantation perhaps in the same dragon tongue, it

would move and act on its own. It would destroy all Evil before it with a power of incomprehensible magnitude. All I had to do was recite the incantation.

I knew not what to say. I remained mute, both because I was unfamiliar with the dragon tongue it spoke, and because of the power of the Four Sisters. Their combined souls were keeping me as mute as a slave with his tongue cut out. It took all the effort I could muster just to stand and hold the scimitar in my hand. Even this was a total and complete surprise to the four wraiths dancing around me.

“Sisters, this creature moves and thinks like a true wizard! His powers are very strong.”

“Aye, his powers are too strong, sister. And with Helvinghar in his hands he becomes even stronger. If he ever learns the secrets of the Second Lord’s weapon, all will be lost! He must be destroyed, sisters. We must destroy him.”

“No! I will not let you harm grandfather. I forbid it!”

Around me, the blurred images of the Four Sisters twisted and turned and moved with an agitation. Ursala’s tiny voice spoke with a hard edge to it I had never before encountered. There was strength in that edge. A force of immense power. Even the Sisters backed away from her, now keeping at a respectful distance.

“But he is our enemy, child! He will become your enemy as well when you mature and inherit all your powers. He should be destroyed now before he has an opportunity to destroy you.”

“No!”

“You are a fool, Ursala. A fool! To think a man-thing can be trusted! To think you and this man-thing can revolt against the master’s will! What foolishness! What stupidity!”

“Leave! Return to the Netherworld. I no longer wish to tal—”

Whoosh! A wind as fierce as a hurricane seemed to fill my skull. A cold wind, colored black and formless, yet incredibly powerful. I blinked once, then twice . . . and suddenly, the blurred vision cleared, and I found myself not standing in the cavern, sword drawn and facing my foes. But still in my bedding, sitting up and moving my arm about wildly. Around me stood Gawain, Gawaith,

and Jojin Bok. On their drawn, pale faces were looks of panic and confusion. They were looking at me as if I had suddenly become a madman.

Kneeling beside me was Alvus Fairhands. His right hand gripped my shoulder with a firm, almost painful grip. His left hand he pressed across the child's fevered forehead. There was a look of deep concern on his lined, tanned face. But not concerned about my journeying into sudden madness. No, this Niscian monk knew what had taken place. He had heard and felt the entrance of the Four Sisters into this world. In laying hands on both me and the child, his powers as a Null Stone immediately banished them back into the Netherworld.

Feeling grateful, I laid a hand on his shoulder and told him my thanks. And then I looked down at the princess. Her sweat-drenched forehead still reflected the fever in her. But the shallow breathing of sickness was gone, replaced with the deep, measured breaths of someone who finally was sleeping soundly and peacefully. The Niscian's touch had indeed driven the Four Sisters from her mind as well.

"Sleep, Roland. I shall remain alert for the remainder of the night and keep the Netherworld at bay. This, I promise," the old man's voice spoke softly.

I nodded and said nothing more. Lowering myself back into the bedding I rolled over onto a shoulder and almost immediately went to sleep. It was a deep sleep I sorely needed. A long one without any dreams.

Soon after this encounter with the Four Sisters, Jojin Bok mounted his Great Wing, shouted a raucous farewell, and left us to begin his journey to the land of the Kelts. In silence the five of us watched as he and his bird lifted into the sky and turn toward the south. Not until he disappeared down the long and narrow valley did we turn our attention to something else. In each of my companions' hearts, I felt the same concerns. Would we ever see Jojin Bok again? Would he return by the end of next summer with his Keltic Great Wings? Would we, each of us, be alive by this Spring's first thaw?

All of us felt these questions lying on our souls like heavy weights. Heavy questions which we could not answer. The only thing we could do was to live our lives, in the time the gods gave us, as best as we possibly could. Live each day and endure. The questions about our individual futures, we could not

answer. All we could do was wait until the future became the past.



A week after the encounter with the Four Sisters, and far from the mountain valley we had the encounter in, I led the five of us to an old, abandoned farmstead deep in the Forests of Talamar. My thoughts were to rest a few days and prepare ourselves for the next leg of our journey. We had to leave the High Kanris and enter the rolling forests of the hill kingdoms below. But we could not use the normal routes leading down to the high country's base. All of the Kanris was afire with the desire to find the mad man of a Bretan monk who fought to protect a Pearl Princess from harm.

With each passing week of our journey, more and more Great Wing riders came to hunt for us. Down every valley, around every turn, I felt the presence of riders who eagerly sought to capture us and claim the bags of gold being offered as a reward. Evidently, the rewards were quite high, for the skies appeared to be filling with those eager to become wealthy. Soon, I knew, our luck would run out. If we did not leave the Kanris, a band of warriors would stumble onto our campsite and capture us. I had to take the princess, the twins, and the old man to safety. That safety was not in the Kanris. It was down in the hill country, far to the north and west of the towering shield wall, where hill forests slowly thinned out to finally meet the rolling sand dunes of a desert called The Desert of the Berlucetti. There, some months' travel away, between desert and forest lands, a range of small mountains gradually rose from out of the forest and ran twisting and turning in roughly a parallel line with the shield wall.

These mountains were called The Edge of The World. Strangely sparse of foliage, windswept and almost barren to the eye, they were an ominous set of sharp peaks and deep walled canyons that were treacherous to pass through. They were the stuff of which legends were made.

Everyone knew the Edge of The World was haunted. So powerful were the legends, neither man nor dragon willingly ventured close to them. Legends abounded of tales where stray groups of men and dragons, stumbling into the

maze of boxed-in canyons and labyrinth-like narrow gorges, found something within which made them go stark raving mad.

Here would be safety. Where every sane creature feared to tread would be the one place where a tiny Pearl Princess would find her sanctuary. But in order to get there we first had to travel through the High Kanris, and then, somehow, make our way down to the shield wall's base to traverse through more than a dozen kingdoms and six dragon baronies. To add to our difficulties, we were in the middle of deep summer. Winter, as it always does this far north, arrives with the suddenness of an invading army. Where on one day the air is pleasant and warm, the birds and forest animals making their usual noise as they hurry through their lives, and the sun rises high overhead with a burning ball of white light, by midnight of the same day, winter arrives dressed in the garb of a howling tempest. More times than not, these howling winds bring heavy snows and curtains of ice pellets the wind hurls with such force, they feel like a thousand tiny arrows piercing your skin.

Before winter arrived, I wanted us to be within the protective confines of The Edge of The World. Yet before we could even attempt to leave the Kanris and begin the journey, other matters forced us to linger far longer than prudence dictated we should. Oddly, Alvus Fairhands pointed out to me one of the issues needing to be addressed.

"Bretan, we cannot win this war with the Faraway Evil by ourselves. Nor can we even with the aid of a few hundred souls who might join our cause."

The old Niscian and I were kneeling in thick underbrush, bows in our hands with arrows notched to the strings, waiting for our evening meal to pass down a dark forest trail leading to a small mountain stream. In the Forests of Talamar, wild game was plentiful. The prospects of finding those who searched for us were extremely unlikely. We would take our time, hunt game and prepare it for our long trek ahead of us, and rest for a short duration. When next we moved, I firmly believed we would halt until we reached sanctuary. Or perished.

I said nothing, kneeling beside the old man, sensing his need to speak further.

"Our encounter with the Four Sisters the other night disturbs me. The child's powers are incredible. Such an encounter should not have happened. As a Null

Stone, my powers should have hooded and bound hers into submission. But her powers would not yield to mine. Not until I laid hands on the both of you at the same time. The next time she becomes ill, and her control is sapped from her conscience, I fear my powers will be inadequate.”

The flickering aura of two or more deer appeared first in my Inner Eye, and then audibly to the two of us, with the snap of a fallen branch being stepped on. Pulling back the arrow notched to the bowstring, I leaned toward the old monk and whispered softly.

“What would you advise, old friend?”

“We need help. We need the help of our religious orders combined. With warriors, with other wizards to help you train the child’s mind, with followers who have the same vision as you, we would have a better chance defeating our foes.”

The deer were approaching, as deer always do, very cautiously and ever alert. Yet they were still far enough way to not hear our conversation.

“I am afraid my brothers will brand me the heretic, if they have not done so already, and formally excommunicate me from all contact. Eventually they will send monks to destroy me. As , I am sure your sect has already done.”

The old man nodded, turning to peer into the forest to see if he could catch a glimpse of the approaching game. Seeing none, he returned his attention to me.

“Of course, they will react in such a way, warrior. Since they have no basis to honestly judge your actions, what other choice have they? You must go to them, Roland. Both to the Bretan High Council and to the Niscian Ruling Fathers and present your case formally.”

“You are asking the two oldest, and I might add the smallest, religious orders to shun a thousand years of doctrine. To consider the idea that the Fifth Sister, a Pearl Princess promised to come into this world by the Dark Lords to destroy all of mankind, might not be the evil incarnate prophecy paints?”

A wicked smile played across the old man’s lips and a light of devilish humor glittered in his yet clear and sharp eyes. “Well, if you put it that way, it does sound a bit daunting.”

A chuckle escaped from my lips, as one did from the old man. Just at that

moment, two deer stepped into the small clearing in front of us. As if one, we both stood and let loose our arrows.

Both found their mark and two very large does staggered a few steps down the forest trail before their legs buckled and fell barely twenty feet from our hiding place. Unstringing our bows, we pulled out long knives and started walking toward our waiting meals.

“A day’s ride east of here is the city of Karlsburg,” Fairhands began, kneeling to one knee by the deer he killed and looking at me as I knelt down beside mine. “There, you will find the Niscian monastery named The Monastery of a Thousand Candles. The abbot there is a monk named Constantine Marcellus. He was once a student of mine. Now he is one of the Ruling Fathers. Go to him. Explain all that has happened. He will listen.”

“But will he believe?” I asked, beginning the work of gutting and skinning my kill.

The old man could only answer in one fashion. Silently he shrugged and smiled whimsically. There was no way to know unless one tried.

CHAPTER 16



*None of us are innocent, my child
In the hearts of all, is
The potential for all the minions of Evil;
Of hate, lust, murderous desire, treachery.
In truth, because Evil's seeds are in the hearts
Of us all. Evil can never
Be destroyed.*

— FROM THE BOOK OF ST. ALBANS

SOMETIMES THE GODS ARE PERNICIOUS. SOMETIMES THEY ACT IN WAYS WHICH appear to be incredibly cruel and harsh. We, the children of the gods, quake with fear and cry out when the divine exhibits its mysteries to us in ways we find incomprehensible. We desire comprehension. We desire understanding. And more than anything else, we desire to be accepted for what we are.

What we are is both divine and flawed. The spark of the divine is that spark which gives us conscious thought. To know the difference between right and wrong. And to be granted the gift of choice. We can choose the path we will follow. We can follow the Path of Righteousness. Or we can take the trail of the Dark Powers. Or, for a few, there is the third choice—that being the Trail of Indifference.

Many of us try to walk the first path—the path of righteousness. To be

righteous does not mean to be dogmatic or fearful of committing sin at every turn we make on our path. Nor have this sense that we are undeserving in whatever good fortune might come our way. To be righteous does not mean we are judgmental. We refrain from our natural urges to condemn others. We try not to act as if our ways are superior to all others. And all others are, obviously, of inferior rank and order. To be righteous means we curb our natural appetites for the excessive. We do nothing in our daily lives in excess. We try not to overeat. We do not overdrink to excess. We refrain from being both too serious and too jovial. Everything we try to do, we try to do in moderation. To be righteous is to be willing to live with a mind, heart, and soul filled with moderation. It is a path filled with contradictions, of dichotomies of both denial and gracious acceptance.

Down the path of the Dark Powers many more of us walk. And why not? The path of the Dark Powers is an enticing journey. Like an alluring seductress, she promises instant gratification, and even more satisfyingly, gratification without the cumbersome baggage of guilt attached. All vices are accepted and openly encouraged. There are no restraints. To be quite candid, there is an exhilarating sense of freedom walking this path. To do as you please—to rape, pillage, kill without guilt—is the freedom of absolutes. With no guilt comes no responsibility.

Ah, and then there is the third path. The Path of Indifference. A path that beckons those who are, more than anything else, afraid of living. To walk this path is to know one has a conscience. To walk this path means one feels guilt. Those who walk this path understand the true meanings of what is good and what is evil. They have appetites that constantly cry out and are never satisfied. To walk this path means one never confronts that which is evil. Nor applauds those who do. Nor do they help those who wish to nurture the basic goodness in our hearts. Fear, indefinable and vacuous in nature, acts like a natural barrier refraining the indifferent from activity. The indifferent knows not why he acts the way he does. He just does.

There is, pilgrim, a price to be paid for any of the three paths one finds himself traversing. Two of the three paths are paths wide and without many hills

or deep crevices to pass over. These two have paths laid smooth and flat, and comfortable to travel on. Yet, for all that, in the end, there is a severe price to be paid within one's soul.

The third path, difficult and torturous to travel, has nothing but steep inclines and seemingly bottomless pits to fall into. The path is narrow, sometimes so narrow, the cutting edge of a fine razor is far wider than the path itself. This path asks one to deny themselves more pleasures than they would naturally partake. Yet at the same time, to enjoy and be thankful for the few pleasures that come their way. To follow this difficult path is to live with the thought one might find themselves hurtling into the oblivion of darkness at the very next moment. And this thought, in itself, becomes just another one of the pitfalls one has to live with and be wary of. Yet, for all of the difficulties in choosing this path, there is a reward that far exceeds those that can be found on any other chosen path.

I confess, this is a long and rambling preamble to what befell the city of Karlsburg. But so necessary to truly understand the confusion and anger which swept over me as I fled from its burning funeral pyre. When the gods act in such a deleterious manner, when they act in a way which, at first glance, seems so antithetical to their true nature, one cannot help but flee in anger and confusion. As I did when I fled from the burning city.

I entered Karlsburg riding my Cedric. Yes, I took a measured chance in being recognized by just being strapped in the saddle of my magnificent war bird. But Cedric's coloration of black body with red accents on wing tips and plume are rather common among Great Wings. Only someone who had seen us together and recognized the natural movement of our bodies as we flew through the air, might have recognized us. A warrior and his Great Wing act as a team. Over the years, they develop a natural flow of movements which complement each other. This discernable orchestra of movement and fluidity is as recognizable as one's face.

In the saddle of Cedric I entered the rather large city of Karlsburg in disguise. On my left side hung the curved steel the Four Sisters had referred to as Helvingshar, sheathed and hidden in its plain wooden and leather scabbard. From my right waist hung the wide, but short iron blade of a sword called a

Gladius. Whereas a dragon scimitar is a slashing blade designed to cut through chain mail and bone in one powerful sweep of the arm, a Gladius is designed to thrust straight into one's enemy. It is a weapon most deadly in close combat.

A number of warrior styles accentuate a two-blade attack, with perhaps the most famous coming from the warriors from the Kingdom of Iberius. An Iberian swordsman identifies himself by wrapping a dark, emerald green cloth diagonally across his torso, right shoulder to left hip, trimmed in gold thread. One finds such swordsmen everywhere in the Kanris. The kingdom produces far more warriors than it can employ. So large numbers leave their kingdom to find employment elsewhere. I knew Karlsburg would have a large contingent of such warriors. I would slip into the city unnoticed.

The city itself was a large frontier city of wooden logs and very few buildings constructed of stone. A wooden palisade of thick logs stacked tightly together, three logs deep, surrounded the city. Five gates cut through the walls, with five wide boulevards, all unpaved, dissecting the city. As many as five thousand souls called this rough, unrefined, yet sturdy and vibrantly alive city their own. Composed mostly of farmers and various mining interests, Karlsburg was nominally loyal to a small kingdom called Barakas. But, in truth, like all the cities who professed their allegiance to the Barakian kings, Karlsburg truly was a free city.

The Kingdom of Barakas was more like a loose federation of high mountain frontier towns. It left in peace each of the kingdom's four cities to follow their own paths, giving only nominal servitude to their king. In times of strife the cities would piece together a makeshift army of peasants and a few hired mercenaries. But so far from the normal routes of commerce and offered so little in the way of true riches, the greedy and powerful left Barakas alone.

Which is the reason why the relatively small Niscian Order chose Karlsburg to build one of its three large monasteries. The Monastery of a Thousand Candles sat on a bluff overlooking both the wide Thangius River and the city itself. Five buildings and a large distinctive Niscian cathedral, all made of logs, graced the bluff behind a stout wall of stone. Perhaps two hundred monks and initiates lived and worshiped in peace here. Its monastic order specialized in the

Art of the Bow, and from my vantage point in the saddle of my descending Cedric, I noticed the three well-kept practice ranges behind the monastic compound.

Here a Niscian warrior-monk would become a master bowman. It would, like most monastic training, take at least two full years of arduous dedication to become proficient. In that time, the warrior-monk would learn Niscian philosophy, Niscian medicine, and the many other arts that ultimately comprise the complete monk. When he was done, he would leave and journey to a different monastery to begin the training either in the Art of the Sword or the Art of the Lance. Or, if this were the last stop in his training, he would complete his final warrior-monk tests, and if successful, would participate in the formal rituals that would make him a true warrior-monk. He would be sent out into the Outer Realms where he would, as all monks must, serve those who are in need.

Of the four major religious orders which thrived in the kingdoms of man, the Niscian Order claimed the fewest in numbers. Perhaps no more than nine hundred Niscians served the small group of followers who were loyal to the Niscian Way. And of that number, no more than three among them walked as a trained wizard-warrior.

We Bretan were not much larger in number. In truth, thanks to the pogroms generated by the Rogarian and Lotharian Orders which swept like a raging forest fire through the High Kanris, hunting down and putting to the sword anything and everything which might be Bretan, hardly any of us were left in the high country. The survivors of these manhunts fled to the foothill kingdoms in the hopes of finding refuge. What once had been the largest and oldest of the religious orders was now reduced to perhaps a thousand in number. The vast majority of my brethren would be found below, in the foothill kingdoms, where we slowly were bringing new converts into our flock. Only in one mountain kingdom could a Bretan monastery be found.

Combine the Niscian and Bretan numbers, and you would have less than a third of the total numbers who were Rogarian. But even that pales when compared to the numbers found in the largest order. The Lotharians are said to have over ten thousand monks and as many nuns serving their flocks. Their

power and wealth could be found in every kingdom in the high country. Their presence in the foothill kingdoms was not so encompassing. But it was growing, and in its growth, becoming more and more of a threat to the Bretan.

I knew Constantine Marcellus well. For a monk still relatively young yet vigorous in his ministry, he possessed a gentle wisdom. His skills as a physician were unsurpassed. Marcellus' rise to prominence within his order was not surprising to hear. He was not, as you might suspect, a warrior-monk. In truth, the vast majority of monks within any order are far from being such. Overall the typical monk is a devout believer. They are trained first to guide the congregations who are in need of religious guidance. True, all monks are trained in a rudimentary form of martial arts. And the prelate who led the Monastery of a Thousand Candles was an accomplished bowman. But he was no warrior-monk. In an unforgiving world where mercy is a word hardly uttered, it is prudent to learn such basics. The vast majority of monks are trained in the arts of healing. They are trained to be teachers, teaching the peasantry how to read and write, as well as how to look upon a cruel world with a philosophical heart.

The abbot was a wondrous physician and a dynamic leader. He had a gift for bringing the Niscian creed to those who were in need. Wherever he went the numbers in converts to the Niscian Way increased tenfold.

Now he led The Monastery of a Thousand Candles. Walking through the busy streets of the city and listening to many of its inhabitants' casual conversations, I was not surprised to hear the monastery prospered. The people were both pleased and proud such an important monastic order could be found in their city. Country folk and city folk packed the large cathedral constructed of logs on every occasion to hear the abbot speak. It was obvious from seeing the happy and vibrantly alive faces of the population that the monastery provided the best of healthcare. I saw no sickness, no wayward souls lounging in the shadows, no waifs running around in rags, begging for handouts.

I found it pleasing to walk down the city's wide but unpaved streets and observe the sights. Vendors were out hawking their wares with verve and energy I found refreshing to observe. Farmers had produce in abundance and were conducting a brisk trade. I bought myself a small loaf of freshly baked bread and

a large portion of cheese. As I walked the city's streets I ate, and listened, and felt the life and vitality of the city. I liked the rough and simple peasant folk who lived here. They were open, honest, and unrestrained in their words. This last quality I found quite curious before I realized no royal Barakian family resided in the city. There were no noble families in Karlsburg. The Barakian kingdom was not like that of Lothar or Rogaria. There was no stifling caste system to be found segregating people into the warrior caste, the merchant caste, the clergy, or the noble-born. The Niscian Creed did not require such a rigid system of social order. Nor did the Bretan.

But the larger orders did. As did the more powerful kingdoms within the high country. One was born into a caste, and one died in the same caste. Rare was the person who found a way to lift himself out of one and enter another. Here, in Karlsburg, such artificial barriers hardly seemed necessary.

Since I had to wait until late into the evening to enter the monastery, I thought I would find an inn filled with the city's natives, drink a glass of wine or two, and listen in on the conversations. It did not take long to find such an establishment. Loud, crowded, filled with peasant folk who wanted to drink and eat some but converse with friends more, I found a small table almost in the center of the inn. Surrounding me were tables groaning with tankards of ale and platters of food and occupied by large groups of either warriors, farmers, laborers and merchants. The news from far and wide. I anticipated, as I ordered a large bottle of chilled wine and a platter of cheese, recent events throughout the high country would be the center of conversation. I was not mistaken.

"Did you hear the latest news about the Vik?" one gruff Cingalese warrior from far-off Cingala rumbled, lowering his empty tankard.

The eight or so warriors sitting at the same table, from eight different kingdoms, shook their heads no and waited for the Cingalese to continue.

"The Vik still hold Odar's Lair. It is said now the dragon army standing before it numbers more than fifty thousand. Fifty thousand!"

"I heard more than a dozen dragon clans, clans never seen by any human before now, have been identified. More arrive with each passing day." a badly scarred, older warrior from the Kingdom of Stagnar growled through his white

beard. "The Vik cannot hold out much longer."

Everyone nodded in agreement, concern clearly observable in their eyes. One red-headed giant from the Ostragoths, dressed in the traditional Gothic leather armor, with his long battle axe leaning against one edge of the table, shook his head and glared back at his comrades.

"This is a bad omen, friends. The Vik fight for their lives and warriors from a hundred kingdoms rush to their aid. But at the very same time, the Rogarians decide to attack the small stronghold of Hemstead. Hemstead! Why there? It is nothing but a small city sitting high in the mountains above the Rogarian eastern border. A city with no more than two or three thousand souls and a pitifully small army. What does the mighty Rogarians want with Hemstead?"

"Ah, that is easy enough, friend," replied a different warrior, a warrior dressed in fine chain mail and a full cloth jerkin made of brightly color silk, grinned as he turned to look at the Ostragothl "It is not the city they want. It is the mountain pass they wish to possess in which the stronghold sits."

"Aye," nodded the shaved bald head of an oriental looking Shin warrior. "The pass leads to the fertile lands of Niscia. The Niscians have iron and coal mines in abundance. As well as valleys that produce many different grains. The Rogarians desire to take them for their own. The first step in attempting such a robbery is to possess the doorway which will let them in."

"Bah!" rumbled the Ostragoth, slamming a meaty hand down powerfully on the rough wooden table and rattling tankards and platters of food. "We should be fighting dragons and not each other! Rogarians are fools. Their lust for land is going to throw the High Kanris into bickering fools fighting each other for another acre of farmland. They're idiots!"

Behind the Ostragoth, leaning against the long oak bar of the inn, with a frothy beer stein in one hand, was the sharply angular face of a Rogarian rider, dressed in Rogarian royal blue. He turned to stare at the back of the bearded giant. There was not a look of brotherly love on the warrior's face. But he was the only Rogarian in the room. For a few seconds he stared at the unsuspecting Ostragoth, then quickly finished his beer, and wiped the froth from his mouth before stepping away from the bar and making his way through the crowd to the

inn's exit.

I frowned at his the Rogarian leaving so quietly. On matters of honor, Rogarians did not retreat. This one's quiet escape from the loud and heavily packed inn created an ill feeling in my gut. If there were others of his breed in the city and he was leaving to gather them for a return visit, I suspected soon there would be a sizable brawl erupting. If this were a possibility, perhaps it would be better if I quietly left and find another inn. I wished not to be pulled into a fight which could spill escalate into something far more deadly.

But as I was rising from the table to my left, the hushed voice of a man's whisper caught my attention.

"Brothers, have you heard the news? The Ruling Fathers have decreed this warrior-monk who calls himself Roland of the High Crag an enemy of all things Niscian. He has been labeled a *Malus Apostate*! It is said he has renounced all of his religious vows and now worships the dragon goddess Siva, the Goddess of Death!"

"God's love embrace us!" several of the other simple woodsmen exclaimed at the same time, a common Niscian expletive, making the sign of the Petitioner's Cross in front of them.

"I heard the Rogarians have a reward out for the man's head. Ten thousand pieces of silver to the one who delivers it to a Rogarian monk or monastery. Ten thousand pieces of silver! Can you imagine such wealth? What I could do with a reward like that!"

"He came to our village once and agreed to preach one Sunday. It was obvious he was a Bretan monk—"

"Shhhh!!" several woodsmen hissed at the same time, throwing up hands to silence their comrade and looking around with panic on their faces at those sitting close to them.

"Do not use that word, brother. There are many here who believe still the Bretan are the Children of the Devil. Say the word too loudly, and someone will overhear us."

The woodsman who was so rudely silenced nodded, color draining from his face, and leaned in closer to whisper more softly.

“I heard the man speak. I know he is a warrior-monk. A swordsman of some repute. But I tell you, I heard the man speak about living God’s Way. Of forgiving others of their many faults. He said evil comes in many shapes, but the evil most of us have to face on a daily basis is the evil of discontent. He preached to us to love our neighbors. Not hate them. He wanted us to care for each other without thinking that someday kindness would need to be repaid.

If this monk is a follower of Siva, then I must be the son of a Rogarian king!”

Several of the woodsmen smiled, relaxing somewhat in their looks of concern.

“But a *Malus Apostate*!” the first woodsman exclaimed loudly in a whisper. “It is a death sentence for the monk, and for anyone who associates with him. Even a suspicion one has been in contact with him after the Ruling Father’s decree would be enough to forfeit your life.”

“I heard,” another woodsman began, his voice in a low conspiratorial whisper, his eyes wide in fear, “he has made a pact with a dragon baron to bring a dragon child into the High Kanris. This child . . . do you think she could be the goddess Siva?”

The five woodsmen stared silently at each other and shrugged. I, on the other hand, sat back in the rough wooden chair and felt energy drain from me. *Malus Apostate*! Not just a branded heretic who had denounced his religious faith. *Malus Apostate* meant someone who not only renounced his beliefs, but actively wished to destroy, permanently and forever, the religion itself!

The Niscians branded me as someone so dangerous I, and all I came into contact, had to be put to the sword as quickly as possible. I felt as if I had been hit by the full force of the combined energy of all the wizards yet alive within the High Kanris. A weakness gripped me, and for a moment or two, despair came over me that was numbing to my very soul. No Niscian monk would dare speak to me now. No one who was faithful to the Niscian Creed would speak to me. Just the opposite. It was the duty of every Niscian, monk, or layman to find me and destroy me.

Despair’s steel grip tightened around my soul. The stark realization of how

immense the odds were stacked against the child me made the idea of even living another fortnight incomprehensible. And all the others, as well, were going to forfeit their lives. Eggar of Fyodor's Crossing and all the peasantry of that village were now equally condemned in the eyes of the Niscians. Jojin Bok, and whoever he might recruit to fight along with us, were condemned men. And the old Niscian monk, Alvus Fairhands, would be soon labeled as such once word reached the Ruling Fathers of his decision to join us.

I came to my feet, knowing what I had come to Karlsburg to accomplish, I still had to do. Even though now it meant all the monks within the monastery would be ten times more alert for my possible approach, and the best swordsmen in the monastery would be close to their abbot's side at all times. But I still had to confront him and explain to him my actions.

But the gods had other plans.

I turned to leave just as the inn's door flew open with force and in came fifteen Rogarian warriors. All fifteen had their faces set for combat, and as they pushed their way through the crowd to head for the table of warriors and toward the Ostragoth, I knew the whole inn was soon to explode.

"Friend," I said, stepping to the bearded oaf whose booming voice had been overheard. "Turn and defend yourself."

The Ostragoth looked up at me and grunted in surprise, and then turned to look over his shoulder. Seeing the approaching blue-clad warriors, he grunted again, as did several of his comrades at the table, but this time in pleasure.

"My thanks, Iberian. Now please, step back and give me room to move."

Ostragoths are not small people. They are, when compared to most people who live in the high country, large-boned, massively built giants. Coming to his feet I found myself surprised at looking up into the man's beard. He towered over me a good foot or more!

There was no time to escape the free-for-all which began the moment the Rogarians confronted the giant. The giant said not a word but grabbed the first blue-clad warrior in a grip so strong the Rogarian's eyes bulged from their sockets. With one jerk of his hands, the screaming Rogarian was flung high over the Ostragoth's head. And in another blinking of the eye, the bearded warrior heaved

the man halfway across the inn. There was a thunderous crash when the Rogarian came down, face first, into the middle of a table filled with pastries and delicacies. All who sat around that table were showered with food and drink from head to foot. Yelping in surprise, they all stood up and immediately bolted for the inn's exit.

That was the cue for the rest of the inn to partake in the festivities. As if of one mind the whole inn leapt at the throats of the Ostragoth, his friends, or at the Rogarians. I tried to move away from the carnage. But like a cork bobbing on the waves of a storm-tossed sea, I was hurled from one innocent bystander to the next. Several times I was hurled to one side and thrown to the floor. Several times I lifted myself off the floor only to be rudely tossed to one side again.

I clawed my way to the inn's exit. The bodies flying around, along with food and chairs and tankards of ale, made it an arduous task. And then, without warning, I was slammed to one side and straight into the back of a warrior dressed as a Lotharian merchant. But the moment we touched, I knew he was no such creature. There was a flash, a sudden stiff wind within my Inner Eye almost froze me to the floor, as a vision swept before me in a surreal vividness.

I saw riders, hundreds of riders, approaching Karlsburg. Riding Great Wings rigged for war, armed and dressed for battle, with the face-guards of their helms lowered as if they were going into battle. They were, even as I stood in the inn, approaching and soon to descend on the unsuspecting city. They were coming with one unifying purpose etched into their dark souls. They were coming to burn Karlsburg to the ground. To decimate the city's population and to destroy the monastery itself.

I came out of the premonition-state as rapidly as I entered it when someone violently heaved me to one side. Staggering off a table, I turned and tried to find the warrior who had given me the horrifying premonition. But the Lotharian was gone. He had immersed himself into the free-for-all and disappeared from view.

I tore myself through the crowd and clawed my way to freedom. Running a few feet to one side of the inn, surprised but laughing onlookers observing the sudden festivities of a brawl erupting before their eyes, stared at me as I turned and faced the east. Closing my eyes, I tried to calm myself and allow my Inner

Eye to scan the near horizon. A sense of overwhelming dread engulfed me. Not more than an hour away, I felt the maleficent presence of approaching warriors. I could feel their collective consciousness. They were eagerly anticipating the profits they would make in raping and pillaging Karlsburg.

Opening my eyes, I turned, perhaps like that of a man suddenly going mad, and stared at the laughing crowd. Within the inn, the noise of the brawl continued unabated. Occasionally, a body or two came hurling out of control with flailing arms and legs out of a door or a window. No one I observed had any inkling of what was approaching. And there was no way to warn them. If I opened my mouth and told them to flee for their lives, they would have pointed at me and laughed even harder. I was the crazy Iberian who cried wolf.

I collected my senses and straightened my disguise. Turning, I began swiftly walking to the open gate which would lead me to the bridge that crossed the Thangis River. If I hurried to the monastery and convinced them of the approaching danger, there was a chance the bowmen among the ranks of the monks might be able to save themselves and a few of the city's people.

But there was a problem with this plan. If I approached in my disguise as an Iberian swordsman, I knew none would believe me. They too would think I was crazy with too much drink and was exclaiming foolishness. If I was going to quickly convince the monastery of the approaching danger, there was only one course left open to me.

I would enter the monastery, openly and brazenly, in broad daylight as a Bretan monk. The Bretan monk they were anticipating. I had to find a way to convince them of their approaching doom before their combined might cut me to pieces.

How I was to accomplish this, I had no idea.

CHAPTER 17



What is this thing called Truth, my child?

Two minds see the same event, yet each see what they only wish to see.

Two hear the words of a reverend master, yet each hears not what the other heard: Truth is a fleeting thought; a chivalrous ideal.

Nothing more. Nothing more.

— FROM THE BOOK OF ST. ALBANS

I RAN ACROSS THE WIDE BRIDGE SPANNING THE THURINGIS RIVER. ON THE FAR bank, overlooking the river, the massive Niscian cathedral had brightly colored banners flying from its four corners. It seemed in the warm summer's sun so inviting and so peaceful. Hundreds of people, followers of the faith, were either coming from or going to the cathedral to worship. As I ran past them, many stopped to stare at me with worried looks before turning and hurrying away.

I felt the approaching of the Great Wings growing within me. I sensed the force approaching was large enough to wipe away the meager defenses the city might attempt like someone might swat away an annoying fly. Karlsburg was not a city that had a ruling family or a royal appointee governing it. There was no such thing as the king's soldiers manning its walls or flying Great Wings over its many buildings in constant vigilance, as would be found in other kingdoms. What was the need? This was Karlsburg, a wild frontier city high in the wild

craggs of the Barakan Mountains and leagues away from the rest of civilization. This was not a city of riches. There were no rich temples dressed in gold and jewels, with their coffers filled with the riches of pilgrims leaving offerings at journey's end. Nor were there palaces of rich merchants or powerful nobles. This was but a peasant's city, an insignificant city in an out-of-the-way place. Why would anyone want to destroy it?

I entered the manicured and pruned gardens and grounds surrounding the cathedral almost out of breath and sweat flowing from my brow. Several dozen worshipers, quiet and reverent, were moving down the wide, white-gravel paths toward the cathedral's steps. None were armed. It was the custom the Niscians had of having all who came to worship remove their weapons and enter the sacred grounds as equals. Kings were welcomed as well as peasants. But none stepped on sacred soil bearing weapons.

I hurried down the widest gravel walk toward the cathedral with the sheathed blade of the dragon scimitar in my left hand and the short blade of the sheathed Gladius still stuck into my sword belt. Several women screamed and several men, though unarmed, hurried to bar my way of approach toward the cathedral. And then, in the blink of an eye, I was surrounded by Niscian monks. Each was a young man, a warrior trainee, and each was unarmed. They wore the traditional short gray cloth jerkin and wide gray cloth pants all Niscian monks wore. But the way they set their feet and turned their bodies as they faced me, told me all were very skilled in hand-to-hand combat. None of them were afraid to confront what appeared to be a deranged Iberian swordsman. Thankfully, none of them were wizards. I wished not to have a fight in open daylight on sacred soil with a Niscian wizard.

I stopped, my chest heaving from my run, and slowly turned and looked at them all. Precious time was slipping away for setting up a proper defense for the city. I had to do something quickly to convince them I was not an Iberian.

So, with a sweep of my hand, I acted. Pulling from my face the mask I fashioned out of rubber, a device I perfected myself, I heard the gasps of the monks as the face of an ordinary Iberian swordsman was replaced by the face they all recognized. And now despised.

“I am Roland of the High Crag. And I have come to warn you of approaching danger.”

“We do not hear your words, heretic. Your words are like a passing breeze. They have no meaning. Disarm yourself and prepare your soul for eternal damnation.”

A thin smile pulled on the corners of my lips. As a monk, I knew I should be humble. I knew I should relish not the rush of sensual exhilaration I felt before entering combat. But I never desired to control this feeling. In the past, this heightened sense of the present helped me in every encounter. I felt this sensation now warming my blood and making everything so much clearer and brighter. I could not help but smile.

“Listen to the passing wind and be warned. A large group of riders approaches the city from the east. Their intent is to burn and pillage the city and the monastery. They will be here within the hour.”

For a response three of the unarmed monks attacked from three different directions. Each gave out their warrior’s screams and leapt at me in various kick moves. They were properly and very fast. But not fast enough. Using body and feet, and the broadside of the sheathed scimitar in my hand, I blocked each kick and sent all three flying across the gravel paths with countermoves. Each monk landed with a hard crash into the gravel, flat on their backs and in deep pain. None came to their feet.

“We waste time, brothers, in this foolish exercise. You know who I am. You know my powers. I am Roland of the High Crag. Warrior-monk of the First Rank of my brotherhood. I come not to harm anyone but to save as many as I can.”

“Once of the Bretan, apostate!” a voice rang out from the Niscian ranks. A voice filled with hate and rancor. “The Bretan labeled you as we have. *Malus Apostate!* You no longer are Bretan, but a condemned creature who must die for his sins!”

Two more fearless monks leapt at me. This time their attacks were coordinated. One came in low, and one came in high. One attacked from the front and the other from the rear. But the results were the same. With little effort,

I blocked each attack and, using hands and again the broadside of the sheathed sword, sent them flying through the air to join their comrades who came before them.

“Stand, my brothers, and let the abbot pass!”

The command was loud with a harsh clarity that captured the attention of all. Half-turning, but still in a fighting stance, I saw the approach of a warrior-monk dressed in full chain mail with his straight sword glistening in the sun and at the ready. But he moved in the fashion of someone providing a defense for someone and not as someone ready to attack. I recognized the warrior. I knew him well. He was a superb swordsman who could, if I did not fight with firm resolve and precise focus, easily defeat me with his straight blade.

But the warrior, whom I respectfully greeted by raising the sheathed sword in my hand, pommel in the vertical position, made no move to attack. He stood in front of the unarmed monk dressed in the traditional tan cloth of a Niscian abbot. The basic uniform of a lowly monk was the same as that of an abbot, except the abbot’s jerkin and wide pants would perhaps be of better cloth and almost a sand color. No other accouterments or markings would distinguish an abbot from a monk except by the color of the garments. It was the Niscian way of simplicity. A simplicity which I greatly admired.

“Heretic, stay your hand for a moment and shed no blood on sacred soil,” the warrior-monk said quietly but firmly, coming to a halt, sword arm and sword extended at a right-angle from his body. His eyes behind his helm’s visor locked upon my eyes and merciless to behold. “The abbot of these grounds wishes no harm to befall you or to his children.”

Behind him, Constantine Marcellus, his eyes severe and a frown on his face, watched me while standing directly behind his armored protector. He was a small man of delicate built. Yet I felt the steel in the man’s soul. He may not have been warlike in nature. He knew he could not defend himself against me, if by some incredible stroke of fortune, or by the use of my wizardry powers, I chose to wipe away with one motion of the hand all who stood before me. For the prelate to come out into the open and to approach someone so labeled as a dangerous heretic such as I, only confirmed my opinion of the man. Warrior or

not, the abbot was a brave man.

“Greetings, Bobar of Faraway,” I began, nodding to the warrior standing before me with the drawn sword, grinning. “Sheath your weapon, old friend. No blood will be shed by me here this day. This, I promise.”

The swordsman did not move, nor acknowledge my greeting, until one hand gently touched the warrior’s free arm. Bobar turned his head to glance at his abbot and nodded. With an amazing speed of the hand, his wicked blade disappeared into its sheath, and he stepped to one side.

The small-framed abbot stepped around the warrior, nodding to the warrior his appreciation for obeying his silent command, and turned to me. Claspings both hands together, he lifted them in front of his face and nodded his head in the common greeting one Niscian might give respectfully to another. To return his respectful greeting, I came out of my fighting stance, faced the abbot directly and returned the silent greeting.

“You do us a great injustice coming here, heretic. In fact, you may do more harm than you can imagine. Just talking to you may have condemned us all to death.”

“I am the wind,” I began, knowing full well what he felt and feeling concerned as well. But an even more pressing danger was approaching. “So, allow the wind to move through the trees without a further notice. But prepare your monastery, old friend. Send others to rouse the city and warn them. My Inner Eye sees Great Wings approaching. They come to do great harm to one and all.”

“They come at your bidding?”

“They do not. I know not who they are or why they come. But they come, and they will be here within the hour. I fear for your life, abbot, and for the lives of my Niscian brothers.”

“Once, long ago, we may have been brothers,” the abbot sighed, real grief flashing across his face before it was replaced with an unreadable mask. “But no longer. Now, you worship Siva and the dragon. Your soul, and our friendship, have been forfeited and consigned to the burning Pits of Hell.”

Bobar of Faraway turned his head partially to one side and, with a flick of

one hand, made a tiny gesture to one of the monks who still encircled me. A young monk nodded, turned, and moved quickly away. Moments later, the same monk, strapped into the saddle of a Great Wing, rose from behind the great cathedral in front of us and turned toward the east. My smile widened. The experienced warrior in chain mail apparently heard in the wind a vague warning of danger and wished to confirm or deny its presence.

“Allow the wind to move past you, old friend, while we wait for your servant to return. There is much that must be said, and so little time to express it all.”

The old abbot smiled sadly and nodded. None of the other monks moved from their positions around me, and the armed warrior never took his eyes from my face, nor once relaxed from his vigilance. Nor did I expect them to. They knew their duty and they would accomplish the deed of exterminating me the moment their abbot gave the word. But for now, one and all were content to hear me speak. I did not hesitate.

I told them all that had that had fallen upon shoulders. I left nothing out. I told them of my yearlong service defending the Baron Anktooth from the onslaught of the Hartooth hordes. I told them of the old baron’s request I place his last remaining kinfolk, his tiny granddaughter Ursala, under my protection. I told them the child was a Pearl Princess, amidst the startled gasps of a dozen or more monks, and I told them why I gave my oath as freely as I did.

I told them everything. I even told them about their revered Alvus Fairhands joining me in my impossible quest. To this all who stood surrounding me reacted in stunned disbelief. It was not until I withdrew from my belt a small scroll written in the firm hand of the old monk and handed it to the abbot before true astonishment settled in among the crowd.

Constantine Marcellus read Alvus Fairhands’s scribbled note twice before he looked up and at me, his face drained of color. He silently folded the note and slipped it into his trousers. For several long moments he said nothing. But I could feel within his soul a great turmoil. Part of him wanted to believe me. A large part wanted to believe the words his revered teacher from years past relayed to him. But an equally large part wanted to reject everything I had uttered. It wanted him to renounce me before those standing around me and to

give the order for them to send me into the Netherworld. For several moments he said nothing. And when he did finally speak, his words surprised me. And gave me the first glimmer of hope during this long trek into darkness.

“The wind sometimes can blow even the oldest of trees and the stoutest of walls into ruin. If the trees have roots that have rotted away, and the walls have no firm foundations.”

I smiled again, saying nothing. His words were enough. In their vagueness was the glimmer of hope I so appreciated. Here was a Niscian who struggled to accept my newfound status. Struggled even more with it now that he had listened to my words and read the note from his old tutor. And moments later, with the startling return of the young monk and his Great Wing, he found himself struggling even more with his doubts.

The young monk, riding his war bird, almost dropped directly on top of us in his hurried descent. Leaping from his saddle, he ran to his abbot and hurriedly spoke in a heated whisper, raising a hand to point toward the east and the south. Constantine did not visually react in any way until his monastic brother finished speaking. And then, turning to Bobar of Faraway, he spoke quietly for a few seconds. The warrior nodded, and as his abbot turned to glance at me with a nod before moving away, he barked out a few crisp orders.

Pandemonium exploded within the monastery. Those who surrounded me swiftly disappeared and ran as fast as they could to the four corners of the monastery's compound. From somewhere behind the cathedral a great iron gong, actually a huge hollow iron pillar more than eight feet long and suspended vertically by ropes from wooden beams, began to chime in a deeply melodic repetition. More monks appeared, this time dressed in chain mail and armed with bows and arrows. They began taking positions all around me. Other monks raced across the bridge toward the city. Moments later, I counted six Great Wings rising from the city's largest landing towers, climbing steeply into the cloudless sky. And then, more Great Wings took to flight. But these did not linger above the city. They lifted into the air and turned west and began racing away. As I watched more and more Great Wings rise and began to follow the first fleeing specks, a great sadness filled my heart. Few would be those who would stand

and defend a nearly defenseless Karlsburg.

In all this time, Bobar of Faraway did not take his attention from me, nor move one muscle. Not until he was sure his abbot was far from this place did he suddenly unsheathe his sword and take a menacing step toward me. Yet I made no effort to defend myself. I had promised I would shed no blood on Niscian sacred soil, as they had promised, and I believed their word. My belief was confirmed in the warrior's actions.

Stepping very close to me, so close that only I and no other would hear his words, the mailed and helmed warrior spoke softly, but succinctly to no one in particular.

"The wind has no boundaries to confine him. He comes and goes as he pleases. He should not stay long in any given place. He should fear those who may wish to bottle him up and subdue his spirit. Go in peace, fair wind. Fair thee well."

The warrior stepped back, his eyes locked on mine, and paused. Then, ever so gently, he nodded before turning and leaving me standing alone in front of the cathedral. For a moment I watched him move toward the cathedral. A sad smile played across my lips. Officially, the monks could truthfully say they had not conversed with a *Malus Apostate*. Only the wind had blown, and the possible image of a heretic had played before their eyes. And the wind, we all know, can bring with it voices from far away and specters who are without substance.

With a sad heart I turned and looked into the sky above me. Raising my right hand, I saw the black speck riding the winds just underneath the clouds, more than five hundred feet above me. As I watched, the black war bird folded its wings back and begin dropping like a stone toward the ground. The dot expanded with startling rapidity, and then with a flourishing of wings flapping with a powerful fury, creating a near hurricane of wind, Cedric came to a landing not more than ten feet from me.

Climbing into his saddle, we quickly departed from The Monastery of a Thousand Candles just as, from over the horizon, a black cloud appeared and began moving toward the city.

CHAPTER 18



*Within our souls, each of us carry
the seeds of Evil, pilgrim.
Along with hatred, and of rage and revenge.
Waiting, sulking in the darkness,
In times of despair, in times
Of desperation,: To leap out into the world we know
And wreak havoc on friend and foe alike.*

— FROM THE BOOK OF ST. ALBANS

KARLSBURG BURNED FOR MORE THAN A WEEK IN A FIERY, SMOKE-FILLED inferno. For days those who came to destroy the town and the monastery murdered and raped and pillaged without remorse. Hundreds of women and children were spared, thrown into holding pens, and later taken away to be sold as slaves. In big nets, the women and children were thrown in and then one-and-all were lifted up into the air by a gaggle of six to eight birds and flown away to slave pens in distant cities. Families were ripped apart. Husbands and fathers murdered before their eyes. Atrocities beyond human words description committed.

And I, Bretan wizard-warrior and monk—I who only wanted to protect a dragon child from a powerful evil—stood on a mountain top and watched thousands die before my eyes. And I did nothing to stop it. In my heart, I knew I

was the one who brought this horrible end to the people of Karlsburg. Because I wanted to protect a tiny Pearl Princess, because I wished to defy the Dark Lords and their ancient prophecies, because I wanted to believe . . . truly believe!. . . that our world could be a better one where dragon and man could live in harmony and peace. It was I who killed the citizens of Karlsburg more so than those who actually carried fire and sword.

And I . . . powerful wizard !. . . did nothing to stop it. I knew I could conjure up a mighty incantation which would have incinerated half of the dark horde of Great Wings with one blow. Or I could have placed an invisible shield of energy over the city which would have kept the marauders out. They would have repeatedly crashed into the invisible shield, sending bird and his rider sliding off and into the ground much like a drop of water slides off the curved surface of an upside-down porcelain cup.

But I did nothing. I did nothing knowing how helpless I truly was in spite of having these terrible wizardry powers. Awe-inspiring power at the tip of one's finger to command is a terrible burden strapped around one's neck like a heavy anchor of stone. Yes, I could have killed all who attacked Karlsburg. At least two thousand Great Wings and their riders were involved in the city's decimation. I could have killed them all. Killed them all with just the wave of my hand. And in doing so, I would have saved many thousands. But, in truth, I could not use my powers with such terrible intent. A price is paid every time a wizard dips into the Netherworld and accesses a portion of its Dark Powers. The more power the power used, the higher the consequences the wizard must pay.

A wizard can be consumed by the Dark Powers with infinite ease if he overextends himself in its use. Most of our training as wizards is not in how to use the power naturally in our possession. A wizard is born a wizard. The natural ability to manipulate the powers of the Netherworld is already present in each person who lives long enough to become a wizard. As my old masters often said, "A wizard's power is in his blood." And it is true. So our training to become a wizard is first learning how to tap into this power and to manipulate it. But more, so much more, of our training consists of how to control it and keep it from sliding us into madness.

A wizard's power is a deadly narcotic. The more it is used, the more the narcotic effects tries to overwhelm one's control. For a wizard to conjure up a massive jolt of Dark Power is a formula for the Dark Power to overwhelm the wizard's self-control.

And as I watched the city burn and hundreds of its innocent citizens hunted down by packs of murderous Great Wings and their riders and put to the sword, the more my rage and sense of helplessness seized me. If I succumbed to the desire to exact revenge using the powers of the Netherworld I possessed, I knew my revenge would have no limits. And in the end, I would have leapt into that crevice of blood-crazed madness. A madness from which no one has ever returned from.

But by the third day of watching the pillagers linger on and on and continuing their hunt for survivors so they could end their terror-filled lives, I could no longer stand beside my Cedric and do nothing. Pilgrim, I confess I did horrible things in the short time I lingered close to the burning city. I used not magic to exact a sense of revenge. But I did use my warrior and hunting skills. Together Cedric and I hunted the hunter. Wherever we found five or less Great Wings and their riders, we attacked. Mostly we hunted at night, when we knew the marauders would make camp in the forest around the burning city. Whenever we found small groups of them, we crashed into their midst and killed them all.

It is a horrible confession, I know. Horror has no meaning to you in the sense as it has for me. You cannot imagine what a Great Wing trained for war can do to hapless warriors caught off-guard and still slumbering in their bedding. Nor, frankly, can you imagine the skills a warrior-monk, with a curved blade like *Helvingshar*, can do. Many a time we descended into a marauders' camp just as they were about to entertain themselves by torturing and maiming innocent peasants. We would cut them down with terrible swiftness and a hot fury burning in our blood. Both marauder and his Great Wings were slaughtered. We heard not their cries and pleas for mercy. Only those captured by the marauders were spared. Several times, we arrived just in time to save the lives of wounded or bound Niscian monks who were soon to die a most torturous death. We bound the wounds of the needy. We brought food and water to those who were thirsty

and hungry. We watched over them as many small groups slunk back into the deep forest to make their escape.

And then we would lift up into the night sky and begin our hunt again. As I say this, pilgrim, I am ashamed of my deeds during those few days around Karlsburg. My rage burned. My desire to exact terrible revenge was insatiable! All my training as a monk to look for, and grant, mercy to our enemies as well as to our friends, I discarded completely from my mind. Cedric and I took incredible chances when we found our enemies. Many times we fought against odds six to one, or more. And we won. Won, not only because the element of surprise was on our side when we suddenly descended onto them from out of a black sky, but because both I and my steadfast friend fought with a grim, bloody fanaticism.

Terrible is the price when a warrior-monk becomes a blood-crazed fanatic. Now, so many years after that bloody episode, I am still haunted by the memories of what we did. I still see the pleading faces of hapless Great Wing riders just before they were silenced with my sword. And worse, I still see the faces of the peasants and monks we saved. They witnessed, and survived, the terrible carnage Cedric and I inflicted on the enemy. In their eyes was a fear, a disbelief even, at what they saw. In the end, as they left us in the night to slip into the woods, I could feel their emotions radiating from their souls. They were numbed by our sudden arrival and our terrible bloodletting more so than they were by those who wished to kill them. They would carry these memories and these feelings with them for the rest of their natural born days.

In the end, after three days of hunting, my monk's training returned to me and made me realize my terrible sin. The longer Cedric and I stayed near the burning city, the greater the odds we would eventually die there as well. The compelling need was for us to leave this place and return to guide Ursala and the others to safety. We needed to leave the High Kanris.

So, on a windswept, rainy morn, high on a mountain top overlooking the still-burning city below us, both Cedric and I watched the city burn for an hour or more, each of us contemplating our dark accomplishments over the last few nights. And then, with great sadness, I leapt into the saddle of my old friend and

we departed the high country valley where once sat the city of Karlsburg and a Niscian monastery called The Monastery of a Thousand Candles.

CHAPTER 19



In our fight against Evil, we all become consumed in the lust for battle.

Our souls become drenched with a frenzy of Revenge: None of us are completely free from Sin when we look Evil in the eyes.

— FROM THE BOOK OF ST. ALBANS

FOR THREE WEEKS AFTER THE RAVAGING OF KARLSBURG, THE MYSTERIOUS GROUP of mercenary Great Wings hunted us unrelentingly. Night and day, the surrounding countryside was filled with riders who searched every grove, every forest, every cavern, every mountain hamlet and hut they could find in seeking us out. Twice they almost herded us into a trap that offered no escape. But each time my Inner Eye read the waves of emotion beating from our trackers' hearts. None, it seemed, knew they were tracking a wizard. Therefore, none made an attempt to control their emotions or their thoughts. Whenever our pursuers came close enough to us, I felt the waves of rage and intent radiating like bright beams of light from their souls. Their hatred for me and for tiny Ursala, coupled with my wizard's training, saved us time and again from being captured.

Yet, we remained in eminent danger. For days and nights on end we hid in dark forests or in caves, or sometimes on high mountain windswept crags where not even wild Great Wings would dare to roost, in our effort to escape. During this time, it was impossible to make a campfire and prepare a proper meal. Dried fish, a few pieces of tough jerky, and the occasional raw meat of a fresh kill was

our sustenance. At night, we would let our birds leave us to hunt. On many of these nights, they would return almost as soon as they were released. Many times Cedric and the other birds remained near, sensing our pursuers too close for them to forage afar.

Nor could I use any form of magic to conjure up a hot meal or two for us on those bleak nights. In the distance, I could feel the auras of Rogarian and Lotharian wizards moving about, searching, prying into the Outer Realms and in the Netherworld for our whereabouts. Because they were intent on using their powers to find us, our enemies radiated enough energy to warn me of their presence. Warn me long before they could blunder upon us. From their auras glowing in the Netherworld, I could steer my little group clear of them. But I dared not use any of my powers. One hint of our presence in the Netherworld or the Outer Realm and a host of warrior-wizards and hundreds of mercenary Great Wings would be upon us.

Yet without warm food, without a warm beds, and no protection from the high country's biting cold, little Ursala grew weary, and her strength drained from her tiny body with each passing day. Valiantly, she endured this tortuous hunt. She never complained and was always willing to do her share of the chores when we made camp. But as the days stretched into the third week of the hunt, we all could see the child needed proper sustenance, a warm bed, and time to rest in peace if she was to survive.

It was the twins who first approached me with their concerns.

"Master, Ursala cannot continue this way for much longer," Gawaith said after he approached, his blue eyes filled with and his hands turning and twisting, almost ripping his rawhide rider's cap all riders wore while in the saddle.

"Aye, master," Gawain nodded, mirroring his brother's concerned tone. "She's hardly ate a morsel in the last two days. The mountain air at night is not good for her. She shivers constantly from the cold when she is not wrapped in your great cloak."

"Master, we must do something. We're afraid the princess is dying."

I nodded, pulling them both close to me and giving them a fatherly hug before releasing them. They, like Ursala, were only children. They should have

been frolicking around in a palace, playing boyish tricks on each other. They, and tiny Ursala, should be laughing and singing, and doing all the silly things children do while they yet are children. But not these three. Not while the rest of the world, both man and dragon, hunted them with a passionate desire to utterly destroy them.

If Odair's Lair fell to the Hartooth, Gawain and Gawaith were the last of Vik royalty. As long as they lived, they would have a claim to their ancestral kingdom. The Hartooth would hunt them down and destroy them because of their royal lineage for that reason. And sadly, there were several kingdoms of the High Kanris that would also have a desire to hunt them down and destroy them. With Gawain and Gawaith dead, no Vik heirs could claim the Kingdom of the Vik. A different noble house would vie for the crown.

Ursala, we all knew, would be the most hunted of us all. A Pearl Princess, a female child of the Baron Hartooth himself, and the promised Fifth Sister of dragon prophecy. Without someone to protect her and shield her from harm, she would never live to see the following spring. Yet, as I turned and stared at the child as she tried to cuddle up underneath the massive black wing of Cedric in an effort to find some warmth on this cold mountain night, I could not help but feel an infinite sadness.

The world seemed bent upon her destruction. Forces within the Outer Realm and forces within the Netherworld were united in their efforts to cauterize her very existence from living memory. What was I to do? I . . . a lone Bretan warrior-wizard. . . a *Malus Apostate* Bretan wizard . . . hated by his own kind, felt helpless and overwhelmed by the challenge which lay before us.

I watched the child try to warm herself from the heat radiating from Cedric's mighty body. I watched as the wily old war bird chortled softly and gently pulled her in closer to his body. The great warrior was as smitten by the child's innocence and beauty as the rest of us. Whenever she came close to him, he would suddenly become the most gentle of creatures around her. I could feel in his soul, his immense desire to protect her from all harm. I felt the confidence he had in me in finding a way to preserve her life against all possible threats.

I admit, pilgrim, on that night I felt the immensity of the world, the

monstrosity of the odds against us like some unbearable weight pressing down upon me and beginning to drive out the very breath from my lungs. I found myself thinking I would fail in the promise I made to an old dragon baron. The child surely would die a most horrible death. As we all would. And there was nothing I could do to forestall or deflect her destiny.

Yet, it was then, in the deepest part of the black mood engulfing me, when I felt the rough hand of the old Niscian on my shoulder and heard the soft rumble of his voice in my ear.

“What is that one of your Bretan saints said a hundred years ago? *‘The hour is dark. The night grows cold. Our souls yearn for a warm fire and a soft bed.’*”

A thin smile played across my weary face as a single tear slid down one cheek. I nodded, finishing the verse from the Book of St. Albans.

“*‘But even in our darkest moments, child, there is always the God of Light waiting for you to call out his name.’*”

The old man’s voice rumbled in amusement as he nodded his head. His hand was heavy on my shoulder. Heavy and feeling warm and comforting. Warm and comforting and needed, like the need a drowning soul in a tempest-tossed sea needing a life-giving rope thrown to him from out of the darkness, was needed.

Within me I felt a spark of hope reigniting. Just a slight ember flashing back into life. The smallest of a glimmer. Yet enough. Just enough.

“I have heard it said that in the city of Charades, a place not too far from here I think, there once lived an old master armorer by the name of Galvin Whitehair. This old metal smith was, at one time, a terror to all things Rogarian.”

“And like you, old man. A natural Null Stone,” I mumbled softly into the night air. “He fears nothing from this world nor the other. His weaponry and armor are truly wondrous to behold in battle. And yes, he hates the Rogarians with an unrelenting passion.”

“He lives still in Charades?”

“Still,” I nodded, smiling, but lifting an eyebrow curiously at him.

“Ursala,” the old man grunted, nodding his head toward the child. “When she is healthy and tries to control herself I can, with my abilities, help mask our whereabouts from prying minds. But when she is sick, she radiates an energy so

pure, my abilities alone cannot negate her presence. We all know the limits of our powers, wizard. I know mine. You know yours. Until she is taught to control hers, I cannot mask her powers without assistance.”

“Therefore, the need for another Null Stone.”

“Aye,” the old man nodded in the darkness beside me. “Someone who will not be impressed by Rogarian religious decrees. Someone who, if asked, may have a desire to rebel against Rogarian authority.”

Two living Null Stones shielding us from the Netherworld by hiding Ursala’s incomprehensible powers. If the combined powers of the old monk and that of Galvin Whitehair worked, perhaps we could slip away from the wide net the Evil From Afar was weaving around us. Assuredly, the child’s control of her mind was minimal at best. Even the few techniques I had her only slightly shaded the blinding radiance shining from her. Try as she might, being only a child, she could not hide her presence from those within the Dark Realm who wished to find her. But the presence of two Null Stones would act a heavy wall of stone and alter the path of her radiating powers. I suspected even two such stones would not completely hide her, and us by extension, from those who wished to harm her. But the trail would become immeasurably more difficult to track and requiring far more wizardry power to be brought to bear . Perhaps more wizardry power than was possible to find.

But there was yet another advantage to be had. This black Evil from Afar, who had been playing in my mind for all these years, would no longer be able to hear my thoughts. As long as I was close to the Null Stones, I too would be hidden from view. Whatever plans I formed, whatever decisions I made, what conversations I might have with those I had to speak to, would all be unknown to our archenemy.

Reasons enough to take the risk and journey to Charades.

CHAPTER 20



***Hope, child! Hope is the element
Which can lift our hearts
And give us a better tomorrow!
Hope beating in our breasts
Is the Eternal Sunlight the Divine One gives to all.
With Hope glowing from within all things are possible!***

— FROM THE BOOK OF ST. ALBANS

TWO NIGHTS LATER, AND WHILE WE MADE CAMP DEEP IN A FOREST FILLED WITH natural and supernatural dangers, the grim forms of the Four Sisters came to us again. We were wary of the many powers of the Darkness preying upon us. For we hid in a forest known for its haunted places and villainous spirits who preyed upon the living when night fell. Here, I led my two blond waifs, the old Niscian, and the fever-ridden Ursala, knowing what dangers I placed them in. But here, deep within among the stunted and twisted trees and the black shadows so deep, one could stare into Infinity, I knew no Great Wing, nor his rider, would dare follow us.

From those who hunted us in the Outer Realm, we momentarily found safety. But from the terrors of the night and the bodiless spirits who fled from the Netherworld and now resided in this dark place, we would be constantly in danger.

Ursala now was very sick. Fever burned her little body from within, and she would not eat. We all knew we had to get her to a place where she could find a bed to rest in and warm fires to keep the chill from her body at night. With the proper herbs and medicines, along with a soft bed to sleep in, I knew I could restore the child's health. This would be had in a small city called Charades. But the small Rogarian city was several days' travel away. And still the mercenary Great Wings and their riders hunted us.

Yet, we could not journey to the walled town that was a bastion of Rogarian sympathy with the child so sick and her mind acting as a pulsating beacon of light. A light strong enough to guide our enemies directly to us. On the other hand, because of her sickness and her inability to control herself, I found myself thinking this situation could be turned into an opportunity. Ursala was so weak from the fever ravaging her small body, she had no energy to do anything. She fell into fitful sleeps which lasted only an hour or two before the fever roused her again. She hardly had strength to walk. Yet her mind throbbed with energy! So strong and so intense, I found it distinctly uncomfortable to be close to her.

As I sat beside her, tossing twigs and small branches onto a large campfire, I kept one eye on her and one eye on the rim of the dark forest surrounding us. Throwing caution to the wind, I had to prepare medicines that would soothe her troubled brow. This was the Forest of the Dead. In this forest, even the trees looked like horrible creatures twisted and contorted in agony. The peasantry who lived in this valley avoided this forest with a religious conviction. The dead, they claimed, haunted this place at night. It was said one could see glimpses of these horrible specters through the gaps in the forest, if one was brave enough to stand at the forest's edge and peer in.

These spirits of the night would keep our mercenary riders from entering this terrible place. There was no need to try to hide our whereabouts now. They knew we were here. Deep within the forest, we found a large clearing beside a moving stream and made camp. Building a fire, I began to prepare a number of medicinal potions for the child while Alvus Fairhands prepared a hot meal, our first in days, with the boys assisting.

The plan was simple. The medicines I prepared were very potent. The

moment the child finished drinking the second potion I was concocting, she would fall into a deep sleep. A sleep that would last for two or three days. But before administering the medicines, I wanted to plant into her fevered mind a misconception. A misdirection. We were going to Charades. But I needed to convince the child just the opposite. We were not going to Charades after all. We were heading for a walled town five days' ride to the north called Brinn. Brinn was a small city, another Rogarian stronghold, which sat on the edge of a trail caravans used to make their way out of the High Kanris and down into the foothills below the shield wall. The passage through the wall was barely wide enough for a man leading a pack horse. The trail was a torturous affair which knifed back and forth across sheer cliff walls as it zigzagged downward.

To our enemies, it would make sense to flee toward Brinn. My hopes were, in telling the child of our change in plan, she would broadcast this knowledge to those who could see her in their Inner Eyes. If I could convince her we were heading for Brinn and not to Charades, she would, through no fault of her own, transmit both the knowledge and the sense of conviction of my words to our enemies. If the Divine One smiled upon us, our pursuers would mount their war birds and hurry to Brinn. And while they flew hastily to the north toward Brinn, we would journey south toward Charades.

The growing blaze before me was needed not only to prepare the medicines and our meal, but also to ward off the night spirits. The bright light of the blaze would both attract the denizens of the darkness, and at the same time, compel them to remain some distance away. Already, as I hurriedly mixed the first potion of hot fluids I was to feed the child, I kept hearing the underbrush to my right rustling and crackling, as if something massive and slow was ponderously approaching.

"Something approaches to our right, master!" Gawaith yelped, hearing the sharp crack of a snapping limb in the darkness.

"My bow, where's my bow?" Gawain yelled, looking frantically for his weapon and both of them looking terrified at the same time.

"Stay your hand, young Gawain," I said, kneeling beside the semi-conscious dragon princess, lifting her head up slightly with one hand while I forced her to

drink the hot brew I held in my other. “It is just a Sheeba come to see what burns so brightly. It means us no harm as long as we do not threaten her.”

“A Sheeba! Gods preserve us!” the twins hissed at the same time, color draining from their faces.

A Sheeba was a hairy creature that stood on two legs like a man, with shoulders as wide as a peasant’s hut. The creature had no head to speak of. The bones of its skull were fused into massive shoulders, giving the impression the creature was one massive torso with hairy arms and legs attached. It was an eater of carrion. It preferred to eat things that had been dead for several days. But it was also said they liked to drink the blood of humans. Drink the hot blood of a still-beating heart, if they were lucky enough to capture a human alive.

Since it was a carrion eater, it was unmoved by the smell of the dead. It carried, however, the smell of decaying flesh wherever it went. This unappetizing aroma came with full force to our nostrils as the creature approached.

“Auuughhh!” Grawain croaked, throwing hands to his mouth and twisting to one side and away from the fire as he grew sick.

The Sheeba stood in the darkness just outside the pool of campfire light. Yet between the oddly turned and twisted trees, I could see its black outline. It was a massive creature. Massive and deceptive in its slow movements. I knew a Sheeba on the attack could be very fast and very deadly. Lethal when aroused and possessing a native curiosity which made it even more dangerous if it became interested in something. I did not want it to become too curious about us. So, lifting a hand, palm outward and toward the creature, I closed my eyes and silently repeated a chant twice, concentrating on imprinting into the creature’s mind the thought nothing of interest was here for her to find.

It worked.

After a few moments, the Sheeba’s heavy breathing and foul smell haunted us she turned and lumbered off into the darkness. Smiling, I glanced toward the boys and noticed Gawaith kneeling beside his brother, bow in hand, while Gawain continued to be violently sick. The old Niscian sat on his haunches, continuing to stir the bubbling broth in the iron skillet hanging above the fire

with a stick in his hand. But beside the old man, I saw the gleam of unsheathed steel within easy grasp. The wily old monk acted unconcerned. But any unwelcome intrusion into our camp and the old man's blade would have been flashing a deadly ballet.

Ursala stirred, opened her eyes and looked up into mine. A smile weakly spread across her lips as she leaned her head forward and took a sip of the hot liquid I held to her lips.

"Oooh, this is terrible, grandfather. It tastes like dirt."

"But it will make your insides cool and your mind clear, child. So drink as much as you can. After you've finished it, I will have a bowl of hot soup for you."

"Where are we, grandfather?"

"In the Forest of the Dead. Which is not far from the city of Brinn."

"Brinn? But I thought we were going to Charades."

My Inner Eye saw the shades and forms of her glowing radiation changing colors.

"We were. But word has come to us that compels us to hurry to Brinn. Besides, we need to leave the high country as quickly as possible. If we go to Brinn, we will find a trail that will take us to the foothill kingdoms below the shield wall."

I felt the tentacles of her power pushing and wiggling around in my mind. Not intentionally, and certainly not with any malice. Just raw power from a child's mind who knew no better. But her unrestrained mental powers were already far greater than most wizard's I knew. It took all the concentration I had to not reveal the deception I had planned.

"I'm so tired, grandfather."

"I know, little one, I know. But before you sleep, you must eat this soup. And then you must take a second potion of medicine I've prepared. If you will do this for me, you'll sleep a long time and wake up in a warm bed with me sitting beside you."

She smiled weakly and nodded. Gawaith hurried over with a steaming bowl of soup, and together, we fed her and conversed with her as she ate. Eventually, I

found a way to pour the second potion of medicine down her and held her close to me while she drifted off to sleep. Soon the boys drifted off to sleep, making their beds of dried leaves and grass close to me and the child. Alvus Fairhands and I sat on a fallen tree, facing the fire, with the children scattered about our feet. As the night deepened, the forest grew very dark and very still. A stillness which neither of us relished. After some moments of listening to the silence, the old monk stood up and began feeding the fire until its flames became taller than a man.

“Our enemies know we are here.”

“Yes,” I agreed, my hands lying on the sheathed blade of Helvingar resting across my legs.

“If there is to be an attack, it will come sometime after midnight and an hour or two before dawn.”

“Yes. That has also occurred to me.”

“I do not feel the presence of any wizards near. But I do feel something strange is hiding off in that direction.” He lifted a hand and pointed to the blackness to my right. “It’s watching us. As if waiting for something.”

“Yes,” nodding again, turning to look thoughtfully in the direction the old man was pointing. “It came soon after the Sheeba left. I see its aura, but I cannot recognize it.”

“If an enemy,” Fairhands grunted as he continued to build up the fire, “why doesn’t it attack?”

“Perhaps it has not decided what it is. But for now, it only stands by a tree and watches us.”

“I’m too old for this, Bretan. Too old to be chasing ghosts in a haunted forest. Too old to be in league with a *Malus Apostate* monk. Just too old.”

I smiled, nodding. I could feel the man’s aches and pains. He needed time to rest in a warm bed as much as Ursala did. Returning my gaze to him, I watched him turn from the fire and bend down to retrieve his sword, which was leaning against the fallen tree. Quietly he walked over to where the boys slept and grunted in pain as he sat, leaned against a different log. Pulling his cloak over him, he laid the sword across his thighs, crossed his arms, and closed his eyes.

“Be sure to wake me when our visitors arrive.”

I started to grunt an answer. But before I could, I heard the old Niscian snoring. Smiling, my attention turned toward the darkness and our curious entity who watched us.

I had lied.

I knew who hid themselves in the darkness.

The first pale, ghostly fingers of a fog began to drift from out of the forest and fill the clearing. With the coming of the fog, the night fell into an unnatural quiet. Coming to my feet, I gripped the sheathed blade of the ancient sword with my left hand and wrapped my right hand around the blade's pommel. But I made no attempt to pull it free. As long as the bronze blade remained hidden, our guests felt no threat. I did not wish them to feel threatened.

Stepping away from the slumbering children, I moved to the very edge of the illuminated portion of our campsite and stared into the darkness. With eyes closed, I focused my Inner Eye into the void and was immediately rewarded with the sudden and violent sense of vertigo attacking me. I braced against the sensation of being psychically hurled into oblivion, tumbling head over feet over and over until I almost became sick.

I heard the Four Sisters now. Two were laughing gaily as only a dragon female can laugh. One kept swirling around and around me with her large dragon blue eyes peering intently at every pore of my body. The third remained motionless, yet close enough to see me clearly. All four where nebulous veils of disembodied energies. Yet I could reach out and touch them. As they could touch me. But they were here, with me, in this forest. And they were interested in only me this night.

“Oh, Sisters! The Man-Thing sees us!”

“Yes, sister. His aura is very strong. Stronger than before.”

“But not strong enough.”

“Stronger than when he killed you, Lhasha! You, who boasted no Man-Thing would ever harm you!”

“Silence!”

The command was given in a voice that was crisp, imperial, but not loud.

Yet, within the voice was the steel of indomitable cruelty. Turning my head, I watched the nebulous veil that had been standing apart and watching me intently, slowly began to float toward me. From her soul, I could feel the power of her dark gods pulsating. I also felt her confidence, sure and unquestioned, flow over me like some intoxicating potion.

A nebulous hand lifted from her side and caressed my cheek. The touch of her long finger as cold as infinity itself. She moved, slowly, around me and took her time examining me before coming to a halt directly in front of me.

“You do not know, do you. You have no idea of the power you hold in your hands. The power that is in you.”

I said nothing. But the weight of the curved blade in its heavy scabbard felt good in my hands.

“He has no clue, sisters. He has no idea who he really is. He is strong and sure in his ways. But oh, so weak in others. His knowledge of the Netherworld and its powers still so inadequate. Soooo inadequate, my darling.”

Mocking me, she cooed, giving another caress from her hand across my cheek. From her aura came this vibrating chord of loathing and curiosity all mixed together. With curiosity being the stronger emotion. Strangely, I felt also this sense of knowing her from a previous time. This Pearl Princess and I had met before. Something within me began to stir. A memory, old and forgotten. Yet a stirring deep, deep in my subconscious, which affirmed the emotions coming from her of our previous encounters.

Around me, the entire world had turned white. There was no color. There was no blackness. There was no sensation of depth, or height, or width. All white. All devoid of sound, except for what the four wraiths in front of me uttered. Yet it did not matter. I was not afraid. I held Helvingar in my hands and I knew all I had to do was unsheathe the bronze blade and the four mirages would evaporate into nothing. They would disappear back into the Netherworld and not return until they felt safe again.

But, from the form in front of me, I felt a ring of amusement flash over me.

“You put too much faith in a weapon you know nothing about, Man-Thing. Aye, it can kill. But not in the way you think. Not in the way it could, if its powers

were truly understood.”

“So, tell me what I must know to unleash this power. Help me bring an end to this terrible madness. You, and your sisters could join Ursala and me to defy the old gods. Together, we could build a world where dragon and man might live in peace as equals.”

“Live in peace as equals? Oh, how droll! How incredibly simplistic!”

The peals of laughter filled the silence around me. Wild laughter. Filled with insanity and a growing streak of chaos whipped together in some formula of fury. As the commanding sister remained in front of me, the other three began to move around me, their mindless laughter increasing. For several minutes, the peals of their laughter filled my ears, filled my mind, filled my soul. Their laughing was unbearable. Gritting my teeth, I commanded myself to endure. To endure and not to react.

Eventually, the laughter began to subside. When finally silent, the remaining three wraiths moved in and surrounded me. So close, I could almost lift a finger and touch them. So close, I could feel their souls against mine.

But not the one in front of me. Not the one who was the strongest of them all. Between us, she kept her distance just out of reach of a sword’s thrust. Yet, she was not afraid. No concern of her well-being filled her aura. Only contempt. Only unfathomable hatred.

“Until you enter where we live, Man-Thing, and see what we have seen, you will never understand why dragon and man are doomed to complete their destinies.”

“No! You did not come to us in the past! And you will not come to us this time, either.” One wraith said in a chiding girlish voice.

“As before, you will try to kill our sister as you killed us. But not this time, Man-Thing. This time, there will be a far different outcome. An outcome you will create. An outcome which will surely end the reign of your kind on this world!” Another chimed in musically.

“You will fail, Man-Thing. Fail as you did in the past. Fail as you will in the future. For you, like your kind, care not to know the Truth. Yet, in your failure, will we find our success. And succeed in our revenge we will.”

“If only you would look!”

“If only you would believe!”

“If only you were not such a frail little creature!”

“If only,” began the specter in front of me in a voice of sweet delight, *“you knew what we have known for centuries.”*

I turned my head to the left and to the right and gazed into the unseeable faces of the three Sisters surrounding me. They all seemed to be floating in space beside me. Undulating slightly, as if a soft breeze might stir a ship’s pennant or banner hanging from its yard arm.

“We have met before? In the past?”

“Yes, Man-Thing. You’re the one who sent me into the Netherworld. As you have sent all of us. But we do not hold this against you. It was not your fault. It was ordained. It was part of the Grand Plan.”

“We actually cherish you, Man-Thing. For without you, there would be no revenge. No settling of old debts.”

“Sisters! Enough!”

The imperial voice was sharp, and wicked, and filled with an inexpressible danger. Her voice was like a physical blow to her sisters. The three surrounding me shrank back as if they were curs being whipped into obedience by a cruel master wielding a leather-wrapped whipping cane.

“We must go. The Master stirs, and I wish him not to suspect of our presence here. Farewell, Man-Thing. We shall meet again. And soon. Farewell.”

The whiteness around me stirred. Stirred as if I was looking at something through a glass of white wine pressed against my forehead. And then . . . I was back in the forest.

CHAPTER 21



All of us journey down the river we call Life.

It is a perilous journey fraught with unimaginable dangers.

There are eddies and whirlpools waiting for us, eager to pull us down into a watery grave.

But we journey on. We strive to take the next step, to

Overcome those obstacles bent on our destruction.

— FROM THE BOOK OF ST. ALBANS

WE ENTERED CHARADES IN DISGUISE. THE BLOND TWINS I MADE INTO SIMPLE oxen herders. Dressed in the plain garb worn by the peasantry around the city, and with the strategic placement of mud and grime rubbed into their clothing and on their faces, the two took to their new roles with glee. Our purchase of a large two-wheeled cart pulled by a team of oxen we acquired some miles away from the city's main gate added credence to our disguises.

Alvus Fairhands became an old peasant woodsman. It was not much of an effort to finish his disguise. Simple homespun clothing, a large wooden staff in one hand, and a peasant's soft leather boots added nicely to the old man's white hair and scruffy beard with conviction.

I attired myself in a similar fashion. So close was my disguise to that of the old Niscian, and I knew someone giving us a casual glance would dismiss us immediately from any other consideration. An assortment of such peasant traffic

entered and departed the gates of Charades a hundred times a day. The city's guards paid little attention to the traffic. I knew we would enter the city without rousing any form of suspicion. It was our departure which worried me.

Ursala, still in a deep recuperative sleep from the medicinal potions I'd given her, lay hidden within a hollow log placed underneath a large stack of freshly hewn logs we purchased along with the cart. Our cargo was Palath wood. A very hardwood that burned with a high-intensity flame. Most metalsmiths preferred this type of wood when they fired up their forges. Galvin Whitehair, being an armorer, would prefer this kind of wood over all others. And this Galvin Whitehair was important to us. For, although Rogarian, he was a Null Stone. A Rogarian Null Stone who might have reasons to come to our aid.

Our birds we left in the forests surrounding the city. Cedric would keep them close at hand, waiting for the signal I would communicate to him when it was time for us to take our leave.

The city itself was the northernmost stronghold found in the Rogarian empire. We were, frankly, in the very heart of enemy territory. If we were discovered, if our disguises were ripped from us, there would be no amount of magic I knew that could save us.

As we approached the city's walls, my Inner Eye could feel the presence of Rogarian wizards in the far distance. None I could sense within Charades itself. But several were close by. If we were discovered in the city, I would not be able to extract us from the mob that would surround us without revealing my presence as a wizard. And at the moment I did so, I knew many Rogarian wizards were close enough to feel our presence would use their wizardry powers to teleport themselves to Charades in the blink of an eye.

Charades was a small city of barely thirteen thousand souls. A single stone wall, a wall of stone of typical Rogarian construction, surrounded the entire city. Rogarian construction of stone fortifications called for its stonemasons to bevel blocks so that the vertical surfaces of each block slanted inward slightly. Rogarian walls used stone blocks of unequal proportions and fitted together in a gigantic jigsaw puzzle of construction. But the walls were strong. Rogarians masons were so skilled, with the many stone blocks fitting together with such

precision, the gaps where the stones met were thinner than a piece of silk thread.

Two large stone towers rose from within the city. They were the royal aviaries Rogarian Imperial troops used to house the contingent of Great Wings and their riders. The city itself would have a contingent of about five hundred Imperial troops within it, plus another five hundred or slightly more city guardsmen. An imperial governor ruled the city in the Rogarian emperor's name. And of course, true to this city as was with all other Rogarian cities, a large Rogarian temple would be in the very center of the town's geographical middle.

Charades was tightly confined within its walls. The streets were cobblestoned and very narrow to traverse. The buildings were tall, narrow, and tightly packed together. Its citizens were stolid burghers, rugged commoners, and tradesmen who, due to their religion, would be polite and respectful to each other, but openly suspicious to any stranger whom they might encounter.

As we entered the city, disguised as we were, few paid any attention to our passing. Yet I could feel a sense of foreboding and anticipation within the souls of many of the city's guards. They were looking for someone or something. Their eyes quickly played across the old Niscian and me as we entered the gate. But they dismissed us just as quickly. Someone told them to look for a particular group or individual. Anyone who did not fit the description was quickly cast aside and forgotten. As we moved through the yawning main gate of the city, past the ten or so city guards dressed in Rogarian blue and trimmed in green, their attention quickly left us and shifted to those following us.

I motioned to the boys to use their wooden canes and guide the oxen down the city's main streets. The city traffic of carts, wagons, and several private litters hefted onto the shoulders of powerfully built slaves, moved with a stolid purpose. Pedestrians hurried back and forth from one side of the street to the next, dodging the many wagons and carts lumbering along. But no one paid any attention to two old woodsmen and the filthy, scruffy-looking youths who worked the oxen.

"Brother," Alvus Fairhands grunted casually, "Look yonder."

I glanced at the disguised Niscian and noticed his head inclined in the direction toward one of the royal landing towers. Looking to peer up and to my

left I noticed six large Great Wings descending toward the tower in a landing pattern. The six riders and their Great Wings looked like those who had been hot on our heels for the last few days.

Apparently, my ruse of planting a false trail in the Netherworld through the fevered brow of Ursala did not send all to Brinn. As I watched, I noticed one of the birds looked very familiar. A big bird with a brown body and cream-colored head and wings. A rare color combination to find among Great Wings, and one which would make its rider stand out distinctly from other riders.

I knew of only one such bird and its rider. We had, weeks before, faced each other in the darkness of a deserted aviary in Odair's Lair. He stood beside the old Baron Anktooth and tried to convince the dragon his grandchild would be well cared for if turned over to him. He was a leader of mercenary Great Wings with a black reputation.

Helgar Longhair.

"Is he not one of your enemies, brother?" Fairhands asked.

I nodded. We would have to tread carefully while we stayed in Charades. The handsome blond-haired leader of mercenary Great Wings was not in Charades by accident. It was his men who had dogged our trail for these many days. It was his men who destroyed Karlsburg and the Niscian monastery with fire and sword. I was sure of it. Even though proof I had not. Others may have heeded the Netherworld trickery I had transmitted through Ursala's powerful mind. But Helgar Longhair lingered and remained in Charades. The city where a second Null Stone resided. A Null Stone who might be persuaded to join our cause.

I motioned the lads to turn the oxen down a side street. On this even more narrow street the crowds thinned considerably. The street was dark and narrow and filled with artisans and craftsmen. Great plumes of smoke rose from hissing furnaces and the air rang with the sound of hammers raining down blows on hot steel filled the air. The ground floor in each of the buildings were opened to reveal artisans and craftsmen working inside. The floors above were their living quarters. Standing in front of many were apprentices who worked the crowds, much as a carnival ringmaster or a consummate politician might work a

crowd in trying to attract them to their cause.

As our lumbering wagon entered the street, I was thankful no suspicious glances were cast in our direction. The crowd's collective psyche radiated no overt sense of hostility above the normal level one might find in a Rogarian city. There was no individual spike of heightened awareness seeking out someone of interest. I did not feel the presence of any wizardry. Yet I felt unease within me. Wizards could be cloaked with invisibility. If the devious cousin of King Olaf was here, along with a few of his henchmen, then constant vigilance was necessary if I wished to protect those around me who put their trust and faith in me.

"Here is Galvin Whitehair's shop," I said, halting the boys and turning to look at the old Niscian. "It would be best if you entered the shop and conducted the business with the armorer. I sense a number of souls within. They seem to be conducting business or laboring away on some task. Nothing unusual in outward appearance, with a shop as well-known as this one. But we should be cautious. While you are in there, I will use my Inner Eye and investigate further."

"You are expecting a trap, master?" Gawain asked in a conspiratorial whisper as the two lads encircled Alvus and me beside the heavy wooden cart.

"We may have to fight our way out of this city, brother! A fight!" Gawaith hissed, his eyes glowing with anticipation and excitement.

"Quiet, you lumbering oafs!" hissed the old monk, irritably waving a hand at the boys to be silent before looking at me worriedly. "You feel a trap is near?"

"All seems normal. And that is what worries me, old friend. Everyone in the high country hunts for the princess and for those who protect her. Yet this city seems so tranquil."

"Ah! I was right! A trap!" Gawaith squeaked, rubbing his hands and grinning in anticipation. "Brother, string your bow!"

Gawain said nothing in reply, but angrily smacked his brother with an open hand on the back of Gawaith's head. A blow with enough force to almost break his brother's neck. Gawain grunted in pain and half-turned to glare angrily at his brother.

"Let us prepare for every contingency," I said. "You, Alvus, will lower any

protective enchantments if wizards are present. As you will do for any Rogarian monks or imperial guardsmen. If there is a trap, I should sense something amiss almost immediately.”

Nodding in agreement, the old man turned and entered the shop of Galvin Whitehair.

Moments later the dour-faced, hulking form of the craftsman followed the monk out of the shop and quickly inspected the heavy load on our cart. The traditional round of negotiations over the proper price of the wood was conducted. Not unsurprisingly I watched the old Niscian as he haggled for a proper sum of money with deft humor. By time the haggling was finished, there was a pleased smile on the towering armorer as he counted out the correct change and dropped each coin, one by one, into Fairhands’s hand. The suggestion of a smile on the old man’s lips spoke volumes to me. Galvin Whitehair had purchased our goods at twice the going rate.

Silently I used my Inner Eye to feel the Netherworld around us for any possible trap closing in on us. The Netherworld was unanimated, and nothing of malice seemed to be raising their fangs in our direction. Seeing nothing amiss, I turned my gaze back to the giant in front of us and said nothing as the monk and the armorer chatted the normal banter following a business transaction.

The blacksmith was a massive man of impressive proportions. His arms and chest rippled with the strength every blacksmith or master armorer acquired after applying his skills over a stretch of years. He moved slow and deliberately, yet I could sense a deep reservoir of untapped agility lingering just below the man’s conscious threshold. I could feel something else emanating from his soul. It pulsed with each beat of his heart. Restrained and controlled, like a keeper of wild animals might restrain an untamed animal through the sheer force of his will, nevertheless the raging inferno of a smoldering deep hate could be easily felt.

Galvin Whitehair hated with unending passion. Hated those who had taken his wife from him. Hated and despised the fanatics who had taken his religion and twisted it into some unrecognizable and unacceptable form he now looked upon as grotesque. Yes, he lived in a Rogarian city. And yes, he professed to be a

faithful follower of the sect every time he went to mass. But deep down, deep within his soul, so deep no prying eyes would ever have a chance to peer inside, the towering form of a master artisan was filled with rage.

Years ago, the Rogarian pogrom against all things Bretan came like a rat-infested plague to Charades. Those who followed the Bretan Way were condemned as sinners and heretics in the city's large cathedral. Hundreds of Bretan followers were hunted down and slaughtered. Many were tortured and then burned alive in giant funeral pyres in the middle of the city square. One of those who perished by fire was Galvin Whitehair's wife.

Terrible were the crimes were against the Bretan faithful who innocent of all crimes were hurled at them from the high altars in the Rogarian cathedrals. Even more horrible was the punishment doled out to the wife of Galvin Whitehair. For she was not a follower of the Bretan Way. Her crime, and thus her harsh punishment, was the crime of showing compassion and charity to those she knew to be innocent. A small family of artisans, employees who worked in her husband's shop, tried to leave Charades and vicious whirlwind of death and destruction. She had known the family for years. Knew the names of the children who played in the shop while their father worked on the forge. Knew the homely wife and mother. Her crime was preparing a large bundle of food for the family to take with them in their escape.

The family was apprehended and thrown into the city's dungeons. Tortured for days by Rogarian priests, in the depths of their agonies, the name of Galvin Whitehair's wife was mentioned. It was enough. She, like the family she'd tried to help, all suffered the same fate.

No amount of pleading for mercy before the Rogarian prelate mattered. The master armorer, a paragon of religious fortitude within his community, prostrated himself on his knees before the city's high priest. He begged the high priest to take his life but spare his wife's. He offered to take his wife and the two would leave the city. Impose upon themselves banishment from all Rogarian society and live in the forest like animals. But his pleas fell on deaf ears. The Rogarian High Priest remained silent. In the end, as he rose slowly from his plain wooden chair, the high priest gave to Galvin Whitehair his decision.

“It is the Will of God, my son. Heresy must be punished.”

With those words, Galvin Whitehair learned the meaning what hate truly meant. And I, standing so close to him now, felt the depth of his hatred radiating and engulfing me with a white-hot rage. It was palatable. It had a taste and aroma all its own. The smell and taste of blood. Terrible was the man’s rage. So deeply etched into his soul and smoldering like an inferno waiting to burst free. I knew it would not take much to release this terrible fury onto those who had wronged him.

My soul ached with an agony of helplessness as I stood beside the giant. The healer in me wished to reach out and offer some kind of soothing words, some medicinal elixir, might quiet the rage within. Yet, I remained silent. I dared not reveal our true identities to him. Hatred consumed him for those who had condemned his wife. Perhaps even more hatred for those who had inadvertently sent his wife to her death.

After a while, the Niscian and the giant finished their conversation. Whitehair, after hearing of our long and difficult journey, offered the quiet repose of one of his warehouses for us to stay in while we remained in Charades. It was a large building not too far from his shop, and it offered both a roof over our heads and a quiet residence away from the main hubbub of the city’s traffic. The perfect place where little Ursala might rest and regain her strength, and not be observed by a curious passerby.

“But can we stay here in this city for two or three days, master?” Gawain asked as we moved away from the armorer’s shop. “Everyone seems to be our enemy, my lord. When she wakes and her mind becomes active again, she will broadcast to everyone in the Netherworld where she resides.”

Alvus Fairhands grunted in agreement, nodding his head. “I cannot completely mask her presence from those who search for her, Bretan. It is only a matter of time before dozens come searching for her here.”

I nodded, sensing their concern not for themselves, but for the child’s well-being. I too, worried over our actions. But we had no choice.

“We must recruit the giant if we can. His abilities as a Null Stone match yours, old man. As you pointed out, with his help, the two of you should be

enough to conceal us from our enemies. The child is too weak to travel. She needs at least two days of deep sleep. At least three or four nourishing meals before traveling again.”

“How do you plan to approach Calvin Whitehair?” Alvus grunted, turning to look at me as our wagon and oxen made their slow way down a deserted dead-end street and toward a large, dilapidated warehouse. “The leader of the mercenaries must suspect something, Bretan. He must have some prior knowledge you would be coming to Charades and seeking out this man . Otherwise, why didn’t he hurry to Brinn with the others?”

“I will go to him soon. An hour before dawn, when the city is deep in its slumbers, I’ll seek his company and ask for his assistance.”

“If he refuses? Or worse, if he creates an alarm and brings his Rogarian wrath down upon you? What will you do then?”

I glanced at the old man and smiled as I shrugged. I would cross that bridge when, and if, that course of action was thrust upon me.

CHAPTER 22



***Evil must be confronted. Evil is a
monster who orchestrates
and revels
In the horrors of the night.
But it cannot withstand the withering scrutiny
of God's wisdom.***

— FROM THE BOOK OF ST. ALBANS

FOR TWO DAYS AND TWO NIGHTS, WE HID OURSELVES IN THE MIDST OF OUR enemies. Late in the second night of our hiding, tiny Ursala stirred in her sleep and fought to release herself from the burning fever gripping her.

The night was quiet. This city, like all stern and proper Rogarian cities who followed their religion's strict doctrine, retired to their homes as night fell and did not stir outside. The streets grew ominously quiet. No pedestrians hurried from one brightly building to the next. Only the city's town guards, each with a long staff and carrying brightly burning oil lanterns to light their path through the darkness, roamed the streets.

Not even the wind stirred as sunset descended into deep blackness.

The warehouse Galvin Whitehand so generously offered to us to rest our weary bones was more like a commoner's hostel than the typical grungy warehouse we expected. The upper floor of the building had rooms with beds

and a large common kitchen to prepare food. The beds were soft and clean. The food we prepared was hot and delicious. And it followed that soon our weary bones, after so many weeks living in the wilds of the high country, ached for a few hours rest buried underneath a comforting pile of heavy blankets.

Gawain and Gawaith were the first to succumb to sleep's seduction. As I watched them move to their beds, and fall into the fresh sheets and heavy blankets, I felt both immense pride and immense sorrow. Fate had been unkind to the brothers. Instead of living in Odar's Landing and enjoying the happy life the Vik were renowned for, Mistress Fate had decreed they were to become outcasts. They were to be hunted. They were forced to live like wild beasts in the depths of dangerous forests. Prey to the beasts of the night as well as those who hunted us for personal gain or religious glory. Both started this odyssey as fair-haired, blue-eyed children, who, knowing of the Warrior's Way, had been plucked from their privileged living and carefree lives. Hurlled into the abyss, their childhood taken away from them. Yet neither complained. Neither wavered when forced to face hardship and combat.

They were no longer children. They were men. Men with, if Fate so chose, limited opportunities and certain death waiting to strike them down early in their short spans in this Outer Realm. As I moved to stand close to them and gazed upon them while they slept, tears welled in my eyes. Tears of frustration, pride, anger at being the cause of their fate, and yes . . . even affection. I looked upon the lads as almost part of my flesh. My kinfolk. And I raged within my soul knowing their fate was so closely attached to mine.

I turned and looked at the pale face of Ursala. Cruel as fate had in store for the twins, twice the measure of cruelty awaited her. Her father, the Baron Hartooth, had his agents scouring kingdoms and baronies hunting for her. He held no affection for his daughter. Vaguely, and through the accidental blending of our minds, through Ursala's Inner Eye, I could see and feel her father's emotions. The void of any affection toward his daughter was a yawning and bottomless pit.

For him, the child was a tool to be used and wielded at his command. A prize of immeasurable value. She was a Pearl Princess. The Fifth Sister as promised

by Dragon Prophecy. She would unite all of Dragonkind under the banners of the Hartooth. And it would be the Hartooth who would lead the final march into the High Kanris and destroy all of Mankind.

Her father's far-reaching web of intrigue and spies hunted her and wished to pluck her back into the dragon world. Yet, other dragon clans hunted her as well. Hunted her, not to return her to the Hartooth, and ultimately, to fulfill dragon prophecy. Just the opposite. Hating the regal and haughty power legendary in the Hartooth, and fearing their own dragon prophecies, many clans wished to see little Ursala dead. Dragon gods were not benevolent creatures. Prophecy decreed terrible calamities for any dragon clan who stood against the Hartooth when the promised Fifth Sister came among them. But only if the child reached her full maturation. When the princess became a woman is when prophecy promised the Hartooth their destiny.

A clan who hated the Hartooth and mistrusted their own prophecies had a window of opportunity open to them. There were several clans who wished to deny the Hartooth their glory. Past grievances and old ancestral hatred fueled their distrust of the ancient First Clan. Killing the promised Fifth Sister before she reached her womanhood would be the knife blade into the Hartooth's heart. So Ursala was being hunted by almost all of dragonkind.

My own people hunted her. She was the missing link to fulfilling a terrible prophecy. We humans, like the dragon clans who despised the Hartooth, knew her removal from the prophecy would mean the doom to any Hartooth grand schemes of domination. Assassins and monks from all religious faiths would be relentless in their efforts to find her. Relentless in finding and removing her from this world, but equally as relentless in finding and destroying all who were trying to keep her out of harm's way.

Cruel is the Mistress of Fate. And seemingly uncaring, and as cruel, is the entity we Bretan call Father Destiny.

I could not but help feel rage and despair filling my soul. A sense of helplessness threatened to overwhelm me. Fate and Destiny wove their reams of our lives into a weave which was unchangeable and unforgiving. There was nothing to do but apparently acquiesce to it and accept our miserable lives as we

lived them.

“Bretan,” Fairhands’ deep voice sounded in the darkness of the room where Ursala slept and where I stood beside the bed looking down at her. “The child is restless. Her fever has broken and the medicines you administered are wearing off. Soon, she will be broadcasting our whereabouts to every wizard within the range of her powers. I cannot block her if she becomes fully awake. Something must be done now.”

I nodded, wiping streams of tears from my cheek. Fairhands’ slow drawl was spoken to me softly. Spoken as if he knew the maelstrom of emotions tearing at my soul. His voice, his presence, was enough to give me strength. Pushing the rage and despair into a cubicle in the depths of my mind, I locked the mental chains to keeping it closed and turned my attention to our immediate needs.

Sitting down on the edge of the bed beside the princess, I reached out with a hand and gently touched her forehead. Her eyes fluttered open the moment my dry hand touched her hot brow.

“Grandfather, where am I?”

“Hidden in a safe place, child.”

“I’m so tired, grandfather. So tired and so thirsty.”

“I know, little one. The last few days have been a great strain on you. You’ve had a bad fever. A fever like yours saps the strength from you. Rest, child. Rest and regain your strength.”

She twisted herself out of the heavy bedding and slid onto my lap. Her tiny head rested on my chest as I folded arms around her. Her entire body felt like a hot stone. Yet, when she leaned her head against my chest, I felt the child instantly relax. Smiling, I could feel the medicine in her working. Soon, the fever would lift. She would regain her strength. But until that time came, her sickness was like a ravenous animal howling in the darkness. Ursala, unaware of what she was doing, was filling the Netherworld with her power. It would be only a matter of time before a wizard would feel her presence.

“Grandfather, I feel many bad people are close by. Are we in Brinn?”

There was no use in lying. Conscious, she would instantly feel the lie before it left my mouth.

“No child, we are somewhere else. Somewhere far away from Brinn.”

“I feel the minds of so many people, grandfather. So many who want to hurt us. Who hate us. Why do they hate us so much?”

“Fear, little one. Fear in their hearts and in their souls. They fear the past and they fear the future they cannot see.”

“I know, grandfather. I know. My sisters keep telling me the same thing. *“The humans are tiny creatures scared of their own shadows! The humans are bad creatures who destroy all who they cannot rule.”*”

I glanced at the Niscian. The child constantly talked to the Four Sisters in the Netherworld. For any other creature, such constant touching the Netherworld with one’s mind guaranteed madness would soon swallow them whole. That Ursala seemed to handle the allure and narcotic power of the Netherworld only reaffirmed our convictions about her. She was a power of vast potential.

“I feel the nearness of the bad man who was with my grandfather the last time I saw him. He is a very bad man. He’s here, and he’s hunting for you.”

“Yes, I know. His name is Helgar Longhair. It was his men who searched for us these last few days. But enough talking, child. You are weak and you need to sleep. Drink this potion I’ve prepared for you. It’ll make you rest and regain your strength. And it will calm your powers and mask them from those who search for us.”

In my hands was a small stone cup filled with the medicinal herbs I had brewed in the forest. small dragon child’s hand reached up to take it as her little voice whispered a reply.

“They already know we are here, grandfather. Several bad men are coming. One of them is a wizard you faced a few days ago. I feel him flying through the air in the saddle of a swift Great Wing.”

She took the potion and, without hesitating, tilted the cup back and drained the contents down to the last drop. Taking a slow, deep breath, she snuggled deeper into my arms and closed her eyes. She fell asleep almost immediately.

Gently, I lowered her back into the bedding and tucked blankets tightly around her.

“What should we do, Bretan? Your herbs and medicines work well. When

she sleeps, her mind is at ease, and she does not reveal our presence. But these few moments of her being awake and conscious has caused us much harm. We cannot stay here. We must move on.”

“We cannot, Alvus. The medicine needs time to work its way through her tiny body. Another twenty-four hours is needed before we can move her. We must stay here.”

“And if wizards arrive before our departure? Are your powers strong enough to confront two or more wizards, along with Longhair’s men, all at the same time?”

I said nothing. We knew the answer to that. Our previous escapes from Vamot of Mons and Iaegor of Lincoln was due more to skillful subterfuge than to magic. I relished not confronting both wizards in a duel.

“We need a ruse,” the old monk grunted, frowning and nodding his head. “A stratagem to lower the odds against us. We need to remove either Longhair and his men from the equation, or this wizard. If they combine their efforts against us . . .”

He did not have to finish. We both knew what the results would be if we confronted a united effort our foes sought.

“Why does it take so long for the wizard to arrive? Can wizards not just blink their eyes or recite an incantation, and arrive in Charades instantly?”

“Yes, they can.” I nodded, smiling. The old man was a natural Null Stone. He could shut off the powers of most wizardry by just his sheer presence within close proximity to a wizard. But, for all his powers and all the years he roamed the high country and the foothills as a warrior-monk, he rarely faced a wizard and knew not the full intricacies a wizard had to carry with him.

“But to do so is costly,” I continued. “When a wizard uses his powers, there is a payment to be made. A wizard weakens his strength in direct proportion to the amount of magic he uses. To teleport here is possible. Yet, on their arrival, they would need to rest for at least two days. Their strength would be too drained to confront us the moment they arrived.”

“Ah. Then they must come by Great Wing in order to conserve their strength. Good. It gives us a chance to plan on possibly removing Helgar Longhair and his

men.”

“Unless, old man, wizards are already here and hidden behind a Cloak of Invisibility. Waiting patiently to reveal themselves when I reveal my presence.”

“But if they are here, can’t they already feel your presence?”

“Not if they are hidden in Cloaks of Invisibility. My Inner Eye will not be able to sense them. But they cannot sense me. The Cloak hides both the hunter and the hunted.”

“Ah! Then we must find out if wizards lurk in dark alleys behind these cloaks you speak of. If they are here, we must remove them one at a time. If they are not in the city, we have time to remove Longhair and his cronies before help arrives.”

I smiled. Obviously, the old man had a plan. Did I not say this elderly Niscian monk was a wily and cunning old fox?

Sitting down again on the edge of the child’s bed, I looked up at the old man. “What devious plan have you devised in that white-maned head of yours?”

A wicked smile curled the gray lips of the white haired old monk. “You are not the only one, Bretan, who is skilled in the arts of disguise and acting.”

We tarried for another twenty-four hours and constructed our elaborate plan to flush out our enemies.



It was a performance stunning to behold. The streets cleared before him as if they were waters being parted by a divine hand. Others knelt immediately to one knee and visibly trembled as he strolled regally down the middle of the cobblestone street leading toward Galvin Whitehand’s shop.

As I moved behind the old monk, I looked into the faces of those we passed. Terror filled their eyes. Color drained from their complexions. Few dared to look up from their kneeling positions and gaze into the face of a Schism Inquisitor.

The old Niscian wore the black robe with the white hood of a Schism Inquisitor. In his right hand was the long staff trimmed in gold and silver of a Schism Grand Inquisitor. With each step the long staff made a distinct clicking

noise on the stones beneath our feet. A sound in itself which could send grown men into screaming nightmares. Such was the powers of this Rogarian prelate.

Among the Rogarians were a small group of devout followers who searched for and destroyed those within the faith who willfully strayed from the fold and wished to create a schism, a parting, of believers. These monks and priests were not warrior-monks, and they were not wizards. But they were fanatical in their beliefs. And very deadly in their methods. Deadly and secretive. They came and went as they pleased, and they seemed to possess unimpeded powers. When it came to Rogarian doctrine and the interpretation of such doctrine, the Schism Inquisitor was the final word.

These inquisitors set themselves apart by wearing a long robe of black with a hood of pure white. They also carried with them long wooden staffs, walking staffs, which were used both as a weapon of defense and as a tool for torture. As a Rogarian priest rose in the ranks of their sect, their staffs became more ornate. When, at last, a prelate rose high enough, he became a Grand Inquisitor. His staff was pure silver riddled with an ornate jeweled head for all to see. Rare were Grand Inquisitors. But a priest who walked among the faithful with a staff of gold and silver was a Schism Inquisitor. The most fanatic of the fanatical. The one people trembled in uncontrollable terror when they made their presence known.

I walked behind Alvus Fairhands at a respectful distance. Dressed in the robes of a simple Rogarian priest, I walked with my hands folded together in front of me and with the long hood of a dark cloth over my head. We entered the city just as the wood and iron gates opened. When the guards recognized the black and white hooded priest, they almost fell over themselves trying to move people back for the black robed priest and I to enter. I smiled underneath my hood when, as we passed underneath the awning of the gate, the old Niscian reached out with a hand and blessed the captain of the guards with a Rogarian blessing.

Halfway down the street where Galvin Whitehand's shop stood a contingent of the city's imperial officials waiting nervously for us. Six members of the imperial administration, all dressed in their finest blue silk robes. With loud

voices they crowed and meowed loudly around the disguised Niscian, greeting the would-be Schism Grand Inquisitor with flowering phrases and sanctimonious declarations. They swarmed around him, genuflecting and kissing the old monk's hand reverently, paying no heed to me in the process. Which we anticipated. No one pays attention to a simple priest. Because of the robed figure in front of me, I became invisible. Giving me, in other words, the perfect situation to eye the crowds and look for our anticipated enemies.

We were not disappointed. Standing in the secondary row of city officials was the long haired, handsome blond Vik kinsman and mercenary captain, Helgar Longhair.

Dressed in finely crafted chain mail with an ornate blue and silver livery partially hiding the mail from view, Longhair stood in the crowd with arms folded across his chest and a dark scowl on his handsome face. The design of the blue and silver livery Longhair wore designated the House of Decidius. The current ruling power of the Rogarian Empire. The tall, thin warrior looked as if he was about to explode in rage. Clearly agitated seeing a Schism Inquisitor in Charades was confirmation enough a trap within the city's walls lay in waiting. This sudden appearance of a holy man who answered to no authority other than to his sect's elders threatened those plans.

Alvus turned out to be an accomplished actor. His disguise of a Schism Inquisitor, who was a number of years younger than what the actual man behind the disguise, was superb. Haughty, regal, even otherworldly in his demeanor, his performance was convincing enough to have fooled even the most suspicious Rogarian. He played the crowd and fawning imperial officials with a deft hand. Intimately familiar with Rogarian dogma, everyone hovered around the potentially frightening priest in complete devotion. From the faces of the crowd, I read absolute awe mixed in with genuine fear of his presence within their city. No one doubted who stood before them. No one dared to challenge him. All hoped they were not the one a Schism Inquisitor came to inquire about.

Several times the imperial officials asked obliquely this very question. To whom was the Inquisitor interested? Fairhands deflected each question with ease. In the end, sensing perhaps the city's crowd was becoming restless, it was

suggested the Inquisitor might adjourn to the city's palace. Fairhands acquiesced, and we were led through the streets to the palace with swift dispatch. We were assigned lavish quarters and invited to a formal dinner being offered in the Inquisitor's honor. Eventually, the imperial entourage, seeing the Inquisitor within the walls of the palace and safely ensconced away from the public, began filtering out of the rooms assigned to us. It took some time but in the end, all left. All except one.

Helgar Longhair.

He stood in front of our quarter's closed entrance, one hand resting on the pommel of his belted long sword, with a clearly angry face painted on his handsome features. The old monk and I could see the warrior believed he stood in the presence of a genuine Inquisitor. And because of this, he felt obligated to control his rage. Yet clearly his first impulse was to demand an explanation on why such a high church official was doing in Charades.

It was the old Niscian who broke the silence.

"A great weight presses upon your soul, my son. Speak, so that I might bring relief to your troubled mind."

"Father, have you not been warned? A great wizard of the hated Bretan, along with the hated dragon creature of prophecy, are soon to enter the city. I and my comrades are here to capture them. Your presence here threatens to destroy our very plans. You must leave tonight, this moment, before all our efforts fail."

"My son, I go where God tells me to go. God told me a great sickness resides in this city. I come to cauterize the wound and burn the sickness from the soul. It is God's will."

"God has already sent the tools to remove this sickness, father. I and my men, plus the Rogarian wizard, Iaegor of Lincoln, are here to do the cauterization. Other wizards are to arrive shortly. Together, we will capture this *Malus Apostate* and destroy the dragon child once and for all."

The old monk grunted underneath his disguise and nodded his head. Standing behind him, I felt his soul glow with the satisfaction of confirming his suspicions. Yet, he was a consummate actor. He kept his inner self hidden from the angry stare of the Vik warrior in front of us.

“Why does not Iaegor of Mons come to greet me, child? Surely his confirmation of your words would compel me to leave immediately. Lead me to him so that I may hear his words.”

“The trap has been set, father. He hides behind his Cloak of Invisibility and cannot take the chance to reveal himself to the Bretan. Surely you understand the powers of wizardry far better than I. Can you not see that your presence here in the city jeopardizes everything?”

“I understand completely, my son. I know of our brother’s wizardry skills. I know the skills of this Bretan creature. I must warn you, the skills of the Bretan are far greater than our brother can bring to bear against him. He will need more help than your men can possibly provide if this trap is to be successful.”

“That is why three other wizards hurry to Charades, holy father. They should arrive sometime before the noon hour tomorrow. Together, my men and four Rogarian wizards should be enough to defeat our enemies and bring them to justice. But all of our plans may unravel if this Bretan senses your presence in the city. I beg you, as a devout follower of the faith, to heed my pleas and leave this city immediately.”

Fairhands started to answer, but the sudden loud banging on the wooden door behind the Vik caught us all by surprise. Angrily Helgar Longhair turned and threw open the door. In the hall stood a cluster of Imperial Rogarian officials, their hands clasped together in agitation, with glowing faces of delirious excitement burned brightly.

“Holy father, the city and the countryside have heard of your presence and a great throng of the faith has gathered in the city square. They are chanting for you, holy inquisitor! They ask that you preach to them. Preach and reveal to them a message of God’s word to them. They are quite insistent on this.”

Behind us, in the distance, the noise of many voices lifting into the air and chanting the name of the Schism Inquisitor came to our ears. The noise seemed to be increasing in its volume even while we listened. Helgar, sensing his failure to remove our presence from the city immediately, snorted in disgust and turned to glare at the disguised old monk.

“My son,” Fairhands began warmly, like a father talking to a wayward son.

“I feel your anger and your dread. I promise to leave the moment I give the masses a few encouraging words. This, I promise you.”

Fairhands turned and looked at the expectant crowd of city administrators and, like the consummate actor he was, stretched out his hands out and nodded in a gesture of resignation and compliance.

“Give my servant and I a few moments to prepare ourselves, and then we will do what we can to lift the hearts of our brothers.”

The explosion of delight and relief filled the faces of the delegation as they bowed repeatedly and left hurriedly to inform the crowd. Helgar, frowning, remained and seemed unwilling to leave. Alvus, seeing the warrior’s reluctance, embraced the warrior in a fatherly fashion and gently guided him to the chamber’s doors.

“Go in God’s love, my son. Be the weapon that brings evil to its knees. Know that all that is supposed to happen this night will soon be revealed.”

The old Niscian’s soft voice seemed to soothe Helgar’s vexation. Nodding reluctantly, the blond Vik turned and strode away as Alvus closed the heavy wooden door in front of him.

“Now is the time to find Galvin Whitehair, warrior. While I hold the city and its officials in one place you should have no problem finding our quarry. With luck, we might be able to pull this off long before our foes realize what has happened.”

I nodded in agreement. But I did not feel at ease with this sudden addition to our plans. It was as if a gift of serendipity had been presented to us on a silver tray, a gift we could not refuse, and somehow, for reasons I could not define, it made me fill ill at ease. I no longer trusted serendipity. Of late, I began to worry about dark schemes residing within schemes, subterfuges within subterfuges. Nothing was as it seemed to be. My mind filled with suspicions.

“This may be a part of the trap, Niscian.” I said calmly. “I do not like you being separated from me or from the princess. If things go awry, you will be too far away for me to help you. And both of us will be too far away to protect the children.”

“A chance we must take, Bretan. But I doubt our foes are so devious as to

weave this elaborate of a plot. They believe I am a Schism Inquisitor. Even if Iaegor of Lincoln revealed himself to me, he would not recognize me for what I am. Go now, while this opportunity is open to us, and find Galvin Whitehair. Compel him to join our cause. Hurry!”

I said nothing.

Yes, this seemed like an opportunity too good to deny. The entire city would be gathered in the city square to listen to the words of a Schism Inquisitor. But the blacksmith would not be present. Not even a famous Schism Inquisitor’s fiery sermon could summon him from out of his wrath. He would remain in his shop and home, warming himself in front of the glowing embers of his fireplace, while others of the faith basked in religious delirium.

It would be easy to make my way, unseen and unchallenged, to him. But I feared the end results. What would be waiting for me when I found this Rogarian misfit? What Herculean effort would it take from me to extract myself, and those who trusted me to protect them, from the steel grip of our foes, if this turned out to be the trap I expected?

I did not know. There was only one way to find out.

CHAPTER 23



***The weak will inherent Paradise
The Cruel and Unjust
Will dwell in darkness and despair.***

— FROM THE BOOK OF ST. ALBANS

CHARADES IN THIS HOUR OF DARKNESS, WAS A SEA OF RELIGIOUS FERMENTATION. The blaring of trumpets, the clatter of clanging cymbals and the thundering rattle of huge drums indicated the city was celebrating the arrival of a great leader. A festive crowd assembled in front of the palace and escorted Alvis Fairhands to the city's center, to the massive wooden platform setting in the middle of the square. It was the executioner's platform where usually religious dissenters were publicly executed. But tonight, accompanied by a throng of singing and chanting Rogarian faithful, the tall hangman's gallows of hardened oak had been converted into a pulpit. From the lips of the Schism Inquisitor, the city would hear the words of God and fall into a profound religious rapture.

It was with ease for me, disguised as a Rogarian monk, to blend into the bustling and chanting crowd and disappear into the darkness altogether. No one seemed interested in an ordinary monk. In moments the crowd moved past me. Leaving me, alone, in one of the city's main avenues. From there I moved down the side streets and back alleys toward my destination.

The streets radiating away from the center of the city were barren of life. Not

even rats scurried about in the darkness. No candle or lantern filled a window with the promise of light and heat. No night watchman made his rounds carrying a heavy oil lantern to light his way down dark streets. I moved through the deserted streets like a thief bent on completing a nefarious mission. Gripping the sheathed curved steel of Helvingar in my left hand, I held to the dark shadows lining the streets and hurried to the compound containing the shops and residence of Galvin Whitehair.

Turning into the cul de sac that would take me to the Rogarian dissenter, I started to hurry my pace and find the armorer before our foes grew suspicious of these sudden changes to their plans. But I stopped in my tracks, as if running directly into a stone wall, as a wave of intense hatred swept around over me. A sea of cold, calculating rage, filled with greed and religious animosity, clutched at my throat and began to almost squeeze the breath from me. Stepping back, and slinking deeper into the street's dark shadows, I fought to deflect this overpowering madness and regain control of my senses.

Helgar Longhair had beaten me to the residence of the Rogarian dissenter.

For some moments, I stood in the inky darkness and made no move to advance or retreat. I sensed, using my Inner Eye, the emotions of all within the dark building in front of me. I felt the cold hatred of Helgar Longhair. I sensed the various emotions of eight of Longhair's henchmen with him. I bathed in the seething anger and fury of Galvin Whitehair. But I did not feel the presence of the Rogarian wizard, Iagor of Lincoln.

Narrowing my eyes, concentrating all my senses, I probed the minds of all within the armorer's large workshop. It did not take much probing to understand a trap had been set. Two of the eight mercenaries lay hidden in the dark rafters above the shop's floor with bows in their hands. The moment I presented myself, I would be skewered with arrows. Helgar Longhair was determined to kill me. He was willing to disobey orders to accomplish this feat. From within his mind I felt his clear disdain for his superior's orders to capture me alive. His hatred for me, for anything Bretan, was an emotion far more powerful than any Rogarian religious decree. For this Vik mercenary, my demise would be far more satisfying than anything his employers might reward him.

I wondered what motivated this man's deep animosity toward me. To my knowledge, Helgar Longhair and I had never encountered each other before. Yet, from this man's soul, I felt hatred almost as intense and as deep as the hatred for anything Rogarian seeping from Galvin Whitehair.

I had not the luxury to ponder this mystery. From the souls of the mercenaries within, they intended to commit foul and terrible deeds to the armorer. If Galvin Whitehair had any chance to live, I had to act immediately.

Moving in silence I entered the darkness of the armorer's shop and hung deep into the shadows. In the middle of the stone floor, near the forge, I found the images of Helgar Longhair, his men, and the bound and gagged giant form of Galvin Whitehair. The large peasant was strung up in chains and dangling by his arms a good foot off the floor. A leather strap covered his mouth to keep him from screaming. His face was battered and bruised from being severely beaten. Blood dripped from open wounds around his eyes. It was obvious Helgar's men had been busy for quite some time on the giant. They weren't finished with him yet.

Two of the mercenary captain's men were busy with the heavy leather billows of the forge, bringing the hot coals back to life. Stuck in the middle of the dull red glowing coals was an iron bar of three or four feet in length. At the right moment, when the bar radiated a bright white in color, the handsome Vik captain of mercenaries planned to apply the hot metal to Whitehair's flesh. In the soul of this evil creature I could sense his growing sense of anticipation. Inflicting severe pain on others needlessly was a joy Helgar Longhair enjoyed above all others.

In the darkness I made my preparations. From a leather pouch strapped to my side, I withdrew a wooden reed and four small, feathered darts. The sharp iron points of the darts I dipped into a creme found in a small vial which also was within the leather pouch. And then, moving like the Angel of Death, I lifted the small blowgun to my lips and sought out the assassins in the rafters above me as Helgar Longhair grinned wickedly and stepped in front of the battered face of his victim.

"You will die a far less painful death if you confess to me now and tell me

where I might find this Bretan monk. Otherwise, my friend, I am afraid I will be compelled to slice off a piece of your flesh, one piece at a time, and use this iron bar to cauterize the wound.”

Helgar Longhair’s voice purred with the sound of satisfaction as one of his gloved hands flicked away a large droplet of blood about to fall from the armorer’s right eye. Smiling pleasantly, the blond-haired Vik warrior circled the hapless giant hanging from the heavy chains, one gloved finger idly poking and probing the back and chest of the victim he was soon to torture.

“Fool. We have known of your hatred for our faith from the beginning. We knew it would be but a matter of time before something would compel you to openly revolt. So we waited. Watched and waited for the right time. And the time came, mind you, with this Bretan monk and his alliance with a dragon abomination. Our masters knew it would be but a matter of time before this foul group would attempt to contact you. A Null Stone of your powers, poor fellow, in the hands of this monk and his dragon masters, would be a formidable weapon for them. Something which simply cannot be allowed. You understand, surely not? Yes? Good. Now, if you would only tell me where we might find this monk and his dragon pet, we can dispense with this sordid affair and end your life quickly and painlessly. What say you?”

With a swift motion of the hand Helgar Longhair ripped the leather strap from Whitehair’s lips and, with a backward motion of the same hand, viciously snapped the man’s head to one side with a powerful blow.

For a response, the chained giant’s sound of laughter erupted from the man’s heaving chest. Laughter was the last thing the Vik captain expected from his victim. Lifting an eyebrow in surprise, Longhair stepped in front of the giant and folded arms across his chest.

“Call me a fool, do you?” Whitehair began, his eyes afire with hate as he turned his head toward his inquisitor. “The fool is the one who believes any form of pain inflicted upon me will compel me to tell you something I do not know. Who is this monk you speak of? What is this set of lies about a dragon child? And suppose I did have knowledge of this monk and dragon child. If they came to me with the offer to destroy all of Rogarian law, I would leap at the

opportunity. I would swear to the gods I would do my utmost to destroy every Rogarian priest, dismantle every Rogarian stronghold and cathedral, and hunt down all who professed to believe still in the lies the Rogarian priesthood espouse. You fool. You sick fool. Do what you want with me! I'll tell you nothing."

A dark fury gripped Helgar Longhair's heart. From the lips of the giant in front of him came not the whining pleas for mercy he expected. From Galvin Whitehair's lips came raging defiance and a sea of hatred for the man in front of him and for everything Helgar Longhair stood for.

In response the Vik mercenary stepped back from his chained captive and turned to reach for the glowing iron bar half-buried in the heating coals. With a dark look of pure evil etched into the man's face, he withdrew the bar with one gloved hand and turned back toward the giant armorer.

"Never mind any form of confession, my good man. It is not needed. We'll find this heretic monk in due time. But for now, let's you and I explore the question of how much a man can suffer pain before he dies from his heart giving out."

Stepping toward the armorer, Longhair lifted the bar up and held it in front of the giant's eyes. A wicked grin of delight played across the man's lips as he started to extend the glowing bar and touch the exposed flesh of the giant's chest.

But the tool of torture never found its intended victim. Just as it was about to touch soft flesh, the clatter of a bow falling onto the floor from the dark rafters above resounded in the darkness. Startled, Longhair stepped back from the chained giant and turned to stare into the darkness. As he did, a second heavy bow fell from out of the darkness and rattled to the floor in front of the forge. And then, the unconscious form of the hidden bowmen fell as well and landed heavily on the shop's stone floor.

Lifting an eyebrow in surprise and turning his head from one side to the next as if he was looking for the source of this strangeness, the Vik tossed the iron poker back into the simmering coals and reached for the pommel of his sword.

In the darkness, just outside the pool of light which lit the center of the shop,

I slipped Helvingar from its wooden sheath. The noise of the bronze-colored blade being pulled from its confinement was like death itself announcing its presence to one and all. As the tip of the blade emerged from the sheath, I stepped into the light and revealed myself.

“Greetings, Helgar. As you so fervently wished, I have come to make my presence known to you.”

A cold fury ran through my veins as I spoke, my voice calm, almost cheery in tone and timbre, but filled with a deadly menace. With the curved blade of the dragon’s scimitar in my right hand, held out slightly from my body, I waited for the first attack calmly. It came suddenly and with startling alacrity from my left.

Two burly Vik mercenaries, their long swords drawn and gripped in their hands, charged out of the darkness, yelling their battle cries at the top of their lungs. One long iron blade whistled through the air toward my chest in a blow designed to cleave me in half. The second blow flew through the darkness toward my skull.

One small step back made the blade aimed at bisecting me find nothing but air in front of it. A step forward and turning my body entirely to the right made the second blow miss its target as well. Neither warrior recovered fast enough to offer much of a resistance.

Helvingar sang that night. A vicious slashing blow across the back of the second assailant split the mercenary’s plain chain mail and bit deep into the man’s flesh. It was not a killing blow. But it was a painful wound that bled freely. In a scream of agony, the man dropped his sword and fell to the stone floor.

The first attacker, now off-balance, extended a leg to regain his center of balance. It was a foolish mistake. Twisting to one side, I used my left foot and, with a sure aim, kicked the man hard just above the kneecap. With the sound of a tree limb cracking in half, the man’s leg gave way. Falling to the floor, gripping his broken leg, the warrior’s voice bellowed into the night air.

This attack and defeat of the two took less than two seconds. Regaining my center of balance, I turned to face the handsome blond captain of mercenaries as a few men came forward, and roughly dragged their wounded comrades to

safety. The bronze steel of Helvingar was covered in blood, dripping large pools of it onto the shop's stone floor. Holding the blade slightly to one side, I noticed the two warriors who had been working the billows of the forge stared at the curved steel of the dragon blade with hypnotic eyes filled with dread.

"Surely you can do better than that, my friend." I grunted in a friendly voice and with a grin on my lips. "You wished for me to show myself. You've set an elaborate trap to capture me. Very well-planned, I might add. So. Here I am. Do as you think you are capable of doing. If more blood is to be shed tonight, why hesitate? Let it begin now."

Six of Longhair's men plus Longhair himself yet stood before me. On Longhair's tanned face was a mask of pure malice. A rage which passed all form and measure of restraint and caution. But attack he did not. Instead, half-turning his head to his right, he gave a curt nod. From out of the darkness came the screams of four warriors. Bursting into the pool of light glowing in the middle of the shop, the warriors rushing toward me were armed with long swords in one hand and round, steel rimmed wooden bucklers, or shields, in the other. Swordsmen using bucklers as a defensive measure were harder to defeat. Four such armed men attacking one defender, made it much harder.

But not impossible.

The attack came united and coordinated. All four opponents were good swordsmen who knew their trade well. They attacked simultaneously and with ferocity, using their bucklers to ward off any potential deadly blows from me. But they had never before faced a warrior-monk. They had never experienced the speed and agility all warrior-monks must possess. Nor, frankly, had they ever experienced such a weapon as Helvingar.

The glowing blade in my hand was a steel no mortal creature had hammered from a forge. The blade's curved edge never dulled. Strong and flexible, it could cut through bars of iron as if they were nothing but loaves of bread. And so it did with two of the iron blades attacking me. Side stepping, ducking, and twisting, I wove through the first assault and bided my time before striking back. When it eventually came, as it always does in a fight, Helvingar reached out and bit off two iron blades with the blinding speed of a coiled viper.

With a loud clamor both blades of long iron fell to the stone floor, leaving in the hands of the two attackers a handle and pommel with the remains of a blade hardly long enough to make a good dagger. Stunned, their eyes staring at their useless weapons, the two stepped back from the fray. Stepping toward them, I used my free hand to extend my fingers into a hardened blade and hit each one on an exposed pressure point on their necks. They fell to the floor, unconscious long before their heads hit the stones of the floor itself.

The remaining two soon followed. One did not bring his buckler up in time to protect himself. Helvingar slipped in and drank deep the man's blood. The fourth stepped to one side, tripped over something on the floor, and lost his balance. A well-placed kick in the knee sent the man rolling to the floor, clutching his broken leg with both hands.

Stepping back quickly and turning to face Longhair, I found myself almost beside the hanging Galvin Whitehair. With a swift slashing blow, I cleaved in two the chains holding the giant by his arms. With a clanging of chains still wrapped around his wrists, Whitehair dropped to the stone floor on bare feet and turned his crimson face toward me.

"Flee, monk! There are too many here to defeat! Behind that door are at least fifty more, plus a Rogarian monk! They knew you would come to me! They came tonight before you arrived and have been lying in wait for you!"

As if by prearranged cue, behind me a wide wooden door rolled open heavily on screaming iron rollers. The shop was filled with the light of twenty burning torches as my eyes fell on the mass of Vik mercenaries, swords drawn, and eager for the command to be given to attack. In front of this armed sea of steel and armor stood the grinning form of Iaegor of Lincoln.

"Well. We meet again, Bretan."

There was a burning look of triumph clearly radiating from the wizard's face. His voice, now more measured and held in check, nevertheless rang with a deep satisfaction. Truly, now the odds were overwhelmingly stacked against me. With fifty armed warriors behind him, plus the known swordsmanship of Helgar Longhair, along with his own talent with the sword, Iaegor of Lincoln felt there was no way for me to escape.

I smiled, yet gripped the steel in my hand firmly, and faced the Rogarian wizard.

“My compliments, wizard. Somehow, you managed to hide yourself and these men behind a Cloak of Invisibility. Truly a praiseworthy feat!”

I had felt the eight men plus Helgar Longhair in the shop with the armorer. I had not felt even a hint of the Rogarian’s presence. Nor the presence of the fifty or so men standing behind him. Impressed, I lifted my blade and saluted the man for his cunning.

“And my compliments to you too, monk. Finding a Schism Inquisitor and duping him to believe you were a simple Rogarian monk in an effort to enter the city was a masterful stroke. Were it not for the fact we knew you were coming here anyway the subterfuge would have worked.”

Serendipity! Neither Longhair nor Iaegor suspected the truth. They truly believed Alvus Fairhands was a Rogarian Schism Inquisitor. Smiling, and acting as if I accepted the compliment, I stepped away from the towering hulk of the armorer beside me.

“Release this man,” I said, gesturing to Whitehair. “He is innocent of all charges and has been a loyal follower of your faith his entire life. He need not suffer longer.”

“Yes. He has been a follower of the True Faith for many years,” Iaegor grinned, looking into the face of the scowling mask of Galvin Whitehair with eyes of pure venom. “But one could not say he has been a loyal follower. We have known of his burning desire to seek revenge for his heretic wife’s death. But we did nothing in the hope that his faith might finally overcome his hate. Alas! His hate burns with an even hotter wrath for our religion than ever before. And being the Null Stone he is, his powers are too strong to allow to be swallowed up into the hands of our enemies. He will, like you, suffer the ultimate punishment.”

All the meanwhile, Whitehair had been glaring at the Rogarian wizard with a look of barely controlled fury. His massive hands kept curling and uncurling into gigantic boulders as his heart beat furiously. I could feel his mind filling flooding with a desire for revenge, insane revenge, and if I did not do something to refrain

him, he would do something unexpected, and ultimately deadly.

But too late! I felt, in the blink of an eye, all sanity leaving Whitehair's mind as a violent bellow of rage escaped his lips. With a lunge, he found a heavy iron bar of perhaps eight feet in length. Gripping it with both hands, he deftly lifted it and began to whirl it around as if it was a wooden staff.

"Save yourself, monk! Flee!" he shouted at me.

With another roar of animal fury, he leapt directly at the Rogarian wizard. Several warriors behind the wizard stepped forward to defend the monk. But they went down in a hail of blows from, their skulls crushed from the blows of the heavy bar. More surged forward to protect the monk. But too late. A giant hand reached out and gripped Iaegor around the neck and squeezed for all its worth!

Gripped by a Null Stone, Iaegor's wizardry was rendered useless. He staggered back into the men behind him, his hands clawing away at removing the vicelike grip around his throat.

In that moment, pandemonium exploded!

Behind me I heard Helgar Longhair scream in fury. I felt the murderous intent in the man's soul. I heard the man's sword whistling through the air as I turned to face him. Helvingar flew through the air in a blinding arc, deflecting the long blade of Longhair's as it descended toward me. The curved blade of the bronze steel met the steel blade of Longhair at a slight angle, deflecting the blow, yet deflecting my blade as well. The tip of the bronze blade bounced off the long blade and caught Longhair at the temple and sliced a long cut down the right side of the man's face. Blood flew everywhere and Longhair recoiled back, dropping his blade, and throwing hands to his face as he screamed in agony.

I did not mean to maim the mercenary. I would have much preferred killing the man in honorable combat. But that opportunity did not present itself. For as I turned to assist Galvin Whitehair, I saw it was too late. Half of the fifty warriors behind the Rogarian wizard were hanging on the massive body of the armorer with daggers flying in their hands. The valiant Whitehair was dead. But even in his death, his vicelike grip could not be removed from the Rogarian's throat.

To stay would mean my death, and eventually the death of Ursala and the

boys. From the leather pouch at my side, I withdrew a small silver ball and threw it hard onto the stone floor. Billowing smoke, filled with ingredients to choke and make one's eyes fill with tears, engulfed the interior of the building. Men began choking and coughing violently as their weapons rattled to the floor. For my part, I did not hesitate. I made my way out of the armorer's shop and quickly disappeared into the night.

A block away from the scene of battle, I leapt to the roof of a large building and brought the long wooden needle of a whistle to my lips and blew hard. From out of the dark skies, the sound of powerful wings filled the area around me, and Cedric landed swiftly onto the roof not more than five feet from me. With two long strides, I leapt into the bird's saddle and strapped myself in.

"The children?" I yelled, gripping the saddle with all my strength as the giant bird of prey shot from the roof in a blinding burst of energy, climbing into the night sky. Did I not say a rider and his bird communicated with each other? Aye, true it is. From my friend's beating heart, I felt his assurance the children were safe and away from the city. Nodding, I pulled from his straps the short, double-curved horn bow all riders use in aerial combat and reached for an arrow to notch to the string.

"To Fairhands!" I yelled.

Cedric banked hard, curled his wings into his body, and began dropping like a stone directly to the brightly lit city square below us. There, surrounding the towering wooden pillory, the entire population of the city stood underneath blazing torches to hear the words of the preaching Schism Inquisitor. High on his makeshift pulpit the old Niscian monk had the crowd enthralled by his sermon. So enthralled, not one soul saw our plummeting forms dropping out of the sky. With a sudden turn to adjust his descent, Cedric waited for the last possible second before throwing out his wings in a braking motion. The wind blowing in my face from our swift descent lessened somewhat. But incredibly swift yet was our descent. In a heartbeat we were over the crowds as the giant bird of prey reached out with his talons and grabbed the preaching monk.

From the pillory Cedric plucked Albus Fairhands from the crowd. Gripping him firmly in his talons, my old friend began climbing into the night sky rapidly

as the thousands below us erupted into howls of consternation and disdain! Ten minutes later, we gently dropped the old Niscian onto a grassy knoll, and then landed beside the birds ridden by my three wayward children. In the saddles of their birds were Gawain and Gawaith. Strapped tightly against Gawaith's chest was the slumbering form of Ursala.

I saw looks of infinite relief on the faces as I leapt from my saddle. Quickly, I said some words to both boys and looked at the drugged form of Ursala. Seeing she was safe, I nodded and turned to face a grim-looking Fairhands.

"They will come for us, monk. I feel the night already filling with our pursuers. We must leave. Take the boys and the child to our agreed-upon rendezvous. I will join you at dawn."

"What do you plan to do, monk? Fight the hundreds following us single-handedly? Bravery and courage are admirable, Bretan. But this is neither. This smells of revenge. And revenge will get you killed."

The old man's words were as sharp as knives as they tore into me. Yet I could not deny their truth. I did burn for revenge! I was the cause of an innocent man's death and found myself helpless in saving him. Gripping the man's arm fondly, I nodded in agreement.

And then I left them. Strapping myself into the saddle of my war bird once more, I waved to them just before we lifted into the night.

What can I say, pilgrim? I am a sinful man. At times, I am overwhelmed with the emotions of guilt. And my guilt leads into the darker shades of a deadly lust. A lust for revenge.

That night, I succumbed to the darkness of my baser instincts. Cedric and I flew as one and the same.

And we hunted our prey with a terrible intent for the rest of the night.

CHAPTER 24



***Blessed are the ones who strive for Peace;
For they are the ones who bring
Hope to the world.***

— FROM THE BOOK OF ST. ALBANS

FOUR MAJOR ROUTES KNIFE DEEP INTO THE HIGH KANRIS. PASSAGES LARGE enough through the high country for armies to maneuver freely in either offensive or defensive formations. In each of these four passages, both at their entrance and exit points, powerful kingdoms have sworn oaths they would defend them from dragon incursion.

There are numerous other passages into the high country. Actually, no more than slits cut into the shield wall due to the occasional rumbling of the earth which infrequently come to haunt the high country. These narrow entrances are far too narrow for more than five or six individuals to slowly navigate their way through, much less for an army to use as a point of invasion. In each of these entrances, where the gaps in the shield wall open for the passage, measures were taken to defend them as well.

At the northernmost regions of the High Kanris, where the towering wall of rock looked out over the rolling carpets of forests called the Goram Hills, was such a passage. Called the Passage of Tears, it was a narrow, steeply inclined gorge cut through the wall. So steep the path, and so fraught with the danger of

sudden rock slides from the heights above, the name of the passage was well-founded. Fierce blizzards from the snow-capped peaks descended without warning, sometimes burying the luckless souls who might be in the passage in a blanket of snow ten feet deep or more. Sometimes, great walls of water flash out from a side canyon, sweeping away everything before it. More pilgrims died while deep within its twisting confines than in any other passage.

Where the passage's entrance opened out into the high country, a large and beautiful city sat. Stout walls of hard limestone gleamed in the sunlight, thick and strong to behold, dotted with numerous towers. The buildings within were all of stone, well made, and pleasing to the eye. Wide avenues and thoroughfares, paved in stone and well-maintained, were usually filled with a prosperous and articulate people. But it was a city of deceptions. Aye, the city was rich and powerful. Its ruling family, relatives to the king who ruled the kingdom, maintained a large force of Great Wings and their riders to protect the city. On the walls, day and night, Iberian swordsmen and Shin crossbowmen kept a vigilant eye focused within and without the walls. By all outward appearances, it was a city well-blessed. The city's tranquility suggested its honest burgers and peasantry, mixed with an assortment of various minor noble families, proudly called this city of delight their home. But like an assassin wearing a well-crafted disguise, a much darker and far grimmer, reality lurked. The city was Rossaria, the third largest city in the Rogarian kingdom. And it was the kingdom's seat for the Rogarian Order's more extreme religious dogmas.

I had brought us into the heart of our most virulent enemy's homeland. Into the teeth of the devil himself. Aye, call me mad. Indeed, a form of madness had made me decide this course of action.

There were two items I had in mind as we approached the powerful battlements of the city. First, the quickest avenue open to us to escape the high country was to use The Passage of Many Tears. It would take only twelve hours of slowly working our way through the twisting labyrinth to descend. But at the bottom of the passage, we would emerge into the Goram Forests. The entrance to the passage at the base of the shield wall was guarded by small city called Oslon. The city was the capital for a group of people called the Kris. They were a hardy

group of large-boned people distant cousins to the Vik. They were, like the Vik, fierce in battle and loyal Bretan followers. Here, I knew, we would find shelter for a few days. More importantly, we might find warriors who knew me and would listen to my overtures in recruiting them to our cause.

There was a streak of logic in my madness in bringing our small group to Rossaria. Who would ever imagine a *Malus Apostate*, along with the dragon princess, and an old Niscian monk and two young boys, would ever consider journeying into the heart of his most fanatical of foes? The city contained more than fifty thousand inhabitants. Its temple complex held more than a thousand priests and warrior-monks. Ten thousand Rogarian imperial warriors protected the city. Why would any rational creature choose this place to stage their escape?

It was a simple decision. I knew it would work. I knew my foes. I understood their arrogance, their supreme confidence, and I was convinced they would never suspect I would bring the tiny dragon princess here.

But there was a second reason, a more personal reason, why we came to Rossaria. In this beautiful city, with its ostentatious wealth and power easy to look upon, sat the Temple of St. Rogarius. A huge temple complex. With a truly gigantic temple dominating the city's landscape. The main temple was made of white and black marble. Five hundred carved marble Greek columns held up its deep blue tiled roof. It was a temple so large, it could be seen from miles away, rising above the rugged country and long before the city's walls came into view. Here, surrounded by his most ardent of followers, in a city that also claimed to be the most ardent of Rogarian faithful, lived the Patriarch of the Rogarian Order.

Claudius Decidius.

Short stature, growing bald, yet with a grace and demeanor that radiated with an unmistakable confidence and power, the Patriarch of the Rogarians was also quite brilliant and a true fanatic. His religion was supreme. His desire to convert all to his faith, or kill those he considered beyond redemption, was absolute. He was a direct heir to the Rogarian throne, thanks to the recent elevation of the Decidian family to the imperial robes. In truth, Claudius Decidius had at his fingertips more power than even his older brother, the new emperor. The rise of

the Decidian family to the imperial robes did not happen without the direct involvement of the Patriarch. I would not have been surprised to find out it was the Patriarch himself who orchestrated the grab for imperial authority.

I wished to have an audience with Claudius Decidius. I wanted to personally inquire as to what the Patriarch might know about the identity of the Evil from Afar. I suspected the Rogarians were in league with this shadowy force. Were they merely simple-minded pawns being manipulated by the Evil's Netherworld mastery? Or were they intricately bound together—mutual partners in the destruction they were orchestrating. If I could penetrate into the complex of St. Rogarius and find the Patriarch, perhaps a little persuasion on my part might convince the Rogarian priest to reveal his secrets to me.

There was another reason why I wished to stand before the Prelate. A darker reason I nursed in my soul and allowed to grow like a disease. For years the Rogarians flowed like a vengeful tide back and forth throughout the High Kanris—rooting out Bretan followers, priests, and monks and burning them at the stake as heretics and enemies against their god. They preached a fiery brand of religion which spoke of only One True Belief. Any variation, any deviation, from this narrow brand of divine will, they deemed a sin. We of the Bretan suffered greatly from these witch hunts. But we were not the only ones. Being not a Rogarian automatically placed one under suspicion. To be accused as a heretic and a nonbeliever was a very short breath away. Hundreds of innocent souls were swept away because they did not bow to Rogarian rule.

I suspected Claudius Decidius would have much knowledge about the recent demise of Karlsburg to tell me.

It was time to strike back. It was time to formally announce to the Rogarians the Bretan were not destroyed. Nor would they submit to Rogarian rule. It was time to declare war on the Rogarian Order. No strike would be so daring, or so damaging to the Rogarians themselves, than to strike the heart of their religious order.

But first, the task at hand was to remove tiny Ursala and the twins safely from the high country. To do this, and to pass through the city of Rossaria unmolested from prying Rogarian Imperial guards' suspicions, we had to make

ourselves to look, once again, utterly mundane in appearance. Again, a good disguise can do wondrous things to one bold enough to act the part.

With this in mind, we journeyed first to a place I knew, a river crossing found in a wide valley just on the border of the Kingdom of Rogaria, where four trails converged creating a rendezvous point for merchants journeying to the Rogarian cities. No city existed at this river crossing, but merchants with long caravans of pack animals heavily laden with goods would arrive and immediately begin a brisk trading frenzy. There, we removed the saddles from our Great Wings, including the packs of gold and supplies given to us by King Olaf weeks ago, and let them go.

No, pilgrim, I did not lose my old friend Cedric. Nor did the lads lose their trusted war birds they had grown attached. No, the idea was quite simple. We could not fly into Rossaria. To do so would be disastrous. We would have been instantly recognized and subdued, and our fates would have been sealed. We had to pass through the city without being recognized. We would pass through the city as merchants leading a rather long caravan of goods down The Passage of Tears. Our birds would not follow us. Instead they would be waiting for us, after passing over the Shield Wall, in the forest below..

There are ingresses and egresses into and out of the High Kanris only Great Wings know. Cedric was a master in such knowledge. The black and red beast would lead our mounts through uncharted mountain valleys and over the shield wall. They would, in the forests which surrounded the city of Oslon, forage on wild game and wait for our arrival. Great Wings are very intelligent creatures. Cedric understood perfectly the plan I outlined to him. When we let the birds go, watched them all rise from the ground and turn toward the northeast, I could feel in the beating heart of Cedric his reluctance in leaving me alone in the midst of so many enemies. As we watched the five large beasts quickly forming a tight hunting formation, I knew they would be waiting for us. All we had to do was pass through Rossaria, not be recognized by imperial Rogarian guardsmen or suspicious Rogarian monks and make the slow and dangerous descent down The Passage of Tears.

Simplicity itself.

Before we approached the merchant's rendezvous I fabricated disguises for all of us. Albus Fairhands I converted from an old Niscian monk into a dour-looking silk merchant, complete with a set of fine silk robes, bright in colors and designs, and an abacus to count his profits. He was not pleased with his disguise but remained stoically silent. Gawaith and Gawain became the Niscian's grandchildren. Silk robes of similar design as the new attire of the monk's they wore. And, with a little manipulation of their ears and noses with devices I carried with me to make disguises, I soon had them looking remarkably like the old Niscian. Their facial appearance would have fooled anyone's casual glance.

The disguise for Ursula became amazingly simple to achieve. Being a pale-skinned Pearl Princess, so unlike the typical dragon that had two colors patterned across their rough reptilian skin, converting her over to appear as if she was a human female child became rather easy. Dressing her in the plain garb of a peasant child assigned to handle one of the pack animals became the perfect disguise. Unless a Rogarian wizard stood right beside her and felt the power of her aura radiating from her, there was no way the typical cursory glance a Rogarian imperial guardsman gave as each caravan passed through the city would recognize the child for what she was.

As for myself, I removed my chain mail, my leather boots, and my weapons. Quickly crafting a jacket from out of canvas and straw donning it, along with the cosmetics used in my disguises, and suddenly I was a wine merchant from some faraway city no one knew. I was thirty years older, perhaps more than one hundred pounds heavier, with a treble chin and wrinkles around my eyes. Years of observing people from all walks of life gave me the gestures, the movements, the personality of the typical wine merchant. I would not be recognized either when we entered the city. Rogarian wizards, if they were present, would sense my presence. But they would never suspect this disguise.

We purchased from the bartering merchants bolts of silk, expensive wines, crates of beautiful porcelain, numerous pack animals, and thirty slaves and hired twenty Iberian swordsmen—the ubiquitous Iberians—as our armed escorts. All four commodities were the typical goods that passed downward from the high country to the hill country. All four were high-value goods, each fetching a

sizable profit. Each, except for the slaves. I planned to set them free the moment we arrived in Oslon.

I added slaves to our little caravan for two purposes. First, as a Bretan monk, I swore an oath to protect the weak and the innocent. That oath implies I would free as many slaves from bondage at any time an opportunity arose. These slaves were warriors and peasants from some minor city with which the Rogarians warred. Instead of decimating a city's population, as most cities do, the Rogarians understand the dictates of greed and know a profitable business when they saw one. The buying and selling of slaves was a profitable business. The militaristic Rogarians were the largest provider of fresh slaves in this part of the northern Kanris. When one of the passing caravans arrived at the crossing of trails marching thirty slaves along in heavy chains, I did not hesitate in acquiring them.

Secondly, the slaves added an extra layer of conviction to our already well-disguised faces. Who would suspect a Bretan monk selling slaves? My world is a cruel and inhospitable place. Layers of cruelty heaped upon more layers of pain and suffering. Pain and suffering have become so commonplace in this world, it was naturally expected from one and all. Nothing appeared as it should. All of us, in our own way, wore disguises every day. By adding slaves to our caravan, I knew every Rogarian we met would wave us through without so much as a second glance at us.

So it came to pass. Down the wide and well-traveled stone highway called the Via Rossaria, our long caravan made its slow trek. We were only one of several caravans to pass through the city. On the day we entered the city, at least a dozen other caravans entered as well, some smaller than ours, but the others very much larger. I halted our dozen pack animals, two dozen attendants, the Iberian escorts, and thirty slaves underneath a grove of large shade trees and waited for hours before sending everyone back onto the road. Entering the city later in the afternoon, knowing the guards who manned the posts would be exhausted, and more importantly, bored from the numbing routines of inspecting one caravan after another all day long, offered us an easier entrance.

Of course, in the disguise of a jovial merchant of fine wines and silks, it was

expected of me to offer small monetary gifts to the gates' guards. Bribes in a city such as Rossaria are the lubricants which keep the economy in motion. I played the part of the merchant to perfection. To the sentries standing at the gate, a few silver coins were handed out discreetly, but generously. To the captain of the guards commanding the gate, a few more silver coins plus two bottles of wine sufficed. We were, as I anticipated, waved through with hardly a Rogarian guardsman sparing us a second glance.

Within the high walls of the city I did not feel the presence of any warrior-wizard. I smiled at this, walking at the head of our caravan, waving to the large crowds and street vendors who gathered around our slow passage. I was positive at least two Rogarian wizards would be within the temple walls and close to their beloved Patriarch. Undoubtedly, they masked themselves with Cloaks of Invisibility. They were hidden from me sensing them. I would likewise not be felt by them. I wanted no confrontation with a wizard, or wizards, until I safely escorted those in my protection through the enemy's busy streets and watched them finally disappear into the narrow, steeply inclined opening of The Passage of Tears.

It required an entire day and night to complete the process. So many caravans passing through the well-populated city required time and patience. Rossaria is a long city, though relatively narrow. Unfortunately, the city gate we needed to pass through was located in the wall on the far side of the city. We had to traverse down backstreets, narrow and cramped with all the strange denizens can be found in a city, pausing innumerable times in the process. But this did not become a problem. Instead, and especially for tiny Ursala and the twins, it became a festive time. There was much to see in Rossaria, with its many elegant buildings and ornate stone monuments depicting one Rogarian achievement after another. Rogarian sculptures were noted far and wide in their artistry at taking stone and carving figures from it that almost breathed with a life of their own. Magnificent statues of warriors on mounted Great Wings in the midst of battle, or great orators standing regally with one arm outstretched as if giving a speech seemed to be everywhere.

I enjoyed the time we had in the city. I especially enjoyed catching views of

the tall acropolis rising from the middle of the city, where the Temple of St. Rogarius sat. The white marble buildings, with their Rogarian blue-tiled roofs, glowed with a brilliant light in the late afternoon sun. The main temple, with its hundreds of marble columns, was stunning to behold. Each column spanned the width of four men standing shoulder to shoulder and rose fifty feet into the air. Rogarian temples are purposely designed to be massive and imposing. The sheer size of the temple made the average worshipper feel as if he was standing in the presence of God himself. It was said a forty-foot statue made of bronze, ivory, lapis lazuli, and gold dominated the central Outer Sanctum of the temple. The artist who created this masterpiece worked for half his lifetime on perfecting the bronze cast alone. Tons of ivory, carefully peeled in long sheets and softly hammered onto the bronze, gave the giant his white toga. The blue from tons of lapis lazuli decorated the white toga and gave the statue his blue eyes. Gold was the statue's hair and the bow in his hand.

God, in his glory, stood in the Outer Sanctum of the Temple of St. Rogarius. All who were privileged to cast their eyes upon it fell to the marble floor on their hands and knees, often confessing their sins before it. It was claimed the statue lived. No matter where you walked in the Outer Sanctum, its eyes followed you. Illuminated by softly burning torches, the light was enough to make heavy shadows play across the statue's face, creating the illusionary suspicion the statue lived and breathed and was watching intently everyone who came before it.

I had a strong desire to gaze upon the face of the Rogarian's version of God appeared to them. I planned to do just that, at the moment Alvus Fairhands, the twins, and tiny Ursala, along with the rest of the caravan, safely left the city's wall far behind them.

CHAPTER 25



*God grants peace to those seeking it
But only if the heart is
Pure.
Peace cannot flourish in a garden
filled with rancor.*

— FROM THE BOOK OF ST. ALBANS

I WATCHED THE LAST RIDER OF OUR CARAVAN, AN IBERIAN SWORDSMAN RIDING an all black horse outfitted in the finest of armor, enter the narrow mouth of The Passage of Tears. Almost twenty Iberian warriors on horseback, thirty slaves in chains, a dozen pack horses carrying fine wines and silks, with the ancient monk shepherding tiny Ursala and the two blond-haired waifs, disappeared into the narrow gorge that was the passage. And those whom I deeply cherished did so with great reluctance in their hearts. They had not taken the news well when I told them I wished to stay behind for a day or two and enter the Temple of St. Rogarius. All wanted me to come with them. Ursala, in particular, worried the most.

“Grandfather, I see terrible things happening to you if you go alone into that place.”

“Child, you can see the future clearly?” I asked as I held the child in my lap as we talked. “And how clear are your visions?”

“I have dreams. Sometimes my dreams come true.”

This was true. Those who can see the future can sometimes see the future that actually unfolds. More so if the person glimpses the future soon to come versus the distant future. The gift was capable of foreseeing events that might happen within hours or days, something an ordinary human might describe as a premonition., were often observed by the gifted.

“What did you see in these visions?”

She frowned, wrinkling her dragon’s odd nose in such a fashion which always brought a smile to my lips, and turned in my arms to look at me.

“I see a big man in gold, holding a bow made of gold. I see men in black with swords drawn, running toward you angrily. I hear screaming. I feel much hate in the room.”

“And?” I mused, lifting an eyebrow and waiting for her to tell me the grim news, suspecting what it might be.

“I don’t see you or feel you. I feel a kind of shell, which might be you. It almost feels like you. But it’s also something else. Something akin to a wild animal attacking another wild animal. I don’t like that feeling, grandfather. It scares me.”

I smiled and pulled her deeper into my arms. I could feel the tension and fear in her little body. I could sense the fear churning in her soul. Her tiny arms went around my neck and her soft cheek pushed up against mine. She did not want me to stay within the city. But I would not be dissuaded. Not even dissuaded by the strong emotional tugs coming from a dragon princess.

We talked for a few more minutes, and then I handed her over to the twins. They too, had bad feelings concerning my desire to remain behind. One look in their eyes was enough. Neither believed they would ever see me again. But the concerns from the children were nothing like the frowning disapproval painted across the Niscian’s brown face.

“Has all of your monk’s training left you, warrior?”

I tried to smile but could not. The ancient Niscian was not a wizard, and so did not have the Inner Eye to look into my soul. But he was old and wise, long used to observing men’s actions and understanding them. He knew what was

compelling me to enter the temple and seek out Claudius Decidius.

“Revenge is a dish best not served, my friend,” he said, frowning and shaking his head as we walked to his mount. “What happened in Karlsburg cannot be forgotten. What we had to do to survive after Karlsburg, we must live with for the rest of our lives. Your efforts to save Galvin Whitehair fell short of their mark. Tragedies happen. But none of these deeds can be cleaned from our souls with the shedding of more blood.”

I nodded, feeling a welt of burning anger suddenly beginning to rise in me. A raging inferno, immensely strong, and surprising me for both its intensity and its desire to be unleashed.

“Alvus, I fought for a year with the Anktooth trying to save their clan from destruction. I felt the glee in the hearts of the Hartooth, knowing they were about to destroy an old and hated enemy. And I did not use my powers.

A few weeks ago, at Fyodor’s Crossing where we encountered the Rogarians, I felt their ecstasy of Rogarian righteousness they had knowing they were about to destroy a Bretan wizard and the peasants who were associated with him. I felt the helplessness and the rage burning within the hearts of the people of that village while they were imprisoned in their own granary. And I barely used my powers to rescue them.

After that, when I rescued you and Jojin Bok from those who were about to execute you, I felt the gloating elation of Rogarian wizards and priests—the very same righteous gloating as before. Again, I restrained myself. No power from the Netherworld. Just worldly alchemy to create the diversions I needed.” I took a breath and continued. “

In rage, I watched Karlsburg die. I watched it consigned to a burning hell. I watched with despair in my heart and tears in my eyes as thousands of innocent victims died. A monastery full of good and kindly monks. Souls who wished for nothing but to bring forth the goodness from out of the hearts of others, all died needlessly. I did nothing to stop it. Nothing.

Finally, I was the cause of a good man dying needlessly. A good man who was innocent of all wrongdoing. And all for what? All this death and destruction for what possible gain? I ask you, old monk, to what good comes to a wizard if,

for all the power he may command at his fingertips, he never uses it? How many must die before the shackles which bind me are unleashed?”

A great sadness came over the ancient Niscian. He felt my pain and knew there was little he could do to lighten its burden. Yet, reaching out with a hand and laying gently on my shoulder, he offered some solace.

“If the powers of wizardry could wipe away all evil, my son, it would have happened long ago. It is not the Netherworld keeping evil alive in this world. It is the darkness found in the hearts of all rational creatures which keeps it burning bright.”

I nodded, hearing the truth in his words. But the ball of anger burning within me would not be quenched. Revenge was in my heart and demanding justice being served.

At the core of so much injustice done to others burned the candle of a Rogarian fanatic. One Rogarian fanatic in particular.

Claudius Decidius.

“You know what you must do if I do not return?”

The old warrior nodded, the frown back on his lips, but a softness in his eyes that belied his true emotions.

“The child must be saved. The fight must continue,” I said firmly.

Fairhands nodded again and slowly mounted his horse. Settling into the saddle he looked down at me with a smile filled with infinite sadness on his craggy face.

“Go and do what you must, Bretan. But go in the knowledge that God’s peace comes to those who need it the most. If they will only ask for it and open their souls to allow it to enter.”

I felt the gentle sting of censure in the ancient monk’s truism. But in my heart burned a need for revenge. A year’s worth of frustration and abject failure was the fuel which fed this all-consuming inferno. I knew, in the cool logic of my mind, all the training I received as a Bretan monk should be turned inward and used, like a city’s fire brigade is called out into the dead of night to fight a burning home, to fight the conflagration within me. If there was anyone who needed the soothing quietness and tranquility of God’s peace, it had to be me.

The problem was a very large part of my baser instincts—that part of the brain and soul that is more animal in nature, not rational and sentient—resisted all efforts to find that peace. That base part smelled the raw saltiness of freshly spilled blood and wanted to smell more of it.

When the last rider of the caravan disappeared into the passage, I turned and began walking, still disguised as a treble-chinned, rotund wine merchant dressed in a fine silk robe, down the crowded streets of the city toward the temple.



It was said that Claudius Decidius was a devout man. Precisely at the stroke of midnight, he would descend from his private quarters within the temple complex and enter the Outer Sanctum. There, in the divine silence of the public portion of the temple, stood the statue of St. Rogarius in its awe-inspiring glory. Attended by only one or two other priests or monks, along with a few of his personal bodyguards, Decidius knelt at the statue's base and prayed for the souls of those who were not as devout as he. It was at this hour of the night I planned to confront this archenemy of mine.

To enter the complex was remarkably easy. In the disguise of a wine merchant I approached the base of the temple's acropolis and found a high wall of polished marble. At one large gate I found a long line of worshipers waiting to enter the complex. Bored imperial guardsmen eyed the crowds as they entered through the gates. Dressed in the Imperial Rogarian blue, with fine chain mail and light steel breastplates, the guards leaned either on their lances or casually walked up and down the lines of the supplicants in silence. From their souls, I could feel their boredom. They were not expecting trouble. There was no one they were looking for. All they wanted to do was to end their work shift and retire to the barracks and have a glass of wine and a good meal.

It took an hour standing out in the growing twilight of a gathering night before I walked through the outer gates of the temple complex. The temple complex was a beautiful sight to behold the moment one entered the gates. To the left of the main gate was the finely constructed dark marbled Chapel of

Timirus Acquainius, one of the first Rogarian warrior-monks, and one of their most legendary warriors. The chapel was perhaps large enough for six or seven to kneel and pray at its small altar within. Built of a dark gray marble, polished to a brilliant finish, with the typical, blue-tiled roof, it was a visual pleasure to behold.

To the right of the Chapel of Timirus Acquainius was the startling white and black Chapel of Gaius Decidius, the first Patriarch of the Rogarian Order. White marble walls of the chapel were starkly contrasted with black obsidian stone columns. Slightly larger than the Chapel of Timirus Acquainius, nevertheless it was another stunning architectural delight to feast one's eyes on.

Two hundred feet above our heads was the giant Temple of St. Rogarius, occupying the entire summit of the acropolis. Massive in its size and proportions, designed in the configuration of a giant "T" with over half of the vertical shaft of the lettering consisting of being the Outer Sanctum. It was the largest building I had ever laid eyes on. The Outer Sanctum was the portion of that temple opened to the public. Thousands came to see the statue of St. Rogarius on a yearly basis. The long line of the Rogarian faithful, waiting patiently to worship, snaked its way up the face of the acropolis on a path of paved stone which that encircled the acropolis's steep sides.

By time I made my way up the twenty sacred steps of the temple's entrance, it was well past sunset, and the city was ablaze with light. Two hundred feet above the city gave to the observer a picturesque panorama of Rossaria. Even with the rage of burning revenge aflame with a searing heat within me, I marveled at the beauty of the temple complex and at the city itself. Marveled at its beauty, and at the same time, recoiled from the beauty as well. An old and cherished Bretan saying played across my consciousness. *True Evil hides itself in the trappings of unattainable beauty.*

Rossaria was a city of wondrous beauty and marvelous sensual sights. The temple complex of St. Rogarius was enough to take the breath away in its sumptuous gardens and lavish architecture. But if one stepped back and closed one's eyes. If one could drive from their mind the visual pleasures surrounding them and look within to feel the true pulse of the city, the true face of the

Rogarian stronghold could be felt. Evil's pulse beat with a slow, methodical rhythm within the walls of Rossaria. Embedded evil, long cherished and nourished. Evil dangerous to behold.

As I entered the silence of the Outer Sanctum and feasted my eyes on the gigantic gold and ivory statue of St. Rogarius, I felt as if I was entering the very gates of Hell itself. And Hell was breathtaking to behold. Everything said about the gigantic statue of St. Rogarius was true. Its splendor and wonder were beyond descriptive words. The ivory of the statue's toga, a dark white color streaked with browns and reds, seemed to move suggestively. Hundreds of torches illuminated the long Outer Sanctum, making the shadows play across the statue's face and toga, creating the illusion of a living giant standing before his faithful. Strong was the impression the giant's chest moved with each breath it took.

The statue was so large, the head of St. Rogarius almost touched the cedar beams of the ceiling above it. The statue itself stood in the middle of the Outer Sanctum, allowing the faithful to gaze upon it from all sides. The floor, black marble streaked with tiny veins of gold, was polished to a mirror finish, bringing the stone's luster and depth of the blackness. One had the impression he was not walking on a floor but was somehow stepping across an infinite abyss. The sensation of other worldliness was almost overwhelming. For a few of the older pilgrims who filled the Outer Sanctum it was. Gazing upon the face of St. Rogarius, seeing the illusion of the giant actually blinking eyes of dark lapis lazuli, was too much to take. Several fainted and collapsed silently to the floor. Priests and nuns, long used to this phenomenon, quickly and expertly removed these overwhelmed faithful silently and efficiently.

In all this time, as I slowly made my way to this central din of malfeasance, I anticipated feeling the auras of Rogarian wizards filling the sanctum. To my surprise nothing happened. I could not bring myself to believe all wizards of the Rogarian Order were absent from the temple complex. I was positive at least one or two were within the complex, close to the Patriarch, hidden in Cloaks of Invisibility. They would reveal themselves the moment I revealed myself. But for now, as long as they remained invisible to me, they were not able to sense my

presence. I thus had hours to explore the public portions of the Outer Sanctum while still disguised as a wine merchant.

But twenty minutes before the hour of midnight, imperial guards and Rogarian monks began to clear the area of pilgrims. In the confusion of rounding up the hundreds of worshipers, it was easy for me to find a quiet niche unobserved. Quickly discarding the disguise and donning the simple garb of a wandering Bretan warrior-monk, I gripped the sheathed Helvingar and threw over me the Cloak of Invisibility. Moving unseen through the mass of departing pilgrims, I found a place in the deep shadows between two fluted marble columns of massive size gave me a frontal view of St. Rogarius. There, patiently, I waited for the arrival of the Rogarian Patriarch.

With military precision the crowds were quickly ushered out of the sacred room. A bevy of temple servants scurried onto the marble floors, escorted in by four imperial guards, and hurriedly swept and polished the black marble. In moments their work was done, and they swiftly departed. For a heartbeat or two the Outer Sanctum was completely empty. Only my hidden self and that of the giant occupied the semi-darkness and eerie calm. Moments ticked by in agonizing slowness. I could feel my heart beating within me. I could feel the dryness in my hand as I gripped the sheathed dragon scimitar.

In the darkness, I heard the soft whisper of a door open. Feet, in soft slippers, padded across the stone floor directly opposite from me. From out of the deep shadows appeared men dressed in black. Black hoods covered their heads. Black gloves hid the flesh of their hands. Black were the sword belts strapped across the chest and shoulders. They quietly slid to the room, looked to their left and right, then quickly knelt to one knee. I recognized them immediately, finding myself not surprised in the least by their presence before me.

Casperian assassins. The best of the best in silent death. Swordsmen who rivaled the best of any religious sect's warrior-monks. Merciless and without any measure of a conscience, they made the best of assassins and the best of personal guards.

More footsteps filled the silence. Into the candlelight illuminating the giant appeared the visage of the curly haired Vamot of Mons. The Rogarian wizard's

presence I never felt. He hid not himself in a Cloak of Invisibility, but openly presented himself before me. The wizard stepped between the two assassins and moved slowly to the front of the statue. Inspecting the statue first, the wizard turned and began making his slow way around the circumference of the entire sanctuary as if he was methodically searching for something. Several times he came quite close to me but did not feel my presence. Surprised by this, I watched with interest.

What kind of phenomenon was this, which allowed a Cloak of Invisibility to work yet somehow masked the distinctive auras of wizards from being felt? Yes, in the past, I stated Cloaks of Invisibility kept all wizardry powers from being felt, or used, while hidden in the cloak. I inadvertently lied. Wizardry powers did leak from a cloak after a wizard had wrapped himself within it. The aura of these powers could be felt if another wizard passed the one cloaked within inches of each other. As Vamont did two times while inspecting the sanctum. I found myself becoming immediately uncomfortable with this discovery. Was there something unique about this temple which partially masked certain wizardry powers? If so, what other powers would be of no benefit to a wizard here? With interest I watched safely hidden in my cloak and in the depths of the shadows.

Vamot of Mons satisfied himself no intruders were within the sanctuary. Turning, he motioned with one hand at something in the darkness, and then stepped back and away from the base of the giant. From out of the darkness, to one side of St. Rogarius, materialized a figure in a toga dyed in the darkest of Imperial Rogarian Blue. Claudius Decidius, his right hand slipped partially into his toga, his bare head capped with snow-white hair, moved with an air of imperial power into the soft torchlight.

“All is well, Patriarch. The sanctuary is yours.”

Vamot’s voice was filled with a reverence I never suspected he possessed. Bowing his head as the Patriarch passed him, I watched as the much older Claudius Decidius turned and faced the statue.

“Foolish to believe the heretic would attack me here in my own temple, Vamot. The Bretan is no fool. To show his presence here would be signing his own death warrant.”

“Yes, I agree the Bretan is no fool. He is the devil himself. He comes and goes like a ghost. Those who survived the destruction of the heretic city told of a wild monk riding a black and red Great Wing who would appear from out of the dark heavens, bringing death and destruction with him. A dozen witnesses say they saw him decimate five or six of the mercenaries and their Great Wings, all before the dead had time to realize their imminent demise!”

“Humph! Truly this creature is devilishly lucky. But he is only one simple warrior-wizard. A mortal such as you or I. Sooner or later, his luck will run out and we shall destroy him.”

A scowl of frustration passed across Vamot’s face as he half-turned and absently gazed off to one side. Claudius Decidius folded hands in front of him, bowed his head, and slowly knelt onto both knees. For several long moments, only the sound of the Patriarch’s voice mumbling a set of prayers filled the silence of the sanctuary.

A cruel smile pulled my lips. Rage battered my soul. With a flourish, I threw the Cloak of Invisibility off me, knowing the soft sound of the cape flying to one side would be immediately noted by wizard and assassins. I was not disappointed.

“Patriarch!” Vamot shouted, stepping in front of his leader, sword in hand and at the ready.

Casperian assassins immediately leapt toward me, swords drawn and held high over their heads in the traditional killing blow. With an impressive swiftness, their blades whistled through the air. Yet, the only thing their sharp edges found was inky blackness. Confused, the two black-clad assassins stepped back and toward the Patriarch, their swords held in defensive modes as they scanned the sanctuary to their right and left, hunting for me.

With a deliberate cruelty, I pulled from its plain wood and leather sheath the curved dragon’s scimitar of Helvingar. The sliding rustle of the bronze colored blade coming out into the open seemed to fill the entire sanctuary. Standing in deep shadow, yet close to the very edge of the bubble of torch light which lit the room, I moved the ancient blade toward the light. Grimly, I smiled in murderous delight, knowing what would appear from out of the darkness in front of them.

The image of the curved blade, with its odd bronze sheen and strange runic script down the blade's sides, filled the hearts of both Patriarch and wizard with terror and fascination. Their eyes glued to the blade seemingly hanging in midair, made both men step back. From the souls of both poured the emotions of terror and realization Death was at hand. The terrible smile of murderous intent stretched my lips further. At this moment, I stepped out of the darkness and appeared before them all.

"Bretan!" hissed the Patriarch, one hand rolling into an angry fist. "You are a fool, heretic! A fool who dies a foolish and useless death! Kill him!"

The Casperian assassins lunged at me, filled with the lust to spill my blood consuming every fiber of their being. Each was a master swordsman, and incredibly quick and skilled. I met them both in the darkness, our blades ringing loudly and with incredible rapidity. Their attack was precise and pressed me several steps back. I had to use all the moves I'd acquired over the years to counter their attack. Twice, the edge of one blade or the other cut through the cloth I wore near to my heart. But in the end, both fell as my blade bit deep into either shoulders or thighs. Both surprised me by screaming when the cutting edge of the scimitar slid across their flesh. But I had only wounded the two. Knowing a wounded animal was the most dangerous, to each I used the curved edge of the sword's pommel and delivered a blow to their heads that dropped them to the floor unconscious.

Stepping away from the fallen assassins, I turned to face wizard and Patriarch. But neither were present! Either they had made their escape while I fought the assassins or Vamot was hiding both himself and Claudius Decidius somewhere in the sanctuary. Whirling about, a madness of killing frenzy overwhelming me, I screamed my frustrations at the top of my lungs.

"Show yourself, Claudius Decidius! Let one Bretan monk show you and your wizard what true wrath looks like!"

The sounds of many doors crashing open and hundreds of feet running in the darkness toward me filled my ears. The dark image of hundreds of warriors and monks almost on top of me filled my vision. No time to conceal myself in a Cloak of Invisibility. I screamed in rage and, with both hands holding the curved

blade above my head, I chose to die fighting and taking as many Rogarians to Hell with me!

And indeed, I descended into Hell. But not the Hell of folklore.

I cannot truly explain what came next.

I . . . I have no explanation. I can only detail the sensory impressions, and the ultimate results, of what lifted me from the temple and rescued me from an inglorious death.

First came the impression of being hurled from a high cliff into a bottomless pit. The sensation of falling, and falling for a very long distance, filled my s. An odd gray and black darkness, a darkness that seemed to somehow move and twist, filled my conscience as I continued to fall. At some point, I must have become unconscious. I lost all sense of time and awareness. Yet, even in this strange limbo, the gray and black darkness engulfing me seemed to twist and move as if it was a monstrous snake that had completely coiled itself around me, squeezing me tighter and tighter.

A sharp sensation of searing heat rolled down the middle of my back. Explosions of one or two brilliantly bright lights directly in front of my eyes momentarily blinded me . . . and then . . . and then . . .

I opened my eyes and found myself suspended in a sea of gray infinity. My arms were above my head, wrists firmly shackled in iron clasps. My legs were pulled to one side slightly, ankles gripped by iron shackles. I was chained spread-eagled on something hard yet something invisible. There was this sense of incredible heat and insufferably stale air. I found it very difficult to breathe. Sweat soon began to pour out of every pore of my body. I could not move. I fought for every lungful of air I took. Gray mist not only filled the space I found myself in, but somehow filled my soul and my mind as well.

So unfamiliar was I to this environment, I knew not whether I was alive or dead. I found myself clawing into a deep pit of sheer panic. I thought, surely I must be dead, and this is the Nothingness found in the space between either Heaven or Hell.

I tried to scream! I felt my chest heave from the effort. I felt my voice box vibrating from the effort. But no sound came to my ears. Only silence. Incredible

silence.

And then, a flash of yellow light, a narrow beam of light, exploded into existence before me on the horizontal plane. In the blinking of an eye it was there, and then it was gone. A moment later, another beam of light flashed. This one came at a forty-five degree angle, starting from above my head and angling down toward my right thigh.

With the second flash of light, I became aware of something quite different in this strange limbo. I felt a . . . presence. I felt The Presence. I felt the Evil from Afar! But this time, it was close. Very close. As close as just standing right behind me, and to my right. Within inches of my right ear. I felt its breath caressing my ear and neck. I felt the warmth of its body flowing across my bare back.

I tried to scream with all the strength I had in me. I now was a mindless animal filled with numbing terror. No amount of struggling would free me from my bondage. I was a trapped animal! I could not run! I could not fight! I could not beg for mercy or forgiveness! I could do nothing! I was completely and utterly helpless. I felt my eyes roll up into my head, and I passed out into a delirious vagueness that was neither sleep nor unconsciousness.

When I opened my eyes, I knew not if I had been unconscious for minutes, or days, or for an eternity. There was no way to tell. All I can say is I found myself in the position as before. Hands and feet were still shackled, and I, feeling like an alchemist's specimen pinned to an examination table, sensed the Evil One to my right.

For the first time, I heard its voice. It was an indefinable sound. Like a dry whisper, but with more rasp to it. Like the hiss of a viper just before it strikes. Yet even more menacing. It sounded to me what Evil should sound like. Inexplicable, yet instantly recognizable.

It was clucking. Clucking, like an irritable parent does when confronting a rebellious youth. I could almost sense it shaking its head . . . if it had a head . . . at me. And then it spoke.

“Child, you constantly surprise me. Time and again, just when it appears as if the thread of your life has finished its course, along comes a different weave

and extends it even further into Time's current. Vexing. That's what it is. Most vexing."

Pilgrim, I will freely confess to you. The terror which gripped me while I lay helplessly shackled before the Evil from Afar overwhelmed me. I wanted to run, to flee. Even to be consigned to the very Pits of Hell itself if it meant I no longer would be in the presence of this creature. I wanted to scream but I knew it would be for naught. No sound would come from my lips. The only thing I could do was to endure.

So I fought to grip the blind terror pounding through my veins. I fought to bend it to my will. To control it. To endure.

"Ah, good. Good. You resist, child. You resist and defy me. Very good. I am pleased. The Game is so much more interesting if you resist. The Flow of Time becomes far more intricate if you defy me. You know, Roland, you are very much an integral part of The Game. I need you, child, to remain alive and defiant far more than you think.

Ironic, yes? The predicament you find yourself in? It is a predicament for me as well. In order to win The Prize, I have to kill you. But you cannot die until all the currents and undercurrents in the Flow of Time allows your death, and my victory, to happen simultaneously. If you die before your appropriate time, my plans sink into the Flow of Time and disappear forever. If you somehow survive long enough to find what powers are there to command that will give you the weapons to destroy me and, again, I disappear into the Flow of Time. So it is irony which forces me to save you from your own foolishness."

I had no conception, no basis, as to understand what this creature was trying to say. A wave of anger flashed through me, and I fought to free myself from my bondage. It was a wasted effort. A man trying to lift the tallest peak in the High Kanris with only his bare hands would have had a better chance to succeed.

The Evil chuckled in amusement at my efforts. It even fondly petted my shoulder with a hand of dry skin as hot as a coal from the Pits of Hell. So hot, it made me wince in pain.

"If you only knew what the source of true magic actually was, my child. If you could only visualize the depth of what power was there. Waiting to be

channeled and used properly. You would join me in my efforts! Aye, you mock me, child. You mock and defy me. But I have looked into the Flow of Time. There is a current there that clearly suggests you would gleefully ally with me if such knowledge came your way. But there are other currents that suggest you would use this knowledge and destroy me without hesitation.

So, I am in this vexing position. You have placed me in this vexation, this sweet conundrum. This delicious quandary which makes The Game fascinating to play. Do I allow the Rogarians monks to kill you in the temple? Or do I whisk you away to freedom? On one hand, if I allow you to die before your time, the Flow of Time tells me it would be very difficult for me to win. The odds of my success suddenly are less than one in five hundred.

On the other hand, if I become your savior, I stand the risk of letting you live too long. You, and the princess, and that terrible sword of yours . . . did I say sword? Ha! More irony! A sword it is. But far more than that. Far, far more than just a sword. Of which . . . for my own sake . . . I will say no more. But the three of you, combined, can become a formidable force. Yet I cannot eliminate any one of you until the time is propitious. So . . . hmm . . . what to do? What to do?"

The voice of Evil, this mind of Evil, conversed not so much with me as it conversed with itself. It found itself pleased with its own conversation. I, for my part, was more of the helpless bystander. I had no say in the matter of my death or survival. Whatever Evil chose, so would it be. Yet, I could not help but become curious. Why would it be so disadvantageous for it to keep me alive? If I was a danger to it, it made sense to kill me.

What did it mean by 'The Game?' What twisted machination of Time and the lives of millions hanging in the balance was this demented creature manipulating? The Flow of Time, I could understand. The future . . . the past . . . seeing into both, this was something all wizards were familiar with. Was this creature beside me a wizard, either dragon or man, who had been seduced by the Netherworld's Dark Power? Could the essence of Evil be nothing more than the bottomless abyss of insanity?

The creature stirred again, mumbling under its breath for a moment or two, before finally speaking to me.

“Already, the Flow of Time changes. Random aberrations stir the currents and cloud the outcomes. Hmm. . .”

It was as if Evil was preoccupied with sensing the ebb and flow of the Time itself. As if he could see it moving like some wide river. As if it was a fisherman on the banks of a river that was infinitely wide, infinitely deep, and filled with dangerous and unpredictable currents. Standing there, watching the whirlpools and eddies which dotted the river’s surface with fascination, the fisherman mumbled to himself. Except I was here . . . wherever “here” might be . . . and I could hear him speaking.

“Well . . . so. That’s the way it should be, eh? Very well!”

The creature stirred. Bolts of light, white and yellow and orange in color, shot past my face in many different directions. I began to experience the sensation of rising to the surface. Rising at an incredible speed. And as I rose, and as the Evil from Afar spoke, I clearly heard its voice receding rapidly behind me.

“You shall live, human. Now is not the time for your death. Nor loudly claim my declaration as the winner of The Game. So we must each go our separate ways for now. Adieu, Mon Cheri! Adieu! Until the next time!”

My body began to vibrate. Flashes of intense heat and intense cold overwhelmed me. The impression of incredible speed made my head spin. I became physically sick. And then, blackness filled my consciousness.

CHAPTER 26



In the end the true enemy is never the one our eyes behold. The One That Deceives is always that part of us which, half hidden in the darkest of shadows, yearns to walk down the path of evil.

— FROM THE BOOK OF ST. ALBANS

THEY FOUND ME LYING ON A HILL IN THE MIDDLE OF A VAST BED OF BRIGHT yellow and orange sunflowers, with me gripping firmly the sheathed blade of Helvingar across my chest. They said the grip on the sheathed weapon was so fierce, it took the strength of all four of them to pry the weapon away from me. They told me that on the day they found me, snow was beginning to fall gently from a gray blustery sky. But oddly, the low rumble of thunder which was continuous and rolling high up across the rugged peaks of the High Kanris, strange and vaguely menacing to their ears, directed their attention to the grassy hill where they found me.

Fairhands and the twins lifted me up and slid me into a wagon and covered me with furs. Ursala sat by me as they slowly made their way across the steep forested hills that cover the base of the High Country for miles on end.

They told me days went by while I lay in the wagon. The symptoms of someone gripped in the throes of some strange sickness first made me shiver violently, suddenly begin sweating profusely, forcing me to throw the furs off me violently. Whenever gripped in these fevers, I became almost like a madman. I

would sit up screaming, my eyes wide in terror, my hands reaching up into the night air and clawing . . . clawing at some unseen image. So violent were these nightmares, the old Niscian monk eventually had to use a dozen or more leather straps and bind my arms and legs tightly to my body.

I conversed with unseen creatures while enslaved in this fever. I yelled and cajoled. I wept like a child. I whimpered and roared in righteous fury. There were times the twins would not approach the wagon while I suffered. I was a madman. I was not the man they knew. That anyone knew. By all intents and purposes, it appeared as if some other entity had entered my body and drove out the soul of the man who called himself Roland of the High Crag. Even Fairhands, an old master in the arts of healing, told me much later he feared for my sanity.

Yet tiny Ursula . . . the dragon princess . . . never wavered. Never left my side. When I shivered in arctic chills, she was the one who covered me with furs. Against everyone's wishes, she used magic to turn large stones into glowing orbs of nourishing warmth and placed them around my body to envelop me in radiating heat. When I roared like a mindless berserker, she was the one who would press chilled compresses to my forehead to soothe the burning fever. Apparently, neither my screams nor my mindless jabber of the insane seemed to bother her. She slept when I slept. She ate only rarely. She hovered over me when I was out of control.

For such a small child, it was her kindness, her patience . . . and her confidence . . . soothed the worries of our companions. Somehow, she knew I would recover. Knew I would return to my old self. She never wavered in this belief.

I remember none of this. All I can say is that one day I opened my eyes and found myself bathed in the dim light of a wagon's interior. The wagon was moving slowly and laboriously across rugged terrain. Outside, I heard the voices of the twins making conversation with the old Niscian. Occasionally, the old monk would grunt something for a response . I caught the aroma of a deep forest wafting across me. Old trees, raw earth, the scurrying of game through the brush. High above, I heard the screech of a war bird faintly and recognized it instantly.

Cedric felt my awakening and welcomed me back among the living.

Smiling, I twisted my head to one side and noticed Ursula leaning against the wall of the wagon, her arms draped across her tiny bosom, head swaying with the motion of the wagon as she dozed in a shallow sleep.

The smile on my lips widened. She was such a tiny child. Frail. Looking yet beautiful to behold. There was a look of blissful contentment painted on her tiny face I shall never forget. For all the hardships . . . for all the dangers we had faced . . . nevertheless she was the image of innocence and beauty in my eyes. She slept in an envelope of contentment beside me. I wished not to disturb her.

Our souls were connected, this child and mine. That strange quality in our blood which made me a wizard and her a Pearl Princess, had somehow woven a new tapestry within the Netherworld between us. A tapestry that grew stronger with each passing day. A tapestry which created a link between our minds and acted as a conduit. From me, she drew some kind of strength . . . some sense of humanity . . . she had never before felt. It apparently appealed to her. It comforted her. It tempered her dragon ferocity and bubbling cauldron of fury lying deep in her subconscious.

From her, I saw the world through the eyes of a child again. I could envision the beauty, the brightness, the thrill of discovery all over again. Qualities I found both beautiful and strange. Beautiful, in that her naivety as a child was enchanting to behold. The world was new to her. The colors . . . the animals . . . new people . . . strange lands. Each passing day, she found something to thrill and excite her. Which, in turn, thrilled and excited me. Yet strange was this response from her as well. This wondrous naivety felt more human than dragon.

The thrill of discovery and the sense of imagination which seems to follow like a hand in glove for humans is not a dragon emotion. Far from it. Discovery for the sense of discovery is human trait. Learning for the delight in simply increasing one's amount of knowledge, whether it be useful or not, singularly marks the difference between human and dragon. A human learns for the love of learning. A dragon learns only to further his pragmatic desires to conquer his surroundings and improve his lot in life. To learn for the sheer enjoyment of learning is something no dragon would ever consider.

But there was something else I acquired from her. I felt it now pulsating through me. Growing. Seeping into the crevices deep within my mind like the waters of a surging ocean tide which refused to abate. The electric tingling sensation of power. Netherworld power, emanating straight out of that part of the Netherworld where magic resides in its rawest form. Flowing through her and into me day and night. Never ceasing no matter if I was near to her or far from her. Only lessening in intensity if any extended distances separated us.

Even now, looking at her, my Mind's Eye saw her aura dancing before my eyes. It was not the aura of an ordinary dragon. Her aura was complex. Envision, if you will, the image of a mirror blurred by a thin layer of oil on its surface. The image reflected back to you is somewhat dimmed and blurred. Sometimes you can see image after image of yourself overlaid on top of each other. The impression of yourself looking into this mirror gives you the impression there are many of you looking back at you at the same time.

That was Ursala's aura which greeted me when I gazed upon her face. I did not see just the aura of tiny Ursala. I saw the many Ursalas that she had been in the past and were yet to come from the future. Her Netherworld power had increased dramatically over the last few weeks. No longer just a child. Now she was tapping into the Netherworld and consciously or unconsciously, making contact with the Ursalas from the time lines of many different pasts and futures. As I gazed upon to gaze at her, I saw several adult versions of her smile at me, pleased to see that I was back among the living. One by one, they said something . . . their lips moving and clearly addressing me . . . just before their ethereal images simultaneously stood up from the slumbering form of the child, turned, and faded into nothingness. What each of them said, I know not. I wondered quietly to myself why their whispers were silent to my ears.

When the last ghostlike image of an adult Ursala faded away, the child Ursala stirred in her awkward sleeping position, lifting arms up to stretch, opening her eyes at the same time. The moment her eyes fell upon me, the warmest, brightest smile a sentient being could give to another illuminated her face into a mask of sheer delight.

"Grandfather, you've returned to us!"

Her small body flew through the air and crashed into my aching chest as she threw her arms around my neck and buried me in a sea of kisses. Laughing, I turned and gazed into her eyes and saw dragon tears of happiness running down her pale white cheeks. Using a thumb, I gently wiped her tears away and kissed her gently on the forehead.

"I have returned, and I am starving," I said softly before kissing her again on a cheek this time and hugging her close to me. "Where are we and how soon will we sup?"

"We are in a forest," she said, leaping catlike off me with amazing agility and turning to leave the wagon's confines. "And we feast immediately!"

Outside, I heard her shouting at the boys and the old Niscian. The wagon came to a jolting halt just as the two blond waifs of the boys clawed their way into the wagon and practically lifted me bodily out of my bed.

Later that night, over a roaring campfire, I recounted to them all that befell me in the Temple of St. Rogarius. But of that terror that had saved me and then shackled me in that suspension of reality, I said very little. In fact, I painted this portion of the story as a nightmare . . . fierce dreams I experienced after succumbing to darkness.

Both the boys and Fairhands asked how I had escaped certain death within the confines of the temple. I concocted some story about falling into a deep pit within the temple and awakening in pitch blackness. After hours of searching for a way out, I felt the cool breeze of the night wafting through the pit. I somehow climbed my way out of the pit and followed the cold breeze down dark catacombs and forgotten passages underneath the temple. Eventually I made my way out of the slipped into the forests surrounding the Rogarian stronghold. Just before the first light of dawn lifted its bright light over the high mountain peaks, I somehow stumbled my way down The Trail of Tears.

With the fierce light of the bonfire burning brightly the boys were captivated by my story and hung onto every word I said. The Niscian monk, however, sat on a stone beside the boys and said nothing as he used the tip of a dagger and drew odd symbols in the dirt between his feet. On his face was an unreadable mask of neutrality. Yet I suspected he knew I was manufacturing an elaborate

story for the boys to hear. For whatever reason I chose not to reveal the truth concerned him. But he was an old, wise monk who, even as I wove a tall tale for the children to hear, nevertheless trusted me. He knew there had to be a good reason I wasn't forthcoming with my tale. He was willing to wait patiently until the proper time came when I might tell him the full story in private.

But tiny Ursala was a Pearl Princess. And in spite of Fairlands's ability as a Null Stone, she and I were connected via the Netherworld. She sat between the boys and listened raptly to my tale as well. The *child* that was Ursala was as enthralled with my tale of escape. As were the boys. Open wonderment filled her face when I told my story. She leapt back in fear when I talked about the evils I faced in the swordsmen who fought me. She gleefully clapped in delight when I told her how I escaped the city.

But unseen by the Niscian and the boys, there were *other* Ursalas sitting with us this night. Ursalas from the past and the future who had journeyed across the River of Time within the Netherworld to join us. *They* knew what had actually happened. And they waited to speak to me in private after all the others had drifted off for the night. When, finally, the boys and little Ursala drifted off to sleep . . . and after the old Niscian monk eyed me suspiciously with a look of concern on his lined, creviced old face, he nevertheless remained silent as he waved bid me good night and disappeared into the wagon.

Left alone, sitting on a stone beside the blazing fire, I laid the sheathed blade of the ancient dragon scimitar across my lap and waited. Only the sounds of the crackling fire came to my ears for more than an hour. But . . . eventually . . . I heard the soft rustle of leather rubbing against chain mail behind me, followed by the sound of a soft leather sandal stepping gently across the mat of dead grass.

And then I heard the gentle . . . soft . . . chuckle of a woman's amused voice.

"Grandfather, I see you have been expecting us."

Ursala. Fully grown and a radiantly beautiful. She was dressed in soft leather and cold, but gleaming copper chain mail. Around her waist was a leather built of soft leather. Hanging from it was the curved blade of a scimitar. Her pearl-white complexion had become more humanlike in appearance, the color of her

skin reflecting the golden light of the fire luxuriantly.

"Come. Join me by the fire and warm yourself. How many of my lovely Ursalas do I speak to this night?"

"Only two of us this night, grandfather. Only two," she said, smiling with sadness as she lowered herself onto a fallen tree, lifting hands toward the fire to warm them. "I am from the far past . . . the first Ursala to rebel against my dragon gods and help you try to save both dragon and man. The other is from the near future."

I smiled. I could see both auras of this woman/child quite easily. In both, I could see pain, fear, uncertainty. And sadness. Vast quantities of sadness.

"Speak to me, my children. Tell me why you defy all the rules of the Netherworld and journey here to find me. What fears do you bring me this night? What hopes, if any. Speak freely and fear not. Nothing you may say I have not already contemplated in my worst nightmares."

"Ah, but that is the issue, grandfather. You *think* you have thought deeply on all the variables for potential disaster you and our baby sister face. But we assure you, loved one, you have not. Much yet is to come. More terrors than you can possibly imagine."

CHAPTER 27



Face the evil, my child. Face the evils and the lies within you.

— FROM THE BOOK OF ST. ALBANS

WE TALKED. FOR HOURS.

I was told a great hardship was to befall us soon. I was told a great temptation would come our way. A temptation so appealing, it would make me want to pause . . . to deviate from my original plan to take the child Ursala far, far away and begin building up a force strong enough to defeat our enemies.

Great temptation comes with the promise of great success.

Only I and the small child sleeping peacefully under a pile of warm furs could make the decision on which route to take. Unfortunately, neither the past nor the future Ursala could predict failure or success for us.

"In my time you, grandfather, decided to throw away your original plan and linger here underneath the Shield Wall. A great force of the enemy appeared, and you saw a possibility . . . a sliver of hope, which offered the promise of ending the entire war in one magnificent clash of arms. We both perished in that long-forgotten battle, my love. The Dark Gods won, and our world plunged into chaos and oblivion."

There was much pain. Immense sadness. Silently, this adult Ursala wept beside me with only the back of a hand wiping a tear from her beautiful cheeks indicating to me she still suffered from the deeds of her past.

"So I should resist this coming temptation," I spoke softly, reaching out and taking one of her hands to hold it in mine. "The child and I should not waver. We should flee from this place and not look back."

"No, I cannot say that grandfather. In our time we made a decision together . . . and we lost. But my sister here with me . . . she tells me she and her grandfather decided to linger, to do battle . . . and they survived. The course of the war was changed. The Evil from Afar raged in fury at our success. The war dragged on. But they survived. And this strange creature who manipulates all, this Evil from Afar, in the end disappeared into oblivion never to return to bother dragon or man again."

Aye, pilgrim. I feel your discomfort.

If neither the past nor the future can be used to predict success or failure, why come these two from out of the Netherworld to speak to me? In each reality, choices must be made. Neither the past nor the future affects the choices that have to be made in the now. The now generates its own River of Time. Aye, the Rivers of Time the two Ursalas lived closely approximated the one I and the child Ursala now lived. But none were *exactly* alike. Variations in each existed. Choices existed. A thousand different permutations existed in each and every River of Time.

The only course of action available to me and those who followed me was to live in the now and make a choice. Make our own choices and accept whatever random chance might fall in our choosing.

"We did not come to persuade you to undertake one course of action or another, my love. We came here to warn you. To caution you and our little sister. We came to warn you about the Evil from Afar."

My eyes turned to look into the face of the lovely woman sitting beside me. Ursala, the grown woman, was stunningly beautiful. Dragon princess or not, her beauty would stir the hearts of both dragon or human. Even I, pilgrim . . . even I felt within me the stirrings of desire as I gazed upon her.

"You must not directly assault this darkness you call the Evil from Afar until you are strong," she told me. "His command of the Netherworld's power is immense. Far stronger than you and our little sister combined. He spared you

recently for reasons I cannot explain. But I assure you, he will not a second time."

"Who is this creature? Where does he reside? How can he be defeated?"

The shimmering auras of both adult Ursalas began to tumble . . . to roil in a mystifying turmoil of emotions and colors. On the face of the woman beside me, I saw fear, puzzlement, and hate flash across her eyes simultaneously. The two Ursalas were apparently fighting with each other. One wanted to tell me all I wanted to hear. The other demanded both be reticent in what they said to me.

"We . . . are . . . in conflict about what to reveal to you, grandfather," the woman whispered fitfully. "Neither of us knows the true image of this powerful creature. Both of us have suffered greatly from his probing mind and unlimited power. All . . . we . . . can tell you is this. The answers are in the far past. In the past long before my time. In the past, when dragon and human were first created. On one hand, if you wish to know this forbidden knowledge, you must make that journey. You must enter the Netherworld and make the journey back before the Dawn of Time. Yet you must not! You must not! That too, is a trap! No wizard, neither dragon nor human, has ever attempted to go back so far and returned again. Madness awaits you there.

The answers you seek are there. But they do not matter. For you will have perished long before you ever could arrive on such a journey!"

Her words spoke true to me. Every time a wizard entered the Netherworld, hundreds of souls would find me and begin whispering to me, enticing me to allow the insanity to swallow me whole, came to me. It took all my training as a Bretan monk to resist this temptation. To just . . . let go.

"I must seek the truth. Yet I must not make the journey. The far past holds the key. Yet I cannot hope to get there. Not unless my wizard's powers grow strong enough. But how will I know, child? How will I know when that time arrives? If it arrives?"

"When your Helvingar whispers to you, Roland of the High Crag. When the ancient blade you hold in your lap begins to whisper to you."

"How . . ." I began.

The woman beside me threw up a hand and laid a finger gently onto my lips

as she turned unexpectedly and gazed off into the fire. A look of concern, of danger, flashed across her face as she stood up suddenly and turned to look at me again.

"We must leave you now, grandfather. We feel danger approaching. This Evil has spies everywhere in the Netherworld. We must hurry!"

She turned and strode swiftly away from the fire ,but paused, hesitated, and turned back to look back at me.

"The decision you and little sister must make is soon upon you, grandfather. I . . . we . . . cannot help you make it. Yet, whatever your choice is, know that we will try to help you both as much as we can. Goodbye for now, my adopted kinsman. May the gods be with you!"

Before my eyes, the image of a grown Ursala dissolved into nothingness.

Left standing with my back to the roaring blaze, I did not move for quite some time. My Mind's Eye reached out into the night to probe the darkness for any approaching danger. But nothing was there. Yet I felt uneasy. A heavy weight sat on my shoulders.

Cataclysmic events were soon to confront us, and my decision . . . our decision . . . would be like the random throw of a set of dice determining our fates. Yet no one knew what our fates might be. There was nothing for us to do but stand on the edge of the infinite abyss and play the game to its ultimate conclusion.

EPILOGUE



AH. I SEE THE FAINT FINGERS OF A NEW DAWN FILLING THE NIGHT AIR. MY URSALA has again left me to sit here in this dungeon cell another day. So be it.

I hear your thoughts, Pilgrim.

Why do I slowly wither away in this dungeon? Did my tiny Ursala and I fail in our struggles against The Evil from Afar? Did treachery and deceit end our noble cause? Did I, in the end, never find out what dark secrets lay waiting to be discovered in the far past?

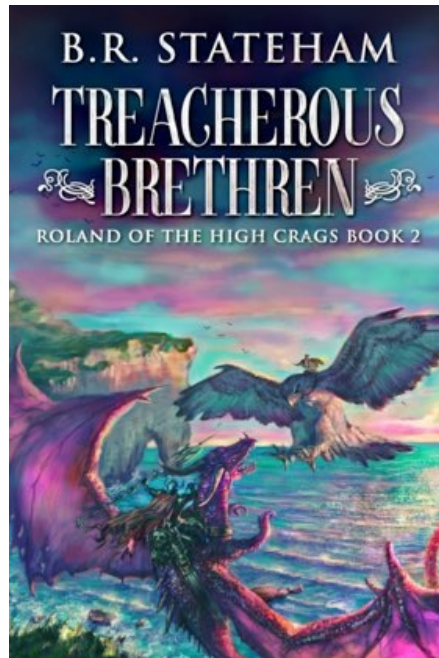
Much needs to be recorded, My Children. Much needs to be said.

But not now. Not now.

I need to sleep. To rest. To gather my strength. Tonight, I will again take up the pen and record the histories the Dragon Princess and I can claim as our own. A long, arduous, terrible tale of war, bloodshed, treachery, and deceit yet to be revealed.

So for now, I bid you good night. Allow an old man to sleep. In tomorrow night's cold, lonely white moonlight, I will write further of our adventures.

Next in the Series:
Treacherous Brethren
(Roland Of The High Crag's Book 2)



The war between dragon and man rages on.

Roland swore to protect and raise the small dragon princess as his own. Feared by humanity and dragonkind alike, the warrior monk is a renowned swordsman, and his skill in Netherworld Magic is legendary.

However, it is the child who fuels the fear burning in the hearts of both dragon and man. For the child is more than a child: she is a weapon, designed by the dark gods to unite all dragonkind under one banner and wage the final war against humanity, wiping them out forever.

Roland has made an allegiance with the dragon child, threatening both dragon and man. Their enemies want them found and destroyed before it's too late. Soon, the warrior monk's resolve and strength will be put to the ultimate test.

A riveting epic fantasy adventure, Treacherous Brethren is the second book

in B.R. Stateham's 'Roland Of The High Crag's' series.

Treacherous Brethren

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



My name is B.R. Stateham. I am a 72 year-old male with a mind still filled with the wonders and excitement one might find in a fourteen year old boy. I write genre fiction. You name the genre, I've probably got a short-story, a novella, or a novel which would fit the description. I've been writing for over 50 years. Which, frankly, means very little in reality. Most writers can say the same thing. For a writer, story-telling is something built into one's psyche. From birth on, a writer was probably telling some kind of story to himself, or anyone close to him. Whether they listened or not.

For the last 37 years I've been married to the same patient woman. A school teacher, now retired, who has this thing of sitting down with me and discussing, or verbally outlining, concepts for stories knocking around in my head. We have three grown adults for children and six (if I got the current number correct) grandchildren. None of the children or grandchildren think that me being a writer is of any particular significance. As it should be.

I like writing dark-noir. Or hardboiled detective/police-procedural novels which border the demarcation line between dark-noir and hard-boiled fiction. In fact, I like mixing up sub-genres in my fiction. Don't be surprised if you read something of mine traditionally found in the dark-noir niche with tinges of Science-Fiction or the Supernatural thrown in to spice up the tale.

That's it. There's nothing else to say. I'm just a writer. But I hope you'll find something of mine to read and find it enjoyable.



To learn more about B.R. Stateham, visit his [author page on Next Chapter's website](#).